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Trump-Kim summit 2019: who are the key aides and advisers on the ground in Hanoi?

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During their second summit, Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un will each be supported by a hand-picked team of trusted advisers and negotiators.

Although the two leaders will ultimately decide the outcome in Hanoi, these are some of the key figures who have helped shape the agenda for their high-stakes talks on denuclearisation.

Stephen Biegun

Since his appointment as US special representative for North Korea in August, Biegun has been the main driver of pre-summit negotiations on the US side, taking over from Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. In recent months, Biegun, a former foreign policy aide to George W. Bush, has embarked on a whirlwind diplomatic tour aimed at narrowing the differences between the sides, jetting between North and South Korea, Sweden and Vietnam.

The former Ford executive was the first senior administration official to arrive Hanoi ahead of the summit, landing a week before Trump to iron out final details.

Lori Esposito Murray, a Council on Foreign Relations fellow who worked with Biegun on Capitol Hill, described the 55-year-old as “smart, strategic, with broad and deep experience in policy and negotiations” and an “excellent choice” for his role.

While generally avoiding the limelight, Biegun has struck a more conciliatory tone with the North than more hawkish figures in the administration. In remarks at Stanford University last month, he said Trump was “ready” to formally end the Korean war, which came to a halt with an armistice, not a peace treaty.

“There has been some pushback to Biegun’s approach from within the administration, mostly from ‘senior officials’ who remain nameless, but this pushback does not seem to have affected negotiations with North Korea,” said Eric Gomez, an analyst at the Cato Institute.

Kim Hyok-chol

Kim has taken charge of talks with the US as special envoy since January, when he replaced Vice Foreign Minister Choe Son-hui, coinciding with rumours of unease within the leadership over ideological purity following the 2016 defection of deputy UK ambassador Thae Yong-ho.

Michael Madden, a North Korean leadership expert at the Washington-based Stimson Centre, said Kim has a long history of involvement in informal “Track II” diplomacy with US figures and is known as a “pleasant fellow”.

Will a softer approach get a firm result on Pyongyang’s denuclearisation?

Kim, who studied English at university and Spanish in Cuba, served as ambassador to Spain until he was expelled in 2017 after nuclear and missile tests by Pyongyang. He currently sits on the State Affairs Commission of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, the “supreme policy-oriented leadership body” chaired by Kim Jong-un.

“Kim Hyok-chol appears to be a tough negotiator and is well aware of nuclear technology,” said Lim Jae-cheon, a North Korea studies professor at Korea University in Seoul.

Mike Pompeo

US Secretary of State Pompeo was instrumental in setting up the second Trump-Kim summit following their first meeting in Singapore last June, holding talks with North Korean officials in Washington and Pyongyang.

Known as a staunch ally of the president, Pompeo has defended Trump against charges of grandstanding and sending mixed messages on denuclearisation. Formerly the director of the CIA, Pompeo is seen as one of the administration’s more hawkish voices on North Korea, and a counter to Trump’s isolationist instincts.

Experts say talks will likely only freeze Pyongyang’s nuclear progress, not dismantle it

Peter Feaver, a political science professor at Duke University, said Pompeo fitted within a team that was “mostly drawn from the hawkish wing of the foreign policy establishment” – in contrast to the “unconventional” Trump.