

Kim invites South Korean President to Pyongyang

Building ties:South Korean President Moon Jae-in with Kim Jong-un's sister, Kim Yo-jong, in Seoul.AP

North Korean leader Kim Jong-un invited the South's President Moon Jae-in for a summit in Pyongyang on Saturday, Seoul said, even as the U.S. warned against falling for Pyongyang's Olympic charm offensive.

The invitation, delivered by Mr. Kim's visiting sister Kim Yo-jong, said he was willing to meet the South's leader "at the earliest date possible", said a spokesperson for the presidential Blue House.

An inter-Korean summit would be the third of its kind, after Mr. Kim's father and predecessor Kim Jong-il met the South's Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun in 2000 and 2007 respectively, both of them in Pyongyang.

Mr. Moon did not immediately accept the invitation. But the prospect could sow division between the dovish leader, who has long argued for engagement with the nuclear-armed North to bring it to the negotiating table, and U.S. President Donald Trump, who last year traded personal insults and threats of war with Mr. Kim.

Washington insists that Pyongyang — which is under multiple sets of UN Security Council sanctions — must take concrete steps towards denuclearisation before any negotiations can happen.

After months of silence on whether it would even take part in the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics in the South, the Games have driven a rapprochement on the peninsula, while the North's athletes, performers and delegates have dominated the headlines.

Mr. Moon met Ms. Kim Yo-jong — a close confidante of her brother and the first member of the dynasty to set foot in the South since the Korean War — and the North's ceremonial head of state Kim Yong-nam at the Blue House in Seoul.

"We hope to see you in Pyongyang at an early date," Ms. Kim Yo-jong told Mr. Moon after delivering a personal letter from her brother, according to officials.

Reunification prospects

"We want to see President Moon become a protagonist in opening a new chapter for reunification and leave great footprints in history," she said.

The two Koreas have been divided since the conflict ended in a ceasefire in 1953, and the democratic South has risen to become the world's 11th-largest economy, while the North has stagnated under the Kim family's rule.

The offer could put Mr. Moon in a delicate diplomatic quandary, but he avoided a direct response, said his spokesperson Kim Eui-kyeom, and called instead for efforts to "create the right conditions" for a visit.

Mr. Moon urged Pyongyang to actively seek an "absolutely necessary" dialogue with Washington, he said.

Tensions between the two soared last year as Pyongyang launched intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of reaching the U.S. mainland and carried out by far its most powerful nuclear test to date.

‘Propaganda charade’

“The U.S. will not allow the propaganda charade by the North Korean regime to go unchallenged on the world stage,” U.S. Vice President Mike Pence tweeted on Saturday. “The world can NOT turn a blind eye to the oppression & threats of the Kim regime.”he said. Analysts believe the Olympic diplomatic drive by the North — which put its ICBMs on show at a military parade in Pyongyang on Thursday — seeks to loosen the sanctions against it and undermine the alliance between Seoul and Washington.

They expressed scepticism on the prospects for a summit, with professor Koh Yu-hwan of Dongguk University not expecting one “in the foreseeable future.”

The North Korean delegation then took the bullet train to Gangneung, the venue of all ice competitions, and attended a banquet hosted by the South’s Unification Minister Cho Myong-gyon. “Although it’s my first time here, it doesn’t feel strange. It’s not unfamiliar,” Ms. Kim Yo-jung said when asked by one of the South Koreans at the dinner how she feels on the other side of the border.

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