

FEATURE



INDEPENDENT

China's Xi to head to North Korea for the first time in 7 years – what's at stake?



Arpan Rai

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Ties between [China and North Korea](#) are at a "new historical starting point", Chinese president Xi Jinping was quoted as saying in a

comment published in the neighbour's state media [before his arrival in Pyongyang](#) for a rare summit with leader Kim Jong Un.

[Xi flew out of the Chinese capital](#) on a special plane and landed in Pyongyang on Monday with an entourage that includes his wife Peng Liyuan, foreign minister Wang Yi, and top Communist Party official Cai Qi, China's official Xinhua news agency reported.

The trip underscores Pyongyang's strategy of forging closer ties with its traditional Cold War allies, while [Beijing](#), North Korea's vital economic lifeline, is expected to reassert its influence over a government that has recently gravitated towards [Russia](#).

Xi was given a red-carpet welcome from Kim and his wife Ri Sol Ju, alongside a guard of honour while children presented bouquets of flowers, Chinese state media showed. A military band played both national anthems in a ceremony at the capital's Kim Il Sung Square, the site of past military parades and state celebrations.

A 21-gun salute was fired as spectators dwarfed by huge portraits of the leaders chanted slogans and released colourful balloons, Xinhua said.

The three-day visit marks the first direct encounter between the two leaders since [Kim's trip to Beijing](#) for a World War II event in September 2025. The high-stakes discussions are expected to address a range of geopolitical and economic objectives for both nations.

What Kim Jong Un stands to gain

After a period of prioritising Russia, which has seen [North Korea dispatching thousands of troops](#) and munitions to support Moscow's invasion of [Ukraine](#), Kim is now seeking to strengthen ties with [China](#). This move is aimed at further breaking out of international isolation, embracing the concept of a "new Cold War," and positioning Pyongyang as part of a united front against the US.

"Pyongyang's leaders usually favour bilateral meetings with other leaders, and eschew

multilateral forums. But Kim followed Xi's script, reviving a relationship that had grown somewhat frosty, and is now being rewarded," Chris Green, senior consultant on the Korean peninsula at the Crisis Group, tells *The Independent*.

"The visit will be rich in symbolism. We should expect highly choreographed displays of unity and shared purpose that reinforce the message that China-North Korea ties remain strong. What remains unclear is whether the



Historically, North Korea has maintained an "equidistance" policy between Beijing and Moscow, a strategy employed by previous leaders to maximise gains from its two primary benefactors. While he is receiving crucial support from Russia for backing its war effort, likely including military technologies and aid, experts suggest Kim cannot fulfil his promise to elevate the living standards of his populace without substantial economic assistance from China.

symbolism will be accompanied by any substantive announcements or concrete deliverables," he says.

Koh Yu-hwan, a former president of Seoul's Institute of National Unification, explains: "North Korea vows to maintain a self-reliant economic system and focus on [advancing its nuclear capabilities](#), but in reality it's nearly impossible to raise living standards by mobilising internal resources alone."

Potential discussions during the Kim-Xi meeting could include the resumption of [Chinese tourism to North Korea](#) and the opening of a bridge over the Yalu River, which has remained unused for years since its completion. The leaders may also explore joint economic development projects in the border regions shared by North Korea, China, and Russia.

The visit also raises questions about whether Kim will leverage his enhanced diplomatic standing to re-engage with Washington. His previous talks with US president [Donald Trump](#) collapsed in 2019 over disagreements regarding sanctions on North Korea.

Pyongyang has since rebuffed offers from Trump to resume negotiations after the American president entered his second term, insisting that Washington first abandon its demand for North Korea's denuclearisation as a precondition. Kim met Xi before his summits with Donald Trump in Singapore and Vietnam in 2018 and 2019, moves widely interpreted as efforts to bolster his bargaining position. Park Won Gon, a professor at Seoul's Ewha University, noted: "From North Korea's perspective, there's belief that having China's backing provides a sense of security and confidence when seeking to improve relations with the United States."

Xi Jinping's objectives

For China, the visit presents an opportunity to draw a traditional ally closer into its sphere of influence, potentially through offers of economic incentives and food aid – traditional forms of assistance Beijing has provided to North Korea.



Beijing also appears to be adopting a more pragmatic approach to Kim's clear nuclear ambitions.

With his visit, Xi is asserting Beijing's effort to project strength and looking "every inch the kingmaker" after hosting and meeting the biggest leaders in the world.

"In the span of three weeks, Chinese president Xi Jinping has hosted Donald Trump in Beijing, received Vladimir Putin, and is now poised to visit Kim Jong Un," says Allen Carlson, an associate professor of government at Cornell University and an expert on Chinese foreign policy.

"In each of these cases Xi's counterparts appear to be living in his world: Trump went to Beijing with historic-low approval ratings and seeking a trade deal; Putin came mired in Ukraine with an economy surviving on Chinese trade; and Kim Jong Un governs the world's most isolated state. In such a company Xi looks every inch the kingmaker," he says.

Mike Chinoy, a former CNN journalist and author, suggests: "I think the Chinese are privately a little uneasy at the embrace of Kim Jong Un and [Vladimir Putin](#), that the North Koreans have really gravitated very heavily towards the Russians. Part of Xi Jinping's goal is to correct the balance."

Xi's trip is his first overseas engagement in 2026 as he has become increasingly selective about state visits since the Covid-19 pandemic.

Seong-Hyon Lee, a senior fellow at the George HW Bush Foundation for US-China Relations, says: "The trip ensures no one can reshape the peninsula's security architecture without his concurrence."

During Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi's visit to Pyongyang in April, observers noted the conspicuous absence of the word "denuclearisation" from the official statement – a departure from China's usual stance advocating for the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula.

Lee elaborates: "The most telling sign of the visit may be a silence: if China's official readout omits the word 'denuclearisation,' Beijing has effectively accepted North Korea as a nuclear state, folding the issue into its broader buffer strategy against the US."

In return, China may seek greater access to the estuary of the Tumen River, which forms part of the border between the two nations, and navigational rights in waters off the Korean Peninsula's east coast.



Figure 1
Location of the Tumen River basin

from Wikipedia

From Wikipedia

William Yang, a senior North East Asia analyst at the Crisis Group says: “As North Korea builds closer ties with Russia, China seeks to use Xi’s trip to reassert its influence over Pyongyang and safeguard its strategic interests in North East Asia.”

Additionally, Xi is looking to smoothen out domestic rifts. “Behind the diplomatic theatre, China faces a prolonged property market collapse that has wiped out household savings,

stubbornly weak consumer demand, and youth unemployment approaching 17 per cent. A generation of young Chinese has embraced ‘tang ping,’ or ‘lying flat’ as their answer to a system that no longer delivers. Xi understands that foreign spectacle is most necessary when domestic conditions are most anxious,” says professor Carlson.

“The world’s axis may be tilting toward Beijing. Whether it stays there is a different question.”