

Chinese President Xi Jinping to meet Japan, South Korea leaders as North Korea tensions rise



Chinese President Xi Jinping will meet Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and South Korean President Moon Jae-in in Beijing on Dec 23, 2019. PHOTOS: AFP, REUTERS

BEIJING (REUTERS) - The leaders of Japan and South Korea will meet Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing on Monday (Dec 23), amid heightened concern that North Korea may be about to return to confrontation with Washington.

South Korean President Moon Jae-in and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe will meet Mr. Xi separately before going to the south-western city of Chengdu for a trilateral meeting with Chinese Premier Li Keqiang.

Though various economic matters will also be on the agenda - as well as tensions between Seoul and Tokyo - North Korea appears likely to dominate the agenda.

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un held a meeting of top military officials to discuss boosting the country's military capability, state news agency reported on Sunday.

North Korea has set a year-end deadline for the United States to change what it says is a policy of hostility amid a stalemate in efforts to make progress on their pledge to end the North's nuclear programme and establish lasting peace.

Mr. Kim and US President Donald Trump have met three times since June 2018, but there has been no substantive progress in dialogue while the North demanded crushing international sanctions be lifted first.

On Saturday, the state media said the US would "pay dearly" for taking issue with the North's human rights record, and said Washington's "malicious words" would only aggravate tensions on the Korean peninsula.

US special envoy for North Korea Stephen Biegun met two senior Chinese diplomats during his two-day visit to Beijing last week, following similar meetings in South Korea and Japan days earlier, as diplomats made last-ditch attempts to prevent a new confrontation.

Beijing, jointly with Russia, proposed last week that the United Nations Security Council lift some sanctions in what it calls an attempt to break the current deadlock and seek to build support.

But it is unclear whether Beijing can convince Seoul and Tokyo to break ranks from Washington, which has made its opposition clear and can veto any resolution.

Though South Korea sees China as instrumental in reviving negotiations, it has so far sidestepped questions on whether it supports the new proposal by Beijing and Moscow. Japan, which has historically been a staunch supporter of sanctions against North Korea, has also refrained from commenting on the proposal.

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