

Timing of North Korea's nuclear test follows long-established pattern

Key moments in Pyongyang's idiosyncratic style of diplomacy tend to coincide with significant dates and anniversaries

- [Justin McCurry](#) in Tokyo
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The North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un, is seen on TV screens in South Korea following the latest nuclear test. Photograph: Lee Jin-Man/AP

It should perhaps have been obvious that [North Korea's](#) third nuclear test would take place just as the president of its "sworn enemy", the US, prepares to make his state of the union address.

Hijacking Barack Obama's speech in Washington later on Tuesday is part of a pattern of behaviour the North established with rocket launches and nuclear tests during the dictatorship of Kim Jong-il, and maintained by his son, Kim Jong-un.

Significant dates and anniversaries, in North Korea and in parts of the world whose attention it craves, have come to act as a loose guide for observers to the possible timing of key moments in Pyongyang's idiosyncratic style of diplomacy.

In selecting a date for the latest test, Kim, fresh from the [launch of his country's first satellite](#) into orbit on 12 December – five days before the first anniversary of his father's death – was spoiled for choice.

The state of the union aside, the test will give the Pyongyang propaganda machine reason to highlight its proximity to Kim Jong-il's birthday on Saturday.

In addition, the administrations in three of North Korea's neighbours – [China](#), [South Korea](#) and [Japan](#) – have unwittingly contrived to lend extra international weight to Tuesday's controlled underground blast.

Japan's new prime minister, Shinzo Abe, has been in office a little over a month, while [South Korea will inaugurate its first female president](#), Park Geun-hye, on 25 February. China, which had urged Pyongyang to abandon the test, will complete its once-in-a-decade leadership transition when Xi Jinping officially takes office in March.

Aidan Foster-Carter, a Korea expert at Leeds University, says the North times its military adventures to irritate its critics, particularly South Korea, Japan and the US.

The latest rocket and nuclear test "one-two" was also intended for Kim Jong-un's domestic audience. "He needed to show the North Koreans that he is indeed a chip off the old block, that he can do the business," Foster-Carter said. "That doesn't necessarily mean that he won't sit down and talk in the future but he has made it incredibly difficult to do that."

Virginie Grzelczyk, an expert on North Korea at Nottingham Trent University, said: "This news comes a day ahead of President Obama's state of the union address, and whether or not this was correlated is unknown at this point."

Whatever the motive, however, the move is likely to put North Korea at the top of the "to do list" of the new US secretary of state, John Kerry, she added.

There is historical evidence that domestic and diplomatic factors appear to hold more sway than simply honouring anniversaries connected to North Korea's first family and their purported revolutionary exploits.

The country's second nuclear test, in 2009, came a year after Kim Jong-il is reported to have had a stroke, paving the way for Kim Jong-un, his youngest son, to be groomed for the succession. In detonating a nuclear device, the regime made clear its nuclear programme would continue even at a time of political uncertainty.

Analysts believe Pyongyang's first nuclear test, in 2006, was designed to strengthen its hand just before it agreed to rejoin now-stalled nuclear talks in Beijing with China, the US, Russia, South Korea and Japan.

Before its nuclear ambitions became clear, the North's provocations centred on missile tests; in 1998, several days before the country marked the 50th anniversary of the Korean peninsula's independence from Japan; and in 2006 and 2009, when the tests were conducted on or around 4 July, overshadowing the more innocent displays of pyrotechnics marking US independence day celebrations.

But by attaching importance to auspicious dates, North Korea risks humiliation when things do not go according to plan.

Kim Jong-un had been in office for just four months when a rocket launch on 13 April last year [failed less than two minutes after liftoff](#) – two days before the centennial of the birth of the country's founder, Kim Il-sung.