

# Kim Jong Nam assassination weakens Beijing's authority

Problem for Xi after killing of North Korean exile who was under Chinese protection

by: Tom Mitchell in Beijing and Bryan Harris in Seoul

Beijing's ambassador in Pyongyang held a lunar new year reception last month for more than 70 senior North Korean officials. According to Chinese news reports, the ambassador's guests lauded "the blood alliance and friendship between both countries".

On Sunday — just three weeks later — North Korean leader Kim Jong Un would severely test the patience of his Chinese "friends" by firing a medium-range ballistic rocket towards Japan. Then came the murder in Malaysia on Monday of Kim Jong Nam, with many speculating that the North Korean leader may have ordered the assassination of his own half-brother.

The twin setbacks have exasperated Beijing just as it was seeking to improve relations with a troublesome neighbour that had angered the international community with two nuclear tests last year.

The Chinese government is already embroiled in a bitter diplomatic dispute with South Korea over President Park Geun-hye's decision to deploy a US missile defence system, which Beijing says will disturb the region's delicate balance of power.

Xi Jinping, Chinese president, must now contend with strained relations on both sides of the divided Korean peninsula and new challenges from his unpredictable US counterpart, Donald Trump, who has publicly rebuked Beijing over its failure to rein in Pyongyang.

But analysts and diplomats say the apparent poisoning of Kim, who spent most of his time under de facto Chinese protection in Macau and Beijing, was the worst Korean development by far for Mr Xi this week.

Though a much ridiculed figure, Kim was the only member of North Korea's ruling family known to share Beijing's belief that the hermit kingdom must open up and embrace economic reform if it is to become more than a failed state dependent on its giant neighbour.

Beijing's official reaction to the apparent assassination of Kim, who was killed while he was waiting for a flight from Kuala Lumpur to Macau, has been muted. On Wednesday a Chinese foreign ministry spokesman would only say that his government was following developments. But it was telling that the murder occurred away from Chinese soil.

"Kim Jong Nam's assassination is much more of a blow than the missile test", which some in Beijing saw as a useful way to test Trump and provide indications of his North Korea policy, says Paul Haenle, who advised George W Bush and Barack Obama on Asia policy. "For China, Kim Jong Nam carried the credibility of the Kim family lineage and was also supportive of Chinese-style economic reform."

Zhao Tong, a foreign affairs expert at the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center in Beijing, adds that if it was confirmed to have been carried out at the behest of Pyongyang, Kim's killing was "bad news for China's authority".

"If ordered by North Korea, the assassination sends a message that Kim Jong Un will protect his regime at any cost," Mr Zhao says. "It will be harder for China to convince the international community that North Korea can evolve peacefully into a modern society."

While less dramatic than the Kuala Lumpur killing, Sunday's missile test also has serious ramifications by undermining what Chinese officials have identified as one of their top foreign policy priorities this year: a reversal of Seoul's decision to deploy the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (Thaad) system. In pursuit of this objective, the Chinese government has recently piled pressure on South Korean companies and cancelled a number of cultural events.

South Korean officials argue that the Pyongyang missile test was conducted in a manner that demonstrated the pressing need for Thaad. The North Korean missile was launched at a steep angle that maximised the speed of its descent, which in a real conflict would make it harder to intercept.

If fired at a more conventional trajectory, the missile would have travelled slower but farther, highlighting its potential to reach targets at the southern end of the Japanese archipelago.

"The more these missile provocations go on and on, the more need there is for Thaad," said one South Korean official.

"The North Korean threat to us is clear, present and imminent, while the Chinese talk about theoretical threats from Thaad," the official adds. "How are the Chinese going to address our security concerns? We haven't had an answer." Additional reporting by Liu Xinning