

Trump in Japan as Asia trip begins

Past and present: U.S. President Donald Trump and First Lady Melania Trump lay a wreath at the USS Arizona Memorial on Friday. AFP/JIM WATSON

U.S. President Donald Trump headed to Japan on the first stop of his five-nation tour of Asia on Saturday, looking to present a united front with the Japanese against North Korea as tensions run high over Pyongyang's nuclear and missile tests.

Mr. Trump, who is on a 12-day trip, is to speak to U.S. and Japanese forces at Yokota air base shortly after arriving in Japan on Sunday and looked to stress the importance of the alliance to regional security.

Ballistic missile tests by North Korea and its sixth and largest nuclear test, in defiance of UN Security Council resolutions, have exacerbated the most critical international challenge of Mr. Trump's presidency.

Aerial drills conducted over South Korea by two U.S. strategic bombers have raised tensions in recent days. In a display of golf diplomacy, Mr. Trump is to play a round of golf with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. The two leaders also played together in Florida earlier this year.

Mr. Trump will also have a state call with the Imperial Family at Akasaka Palace during his visit. Mr. Abe and Mr. Trump will meet families of Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea.

Joined by his wife Melania on part of the trip, Mr. Trump's tour of Asia is the longest by an American president since George H.W. Bush in 1992. Besides Japan, he will visit South Korea, China, Vietnam and the Philippines. Mr. Trump extended the trip by a day on Friday when he agreed to participate in a summit of East Asian nations in Manila.

His trip got off to a colourful start in Hawaii. He was taken by boat out to the USS Arizona Memorial, where lies the Second World War ship that was sunk by the Japanese during the Pearl Harbor attack in 1941. The Trumps tossed white flower petals into the waters at the memorial in honour of those who died at Pearl Harbor. Mr. Trump's trip is to be dominated by trade and how to muster more international pressure on North Korea to give up nuclear weapons.

"We'll be talking about trade," Trump told reporters at the White House on Friday. "We'll be talking about obviously North Korea. We'll be enlisting the help of a lot of people and countries and we'll see what happens. But I think we're going to have a very successful trip. There is a lot of good will."

A centerpiece of the trip will be a visit to the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Danang, Vietnam, where he will deliver a speech in support of a free and open Indo-Pacific region, which is seen as offering a bulwark in response to expansionist Chinese policies.

No talks, says N. Korea

Meanwhile, North Korea ruled out talks and threatened to increase its nuclear arsenal in a fresh warning to Mr. Trump's administration on Saturday.

The North's state-run KCNA news agency said in a commentary that the U.S. should be disabused of the "absurd idea" that Pyongyang would succumb to international sanctions and give up its nuclear weapons, adding that it is in "the final stage for completing nuclear deterrence". "It

had better stop daydreaming of denuclearisation talks with us”, said the commentary titled “Stop dreaming a daydream”.

“Our self-defensive nuclear treasure sword will be sharpened evermore unless the US hostile policy toward the DPRK is abolished once and for all”, it said, using an abbreviation for the official name of North Korea.

Also, some 500 protesters took to the streets in Seoul Saturday, chanting slogans and waving banners as they accused Mr. Trump of bringing the Korean peninsula to the brink of war. “No Trump, No War”, read one of the banners, while others portrayed the U.S. President wearing a Nazi uniform.

Nearby, a rival group of some 100 Trump supporters, including many military veterans, chanted: “Welcome to Korea, We believe in Trump”.

Mr. Trump, who dismissed direct talks with Pyongyang as “waste of time”, will meet with President Moon Jae-In, who came to power early this year advocating for engagement with Pyongyang, a stance denounced as “appeasement” by Mr. Trump.

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