

Trump, Tillerson Press China For Action Against North Korea

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As US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson completed his weekend trip to China, President Donald Trump again compounded tensions in North East Asia by condemning North Korea for its latest rocket-engine test, announced on Sunday. Trump told the media yesterday the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un was “acting very, very badly”—with the implied threat that the US would take action, including possible military strikes.

Trump’s remark was also designed to ramp up the pressure on Beijing to use its economic levers to force Pyongyang to bow to US demands to dismantle its nuclear and missile programs. It echoed a tweet by Trump last Friday declaring:

“North Korea is behaving very badly. They have been ‘playing’ the United States for years. China had done little to help!”

Tillerson’s trip to Asia over the past week—to Japan, South Korea and finally China—was designed to deliver the same message to the Chinese government.

While his public remarks in Beijing were relatively muted, Tillerson had already made clear in Seoul that “all options,” including military ones, were on the table if the Chinese government did not bring Pyongyang to heel. Referring to the Obama administration’s policy of step-by-step sanctions, he said: “Let me be very clear. The policy of strategic patience is over. We are exploring a new range of diplomatic, security and economic measures.”

In Beijing, Tillerson met with Chinese President Xi Jinping and Foreign Minister Wang Yi. Wang appealed for the US to adopt a “cool-headed” approach to North Korea and said he and Tillerson “both hope to find ways to restart the talks” with Pyongyang. The US secretary of state, however, insisted that any discussions were contingent on the North Korean regime reversing its nuclear weapon and missile programs.

The Trump administration last week flatly rejected a proposal by Wang for a suspension-for-suspension approach—North Korea would suspend its nuclear and missile programs and the US would call off its massive joint military exercises in South Korea—as a means for starting negotiations. The joint war games, involving more than 320,000 military personnel, an aircraft carrier strike group and stealth war planes, are a rehearsal for war with North Korea.

In his only in-depth media interview during his trip, Tillerson told the right-wing *Independent Journal Review* that the “imminent threat” from North Korea had propelled it to the top of the agenda in Beijing. He suggested that “broader sanctions” on North Korea could be

considered, adding:

“It’s not our objective to force [Pyongyang] into some brash action.”

Yet is precisely the threat of US military action that the Trump administration is using to try to muscle the Chinese government into imposing crippling sanctions on the North Korean regime. Beijing has already taken harsh punitive measures against Pyongyang, including suspending the import of coal—North Korea’s largest export earner.

Further sanctions could trigger a major economic and political crisis in Pyongyang. China accounts for at least 70 percent of North Korea’s trade and most of its imported oil. The Chinese government has been hostile to North Korea’s nuclear tests, which provide the excuse for a military build-up by the US and its allies. But Beijing also wants to avoid the collapse of the North Korean regime, which could result in a unified pro-US Korea on its northern border.

China has been particularly hostile to the US decision to begin installing a Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) anti-ballistic missile system in South Korea. While nominally directed against North Korea, the THAAD deployment is part of an expanding anti-missile system that is primarily aimed at fighting a war with China.

In Seoul last week, Tillerson publicly called on China to refrain from taking economic retaliation against South Korea over the THAAD deployment. In Beijing, he undoubtedly used the threat of more US anti-ballistic missile systems in Asia to try to force the Chinese regime to take action against its North Korean ally.

North Korea’s test last weekend of what it claimed was a high-thrust rocket engine and hailed as a “great victory,” only played directly into US hands. Far from defending the North Korean people, the rocket test, coming on top of a series of missile launches this year, provides a pretext for the Trump administration to deal with the supposed “imminent threat” through military means.

A chilling piece appeared in the *New York Times* on Saturday by Max Fisher entitled, “The risks of pre-emptive strikes against North Korea.” The article reflects the calculations now being made in US strategic and military circles about the costs of war on the Korean Peninsula.

“Almost any plan would bring a high risk of unintended escalation to all-out war,” Fisher wrote. “It would place millions of South Korean and Japanese civilians in the cross hairs of North Korean weapons with few guaranteed benefits.”

The article outlines three options—a single strike on a missile launch, a series of attacks to devastate North Korea’s nuclear and missile facilities, and an all-out war to destroy the Pyongyang regime, its military apparatus and industrial base. Fisher concludes that any of these plans would result in retaliation by North Korea that could result in mass deaths.

The article cites General Curtis Scaparrotti who told a congressional committee in 2016, when he was head of US forces in South Korea, that a war with North Korea “would be more akin to the Korean War and World War II—very complex, probably high casualty.” Fisher

concludes with a quote from North Korean analyst Jeffrey Lewis.

“It’s a bad strategic idea, but you can understand why military planners would gravitate towards it,” Lewis said, calling the plans “the best of a bad lot.”

Yet when Tillerson declares that “all options” are on the table, he is referring to these reckless US acts of aggression. Whatever the pretexts and the starting point, a US-led war against North Korea would not only devastate the Korean Peninsula. It could rapidly draw in other powers, including Japan and China, and lead to an unprecedented world conflagration involving nuclear weapons.

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