



US denies concession over Trump meeting with Kim

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The White House insisted Donald Trump's decision to break with decades of precedent and grant a personal meeting with Kim Jong Un was not a concession to Pyongyang, claiming it showed its policy of isolating his regime was working.

Washington has repeatedly shunned requests from North Korean leaders for fear of legitimising its autocratic rule. Both Mr Kim and his father, longtime dictator Kim Jong Il, sought an audience with US counterparts to enhance their standing.

But the Trump administration said the agreement to meet, which aides said was a snap decision made personally by the president, was not a change in policy and would not be accompanied by a loosening of sanctions on Pyongyang

"The North Koreans are coming to the table despite the United States making zero concessions," said Mike Pence, the vice-president. "Our resolve is undeterred and our policy remains the same."

Despite the insistence that US policy had not shifted, analysts said a meeting would mark a stark reversal in the approach to Pyongyang pursued by successive Democratic and Republican US administrations.

It also comes just months after the two men exchanged angry insults following the resumption of nuclear and missile tests by Mr Kim, sending shudders through the region as both leaders threatened nuclear war.

Mr Trump had previously belittled efforts to reach out to the Kim regime for talks — including those by his own secretary of state, Rex Tillerson. Mr Tillerson made clear on a tour of Africa that the reversal was Mr Trump's alone, saying it was “a decision the president took himself”.

Senior administration officials who gathered to meet South Korean envoys at the White House on Thursday had not expected Mr Trump to attend himself until a day later, making the on-the-spot decision to accept the invitation even more unexpected.

Evan Medeiros, former Asia director at the National Security Council under then-president Barack Obama, said agreeing to the meeting delivered Mr Kim a diplomatic win and was a “mistake”. “This move is vanity over strategy,” said Mr Medeiros. “It validates and advances Kim's goal of being recognised as a de facto nuclear state. You don't give away a presidential meeting for nothing. What did we get for this? Nothing.”

Even though those concerns were echoed in several capitals, both China and Japan — the two regional powers who, along with South Korea, have the most at stake in the stand-off — said they welcomed the summit, which is to be held by May.

Shinzo Abe, the Japanese prime minister whom Mr Trump hastily called after deciding to meet Mr Kim, announced an unplanned trip to Washington next month. Japan, which has been targeted by several of North Korea's missile tests, fears getting cut out of a negotiation between Seoul, Washington and Pyongyang.

The White House's contention that it had not made any concessions was borne out, in part, by South Korean officials, who said Mr Kim would not object to next month's military exercises between US and South Korean forces. Previously, China had urged the US to cancel the annual exercises as a way to entice Pyongyang to end its nuclear testing.

The South Korean envoys also said Mr Kim is willing to commit to de-nuclearisation and would suspend nuclear and missile testing while the talks were under way. Mr Tillerson said it came “as a little bit of a surprise to us” how open Mr Kim was to agreeing to the meeting without concessions.

“At this point we're not even talking about negotiations,” said a senior administration official. “What we're talking about is an invitation . . . to meet face-to-face.”

Still, in Washington some within Mr Trump's own party expressed nervousness. Republican Marco Rubio, the Florida senator, said talks would be “harmful” unless the US stipulates preconditions that include maintaining America's alliance with South Korea and never recognising Pyongyang as a nuclear power.

Administration officials are scrambling to consider how and where to set up the meeting. “That will take some weeks before we get all that worked out,” said Mr Tillerson.

Eric Gomez, east Asian defence expert at Cato Institute, said the Trump administration has “hardly any diplomats with Korea experience”. The administration has yet to successfully nominate an ambassador to South Korea, and Joseph Yun, a long-time Korea envoy, is leaving the state department.

“Trump needs to get his diplomatic team in place to make the most of these talks,” said Mr Gomez, adding that it will be difficult at such short notice.

But a senior US administration official said the president was trying to avoid the pitfalls of the past and bypass low-level talks that do not deliver results.

“Kim Jong Un is the one person who is able to make decisions under their uniquely authoritarian, or totalitarian, system,” said the official. “[Mr Trump] expects North Korea to start putting action to these words that were conveyed via the South Koreans.”