

EDITORIALS

Kim bends to American resolve

The Australian, 12:00AM March 10, 2018

Donald Trump's agreement to meet Kim Jong-un is highly significant given their mutual threats of annihilation that have brought the Korean peninsula to the brink of nuclear war and destabilised the world. Only months ago at the UN, Mr Trump, in response to Kim's incessant abuse and belligerence, warned he was prepared to "totally destroy" North Korea if it did not stop its nuclear weapons program. Now, in one of the most astounding diplomatic turnarounds of our time, Kim, continuing the charm offensive he initiated at the start of the Winter Olympics in South Korea last month, has asked to meet Mr Trump as soon as possible. A summit in May is likely.

Given Kim's mercurial and frequently incomprehensible behaviour, there are reasons to be cautious. But while it is impossible to be sure about anything in regard to North Korea, the agreement to hold the meeting is a remarkable coup for the Trump presidency and Mr Trump's frequently derided foreign policy skills.

For decades, US presidents have floundered in dealing with Pyongyang. After Jimmy Carter left the White House he met Kim's grandfather, the Stalinist nation's founder, Kim Il-sung. After Bill Clinton left office he met Kim Jong-un's father, Kim Jong-il, to secure the release of a US prisoner. But in office Mr Clinton was confounded by North Korea and was unable to halt its nuclear program. Madeleine Albright, Mr Clinton's secretary of state, was the highest level US visitor to Pyongyang, in 2000. Arrangements for a visit by Mr Clinton fell apart when Kim Jong-il would not agree to stop building missiles.

George W. Bush famously labelled North Korea part of his "Axis of Evil" in 2002 and tried to persuade North Korea, through diplomatic channels, to dismantle its nuclear program. The talks seemed promising in 2007 but fell apart in 2009. Barack Obama, as with much else in his conduct of foreign policy, was largely out to lunch on North Korea. Confounded by the dangers the rogue nation posed, his "strategic patience" amounted to doing virtually nothing.

Mr Trump, in contrast, has been hands-on and resolute. His threats to use the US's vast military power to rain "fire and fury" on North Korea and his contemptuous references to Kim Jong-un as "little rocket man" have appalled the Trump haters. But the evidence suggests they have worked. Just what led Kim to abandon his references to Mr Trump as a "dotard" and "lunatic" is not

clear. But Mr Trump's "carrot and stick" approach to the profound challenges represented by the Pyongyang regime is succeeding where previous presidents failed. The "extreme" sanctions Mr Trump persuaded the UN to impose, with Chinese support, are working. Trade across the North Korean-Chinese border has declined sharply. Despite its "juche" policy of self-sufficiency, the North relies on imported energy, food and raw materials to survive, and for the luxuries Kim lavishes on compliant officials. South Korean envoys who have visited Pyongyang attribute Kim's change of heart to Mr Trump. "His leadership and his maximum pressure policy, together with international solidarity, brought us to this juncture," one said.

Undue optimism would be premature. For 60 years, the North at times has been willing to talk about normalising relations, only to back out of final agreements. Nothing short of the "permanent denuclearisation" of the Korean peninsula Mr Trump has spoken of will do. He must not compromise. Pyongyang's agreement to halt missile tests is a good sign. But Mr Trump should listen to one of Mr Bush's advisers, Michael Green, who warns there is every reason to believe North Korea is "attempting to blunt sanctions and secure de facto legitimacy for its nuclear weapons program with this gesture". Japan, he says, fears a reduction of sanctions and of military exercises in exchange for an illusory pledge that North Korea will violate, just as it has violated past agreements. The summit will be a test of Mr Trump's negotiating skills. His forcing Kim to talk is a big breakthrough; a bigger challenge is ahead. Global stability is at stake.