

International

China: The not-so invisible hand in US-N Korea talks

China has regularly played diplomatic wingman to North Korea

BEIJING: By hosting North Korean leader Kim Jong Un for a fourth time, China has signaled again that it will not be sidelined in the diplomatic dance between its Cold War-era ally and Washington. With another nuclear summit looming between Kim and US President Donald Trump, a meeting between President Xi Jinping and the North Korean leader was inevitable, according to analysts. It has become something of a ritual: Last year, Kim briefed Xi before and after his historic summits with Trump and South Korean President Moon Jae-in.

China, which wouldn't want to be left out in the cold in any settlement, has worked to improve relations with its neighbor, which deteriorated after Beijing backed UN sanctions against North Korea. While Beijing has been angered by Kim's nuclear tests, it would not be happy to see its decades-old ally move closer to the United States at China's expense.

"(China) does not think their interests would be threatened by better inter-Korean relations, whereas the possibility of a North Korean alignment with the US, even potentially, against China, I think it's Beijing's nightmare," Bonnie Glaser, a senior adviser at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), told AFP. "I don't think they believe it's impossible under President Trump... and this is one of drivers for Xi Jinping to keep Kim Jong Un close," Glaser said, noting that Xi reached out "very quickly" after Kim started engaging with Moon.

China has played diplomatic wingman to North Korea, even loaning Kim an Air China jet to travel to his meeting with Trump in Singapore last year. Beijing

is intent on keeping Pyongyang within its sphere of influence — the North acts as a buffer state, keeping the 28,500 US troops in South Korea far from China's borders. Following their meeting in Singapore where Kim and Trump signed a vaguely-worded document pledging work towards the "denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula", progress has stalled, with Pyongyang and Washington unable to agree on what that means.

Security guarantee

North Korea also needs to stay close to its Korea War ally if diplomacy fails. Trump's withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal and Libyan leader Moamer Kadhafi's ouster after giving up his own weapons program are not distant memories. China could provide economic, political and security guarantees to North Korea in denuclearisation talks, said Hua Po, a Beijing-based independent political commentator.

"If the Korean Peninsula declares itself to be a nuclear-free zone, China can make a nuclear security commitment to North Korea," he said. As Pyongyang's only major ally, Kim is hoping Xi can push for relief from the multiple sets of sanctions imposed on it over its weapons programs. The US wants them to remain in place until gives up its arms, something Pyongyang has made no public promise to do.

"North Korea is looking for something where... they would be rewarded for meeting certain goals, rather than sanctions being lifted only after CVID (complete, verifiable and irreversible destruction) of their nuclear facilities, which is what the US is



BEIJING: This January 8, 2019 picture released by North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) on January 10 shows North Korea's leader Kim Jong-Un (C) receiving a bouquet of flowers from a Chinese girl upon his arrival at the Beijing station. —AFP

adamant on," said Graham Ong-Webb, a research fellow at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore. According to the official Xinhua news agency, Xi said he hopes North Korea and the United States will "meet each other halfway".

China is "much more pragmatic concerning North Korea's denuclearisation path providing they do not provoke or upturn regional stability," Beijing-based analyst Tom Fowdy told AFP. "If Washington will not give him (Kim) economic concessions, China in a subtle way almost certainly will... albeit with the ex-

pectation he does make progress and does not return to belligerence."

Kim's grandfather Kim Il Sung was also adept at playing off Communist rivals Beijing and Moscow against each other during the Cold War to extract concessions from both. Yet it appears the overtures so far have been one-way: after four visits to China, Xi has yet to visit Pyongyang. North Korean state media reported Thursday that Xi accepted Kim's invite to visit, but this was conspicuously absent from Chinese media reports. —AFP

China ambassador accuses Canada of 'white supremacy'

OTTAWA: A Chinese envoy on Wednesday accused Canada and its allies of "Western egotism and white supremacy" for demanding the immediate release of two Canadians held for alleged spying. In a letter published by The Hill Times newspaper, China's ambassador to Canada Lu Shaye also criticized the "groundless" detention of a top Chinese tech executive at the request of the United States.

China detained former diplomat Michael Kovrig and businessman Michael Spavor last month, accusing them both of activities that "endanger China's security" — a phrase often used by Beijing when alleging espionage. The arrests are thought to be in retaliation against Canada's December 1 arrest of Huawei vice president Meng Wanzhou, who is accused of violating Iran sanctions.

"It's understandable that these Canadians are concerned about their own citizens. But have they shown any concern or sympathy

for Meng after she was illegally detained and deprived of freedom?" Lu wrote in the Ottawa newspaper. "It seems that, to some people, only Canadian citizens shall be treated in a humanitarian manner and their freedom deemed valuable, while Chinese people do not deserve that," he said. "The reason why some people are used to arrogantly adopting double standards is due to Western egotism and white supremacy."

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and US President Donald Trump in a telephone call on Monday denounced the "arbitrary" detentions of Kovrig and Spavor. Australia, Britain, France, Japan, Germany and the European Union have also made statements in support of Canada. Meng is currently living in a luxury home in Vancouver after being released on bail pending the outcome of an extradition hearing. She is required to wear an electronic anklet to monitor her movements and has an 11:00 pm to 7:00 am curfew. Meanwhile, a group of Canadian parliamentarians visiting China this week complained to officials that Kovrig and Spavor have been granted few consular visits, denied access to lawyers, and remain in "completely unacceptable" detention conditions. —AFP

Four civil defense volunteers gunned down in Thailand

PATTANI: Four Thai civil defense volunteers were gunned down yesterday at a school in the kingdom's south with students just meters away, as bloodshed greets the 15th year of an insurgency in the Malay-Muslim border zone. The culturally distinct region that borders Malaysia has seen rebels fight against the rule of Buddhist-majority Thailand, which annexed the area over a hundred years ago.

Since 2004, armed insurgents have clashed with Thailand's powerful military, killing nearly 7,000 people — mostly civilians — both Muslims and Buddhists. The death toll dropped to a record low last year as Thailand's junta tightened its security web in the south. But recent weeks have seen an uptick in violence, as rebels show they remain able to carry out operations after 15 years of conflict.

The men killed yesterday were all Muslim and were guarding a school in Yarang district of Pattani province when the gunmen struck. An AFP photographer at the scene saw uni-

formed bodies on a blood-splattered floor in the school compound. "They were shot dead at the scene," Lieutenant Wicha Nupannoi, of Yarang police station told AFP, adding the killers were suspected insurgents.

"The assailants seized their four rifles," he said, adding there were no eyewitnesses to the attack, which took place before lunch. Civil defense "volunteers" are poorly paid local civilians — both Muslim and Buddhist — who are lightly-trained, armed and paid by the Thai state to supplement security forces who have blanketed the southernmost provinces throughout the rebellion. The 15-year insurgency has seen scores of teachers killed, slain for their perceived collaboration with the Thai state, and led to the deployment of armed guards at schools.

In a rare public statement dated January 4 the main rebel group — the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN) — which has command and control over most of the rebel foot soldiers, swore to "keep fighting". "Siam (Thailand) can't hold out," the BRN wrote, signing off with a warning: "Do not help and support Siam." Prolonged peace talks between the Thai government and an umbrella group which claims to represent the rebels have failed to yield peace. But Thai authorities as well as the Malaysian facilitator of the talks have recently expressed confidence they will reach a detente soon. —AFP