Local Koreans view North Korea’s bellicosity as bluster

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By Jodie Wagner - Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

WEST PALM BEACH —

Threats of an imminent missile strike by North Korea against South Korean or U.S. targets is nothing more than bluster, many Koreans living in Palm Beach County say.

North Korea recently has grown increasingly belligerent toward the United States and South Korea, threatening — among other things — to launch a pre-emptive nuclear strike, attack U.S. and South Korean bases and restart its nuclear weapon facilities.

The threats are being taken seriously by the United States — which deployed ships to the region capable of shooting down missiles — as well as its allies.

Many Koreans living at home and abroad, however, consider the threats nothing more than political posturing by the government and its 30-year-old leader, Kim Jong Un.

“North Korea has been so good at what they do — using their circumstances to their advantage,” said Bo Sim, associate pastor at United Methodist Church of the Palm Beaches in West Palm Beach.

Sim, 51, spent much of his childhood in Busan, South Korea, and many of his family members still live there, including his 26-year-old son.

“Initially, Koreans were wondering what he was doing,” Sim said of Kim, who took over leadership of the country after his father, Kim Jong Il, died in 2011. “And once they figured it out, they thought it was a power play. They (Kim’s regime) want to let the world know that he’s the new guy and is in control. It’s well-planned and orchestrated.”

What North Korea wants is recognition from the world as a nuclear power as well as a peace treaty with the United States, said Dukhong Kim, an assistant professor of political science at Florida Atlantic University.

The countries have had a difficult relationship since an armistice ended the Korean War in 1953.

Tensions have mounted recently since the United Nations Security Council imposed new sanctions on North Korea after its third nuclear arms test in February.

North Korea nullified the armistice last month in response to the sanctions as well as the start of annual joint military exercises in South Korea conducted by U.S. and South Korean troops.

The U.S. has more than 28,000 troops stationed in South Korea.
Dukhong, a native of South Korea who has lived in the United States since 1994, doesn’t expect North Korea to attack the South or its allies.

“They know that would be suicidal,” he said. “What they will do is they will make a skirmish, in the worst case, with the United States and South Korea. The situation has gotten complicated.”

Last week, North Korea pulled more than 50,000 of its workers from an industrial complex it operates jointly with South Korea.

Kim’s regime also warned diplomats in the country that it would not be able to guarantee their safety in the event of a conflict and advised foreigners in South Korea to secure shelter or evacuate the country in case of hostilities.

The rhetoric has failed to alarm many South Koreans, who have lived through decades of North Korean bluster.

“The people of South Korea, we really don’t worry about that,” said Suk Han, longtime pastor at Korean Presbyterian Church of Palm Beach and a native of Seoul, South Korea. “It’s not a big worry.”

Sim has spoken with relatives in South Korea, and all share similar sentiments.

“My cousins and my family there are not concerned,” he said. “Stocks in Korea actually have risen the last few days. I think that shows the cumulative reaction of the Korean people.”