

XI'S VISIT IS AN ATTEMPT TO INFLUENCE THE KOREAS

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Chinese President Xi Jinping's gambit of visiting North Korea has to be seen against the backdrop of the escalating China-US trade war and US President Donald Trump's lack of success in talks with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. Clearly, Mr Xi is signalling that China continues to have a strong relationship with the reclusive nation and will play a key role in any negotiations aimed at resolving the situation on the Korean peninsula. This is also evident from Mr Xi's comments in an editorial published by a state-run North Korean newspaper — that China will fully support Mr Kim's regime and engage with other stakeholders to expedite progress in dialogue on the issues of the Korean peninsula.

China remains the biggest trading partner of North Korea and has even been accused of providing clandestine aid that helps Pyongyang overcome the impact of crippling United Nations sanctions. Despite the numerous claims of the US administration since Mr Trump began engaging Mr Kim, evidence uncovered by Western intelligence agencies suggests North Korea has done little to roll back its secretive nuclear weapons and missile programmes. Amid signs that the China-US trade war is unlikely to be resolved any time soon, Mr Xi is indicating that Beijing will retain its influence on the Korean peninsula and must be involved in future negotiations.

But the Chinese side runs the risk of emboldening the North Korean regime, which has resumed tests of smaller weapons and spoken about "truly undesired consequences" if the Trump administration doesn't show more flexibility in negotiations. All the stakeholders, especially South Korea and Japan, will be hoping that Mr Xi will be able to persuade Mr Kim to refrain from any reckless steps and to work towards the goal of denuclearisation.

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