

Putin hosts Kim for talks on North Korean nuclear standoff

Russian President Vladimir Putin supports North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's efforts to normalize relations with the U.S.

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Putin hosts Kim for talks on North Korean nuclear standoff

Russian President Vladimir Putin, center right, and North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un shake hands during their meeting in Vladivostok, Russia, on Thursday | Photo: AP

Russian President Vladimir Putin sat down for talks Thursday with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, saying the summit should help plan joint efforts to resolve a standoff over Pyongyang's nuclear program.

Speaking at the start of the talks at a university on the Russky Island across a bridge from Vladivostok, Putin voiced confidence that Kim's visit will "help better understand what should be done to settle the situation on the Korean Peninsula, what we can do together, what Russia can do to support the positive processes going on now."

Kim's first trip to Russia comes about two months after his second summit with President Donald Trump failed because of disputes over U.S.-led sanctions on the North. Putin meanwhile wants to expand Russia's clout in the region and get more leverage with Washington.

"We welcome your efforts to develop an inter-Korean dialogue and normalize North Korea's relations with the United States," Putin told Kim.

For his part, Kim noted that with the world's attention now concentrated on the Korean Peninsula, "I think we will have a very meaningful dialogue on sharing our opinions on this matter while also jointly apprising and studying it."

He also congratulated the Russian leader on his reelection to another six-year term last year.

In February, Trump-Kim talks ended without any agreement because of disputes over U.S.-led sanctions. There have since been no publicly known high-level contacts between the U.S. and North Korea, although both sides say they are still open to a third summit.

Kim wants the U.S. to ease the sanctions to reciprocate for some partial disarmament steps he took last year. But the U.S. maintains the sanctions will stay in place until North Korea makes more significant denuclearization moves.

North Korea has increasingly expressed frustration at the deadlocked negotiations. Last week, it tested a new weapon and demanded that U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo be removed from the nuclear talks.

Kim arrived in Vladivostok Wednesday aboard an armored train, telling Russian state television that he was hoping that his first visit to Russia would “successful and useful.” He evoked his father’s “great love for Russia” and said that he intends to strengthen ties between the two countries. The late Kim Jong Il made three trips to Russia, last time in 2011.

Like the U.S., Russia has strongly opposed Pyongyang’s nuclear bid. Putin has welcomed Trump’s meetings with Kim, but urged the U.S. to do more to assuage Pyongyang’s security concerns.

Speaking before the talks, Putin’s foreign affairs adviser Yuri Ushakov said that Russia will seek to “consolidate the positive trends” stemming from Trump-Kim meetings. He noted that the Kremlin would try to help “create preconditions and a favorable atmosphere for reaching solid agreements on the problem of the Korean Peninsula.”

Dmitri Trenin, the director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, said that Putin will likely encourage Kim to continue constructive talks with the U.S., reflecting Russia’s own worry about the North nuclear and missile programs. “Russia can’t be expected to side with North Korea and, let’s say, support the North Koreans all the way in the Security Council where Russia is a veto wielding member and where all sanctions imposed on North Korea require Russia’s approval,” he said.

Trenin emphasized that Moscow is skeptical that the North could be persuaded to fully abandon its nuclear weapons, considering it a “mission impossible.”

“North Korea will not give up the only guarantee of the survival of the North Korean state and its regime,” Trenin said.

Russia would also like to gain broader access to North Korea’s mineral resources, including rare metals. Pyongyang, for its part, covets Russia’s electricity supplies and investment to modernize its dilapidated Soviet-built industrial plants, railways and other infrastructure.

Vladivostok, a city of more than half a million on the Sea of Japan, faced gridlock on its roads as traffic was blocked in the city center due to Kim’s visit. The authorities have temporarily closed the waters around Russky Island to all maritime traffic.

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Al Qaida-linked terrorists say attack that killed at least 11 Malian soldiers was revenge for the massacre of some 160 Fulani civilians in the village of Ogossagou last month, which was Mali's worst ethnic bloodletting in living memory.

by Reuters and Israel Hayom Staff Published on 2019-04-24 18:30 Last modified: 2019-04-24 12:35

Mali jihadists say army base attack was revenge for village massacre

Survivor of the Ogossagou massacre Ada Diallo | Photo: AP

Al Qaida-linked terrorists in Mali claimed responsibility on Tuesday for an attack on a military base that killed at least 11 soldiers, saying it was revenge for the massacre of some 160 Fulani civilians last month, the SITE Intelligence Group said.

Sunday's assault on a base in west-central Mali was the latest in a series of deadly raids by heavily armed jihadists, who have stepped up their attacks in central Mali and neighboring Burkina Faso and Niger in recent months.

The militants have tapped into festering tensions between semi-nomadic Fulani herders and farming communities across West Africa's semi-arid Sahel region to try to win support among the Fulani, who often feel politically and socially marginalized.

Suspected militiamen from the Dogon ethnic group killed about 160 Fulani in the village of Ogossagou on March 23 in Mali's worst ethnic bloodletting in living memory.

In a statement, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), the leading Islamist group in Mali, said its attack was "in commitment to its past vow to avenge and exact retribution for the martyrs from the O gossagou massacre," according to U.S.-based SITE, which monitors jihadist websites.

Previous Islamist attacks have led to reprisals by ethnic militia against Fulani civilians, feeding a cycle of violence that regional forces, U.N. peacekeepers and thousands of French troops deployed to the zone have proved unable to break.

JNIM said it had killed at least 16 soldiers and taken two hostage, while four of its own fighters died in combat. Mali's Defense Ministry said on Saturday that 11 soldiers had been killed.

Mali President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita appointed a new prime minister on Monday, days after the government resigned following pressure to respond to the O gossagou massacre and other violence.

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North Korean leader arrives in Russia for summit with Putin

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un gets off a train upon arrival at Khasan train station in Russia's Primorye region, Wednesday | Photo: Primorsky Regional Administration Press Service via AP

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un arrived in Russia by train on Wednesday, a day before his much-anticipated summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin that comes amid deadlocked diplomacy on his nuclear program.

Kim, dressed in a black coat and a fedora, met with Russian officials at Russia's Khasan train station near its border with the North. The official website of the Primorye governor released pictures of Kim stepping off the train and given the traditional Russian bread and salt at the station.

Speaking to Russia's state-owned Rossiya-24, Kim said on arrival that he is hoping for a "successful and useful" visit and would like to discuss with Putin "settlement of the situation in the Korean Peninsula" as well as bilateral ties with Russia.

Kim then sat down with local officials as well as a Russian deputy foreign minister before setting off to the Pacific port city of Vladivostok for a summit with Putin on Thursday. He became the first North Korean leader to travel to Russia since his late father, Kim Jong Il, visited in 2011.

"I have heard a lot about your country and have long dreamt of visiting it," Kim was quoted as saying. "It's been seven years since I took the helm, and I've only just managed to visit."

Kim evoked his father's "great love for Russia" and said that he intends to strengthen the ties between the two countries.

Earlier Wednesday, the North's state media confirmed Kim's departure aboard his khaki-green armored train from an undisclosed location in North Korea. Yonhap, citing an analysis of North Korean photos on Kim's departure, speculated Kim may have left from a rural area, not Pyongyang.

Kim was expected to arrive in Vladivostok around late Wednesday afternoon and attend a dinner reception hosted by Russian Deputy Prime Minister Yuri Trutnev, according to

South Korean media. After his summit with Putin, Kim may tour neighboring facilities or landmarks before departing for home on Friday, the reports said.

Kremlin adviser Yuri Ushakov told Russian media the summit will focus on North Korea's nuclear program, noting that Russia will seek to "consolidate the positive trends" stemming from U.S. President Donald Trump's meetings with Kim.

In February, Kim's second summit with Trump in Hanoi ended without any agreement because of disputes over U.S.-led sanctions. There have since been no publicly known high-level contacts between the U.S. and North Korea, though both sides say they are still open to a third summit.

Kim wants the U.S. to ease the sanctions to reciprocate some partial disarmament steps he took last year. But the U.S. maintains the sanctions will stay in place until North Korea takes more significant denuclearization steps.

Some experts say Kim could try to bolster his country's ties with Russia and China. Others say it's not clear how big of a role Russia can play in efforts to restart the nuclear negotiations. The summit could allow Putin to try to increase his influence in regional politics and the standoff over North Korea's nuclear program.

"Kim wants to show that he's cooperating with Russia too, rather than looking to only the U.S. and China. But I think it's not easy for Russia and China to provide North Korea with practical assistance that leads to the inflow of dollars," said Chon Hyun-joon, a former senior researcher at the Korea Institute for National Unification in Seoul.

North Korea has increasingly expressed frustration at the deadlocked negotiations. Last week, North Korea tested a new weapon and demanded U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to be removed from nuclear talks.

Putin's adviser added that the Kremlin would try to help "create preconditions and a favorable atmosphere for reaching solid agreements on the problem of the Korean Peninsula."

Ushakov pointed to a Russia-China roadmap that offered a step-by-step approach to solving the nuclear standoff and called for sanctions relief and security guarantees to Pyongyang. He noted that the North's moratorium on nuclear tests and scaling down of U.S.-South Korean military drills helped reduce tensions and created conditions for further progress.

Ushakov said that Putin-Kim summit's agenda will also include bilateral cooperation. Russia's trade with North Korea is minuscule at just \$34 million last year, mostly because of the international sanctions against Pyongyang.

Russia would like to gain broader access to North Korea's mineral resources, including rare metals. Pyongyang, for its part, covets Russia's electricity supplies and investment to modernize its dilapidated Soviet-built industrial plants, railways and other infrastructure.

In the meantime, Vladivostok has been seeing a number of unusually strict security measures. Maritime authorities said that the waters around Russky Island, off the southern tip of Vladivostok, would be temporarily closed to all maritime traffic.

The island has a university with a conference hall and is seen as a likely summit venue.

Separately, local media reported that some platforms at Vladivostok's main train station would be closed for several days, and that buses will be rerouted from the train station Wednesday. News website VLru reported on road construction to even out the entrance at the train station, possibly to allow Kim's limousine to drive straight off the platform.

Tags: Kim Jong Un North Korea Putin Russia U.S.

US cranks up sanctions against Hezbollah

Treasury takes steps against two people and three companies accused of helping the Shiite group evade US sanctions.

by Reuters and Israel Hayom Staff Published on 2019-04-25 07:18 Last modified: 2019-04-25 07:19

US cranks up sanctions against Hezbollah

Hezbollah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah addresses supporters via a screen in Beirut, last September | Photo: Reuters

The U.S. Treasury, moving to boost pressure on Hezbollah, imposed sanctions on Wednesday against two people and three firms that Washington accuses of being involved in schemes to help the armed Shiite group backed by Iran evade American sanctions.

The Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) said it was targeting Belgium-based Wael Bazzi because he acted on behalf of his father Mohammad Bazzi, a Hezbollah financier.

OFAC also took action against two Belgian companies and a British-based firm controlled by Bazzi.

In addition, the U.S. Treasury designated Lebanon-based Hassan Tabaja, who it said had acted on behalf of his brother Adham Tabajha, also a Hezbollah financier. The U.S.

action freezes their assets and property and prevents U.S. citizens and businesses from dealing with them.

The two men and three businesses were targeted for sanctions under U.S. regulations aimed at suspected terrorists or those who support them, the Treasury said in a statement. Hezbollah is considered a foreign terrorist organization by the United States.

“The Treasury is relentlessly pursuing Hezbollah’s financial facilitators by dismantling two of Hezbollah’s most important financial networks,” Treasury Undersecretary Sigal Mandelker said in a statement.

“By targeting Hassan Tabaja and Wael Bazzi and their European-based companies, this administration is continuing to disrupt all avenues of financial support relied upon by Hezbollah,” he said.

The U.S. State Department earlier this week offered a reward of up to \$10 million for information that could help disrupt Hezbollah’s financing.

The move to boost pressure on the group comes at a time of growing U.S. concern about its role in the Lebanese government. Hezbollah’s regional clout has expanded as it has sent fighters to Middle East conflicts, including the war in Syria, where it supported President Bashar Assad.

Tags: financingHezbollahIran

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Greenblatt: Trump plan doesn't include Jordan-Palestinian union

US president's envoy to the region struck down speculation regarding the proposal, still under wraps, which **aims to end Israeli-Palestinian deadlock**; White House intends to publish plan in June

Reuters |Published: 04.24.19 , 21:09

An architect of a still-secret U.S. plan to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict took to Twitter again on Wednesday to disclose another element that it would not contain - a confederation with neighboring Jordan.

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U.S. President Donald Trump's Middle East envoy, Jason Greenblatt, had already tweeted "False!" on Friday to what he said were reports that the proposal would give part of Egypt's Sinai desert to the adjacent Palestinian enclave of Gaza, which is ruled by the Islamist Hamas terror group.

Greenblatt with Netanyahu

Greenblatt with Netanyahu

On Wednesday, Greenblatt denied that the plan envisages a confederation involving Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian Authority, which administers limited self-rule in the occupied West Bank.

"@KingAbdullahII & #Jordan are strong US allies. Rumors that our peace vision includes a confederation between Jordan, Israel & the PA, or that the vision contemplates making Jordan the homeland for Palestinians, are incorrect. Please don't spread rumors," Greenblatt wrote.

White House senior adviser Jared Kushner, another main architect of the peace proposal, said on Tuesday it would be made public after the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan ends in June.

Greenblatt and Abbas (Photo: Reuters)

Greenblatt and Abbas (Photo: Reuters)

Kushner, who is married to Trump's daughter Ivanka and spoke at a Time magazine forum in Washington, did not say whether the plan called for a two-state solution, a goal of past U.S. peace efforts.

Palestinian leaders have called for the establishment of an independent state alongside Israel in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with East Jerusalem as its capital.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who won a fifth term in an election two weeks ago, laid down a series of conditions for Palestinian statehood in a major policy speech in 2009.

But U.S.-brokered peace talks collapsed in 2014, partly over the expansion of Israeli settlements in territory Palestinians seek for their state.

In a last-minute election campaign promise that angered Palestinians, Netanyahu said he planned to annex Jewish settlements in the West Bank if he was again chosen as Israel's leader.

The U.S. proposal, which has been delayed for a variety of reasons over the last 18 months, has two major components. It has a political piece that addresses core issues such as the status of Jerusalem, and an economic part that aims to help the Palestinians strengthen their economy.

Palestinian leaders have said Trump cannot be an honest broker after he broke with long-standing U.S. policy and recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital in 2017 and moved the American embassy to the city last May.