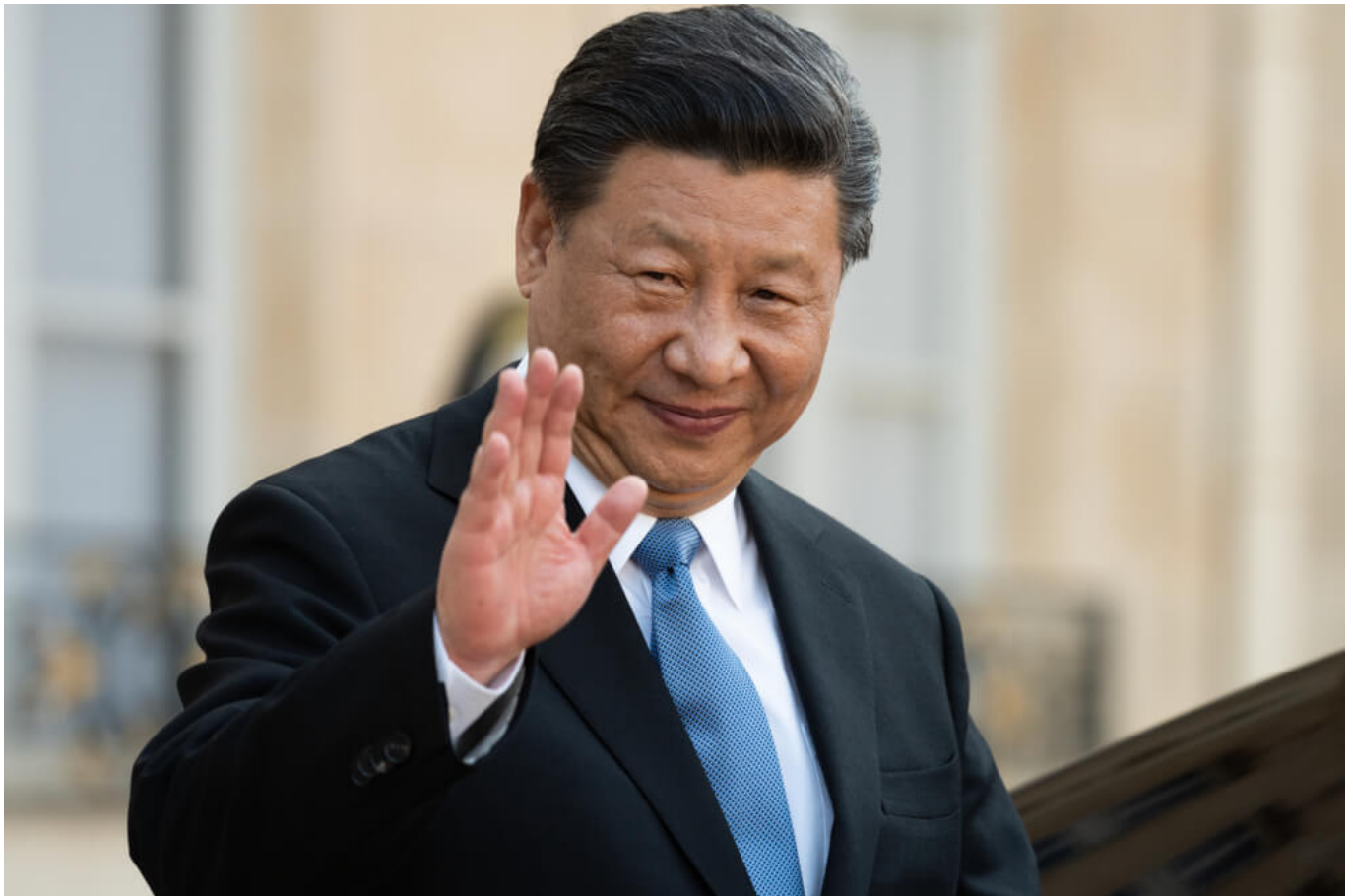




By: TA | AP Brief

# Xi Jinping will travel to North Korea in first visit since 2019



Chinese leader Xi Jinping will travel to North Korea next week, both countries announced Friday, in what will be his first visit in nearly seven years.

His trip will be the latest in a series of steps by China to reinforce its close ties with its nuclear-armed neighbor.

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has reached out to Russia in recent years, notably by **sending troops** and conventional weapons to support its war against Ukraine.

But in the past year, Kim has likewise been trying to improve ties with China, the North's biggest trading partner and provider of aid.

"As North Korea builds closer ties with Russia, China seeks to use Xi's trip to reassert its influence over Pyongyang and safeguard its strategic interests in northeast Asia," said William Yang, an analyst for the International Crisis Group.

Xi will make a state visit from Monday to Tuesday, Chinese and North Korean state media said in brief dispatches. His **last visit** was in June 2019.

The trip is coming just a few weeks after **Xi hosted U.S. President** Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin in quick succession in Beijing.

North Korea's nuclear weapons program has long been a major concern for the United States, which opposes it. The U.N. has imposed economic sanctions on North Korea because of its nuclear and missile development.

The announcement of the trip came a day after North Korea unveiled a new facility to produce the **material for nuclear bombs**. It is believed to be a uranium enrichment plant, though North Korea has not confirmed that.

## A nuclear state

During a visit to the plant, Kim announced plans to bolster the country's nuclear forces

"at an exponential rate."

Experts say the plant's disclosure implies that Kim was eager to cement his country's status as a nuclear weapons state ahead of Xi's visit.

The experts say Kim wants international recognition as a nuclear state so he can demand the lifting of the sanctions.

They say Kim would ultimately push for arms reductions talks with the U.S. to win concessions in return for a partial surrender of his country's nuclear capability.

Kim has been focusing on expanding his nuclear arsenal since his high-stakes **diplomacy with Trump** collapsed in 2019.

Trump has repeatedly expressed his desire to restore diplomacy with Kim, but the North Korean leader has said the U.S. must first drop its demand for North Korea to denuclearize as a precondition for talks.

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Xi and Kim met in Beijing in September and pledged mutual support and enhanced cooperation. Kim was in the Chinese capital to attend a Chinese military parade alongside other foreign leaders including Putin.

Russia and China, both veto-wielding members of the U.N. Security Council, have previously frustrated efforts by the U.S. and others to toughen international sanctions on North Korea, despite its banned weapons tests.

At their meeting in Beijing last month, **Putin and Xi** expressed their opposition to "foreign policy isolation, economic sanctions, military pressure and other methods of creating threats to the security" of North Korea,

according to a statement from the Kremlin.

Embracing the ideas of a “new Cold War” and a multipolar world, Kim has pushed for a more assertive foreign policy by expanding ties with countries locked in confrontation with the United States.

The trip abroad is a relatively rare one for Xi, who has curtailed his international travel sharply since the COVID-19 pandemic.

His last overseas visit was to South Korea last fall for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit, where he met Trump.