

South Korea's Leader Bluntly Warns U.S. Against Striking North

SEOUL, South Korea — With his public alarmed by President Trump's recent threats to North Korea, President Moon Jae-in of South Korea issued an unusually blunt rebuke to the United States on Tuesday, warning that any unilateral military action against the North over its nuclear weapons program would be intolerable.

"No one should be allowed to decide on a military action on the Korean Peninsula without South Korean agreement," Mr. Moon said in a nationally televised speech.

As a candidate for the presidency, Mr. Moon, a liberal who took office in May, said he would "say no to the Americans" if necessary. But he has aligned South Korea more closely with its military ally than many had expected. Though he suspended the deployment of a United States missile defense system opposed by China, he reversed that decision last month after North Korea tested two intercontinental ballistic missiles.

But President Trump's threat to bring "fire and fury" to North Korea, along with other statements from American officials about the possibility of war, has unnerved many South Koreans and put pressure on Mr. Moon to live up to his campaign promise. "Our government will do everything it can to prevent war from breaking out," he said in his speech Tuesday.

Mr. Moon's pushback was the latest indication that Mr. Trump's unorthodox approach to foreign policy, coupled with Pyongyang's rapid progress toward its goal of nuclear missiles that can reach the mainland United States, was putting new strain on the longstanding alliance. And it underscored how Mr. Trump's volatile language is sowing division with an ally whose help would be vital to the success of any American military campaign on the divided peninsula.

Since the 1950-53 Korean War, South Koreans have grown used to bellicose rhetoric from North Korea, like its routine threats to unleash "a sea of fire" on Seoul, the capital, which is within range of the North's artillery.

But they had never seen an American president taunt the North with similar

language, until Mr. Trump threatened it with “fire and fury like the world has never seen” and said his country’s military options were “locked and loaded.”

“The Americans had always been an ally who would prevent, not start, war on the Korean Peninsula,” said Kim Ji-woon, a college student attending a rally on Monday in central Seoul that featured a large banner reading: “Trump, shut up!” “With his trash war talk, Trump makes me wonder what’s the use of the alliance.”

Mr. Moon has been careful not to do anything that his conservative enemies could use to accuse him of undermining the relationship with the United States. But all South Korean leaders have learned that it is political suicide to look too weak to stand up to a bigger power, even if it happens to be the country’s main ally.

In 2008, many South Koreans believed that President Lee Myung-bak had succumbed to United States pressure to allow American beef imports into the country despite fears of mad cow disease. Huge crowds took to the streets, and the government was paralyzed for weeks. Mr. Lee eventually apologized in tears.

The backlash could be far greater should North Korea shell Seoul in response to an American military strike, said Kim Dong-yub, an analyst at the Institute for Far Eastern Studies at Kyungnam University in Seoul. “It could be the end of the alliance,” he said.

Many South Koreans have seethed in recent days over what they considered irresponsible statements from American leaders about the possibility of war, particularly since comments by Senator Lindsey Graham were widely reported here.

“If thousands die, they’re going to die over there — they’re not going to die here,” Mr. Graham, a South Carolina Republican, told NBC’s “Today Show” this month, summing up what he said were the views of Mr. Trump. “He’s told me that to my face — and that may be provocative, but not really. When you’re president of the United States, where does your allegiance lie?”

Around the same time, Mr. Trump’s national security adviser, H.R. McMaster, said the American military options for North Korea included launching a “preventive war.”

South Korean newspapers have reacted with dismay. Kim Young-hie, a prominent

columnist at the JoongAng Ilbo, a conservative mass-circulation daily, called Mr. Trump “a dangerous president who doesn’t understand the basic concept of war.”

“It is shameless for someone to openly say that he does not care if Korea is destroyed and that hundreds of thousands of Koreans might die in military action aimed at defending the U.S. mainland,” he wrote last week.

Members of Mr. Moon’s governing Democratic Party have also been critical, including its chairwoman, Choo Mi-ae, who accused “high-ranking American officials” of worsening the situation with their “impromptu and not carefully thought-out messages.”

Mr. Moon has faced pressure from the conservative opposition as well. The Korea Liberty Party called him an “invisible man” for failing to defuse the standoff between Washington and Pyongyang.

Mr. Trump and Mr. Moon have spoken only a handful of times, most recently in an Aug. 6 phone call. Mr. Trump has yet to appoint an ambassador to South Korea.

South Koreans had chafed at some of Mr. Trump’s remarks well before the latest tensions with Pyongyang. As a presidential candidate, Mr. Trump repeatedly accused the country of not contributing enough to the American military presence. In April, he caused offense by saying that Korea “used to be a part of China.”

His policy toward North Korea has been baffling to many in the region. Mr. Trump has called the Obama administration’s approach to Pyongyang, commonly known as “strategic patience,” a failure. But he also once said he would be “honored” to meet Kim Jong-un, before threatening his country with devastation this month.

“We are very much confused,” Moon Jung-in, a special policy adviser to President Moon, told ABC News on Sunday. “Therefore, we think that now the American government has moved from strategic patience” to “strategic confusion.”

In his speech on Tuesday, President Moon repeated his argument that sanctions and pressure alone would not deter North Korea from its nuclear pursuits, but he said war should not be an option. “The purpose of strong sanctions and pressure against North Korea is to bring it to the negotiating table, not to raise military

tensions," he said.

He urged North Korea to help create an atmosphere for dialogue by refraining from further nuclear or missile tests. But Pyongyang, which often calls South Korea an American "puppet," has been dismissive of Mr. Moon, conducting seven missile tests since he came to office and ignoring his offer to hold talks at the countries' border.

Analysts expect North Korea to conduct more missile tests after the United States and South Korea begin annual joint military exercises on Monday. The North regards those drills as rehearsals for invasion.

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