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US secretary of state issues new ultimatum to North Korea

Just days after declaring the US was willing to talk to North Korea without preconditions, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson delivered a fresh ultimatum to Pyongyang. He ruled out any meeting unless it was preceded by a “sustained cessation of North Korea’s threatening behaviour.”

Speaking at the UN Security Council on Friday, Tillerson declared: “North Korea must earn its way back to the [negotiating] table. The pressure campaign must, and will, continue until denuclearization is achieved.” Pyongyang had a choice, he stated, either give up its nuclear weapons programs, “or it can continue to condemn its people to poverty and isolation.”

The Trump administration, however, is not simply threatening to maintain the present crippling sanctions on North Korea, but to launch a war of aggression against the small, economically backward state. Trump has repeatedly made clear that he will not tolerate North Korea developing a nuclear missile that can reach continental America.

Tillerson told the Atlantic Council on Tuesday that it was “not realistic to say we’re only going to talk if you come to the table ready to give up your [nuclear] program.” He offered to hold a first meeting with North Korean officials to talk about anything, including “the weather if you want,” in order to break the ice.

Tillerson was quickly pulled into line by the White House, which declared that Trump’s position had not changed, fueling further speculation that the president might remove the secretary of state.

Nevertheless, in a stunning about-face, the policy elaborated by Tillerson on Friday was precisely what he declared on Tuesday to be unrealistic. His only remarks underscore the belligerent and provocative character of the Trump administration's stance towards North Korea.

Pyongyang is deeply concerned that Washington's real aim is regime change—either through an economic blockade or war—and has sought security guarantees before any talks. The Trump administration has refused to offer such an undertaking and continues to insist that “all options are on the table”—including a US military attack.

At the UN, Tillerson called on China and Russia to effectively strangle North Korea economically. Faced with the threat of a major US-led war on their doorstep, both countries have already agreed to punitive UN sanctions that ban virtually all North Korean exports and restrict energy imports.

The US secretary of state demanded that Beijing and Moscow go much further. He berated Russia for continuing to employ North Korean guest workers, saying it called “into question Russia's dedication as a partner for peace.” He similarly declared that “the United States questions China's commitment” when Chinese crude oil flows into North Korean refineries.

Trump yesterday phoned Russian President Vladimir Putin to again demand that Moscow put more economic pressure on Pyongyang. He tweeted later that the “primary point of the call was to discuss North Korea. “We would love to have [Putin's] help on North Korea. China's helping, Russia is not helping,” Trump said.

Russia and China have both been reluctant to impose an economic blockade on Pyongyang that would provoke a political upheaval and open the door for a US intervention into North Korea to impose a pro-US puppet. A complete embargo would itself be an act of war that could provoke North Korean retaliation.

Tillerson sought to assure the UN Security Council that the US was not about to launch a war on North Korea. “We have been clear that all options remain on the table in the defense of our nation, but we do not seek, nor do we want, war with North Korea,” he said.

Such assurances are worthless. By “defence,” Trump means that he will not permit North Korea to have a nuclear intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) and is prepared to launch a criminal war of aggression to achieve that end. At the United Nations in September, he threatened to “totally destroy” North Korea.

Late last month, North Korea tested an ICBM that appeared to have the range to reach all parts of the United States. While many questions remain as to its ability to deliver a nuclear weapon, the Trump administration has already primed the US military for a massive attack on North Korea.

In carefully chosen words, Admiral John Richardson, the US highest-ranking naval officer, underscored the Pentagon's preparedness for war with North Korea. "We in the military understand that we have to be prepared for any kind of increasing capability that could come from the North, that would threaten us from the North, so that we could prevail," he said.

Republican Senator Lindsay Graham, a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee and one of Trump's golfing partners, was not so circumspect. In an interview in the *Atlantic* published on Thursday, he put the current odds that Trump would go to war against Pyongyang at 30 percent. If North Korea conducted another nuclear test, he said, the probability could rise to 70 percent. "We're not to the tipping point yet," he said, but "if they test another [nuclear] weapon, then all bets are off."

In a chilling assessment of what the US is preparing, Graham warned: "War with North Korea is an all-out war against the regime. There is no surgical strike option ... If you ever use the military option, it's not to just neutralize their nuclear facilities—you gotta be willing to take the regime completely down."

"I don't know how to say it any more direct: If nothing changes, Trump's gonna have to use the military option, because time is running out," Graham warned. Such a war would kill hundreds of thousands, if not millions of people, and could rapidly involve other major nuclear-armed powers, particularly Russia and China.

That the Trump administration is on the brink of plunging Asia and the world into nuclear war has provoked a series of worried warnings. Speaking at his annual press conference on Thursday, Russian President Putin declared that a pre-emptive US strike against North Korea would be "catastrophic."

Speaking the same day in Tokyo, UN Secretary General António Guterres told the UN Security Council stated: "The worst possible thing that could happen is for us all to sleepwalk into a war." He appealed for a negotiated resolution to the confrontation so as to avert "a level of danger that would be unpredictable in its trajectory and catastrophic in its consequences."

The acute danger of war is also heightening factional infighting in Washington and efforts to remove Trump. Far from lessening the likelihood of conflict, the political crisis could

drive Trump to attack North Korea as a means of diverting the immense internal tensions in the United States outward against a foreign foe.