

Xi's backing will add to Kim's confidence

The reclusive leader of North Korea, Kim Jong Un, has proved this month that he is capable of springing a surprise or two on the international arena. A little more than a fortnight after he sent an invitation for talks to US President, Donald Trump, through South Korean officials, Kim travelled to China in an armoured train to meet President Xi Jinping. Mr Kim's three-day secret visit to Beijing was his first trip abroad and his first meeting with a head of state since he assumed power in 2011. Mr Kim travelled to Beijing at Mr Xi's invitation, a move that reflects China's keenness to shape the narrative ahead of a crucial summit of the leaders of North and South Korea next month, and the planned meeting of Kim and Mr Trump in May.

For long, China has looked at the North Korean regime as a counter to the close defence and security cooperation between the US and South Korea. But the North's increasingly belligerent and relentless nuclear and missile tests, including the reported testing of a hydrogen bomb last September, increased the concerns of the world community and caused considerable embarrassment for China, often seen as the only country with any sort of leverage over North Korea.

Finding itself in an awkward position, Beijing has increased pressure on Pyongyang to end its weapons tests while seeking to assuage its ally by linking the suspension of weapons tests to the suspension of military drills by the US and North Korea. It remains to be seen what role, if any, China had in persuading Kim to reach out to the US, but it would not be surprising if North Korea made the move at the prompting of a top Chinese leader like Mr Xi. There are even reports that footage aired on Chinese state-run television showed Kim taking notes as Mr Xi spoke during their meeting, and that the Chinese president spoke of the need to "strengthen strategic communication". China's backing at this stage will only add to Mr Kim's confidence, given his unchallenged grip on power and the North's nuclear and missile programmes. It is this confidence that the US should focus on ahead of the meeting between Mr Kim and Mr Trump. The US president, who has not surrounded himself with the finest of advisors in recent months, may not find it very easy to negotiate with Mr Kim, who has already set conditions for the denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula, including "synchronous measures" by the US and South Korea.

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