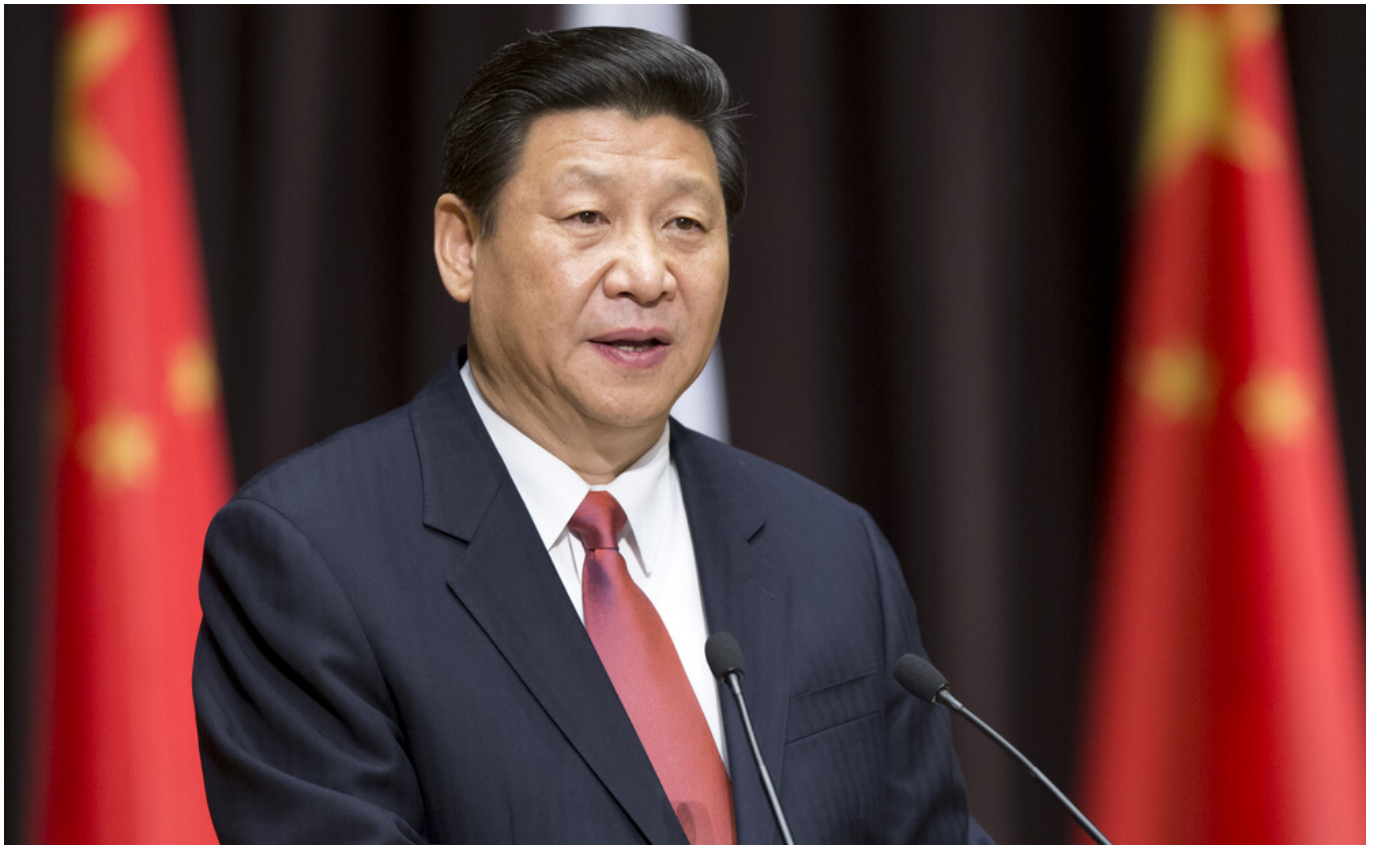




By: TA | AP Insight

# Xi travels to Pyongyang to cement North Korea in China's orbit



China's Xi Jinping is traveling to North Korea for the first time in nearly seven years in a trip that offers North Korean leader Kim Jong Un a stage to showcase an increasingly assertive foreign policy anchored by closer ties with his country's former Cold War allies.

China, the North's economic pipeline, is expected to reassert its influence over a traditionally allied government that has grown closer to Russia in recent times.

The meeting between the two leaders is their first since **Kim traveled to Beijing** for a World War II event in September 2025.

## What Kim wants

After years of **prioritizing Russia** — dispatching thousands of troops and munitions to support Moscow's invasion of Ukraine — North Korea's leader is now seeking stronger ties with China to break further out of isolation, embracing the idea of a “new Cold War” and projecting Pyongyang as part of a united front against Washington.

Since the era of its previous leaders, North Korea has long maintained an “equidistance” approach toward Beijing and Moscow, playing its two main benefactors against each other to maximize its gains.

While he is receiving crucial support from Russia for backing its war effort, likely including military technologies and aid, Kim cannot fulfil his promise to improve the living standards of his populace without greater economic assistance from China, according to Koh Yu-hwan, a former president of Seoul's Institute of National Unification.

“North Korea vows to maintain a self-reliant economic system and focus on advancing its nuclear capabilities, but in reality it's nearly impossible to raise living standards by mobilizing internal resources alone,” Koh said.

**From North Korea's perspective, there's belief that having China's backing provides a sense of security and confidence when seeking to improve relations with the United States - Park Won Gon**

The Kim-Xi meeting could include discussions on resuming **Chinese tourism** to North Korea and opening a bridge over the Yalu River that has remained unused years after its completion, Koh said.

The leaders could also discuss joint economic development projects in border regions shared by North Korea, China and Russia.

It remains to be seen whether Kim at some point will use his increased diplomatic footing to reengage with Washington after his **talks with U.S. President Donald Trump** collapsed in 2019 over disagreements about sanctions on North Korea.

Pyongyang has so far rebuffed Trump's offers to resume talks after the American president entered his second term, insisting that Washington first drop its demand for **North Korea's denuclearization** as a precondition for negotiations.

Kim also met Xi before traveling to Singapore and Vietnam for his summits with Trump in 2018 and 2019, moves widely interpreted as efforts to bolster his **bargaining position**.

“From North Korea's perspective, there's belief that having China's backing provides a sense of security and confidence when seeking to improve relations with the United States,” said Park Won Gon, a professor at Seoul's Ewha University.

## What Xi wants

For China, the visit is a chance to bring back a **traditional ally** closer into its orbit, by offering possible economic incentives and food aid, traditional assets it has given to North Korea.

"I think the Chinese are privately a little uneasy at the embrace of Kim Jong Un and Vladimir Putin, that the North Koreans have really gravitated towards very heavily towards the Russians. Part of Xi Jinping's goal is to correct the balance," said Mike Chinoy, a former CNN journalist and author of an upcoming book about the insular country.



*In April, Wang Yi visited Pyongyang and met with Kim. Observers noted the absence of the word "denuclearization" from the statement on the visit*

Xi is making his first overseas trip in 2026 after become increasingly selective about making state visits since the pandemic.

Coming on the heels of separately hosting both Trump and Putin, the choice is strategic.

"The trip ensures no one can reshape the peninsula's security architecture without his concurrence," Seong-Hyon Lee, a senior fellow at the George H.W. Bush Foundation for U.S.-China Relations, said.

Beijing is also realistic in response to Kim's clear nuclear ambitions.

In April, China's Foreign Minister **Wang Yi visited Pyongyang** and met with Kim. Observers noted the absence of the word "denuclearization" from the statement on the visit, a departure from the standard line that China usually deploys which calls for denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

"The most telling sign of the visit may be a silence: if China's official readout omits the word 'denuclearization,' Beijing has effectively accepted North Korea as a nuclear state,

folding the issue into its broader buffer strategy against the U.S.," said Lee.

In exchange, China could seek greater access to the estuary of the Tumen River, which forms part of the border between the two countries, and navigational rights in waters off the Korean Peninsula's east coast.

Ultimately Kim is likely to give Xi a grand and lavish welcome at the symbolic level, but China may not be able to extract much from an **increasingly confident Kim**, experts say.

"He's going to give Xi Jinping a welcome befitting of the head of state of their giant neighbor, but he's not going to play the pliant 'little brother,'" said Chinoy.