

WORLD

# North Korea's Kim to Appeal for Economic Relief at Summit With Putin

Talks are meant to increase pressure on Trump administration to soften its position on Pyongyang's denuclearization



North Korean leader Kim Jong Un met Wednesday with Russian officials in Vladivostok, Russia. Mr. Kim is scheduled to hold talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin on Thursday. PHOTO: KCNA/KNS/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

*By Thomas Grove*

April 24, 2019 10:08 p.m. ET

VLADIVOSTOK, Russia—North Korean leader Kim Jong Un is expected to appeal to Russian President Vladimir Putin for economic relief Thursday in talks meant to revive old ties between Moscow and Pyongyang and boost pressure on the Trump administration to soften its stance in negotiations over the reclusive state's denuclearization.

The talks come as both countries' ties with the U.S. have frayed. North Korean pressure on Washington has crescendoed following a failed meeting with President Trump in Hanoi in February. Since then, North Korea has been found to be restoring a missile launch site it claimed to be dismantling, threatened to exit nuclear talks and tested guided tactical weapons.

The summit is the first between the two leaders in Mr. Kim's seven years as leader. While his grandfather and father, who visited Russia in 2011 shortly before his death, kept the Kremlin close, the younger Mr. Kim has increasingly sought ties with his country's biggest economic partner, China. A previous attempt at arranging a first meeting with Mr. Putin fell through.

Mr. Kim's renewed interest in Russia serves two purposes: It signals to Mr. Trump that Pyongyang has other partners if Washington doesn't soften its line on denuclearization and, secondly, it gives Mr. Kim a hedge against its overwhelming economic ties with China, if talks with Mr. Trump do fall through.

"Kim is here to show that he has friends in Moscow and that he can maneuver between not only Washington and Beijing," said Fyodor Lukyanov, head of a Kremlin defense and foreign policy advisory body.

The leader, who was met with fanfare reserved for few visitors to Russia, is expected to ask at the closed-door meeting with Mr. Putin for economic aid, food and medicine for his country, which has increasingly struggled in recent months with sanctions. He is also expected to probe the possibility with Mr. Putin of getting around the United Nations measures that Moscow signed on to in 2017.

"Kim will try to squeeze as much as possible out of the talks, because right now the North Korean economy seems to be really going downhill," said Andrei Lankov, a Russian expert on North Korea and a professor at Kookmin University in Seoul.

"He will also probably try to push the Russian government and Vladimir Putin himself to find some way around sanctions, but I don't think he'll succeed," Mr. Lankov said.

Mr. Putin is unlikely to give much in negotiations. Moscow has already said the summit won't end with any joint declaration or statement. The one upside the talks hold for the Kremlin leader, keenly sensitive to Russia's role on the global stage, is to be seen on par with Washington and Beijing.

Mr. Kim will likely be welcomed Thursday with the Soviet-inspired formalities that are familiar territory to him. Mr. Kim was visibly ill at ease with Mr. Trump's informal off-the-cuff style speaking with press at a previous summit. No press conference is expected between the two leaders in Vladivostok and their public comments are expected to remain relegated to formal greetings made during state visits to Russia.

Despite the meeting with Mr. Putin, North Korea still hopes for another third round of talks with Mr. Trump, said Mr. Lankov.

Talks between Messrs. Trump and Kim foundered in February. U.S. officials accused North Korea of demanding billions of dollars of sanction relief without providing sufficient steps toward denuclearization.

Pyongyang says its requests were modest and focused only on relief for its struggling civilian economy. The U.S. wants another conference, but national security adviser John Bolton said another summit wouldn't happen without serious commitments from Mr. Kim to that end.

Russian lawmakers clamored Wednesday for easing sanctions on North Korea, a view shared by a large part of the Russian political elite who maintain Soviet-era sympathies for the country. Last year, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov praised what he called “Pyongyang’s demonstrated readiness for cooperation and positive movement.”

“North Korea’s steps on the track of gradual disarmament should be done in parallel with a weakening of sanctions,” he said, speaking at the U.N.

Washington has criticized Russia for spotty implementation of sanctions, including through ongoing operations of joint ventures between North Korea and Russian companies. Russia’s implementation of sanctions on North Korea walk a fine line. Russian officials sometimes turn a blind eye to trade they hope will avoid economic collapse on Russia’s southeast border while enforcing the measures enough to maintain pressure for disarmament.

“Russia abides by sanctions as it sees fit and doesn’t abide as it sees fit,” said Mr. Lukyanov.

Moscow’s economic ties with North Korea collapsed following the fall of the Soviet Union, but grew throughout the 1990s and 2000s. At the end of 2017, Russia became North Korea’s second largest trading partner although Russia represents only 1.4% of North Korea’s trade, while China comprises 94.8%.

U.N. sanctions have made a dent in Russia-North Korean trade, which last year amounted to \$34 million, a 56% decrease from 2017, when the turnover was \$78 million, according to data from the Russian Federal Customs Service.

Russia is also slowly winding down the number of North Korean guest workers in its country. Under the U.N. measures Russia is forbidden from issuing fresh invitations to North Korean guest workers who work across the country in textile factories, the lumber industry and other sectors.

From some 24,000 workers in Russia at the end of 2017, there are currently around 10,000 left, North Korean data shows, and Russia must send them all home by the end of this year. Before sanctions, guest workers abroad, most of whom send their money back home to North Korea, earned Mr. Kim’s government some \$2 billion annually.

—*Ann Simmons in Moscow contributed to this article.*