

US secretary of state ramps up pressure on China over North Korea

By Mike Head
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US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson is using a three-country trip to Tokyo, Seoul and Beijing this week to line up America's current allies, Japan and South Korea, behind Washington's preparations for an economic and potentially military confrontation against North Korea and also China.

Tillerson held talks with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida yesterday. Today, he lands in South Korea for discussions with Acting President Hwang Kyo Ahn. Tomorrow he will be in China for meetings with President Xi Jinping, State Councilor Yang Jiechi and Foreign Minister Wang Yi.

While Tillerson is couching his public comments in language about responding to North Korean ballistic missile and nuclear weapons tests, the thrust of his tour is to escalate the US pressure on China over its alleged failure not to do more to rein in North Korea.

According to US officials, Tillerson will threaten punishing sanctions against Chinese companies accused of trading with North Korea, and categorically reject Chinese calls not to proceed with stationing a US anti-missile system and attack drones in South Korea that could be used in any nuclear war with China.

Tillerson is the second member of Trump's cabinet to visit Japan. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis went last month, and Vice President Mike Pence is due in April, underscoring the administration's focus on using North Korea's missile and nuclear programs as a pretext for targeting China.

In Tokyo yesterday, Tillerson called for closer "trilateral cooperation" between Japan, South Korea and the US. It was important to "maintain a strong alliance in which there is no space between us," he said.

Tillerson's visit follows a Trump administration

review of US strategy toward North Korea. According to media leaks, it was considering "regime change" and military attacks on the North. Earlier this month, the *New York Times* reported that President Donald Trump's national security deputies had discussed both the possibility of pre-emptive US military strikes on North Korea and a reintroduction of nuclear weapons to the South.

Tillerson's trip is being conducted against a backdrop of huge annual US-South Korean war games, based on "offensive" scenarios that include the rehearsal of "decapitation raids" by special forces units to assassinate the North Korean leadership. Intent on heightening tensions, the White House has rejected a proposal by China to halt the drills in return for North Korea suspending nuclear and missile activities.

In Tokyo yesterday, Tillerson said the "ever-escalating threat" from North Korea's nuclear program showed a clear need for a "new approach," but did not say what the Trump administration planned. Speaking at a joint news conference after talks with Foreign Minister Kishida, he claimed there had been "20 years of failed approach," including attempts to assist and encourage North Korea "to take a different pathway."

The *Japan Times*, citing an anonymous senior Japanese foreign ministry official, reported that Tillerson told Kishida that "all options are on the table" in dealing with North Korea's military threat. The official said Tillerson offered "several ideas" but denied that specific military options were discussed.

Before Tillerson's departure from Washington, a Trump administration official underscored the White House's rejection of China's objections to the deployment, currently underway, of a Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) anti-missile battery

in South Korea. “THAAD is non-negotiable,” the official told Reuters. “This is one of those things where Beijing is just going to have to adapt to or live in a perpetual cycle of outrage.”

In media briefings, senior US officials said Tillerson would also tell Beijing that the US was prepared to increase financial penalties against Chinese companies and banks that do business with North Korea.

Penalties have already begun, escalating an offensive that the Obama administration began last year. The Commerce Department last week announced that a Chinese tech firm, ZTE, would pay a \$1.2 billion fine for violating sanctions by selling equipment to Iran and North Korea.

Although ZTE agreed to submit to the penalty, such large fines have the potential to damage China’s economy. Last September, the Obama administration set a precedent by targeting a Chinese company, the Dandong Hongxiang Industrial Development Co. Ltd, accusing it of money laundering on behalf of Pyongyang.

Korea is only one potential flashpoint. During his congressional confirmation hearings in January, Tillerson set the stage for a possible clash with China, saying it should be barred from artificial islands it has built in the South China Sea.

Publicly, Tillerson’s trip was meant to reassure Japan and South Korea of Washington’s continued commitment to their defence. During his election campaign, Trump repeatedly threatened to pull out US forces unless Japan and South Korea paid more for hosting them.

In Tokyo, Tillerson emphasised the importance of the US-Japan alliance. Speaking before meeting Abe, Tillerson said it was “the cornerstone for stability in Northeast Asia and the Asia Pacific” and “we look forward to strengthening that alliance further.” Abe said Tillerson’s visit to Japan was “timely,” when tension was mounting in the region.

The Japanese government reportedly agreed to expedite scheduling of a Security Consultative Committee—a meeting of the foreign and defense chiefs of both countries—to start considering concrete steps to enhance the alliance as soon as possible.

However, the visit also occurred in the context of steps by Abe’s government to rearm militarily in order to pursue its own imperialist ambitions, while still

operating under the umbrella of its strategic alliance with the US. These moves include sending a Japanese guided-missile destroyer to participate in US-South Korean exercises near where four North Korean test missiles landed this month and dispatching a helicopter carrier for three months of operations in the South China Sea and across the Indo-Pacific region.

A hint of the tensions between the US and Japanese governments came in the Tillerson-Kishida press conference when Kishida said “Japan will assume larger roles and responsibilities.” A CBS News correspondent asked the Japanese foreign minister about reports that Abe’s government was considering acquiring its own THAAD system and a pre-emptive strike capacity against missile launches. Kishida said he did not understand the question and declined to allow the reporter to clarify.

On the economic front, the two sides evidently sought to patch up the rift caused by the Trump administration’s withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which had promised greater access to each other’s markets as part of a wider push for a US-led Asia-Pacific economic bloc against China.

Officially, Tillerson and Kishida “affirmed cooperation” through a new bilateral economic dialogue, to be led by US Vice President Pence and Japanese Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso, who is also finance minister. In reality, the trade war warnings of punitive tariffs issued by the Trump administration, while initially directed against China and Mexico, also threaten major Japanese companies operating in these markets.

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