

Rex Tillerson in Seoul: 'Preemptive' Strike on North Korea an Option

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, on his first official visit to Asia, is certainly making a lot of headlines—and probably making North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un very nervous.

Friday, during a press conference in Seoul, South Korea, he made it abundantly clear that when he said “all options are on the table” in dealing with the North’s illicit nuclear weapons program, he really meant it. That includes a “preemptive” military strike against the rogue state.

“All of the options are on the table,” he said. “Certainly, we do not want to—for things to get to a military conflict. We are quite clear in that, in our communications. But obviously, if North Korea takes actions that threatens the South Korean forces or our own forces, then that would be met with an appropriate response. If they elevate the threat of their weapons program to a level that we believe requires action, that option is on the table.

“But we are hopeful that, by taking these steps—and we have many, many steps we can take before we get to that point—we hope that that will persuade North Korea to take a different course of action. That is our desire.”

He also mirrored comments he made Thursday during a joint press conference in Tokyo with his Japanese counterpart about the futility of diplomatic actions taken over the past 20 years. He said those efforts have done nothing to stop the development of the North’s nuclear program.

“Twenty years of talks with North Korea have brought us to where we are today,” he said. “Both the [Republic of Korea]

and the United States have been quite clear over these 20 years, that we seek nothing but a stable Korean Peninsula and an economically prosperous Korean Peninsula. North Korea has nothing to fear from the United States. But this 20 years of talking has brought us to the point we are today.

“So the track that we are now on is to use a number of steps with an ever-greater number of actions ahead of us that involve sanctions, which the United Nations Security Council has already approved, including China, which voted for those sanctions. And then we are calling on all countries to now fully implement those sanctions. We are also calling upon China to fully implement those sanctions, as well, in compliance with the U.N. Security Council resolution that it voted for.

“We will be widening the circle of allies in response to North Korea’s threats and their provocative actions, and asking others to join in. It is important that the leadership of North Korea realize that their current pathway of nuclear weapons and escalating threats will not lead to their objective of security and economic development. That pathway can only be achieved by denuclearizing, giving up their weapons of mass destruction. And only then will we be prepared to engage with them in talks.”

Tillerson will be visiting China on Saturday for what could be a contentious discussion about the Communist state’s destabilizing influence on the region, particularly with its “island-building” in the South China Sea and its reluctance to rein in the Kim Dynasty in North Korea. The U.S. is also preparing to deploy the THAAD ballistic missile defense system in South Korea, which has prompted an angry response from the Chinese.

The secretary made it clear he’s not bending on the issue of defense for American allies in Southeast Asia.

"I do believe that we will proceed with the installation of THAAD," he said. "And it's my expectation that the new government in South Korea will continue to be supportive of the THAAD system, because it is directed solely at the defense of the ROK.

As to conversations with the government of China, we will be discussing with them the serious threat that North Korea poses to peace and stability in the Korean Peninsula, but even beyond. North Korea is now pursuing programs that would allow them to present a clear threat to the continental United States and to other parts of the world. So we will be discussing with China what we believe they should be doing to help mitigate this threat, as well.

As to their punitive actions against South Korea because of the agreement to install the THAAD system, as I indicated in my remarks, we believe these actions are unnecessary, and we believe they are troubling. We also believe it is not the way for a regional power to help resolve what is a serious threat to everyone. And so we would hope that China would alter its position on punishing South Korea for the THAAD system. As I said, we have emphasized many times it's purely defensive in nature, and we would hope that they would help us engage with North Korea to eliminate the reason a THAAD system is even required.

Tillerson also discussed the need to ramp up sanctions in North Korea as a deterrent to continued development of its nuclear program.

"I don't believe we have ever fully achieved the maximum level of action that can be taken under the U.N. Security Council resolution, with full participation of all countries," he said. "There also are other sources of revenue to North Korea that fall outside of the specific sanctions, and we know that other nations could take actions to alter their relationship

with North Korea in support of our efforts to have them give up their nuclear weapons program.

“I think, in terms of talking about any kind of a freeze, I think it’s premature for that. But at this stage, I’m not sure we would be willing to freeze, with the circumstances where they exist today, given that that would leave North Korea with significant capabilities that would represent a true threat, not just to the region, but to American forces as well.” {eo}