

China wades into diplomatic games



North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.

Rowan Callick, *The Australian*, 12:00AM April 19, 2017

No solid evidence has yet emerged how China is pressing its only ally, North Korea — beyond sanctions already installed, and the repetition of rhetoric — to halt or relinquish its march towards long-distance nuclear attack capacity.

But the Donald Trump administration has signalled that at the recent presidential summit and since, Chinese leaders have indicated their readiness to push Pyongyang more heavily in return for an American abandonment of earlier plans for a trade war.

President Trump said in a *Wall Street Journal* interview that he told China: “You want to make a great deal? Solve the problem in North Korea. That’s worth having deficits.”

Vice President Mike Pence said on Monday following a visit to the border between the two Koreas that Mr Trump was hopeful that China “will take actions needed to bring about change in policy” in North Korea.

China provides almost all North Korea’s oil, 500,000 tonnes a year, and buys more than 80 per cent of its exports. Although last week China turned back North Korean boats carrying coal, the country’s top export, China’s own exports to North Korea soared by more than 50 per cent in the first quarter of 2017.

While Mr Trump’s rhetoric of a trade war, and of charging China with currency manipulation, was never viewed by Beijing as posing a major threat, other factors have emerged that are more likely to cause it to get tough with Pyongyang.

Underlying them, is China's concern that if the US acts militarily — and successfully — to strike North Korea's nuclear capacity, then Washington will at a stroke regain most of the regional prestige it had lost over the last decade, and emerge as once more the principal player in east Asia.

There are also negative reasons. For instance, North Korea's apparent refusal even to respond to requests from Beijing for visits to Pyongyang by Foreign Minister Wang Yi and nuclear ambassador Wu Dawei, who spent several days in Seoul with his South Korean counterpart Kim Hong-kyun last week. And Chinese academics expert on north Asian issues have recently begun urging Beijing to start treating Pyongyang as just another government, rather than to keep viewing it through the 65 year old lens of communist military solidarity in the Korean War, where Mao Zedong's oldest son Anying was killed.

Shen Zihua, a history professor at East China Normal University, said in a recent speech that "the fundamental interests of China and North Korea are now conflicting." He said: "China's primary interest is to ensure stability in the neighbourhood and in regional development, but since North Korea started to possess nuclear weapon, the area around China has never been stable." China should understand the true origin of the Korean peninsula crisis, he said, "and be clear about who are our friends and who is our enemy, and revise our policies accordingly."

Wu Qiang, a professor of international politics, said that "in the past, the US policy toward North Korea was one of patience, and China's was one of inaction." Now, he said, "China has to eat the bitter fruit of that inaction. Its influence on North Korea has decreased, and it can hardly influence America's policies on the issue now."

Professor Wu said that China needed to abandon its unrealistic ideas about North Korea, including that it is a strategic buffer for China, and that the friendship between China and North Korea is unbreakable. He urged the international community to "abandon its former compromises with North Korea, and instead to engage actively to promote North Korea's transformation towards democracy, the unification of the peninsula, and denuclearisation."

The time scale for China to start pressing North Korea more forcefully, is clear. Washington cannot act militarily until the May 9 presidential election in South Korea, a crucial ally. After that, Beijing is being led to believe, Mr Trump might do almost anything.