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N Korea sets stark policy test for China

By Leslie Hook in Beijing

North Korea's nuclear test has presented Beijing with a stark test of foreign policy, less than four months into Xi Jinping's leadership, in a move that could further escalate diplomatic tensions across the region.

Beijing on Tuesday said it "firmly opposed" Pyongyang's nuclear tests and had summoned the North Korean ambassador in Beijing to the foreign ministry for a *démarche*. Chinese foreign minister Yang Jiechi urged North Korea to "put a stop to words and deeds that exacerbate the situation, and immediately return to the right path of dialogue and consultation."

China is by far North Korea's biggest formal ally, but the relationship has started to fray after a series of diplomatic snubs by Pyongyang since Kim Jong-eun came to power a year ago. The deteriorating ties led to China's decision to support a fresh round of UN Security Council sanctions against North Korea last month.

Beijing, North Korea's largest trade partner, has publicly said it opposes nuclearisation on the Korean peninsula and urged Pyongyang to abide by UN Security Council resolutions that limit its military activity. Yet China has maintained close trade ties with North Korea that allow the hermit kingdom access to vital commodities, such as crude oil, and to hard cash.

Tuesday's nuclear test, a violation of Beijing's wishes, will raise pressure from both inside and outside China for Beijing to keep its unruly neighbour under control.

Analysts say the nuclear test illustrates how little China is able or willing to exert its influence on North Korea.

"Once again China had no significant impact on trying to get North Korea to follow the UN Security Council resolution," says Bruce Klingner, senior research fellow at the Heritage Foundation in Washington and a former CIA analyst specialising in North Korea.

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- Bruce Klingner, Heritage Foundation, Washington

warned that North Korea would “pay a heavy price” if it went ahead with a third nuclear test. And Beijing issued an unusually strongly worded statement on North Korea’s planned missile test in December, noting its “deep concern”.

Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt, northeast Asia director at the International Crisis Group, says China’s leader Mr Xi is likely to take a tougher approach towards North Korea than his predecessor. “[China’s] economic support to North Korea has brought few political returns, and that is what [Mr] Xi is going to have to consider right now.”

Bilateral trade between the two countries reached \$5.9bn last year, an increase of 3 per cent from the previous year, according to Chinese customs data. Much of that trade is in commodities such as coal and rare earths, providing much-needed cash to the North Korean regime.

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