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Kim Jong Un Looks to Putin for Help Dealing With Trump Whiplash

By Bloomberg

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Kim Jong Un **Bloomberg**

Kim Jong Un, like Vladimir Putin, has enjoyed flourishes of bonhomie with Donald Trump only to see the relationship fray over sanctions. Now, the North Korean leader is turning to the Russian president for help.

Kim left North Korea by train and crossed into Russia on Wednesday, the Interfax newswire reported, citing an unidentified official. Kim is slated to meet Putin Thursday in Vladivostok for his first summit with the Russian leader since coming to power in 2011.

The trip — coming almost a year after Russia's invitation — appeared timed to show that Kim has alternative sources of support after his failed meeting with Trump in Hanoi left North Korea with no clear path to escape a U.S.-led international economic embargo.

Related article: North Korea's Kim Jong Un Arrives in Russia for Summit With Putin

While Putin has little money to share and is unlikely to make any moves that could violate sanctions or create another dispute with the U.S., Kim may have to settle for Russian pledges of diplomatic and economic support.

The Kremlin has touted the significance of the meeting, but the two leaders won't make any joint statements and so far don't plan to sign any official documents, according to Yury Ushakov, Putin's foreign-policy aide.

Here's what Kim wants:

1. Diplomatic lifeline

Much has changed since Josef Stalin helped Kim's grandfather, Kim Il Sung, set up the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in the aftermath of World War II, including the Soviet Union's collapse and China's emergence as North Korea's main benefactor. Putin has preserved some Russian influence on the Korean Peninsula, hosting North Korean workers and participating in six-nation nuclear talks, but has so far not met Kim.

Related article: Russia Tells UN It Sent Home Over Half of North Korean Workers in 2018

Both Kim and Putin and have something to gain by meeting now. Kim wants to protect the diplomatic profile he built during a series of unprecedented trips abroad last year and demonstrate to Trump that he has friends beyond just China.

For the Kremlin, the meeting is a chance to show Russia's still a player in a major global issue where it's been largely upstaged by China and the U.S. "For Putin, it's important to stay in the game," said Georgy Toloraya, head of the Center for Asian Strategy at the Russian Academy of Sciences. "It's thanks to the Korea issue that there's been some positive movement in the U.S.-Russian relationship."

2. Sanctions relief

Russia has largely followed China's lead on sanctions, joining Beijing to support UN penalties when Kim was testing weapons of mass destruction and urging relief after he stopped. Putin's veto on the UN Security Council could give him leverage to chip away at some sanctions on the grounds that they're violating intended protections against "adverse humanitarian consequences."

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Still, Russia has pledged to abide by Security Council resolutions and there's no sign Putin would take the risk of violating them.

3. Guest worker exceptions

One North Korean sanctions complaint that could find a receptive audience in Russia is the

Security Council requirement that countries expel North Korean guest workers by the end of the year. North Korea has sent tens of thousands of citizens to places like Russia and China for manual labor, earning the regime more than $500 million a year in vital foreign currency — or about 1.5 percent of the country's economy.

North Korea wants Russia to let its workers stay, Russian lawmaker Fedot Tumusov told the Interfax news agency after returning from Pyongyang. Sparsely populated areas of the Russian Far East have grown reliant on the workers for industries such as timber and construction, giving authorities an incentive to look the other way. But sanctions require the last of them to leave by the end of this year, leaving little room for concessions.

4. Transportation links

Decades of sanctions, stagnation and excessive military spending have left North Korea's infrastructure in bad shape. And Russia, which shares a 17 kilometer (11 mile) border with the country, wants it upgraded to gain access to the North and South Korean markets.

Kim has sought to improve his rail system, which could carry South Korean goods to China and Europe and provide broader access to an estimated $6 trillion in mineral resources, according to a 2013 estimate by the North Korea Resources Institute in Seoul. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said in December that Moscow wanted to work with the two Koreas to upgrade their rail links, which would require sanctions waivers.

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Kim may walk away from his trip to Russia with a pledge to expand border crossings, enhancing a bridge built nearly 60 years ago to allow for stepped-up vehicle crossings. China and North Korea opened a new border crossing over the Yalu River in April.

5. Barter system

With trade between them down more than 56 percent last year, Russia and North Korea are working on a mechanism to stimulate commerce without violating sanctions, the Kommersant newspaper reported Tuesday. The two sides would ship goods to each other that don't fall under the sanctions and avoid the risk of financial penalties by using no money, just barter settlement, the report said. Ushakov, the Kremlin aide, declined to comment on that possibility, however.

"Russia could agree to sell them various goods that Western firms are scared to sell," said Andrei Lankov, a North Korea expert at Kookmin University in Seoul. "North Korea is viewed as such a dangerous partner that companies fear doing even business that's permitted."

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