



US President Donald Trump has agreed to meet North Korean leader Kim Jong Un by May – a move that caught many off guard. PHOTOS: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE



Japanese Premier Shinzo Abe will try to impress upon the US not to cut a deal with North Korea that could leave Japan's security needs exposed, says the writer.

Why a Trump-Kim summit poses problems for Japan

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For The Straits Times

US President Donald Trump's offer to meet North Korean strongman Kim Jong Un caught many off guard and has since sparked a flurry of discussions on what it could mean for Washington and its relations with Pyongyang.

One important actor, which seems to have been flummoxed by the pace and scale of the recent events and feels left out in the cold, is Tokyo.

Japan has an important stake in the resolution of the imbroglio on the Korean peninsula. It was a member of the six-party talks, along with China, North Korea, Russia, South Korea and the US, which tried unsuccessfully to sort out the impasse over Pyongyang and its nuclear weapons programme.

Tokyo had earlier warned that "talks for the sake of talks are meaningless", though in recent days it has welcomed North Korea's decision to have talks with the US, while stressing that "Japan and the United States will not waver in the firm stance that they will continue to put maximum pressure until North Korea takes concrete action towards the complete, verifiable and irreversible end to nuclear missile development".

There are several reasons for Japan and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to worry about the latest twist in events.

First, Japan may feel that the US under President Trump may be inclined to cut a deal with North Korea (and also with South Korea), leaving Tokyo in the lurch.

The US-Japan alliance has been the bedrock of Tokyo's foreign and security policy, and Japan hosts approximately 54,000 US military personnel (along with 25,000 Japanese workers) on its soil.

Second, should North Korea's nuclear arsenal remain intact, it could threaten Japan, as Mr Kim may guarantee not to target only the US. "Denuclearisation" is a vague term and it is not clear what North Korea means by it, or how it will be verified that Pyongyang has completely given up its nuclear weapons.

Third, Mr Abe's Liberal Democratic Party faces elections later this year, and not being able to act decisively (to Japan's advantage) on the North Korean issue could strengthen some of his detractors.

Fourth, with the 2020 Tokyo Olympics looming, the Japanese government will have to be even more vigilant against Pyongyang's provocations. Last year, North Korea had on two occasions tested missiles that flew over Japanese territory, and Mr Kim has also threatened to "sink" Japan.

Japan will have to act fast if it is to stay relevant in the scheme of things playing out in North-east Asia.

In an age when diplomacy takes place through Twitter, Japan will have to pull up its socks and adjust to the new ways of fast-paced diplomacy conducted through social media and in full public glare.

One of its hidden strengths could well be its Foreign Minister Taro Kono, who has shown indefatigable energy in putting Japan back in the global spotlight besides showcasing his impressive social media skills.

There are signs that Tokyo is adjusting and adapting to the changing environment.

First, Mr Abe is likely to visit the US next month, before Mr Trump's summit with Mr Kim, and will try his best to impress upon

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Washington not to cut a deal with Pyongyang that could leave Tokyo's security needs exposed.

Second, Japan is already hedging its bets with regard to China by signalling that it is ready to join the Beijing-led Belt and Road Initiative on a case-by-case basis. But at the same time, it is also a part of the "New Quad" along with the US, India and Australia.

Many times in the past, Mr Abe had been quick off the mark and shown remarkable political dexterity, and this time it could very well be the same.

He had reached out to Mr Trump even before he was formally sworn in as President, and has been shepherding the process of bringing into reality the former Trans-Pacific Partnership minus the US. This led to the signing of what is now known as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership in Chile recently.

Now, Mr Abe will have to put his considerable political skills to work to secure the best bargain for Japan as the geopolitical landscape undergoes rapid changes.

As a first step, Japan has made an offer of 300 million yen (\$3.7 million) to the International Atomic Energy Agency to inspect Pyongyang's nuclear facilities, provided it agrees to international inspections.

While the sudden lurches in US-Korea relations do indeed pose a challenge to Japan's security interests, they also present Tokyo with opportunities to re-invent itself, something that it has successfully done in the past.

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