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BEIJING AND SEOUL

Kim Jong Un's visit to Beijing clears up some questions and raises others

ON MARCH 28th a sandstorm descended on Beijing like a chemical-weapons attack, sending pollution-monitoring equipment off the charts and reducing visibility to a few metres. The same day the Chinese government announced that Kim Jong Un, North Korea's leader, had met his Chinese opposite number, Xi Jinping, in Beijing, sending diplomatic speculation off the charts and leaving the prospects for talks about North Korea's nuclear weapons as hard to discern as ever.

Mr Kim's visit was shrouded in secrecy from the moment an armoured train, similar to the one his father and grandfather used for foreign trips, pulled into Beijing station, unannounced. The mystery continued throughout his two-day stay, Mr Kim's first meeting with any head of state and his first known foreign trip since he took power in 2011. The visit was not even confirmed to have taken place until he had returned to Pyongyang. But if it added new puzzles to the geopolitics of North-East Asia, it also made a few things clearer.

The trip affirms China's central role in keeping the peace in the region after a flurry of diplomatic activity had shifted the focus to South Korea and the United States. Relations between China and what it used to refer to as its "little brother" have been severely strained by Mr Kim's nuclear-weapons programme. Last year Mr Xi gave

a warning that "no country can afford to retreat into self-isolation"—widely seen as a dig at Mr Kim. When the Chinese president sent a special envoy to North Korea, Mr Kim refused to meet him. But straining does not mean breaking. This time the tone of Mr Xi's speech of welcome was emollient. Xinhua, China's news agency, quoted him saying "we speak highly of this visit" and referring to "the major efforts that North Korea has made" towards improving the situation on the Korean peninsula. In communist diplomacy, it seems, old habits die hard.

Back on track

For Mr Xi, the visit may come as something of a relief. The Chinese were alarmed in early March when Mr Kim offered to meet Donald Trump for direct talks, and the American president accepted. They feared being shut out of negotiations and being left to face Mr Trump's threats of a trade war without anything to offer on North Korea. Optimists in Beijing now hope that, in the wake of Mr Kim's visit, Mr Xi may be able to limit some of the risks of the forthcoming summit with Mr Trump. The hope is that, if talks go awry (which seems all too possible), China is more likely to step in to help. Just after the summit, China announced that one of its top foreign-policy officials, Yang Jiechi, would visit South Ko-

rea for talks—taken as further evidence of Chinese engagement.

Seen from the North Korean perspective, Mr Kim's visit looks like an attempt to reassure himself that his country's most important ally and main financial backer remains behind him as he begins a risky period of diplomacy. In late April Mr Kim is due to hold a summit meeting with South Korea's president, Moon Jae-in, to be followed by the one with Mr Trump, probably in May. In Beijing he confirmed that both meetings would take place. The trip came days before North and South Korean officials were scheduled to make final preparations for the summit with Mr Moon. Mr Kim cannot afford to be wrangling with China just now.

His comments in Beijing on the denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula also raised hopes that he may be moderating his stance somewhat. Xinhua quoted him saying that, if South Korea and America responded to his efforts "in good faith" and built a "peaceful and stable atmosphere", then the issue of denuclearisation could be resolved. He told Mr Xi he is still committed to achieving that goal.

But his language does not differ much from the North's previous public comments. To North Korea, building a "peaceful and stable atmosphere" means the withdrawal of American troops from the peninsula and the end of America's military alliance with South Korea and Japan, which are all non-starters. Nevertheless, the Trump administration cited Mr Kim's visit to Beijing as further evidence that America's campaign of maximum pressure was "creating the appropriate atmosphere for dialogue with North Korea". The sandstorm that blanketed Beijing seems a suitable image for that atmosphere. ■