



Reagan Aide: South Korea Worried by Trump Talking Like Kim

Karl Herchenroeder

August 20, 2017

President Trump's rhetoric has altered the dynamic in South Korea regarding fears over a U.S.-North Korea conflict, a former special assistant to President Reagan said Tuesday.

Doug Bandow, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute who has visited North Korea twice, said Trump's talk has worried some of his friends in Seoul, which is about 30 miles from the North Korean border. Prior to this administration, Bandow said that you wouldn't see anyone in Seoul, Beijing or Pyongyang running for bomb shelter, despite the rhetoric from North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un.

"They're all used to this," Bandow said at the Cato Institute on Tuesday. "(What) they see in the White House now is somebody who's caught up in the same rhetoric, and they're not used to that. Traditionally, though, America was kind of seen as a stable force. Today people aren't so sure, and that's raising concerns."

Earlier this month, President Trump warned Kim Jong-un against making any threats against the United States, stating that DPRK menacing will be met with "fire and fury like the world has never seen." North Korea responded with threats to send missiles to Guam with flight paths over Japan. Lawmakers have criticized Trump's approach, suggesting that he is only adding fuel to the fire.

The president responded that maybe his "fire and fury" comments were not strong enough. In an Aug. 11 tweet, Trump said: "Military solutions are now fully in place, locked and loaded, should North Korea act unwisely. Hopefully Kim Jong Un will find another path!"

On Tuesday, DPRK leaders backed off their threats to launch missiles over Japan, but the government warned in a statement that Kim could change his mind "if the Yankees persist in their extremely dangerous reckless actions."

Bandow argued that neither Washington nor Pyongyang wants to engage in a military conflict, particularly Pyongyang.

"(North Korea) is acting out of weakness," he said. "This is bluff, this is bluster. They want a deterrent because they're afraid of the U.S. They try to act strong through their rhetoric."

He added, however, that Trump speaking with the same tone as Kim has “revved everything up.” While North Korea knows it could never win a conventional war against the U.S., he said the great equalizer is nuclear weapons.

Bandow was asked about previous administrations’ stances and rhetoric on North Korea, with a particular focus on President Clinton. Clinton considered military options against North Korea but he was dissuaded by South Korean officials who feared their country would become a battlefield. During a visit to Seoul in 1993, Clinton said, “It’s pointless for (North Korea) to try to develop nuclear weapons because if they ever use them it’d be the end of their country.”

Bandow claimed that Reagan, who was “horrified” by the prospect of nuclear war, would never use the rhetoric that Trump has taken on North Korea. Like with the Russians during the Cold War, Bandow said, Reagan would be doing everything in his power to engage his adversary.

Bandow, who first visited North Korea about 25 years ago, completed his second trip recently. He said it’s astonishing to see how much the “Hermit Kingdom” has changed in the past two decades. The emergence of private automobiles, cell phones, fashionable clothing, modern buildings and bicyclists are all signs of Pyongyang’s dramatic change. On his first trip, he said that he was not allowed to order food in restaurants, but rather North Koreans gave you food, and you ate. During his most recent visit, he ordered food and had something delivered that “was recognizable.”

“This is not Shanghai, but still (there is) that sense that things are changing,” Bandow said.