

US secretary of state: Military action against North Korea 'an option', warns Rex Tillerson

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US secretary of state says policy of strategic patience has ended due to threat posed by Pyongyang's nuclear weapons programme

A pre-emptive US military strike against North Korea may be necessary if the threat posed by its nuclear weapons programme reaches a level that "requires action", the US secretary of state, Rex Tillerson, has warned.

Speaking in Seoul on the second day of a visit to the Asia-Pacific region, Tillerson said Washington's policy of "strategic patience" towards the regime in Pyongyang had ended.

In his strongest comments yet on concerns that North Korea is moving closer towards developing a nuclear strike capability that could threaten the US mainland, Tillerson said "all options are on the table".

"Certainly we do not want to, for things to get to military conflict," he said at a joint press conference with South Korea's foreign minister, Yun Byung-se.

"If they elevate the threat of their weapons programme to a level that we believe requires action, then that option's on the table.

"Let me be very clear: the policy of strategic patience has ended. We are exploring a new range of security and diplomatic measures."

Those words hint at a departure from the North Korea policy pursued by the Obama administration, which sought to use multilateral sanctions to pressure the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un, into agreeing to denuclearisation in exchange for aid and investment.

But over the past 11 years, North Korea has responded by carrying out five nuclear tests and dozens of missile launches, and made it clear it is not prepared to relinquish weapons of mass destruction in the face of American "hostility".

Tillerson said North Korea could no longer be allowed to continue developing its nuclear and missile technology. "That would leave North Korea with significant capabilities that would represent a true threat," he said.

The failure of Obama's isolationism sparked speculation that the US would adopt a fresh approach towards North Korea under Donald Trump.

On Thursday, Tillerson conceded that 20 years of US attempts to "denuclearise" North Korea had been unsuccessful. "I think it's important to recognise that the political and diplomatic efforts of the past 20 years to bring North Korea to the point of denuclearisation have failed," he said during a

visit to Tokyo.

“That includes a period where the United States has provided \$1.35bn in assistance to North Korea as an encouragement to take a different pathway.”

“In the face of this ever-escalating threat, it is clear that a different approach is required. Part of the purpose of my visit to the region is to exchange views on a new approach.”

Aside from repeating that Washington’s policy options remain open, Tillerson has not offered details of how the Trump administration plans to address the rising threat from North Korean nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles.

Earlier on Friday, Tillerson was able to view the North Korean countryside firsthand from the demilitarised zone, the heavily armed strip of land that has divided the Korean peninsula since the end of the 1950-53 Korean war.

Watched by North Korean soldiers on the northern side of the demarcation line, Tillerson toured the Panmunjom joint security area, which has been guarded by both North Korea and the US-led UN command since the end of the conflict.

At one point, the North Korean guards were just a few feet from Tillerson, with one appearing to be filming or photographing the secretary of state, who also met some of the 28,500 US troops based in South Korea.

Tillerson faces potentially the most difficult leg of his three-country visit when he arrives in Beijing on Saturday.

The US has called on China – North Korea’s only diplomatic ally and its biggest trade partner – to fully implement internationally agreed sanctions and exert more political pressure on Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear weapons programme.

“I don’t believe we have ever fully achieved the maximum level of action that can be taken under the UN security council resolution with full participation of all countries,” Tillerson said in a reference to China.

“We know that other nations can take actions.”

Justin McCurry in Tokyo and agencies in Seoul

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<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/mar/17/military-action-against-north-korea-an-option-warns-rex-tillerson>

Tillerson concedes US efforts to ‘denuclearise North Korea’ have failed

US secretary of state starts four-day Asia-Pacific trip by calling for new approach towards Pyongyang’s weapons programme.

The US secretary of state, Rex Tillerson, has conceded that 20 years of US attempts to “denuclearise” North Korea have failed, and called for a new approach towards the regime’s nuclear weapons programme.

Speaking in Tokyo at the start of a four-day visit to Japan, South Korea and China, Tillerson said on Thursday: “I think it’s important to recognise that the political and diplomatic efforts of the past 20 years to bring North Korea to the point of denuclearisation have failed.

“That includes a period where the United States has provided \$1.35bn in assistance to North Korea as an encouragement to take a different pathway.

“In the face of this ever-escalating threat, it is clear that a different approach is required. Part of the purpose of my visit to the region is to exchange views on a new approach.”

Tillerson said he and his Japanese counterpart, Fumio Kishida, had discussed a fresh approach to North Korea’s “dangerous and unlawful” nuclear programme, but neither revealed details.

“North Korea and its people need not fear the United States or their neighbours in the region who seek only to live in peace with North Korea,” the secretary of state added. “With this in mind, the United States calls on North Korea to abandon its nuclear and ballistic missile programmes and refrain from any further provocation.”

US administration officials have said that all options are on the table, including military strikes, but Tillerson indicated that Washington would continue to demand the full implementation of UN sanctions and press China to make more effective use of its leverage with the North Korean regime.

Calls for an alternative to the multinational sanctions supported by previous Japanese and US administrations have grown amid worrying evidence that the measures have not prevented North Korea from edging closer to its aim of developing nuclear weapons capable of striking the US mainland.

Japan and South Korea, which host tens of thousands of American troops, are within range of North Korean missiles.

In another show of defiance, North Korea fired four ballistic missiles into the sea off Japan’s north-west coast last week and test-launched a new ballistic missile in February to coincide with Trump’s summit in Florida with the Japanese prime minister, Shinzo Abe.

Trump said last year that he would consider inviting the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un, to Washington for talks, but has not broached the idea of engagement since becoming president.

It is unlikely that the idea of direct negotiations will be resurrected unless North Korea agrees to give up its nuclear weapons programme – a precondition it has shown no sign of accepting.

On Thursday, Tillerson repeated Trump’s demand that China do more to rein in North Korea. “We do believe they have a very important role to play,” he said. “We will be having discussions with China as to other actions that they should be undertaking.”

China, North Korea’s main ally and biggest economic partner, last month suspended coal imports from its impoverished neighbour and has supported UN resolutions condemning its nuclear and missile tests.

But Beijing is unlikely to support any measure that could lead to the collapse of the regime in

Pyongyang, since that could lead to a deluge of refugees and the presence of US and South Korean troops on its border with North Korea.

Chinese cooperation has been further complicated by the forthcoming deployment of a controversial US anti-missile system in South Korea [1].

China has objected to the Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (Thaad) missile defence system, describing its advanced radar as a threat to its own security. Military officials in the US and South Korea insist that Thaad's sole purpose is to thwart missile attacks from North Korea.

Earlier on Thursday, Tillerson said the US would continue to work with Japan and South Korea to pressure Pyongyang into giving up its nuclear weapons programme. "Trilateral cooperation is critical in particular as we address North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missiles programme," he said at the start of a meeting with Kishida.

Despite concerns last year that the US could reduce its military presence in the volatile Asia-Pacific under Trump, senior figures in the administration have sought to reassure Tokyo and Seoul that it remains committed to their defence amid North Korea's nuclear programme and Chinese naval activity in the South and East China Seas.

Tillerson said making Japan the first stop on his visit "does underscore the importance that the United States places on the Japanese-US relationship, but also the importance of the Asia-Pacific region to the United States. The US-Japan alliance remains the cornerstone of peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region."

Tillerson was due to hold talks with Japan's prime minister, Shinzō Abe, on Thursday evening. On Friday, he will meet South Korea's acting president, Hwang Kyo-ahn, and visit the demilitarised zone - the heavily armed border separating South and North Korea.

In Beijing at the weekend, Tillerson is expected to attempt to calm Chinese fears over Thaad, play down talk of a possible trade war between the world's two largest economies, and finalise plans for the Chinese leader, Xi Jinping, to visit Trump in April.

Justin McCurry in Tokyo

* The Guardian. Thursday 16 March 2017 10.23 GMT Last modified on Thursday 16 March 2017 10.36 GMT:

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/mar/16/tillerson-concedes-us-efforts-to-denuclearise-north-korea-have-failed>

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/mar/08/china-warns-trump-facing-head-on-collision-north-korea>