

A Trio of Unlikely Partners: Kim, Xi and Trump

By **Mark Landler**

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WASHINGTON — President Trump revels in his friendships with the leaders of China and North Korea, but can seem jealous when his two friends spend time with each other. He once griped that President Xi Jinping of China encouraged a visiting Kim Jong-un of North Korea to take a harder line in his nuclear diplomacy with the United States.

So when the Chinese president announced a surprise visit to North Korea this week, Mr. Trump reacted by rushing to nail down his own date with Mr. Xi — an “extended meeting” in Osaka, Japan, a week later. “Had a very good telephone conversation with President Xi,” an eager Mr. Trump said on Twitter.

It was only the latest move in what has become a kind of strongmen’s dance, involving a trio of unlikely partners whose motives for getting together are deeply divergent but whose interests occasionally harmonize. Their phone calls, letters and face-to-face meetings reveal how the power balance among the three fluctuates, depending on the geopolitical winds and their own domestic political circumstances.

Mr. Trump’s call with Mr. Xi — initiated by Mr. Trump, according to China’s state media — suggested he did not want to be left on the sideline in a negotiation that he views as one of his marquee foreign-policy projects. But it

also turbocharged the stock market on the day the president formally opened his re-election bid, since investors viewed it as a sign that the United States and China might finally settle their debilitating trade war.

If anything, Mr. Xi faces even greater pressure than Mr. Trump from the tariffs, not to mention the angry protesters who have taken to the streets of Hong Kong. And for Mr. Kim, who is still nursing the wounds of his failed summit meeting with Mr. Trump in February, the Chinese president's long-sought visit, which began Thursday, is another step in his return to the world stage.

Given all these crosscurrents, it seemed inconceivable that the timing of Mr. Xi's visit to Pyongyang, the North Korean capital, was accidental.

Administration officials said they expected the Chinese leader to try to make headway with Mr. Kim on the nuclear talks and then use that as leverage with Mr. Trump in the trade negotiations, when they meet at the Group of 20 gathering in Osaka.

Mr. Xi himself stoked those expectations, publishing a rare article on Wednesday in the North Korean ruling party's official newspaper, Rodong Sinmun, in which he said China was willing to draw up a "grand plan" with the North Koreans that would "realize permanent peace" on the Korean Peninsula.

"If Xi can't say something to Trump on trade, it would suggest that his visit to Pyongyang was for naught," said Jonathan D. Pollack, an expert on China and North Korea at the Brookings Institution. "Xi, like everyone else in Asia, is trying to reposition himself in light of a very unpredictable American president."

Yet on both fronts, the Chinese president faces an uphill battle.

Mr. Kim's talks with Mr. Trump in Hanoi, Vietnam, broke down after it was clear there was a chasm between the North Korean and American positions — one that China can hardly bridge. And while there are also signs that the trade war is causing economic damage in the United States, particularly among farmers and manufacturing workers, the president himself seems sanguine that tariffs are a political winner, allowing him to continue to drive a hard bargain with China.

There is no question Mr. Xi's position has weakened since May 2018, when he played host to Mr. Kim in the Chinese city of Dalian a month before Mr. Trump met the North Korean leader for the first time in Singapore.



President Trump departing Air Force One at Joint Base Andrews. Mr. Trump reacted to the Chinese president's surprise visit to North Korea by rushing to nail down his own date with Mr. Xi.

Erin Schaff/The New York Times

At that time, Mr. Trump had yet to impose tariffs on hundreds of billions of dollars of Chinese exports. And he was counting on Mr. Xi's support to give teeth to United Nations sanctions against the North. Mr. Trump said he suspected that Mr. Xi, whom he described as a "world-class poker player," had advised Mr. Kim to play hardball, in part to give Beijing leverage in its trade talks with Washington.

"There was a different attitude by the North Korean folks after that meeting," he said. "I can't say that I'm happy about it."

Now, Mr. Xi is dealing with a Chinese economy that is flagging, in part because Mr. Trump imposed the tariffs, and an unprecedented show of defiance in Hong Kong, where the Chinese government has been blindsided by enormous demonstrations against the local government's proposed extradition law.

That, as much as any competitiveness with Mr. Trump, could explain Mr. Xi's decision to become the first Chinese leader to visit Pyongyang in 14 years.

"He's looking for ways to bolster his standing," said Kurt M. Campbell, who served as assistant secretary of state for East Asian affairs under President Barack Obama. "It does secure his stature and standing as a leader, and there aren't many other places he can do that."

Mr. Xi, analysts said, will scarcely relish his visit to North Korea. He is staying barely two days and avoided scheduling the trip on dates that would have had greater historic resonance, like June 25, the date in 1950 that North Korea invaded the South, or Oct. 19, the date in 1950 when China entered the war on the North's side.

"There's not a lot of love here, to say the least," Mr. Pollack said. "In that sense, it is something of a minimalist visit, though Kim will try to milk it as much as possible, and Xi might try to milk it for his own purposes."

While Mr. Xi has been far less fulsome than Mr. Trump about his personal relationship with Mr. Kim, the United States and China are largely in sync on North Korea. Both want Mr. Kim to avoid provocations like nuclear tests or missile launches. Both have supported draconian sanctions as a way to pressure him. American officials have said they believe Mr. Xi can play a constructive role with Mr. Kim.

What is less clear is how much good will that will buy Mr. Xi with Mr. Trump on trade. Early in his presidency, Mr. Trump offered to delay some of his most aggressive moves as long as China was helpful in pressuring the North. But after Singapore, where he claimed to have developed his own rapport with Mr. Kim, he abandoned that linkage, imposing a 25 percent tariff on \$34 billion worth of Chinese goods.

Mr. Trump's relationship with Mr. Kim has waxed and waned as well. The North Korean leader recently sent Mr. Trump a letter that the president described as "beautiful." But it contained no proposals for how to restart the stalled negotiations over its nuclear program.

Mr. Trump's rally Tuesday in Florida may have offered a glimpse of his current feelings for his two friends. He said nothing about Mr. Kim, with whom, he once said, he had fallen in love. But he did say he had spoken at length with Mr. Xi — "terrific president, a great leader of China."

"We'll see what happens," he added, "but we're either going to have a good deal and a fair deal or we're not going to have a deal at all, and that's O.K., too."

Jane Perlez contributed reporting from Beijing, and Peter Baker from Washington.

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