

Press Releases: Interview With Elise Labott of CNN

Interview
Rex W. Tillerson

Secretary of State

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QUESTION: Secretary Tillerson, thanks so much for joining us, and Happy New Year.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Happy New Year to you and to all the Americans out there as well. It's a pleasure.

QUESTION: Let's start with North Korea. There was big news last night about the North and South arranging talks for next week, North Korea now coming to the table. Is that an opening maybe for talks with the U.S. or nuclear talks?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, I think it's too early to tell. We need to wait and see what the outcome of their talks are. The President had a – President Trump had a good call with President Moon yesterday morning, which I participated in, and their intent is to talk about the Olympics – obviously, a very important upcoming event for South Korea – and the potential participation of North Korea in those Olympics. So our understanding is that's the content of the meeting. So I think it's a little early to draw any conclusions.

QUESTION: But it could be a positive sign maybe that North Korea wants to engage a little bit.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, we'll see. We'll see. Perhaps. I know some are speculating that this may be their first effort to open a channel. But as you know, we've had channels open to North Korea for some time, and so they do know how to reach us when – if and when they're ready to engage with us as well.

QUESTION: Well, maybe you'll be next.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: We'll see.

QUESTION: If you could explain a little bit about what the U.S. policy is on

North Korea, because I think Americans are a little bit confused. Do the North Koreans have to give up their nuclear program before committing to talks?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Our policy is the complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearization –

QUESTION: Right.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: – of the Korean Peninsula. That is a policy that is commonly held by everyone in the region as well.

QUESTION: Right.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: The Chinese have that as a stated policy. Russia has it as a stated policy. So regionally, all of the countries in the neighboring area, as well as the international community, are well aligned on the policy. How we achieve the ultimate endpoint, the final fully – full denuclearization, the verification of that, and the irreversibility of it, clearly that's going to take some time. So how we begin the talks is yet to be determined, but we clearly need a signal from North Korea that they understand these talks must lead to that conclusion. The pathway of how you get there, that is the nature of the negotiation. There'll be some give and take to achieve those objectives. So that's – that objective has never changed.

QUESTION: Because as you said, it's unrealistic for them to kind of sit down and say, "We're ready to do it," but it sounds like they'd have to show some willingness, but then the mechanics of that are able to be worked out.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: We have to have the shared view that that is the reason we're talking, that's the purpose of these talks, and it is through those talks that North Korea actually can chart the way for themselves of a more secure future, a more prosperous future for their people as well. So there are very positive outcomes to these talks for North Korea, as there will be positive outcomes for the security of the entire region. That is the nature of the negotiations.

QUESTION: Do you think – a lot has been made about the President's tweet on the nuclear button, but now North Korea is talking with South Korea. Do you think that tough rhetoric has worked here?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: I think the rhetoric that North Korea understands is while it is our objective – and the President has been very clear – to achieve a denuclearization through diplomatic efforts, those diplomatic efforts are backed by a strong military option if necessary. That is not the first choice, and the President has been clear that's not his first choice. But it is important that North Korea, as well as other regional players, understand how high the stakes are in an effort to ensure our diplomatic efforts are fully supported. And I think to date, the diplomatic efforts have been supported very well in the international community. If you look at the three UN Security Council resolutions on sanctions, the participation in

those sanctions and a number of countries going well beyond the Security Council resolutions and imposing unilateral actions on their own, both economic as well as diplomatic, I think it is a recognition that the President has demonstrated to the world how high the stakes are. That's why we must achieve a diplomatic outcome.

But the North Koreans have to understand that, and they have to understand that the penalties to them will continue and will only grow more severe in terms of sanctions actions and other actions until they do get on a pathway to achieve that objective that the entire world hopes to achieve.

QUESTION: So it sounds like this kind of good cop, bad cop, if you will – hold out the prospect of talks but if talks don't work, military action – that might be the formula that you and the President will continue.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: I'm going to let you characterize it that way. I'm not going to necessarily show all of our cards.

QUESTION: Let's go to Iran. You've said that you want to support, quote, elements in the country that will lead to a peaceful transition of government. That sounds like regime change.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, I think the Iranian people have suffered under this regime, the regime that has – it is a revolutionary government. They describe themselves as a revolutionary government. And the Iranian people have suffered under this regime. Very little good has happened for the Iranian people. Ever since this regime has taken power, they have suffered under economic sanctions because of this regime's destabilizing activities in the region.

At some point, people will decide this is not how they want to live any longer, but we always support a peaceful transition of power. We do not support violent transitions of power, but we do support peaceful transitions of power, and we've seen those expressions in years past with the large demonstrations at the elections in 2009, the demonstrations that we see in the streets today. We are supportive of the Iranian people achieving their aspirations for a better quality of life, for greater freedom. We believe they deserve that, but it will be up to the Iranian people to manage that peaceful transition. We support that.

QUESTION: How do you help them facilitate that?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: I think by amplifying their voices. When they go to the street, we listen to why they are there, what are their concerns, and where there are legitimate concerns and we agree that their concerns are legitimate, we should support the expression of those. And that's what the President has done, the White House, the Vice President, myself here at the State Department, through statements we've made, is to give their voice amplification. We know the regime listens to the world, and that's why we've been working diligently with others in the world, including our European partners, to also amplify these voices within the country to say to the regime, you must address these concerns of these people and you should be

address it by beginning a process of reform.

QUESTION: How does that factor into your decision on sanctions? Do you support waiving sanctions at this next certification?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, we've been very clear on our policy on Iran. The prior administration focused all of the Iranian policy around the nuclear deal, the JCPOA. Our policy is much broader. We look at the totality of Iran's actions and behaviors. So the decisions around waiving sanctions relative to the nuclear agreement and decisions to take in terms of imposing additional sanctions on Iran that are unrelated to the nuclear agreement are – there's a broad array when you talk about sanctions. And I think –

QUESTION: So non-nuclear sanctions, you're talking about.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, I think some people get confused –

QUESTION: Yeah.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: – sometimes, and it's understandable. But Iran's support for the Houthis in Yemen, their support for destabilization efforts in Syria, the funding of militias, the sending of foreign fighters, arming terrorist organizations in the region, Lebanese Hizballah – that has to be dealt with. And our sanctions are targeted at Iran's destabilizing activities within the region while still maintaining all our efforts to ensure Iran never acquires nuclear weapons.

So there are sanctions regimes built around both of those efforts. And what the President has done with his policies, is he's now looked at Iran in its totality and said Iran has to be held to account in both of these areas.

QUESTION: So it sounds like maybe, even if you certify on the nuclear issue, more non-nuclear sanctions could be coming.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: They will be coming. There were non-nuclear sanctions announced yesterday by the Treasury Department in response to Iran's missile – ballistic missile development programs, which are in violation of earlier agreements.

QUESTION: And more to come?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: In all likelihood, unless Iran alters its behavior. And again, this is the objective of the sanctions, is to put enough pressure on these governments that they decide the price, the cost of what they're doing, is too high.

QUESTION: Well, and also the Revolutionary Guard's grip on the economy, right? And that's really what you're trying to –

SECRETARY TILLERSON: That's a lot of what the demonstrations in the streets were about, is young people and others saying, "There's too much of our economy and our wealth of our country going to support these destabilizing activities of the IRGC, as well as the IRGC's involvement in our economy.

We're not seeing enough of the benefit. The elites are seeing the benefit."

QUESTION: Let's talk about Russia. You came in, the President wanted a better relationship. It's been a tough year. What do you see the flashpoints next year?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, it has been a difficult year with Russia. We clearly – and I've said clearly, the President's stated clearly – our two nations should have a more productive relationship. Today, it's very strained, for all the reasons that I think the American people well understand. Having said that, we have maintained a constant engagement with Russia, very active engagement. The President's had two face-to-face meetings with President Putin, and he's had phone calls with him as well. I have a very active line of communication, as does DOD, with Russian counterparts.

QUESTION: But I hear you're very – when you're with Foreign Minister Lavrov, you're pretty tough.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, we're – he's pretty tough, and I'm pretty tough, but I think this is – it's important if we're going to deal with these tough issues, we have to be very open and candid and frank with one another about what both of us – and I think Foreign Minister Lavrov is as committed to trying to improve this relationship as I am. These are difficult issues, and we have made it clear that the keystone is really Ukraine.

QUESTION: Right.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: We have to make progress in Ukraine. Having said that, we have found areas of cooperation in Syria that have led to the near defeat of ISIS in Syria. The U.S., along with the Iraqi forces, has completely defeated ISIS in Iraq. And now, it's how do we stabilize and chart the path forward for a stable Syria so that it does not present opportunities for ISIS to re-emerge, or other terrorist organizations.

QUESTION: President Trump said that this whole Russia investigation has been a kind of drag on your foreign policy, that it hurts you with allies, that there is a lot of confusion. Has – how has that impacted your dealings with world leaders in terms of this cloud, if you will?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: It has had no impact. And I say that –

QUESTION: Really?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: It's had none. It never comes up in our conversations or in my bilats or in my dialogues with world leaders elsewhere. The domestic issues in – around the Russia involvement in our elections are not part of our dialogue elsewhere. I think the rest of the world recognizes it is a domestic issue, it's an important one. The Russians and we talk about it, and we have said to them, look, it's a problem.

QUESTION: Do you think they're going to try to meddle in 2018?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: I don't know. I hope they don't.

QUESTION: Do you have evidence that they are?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: We have none yet. But we do know that Russia has involved themselves in other elections –

QUESTION: Right.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: – in Europe and elsewhere. So it's – it is a message we convey to the Russians. The way I convey it is I don't understand why you do this. I don't understand what you think you're getting for this. Because it's not evident to me as to how is this benefiting you –

QUESTION: Well, chaos –

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, it's –

QUESTION: Chaos in the United States benefits them.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: How is it damaging – but it damages Russia, because we're not making progress –

QUESTION: Sure.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: – and they're not making progress with others. So we try to stay focused on the really big issues between us, which is Syria and the situation there, the situation in Ukraine and Eastern Europe, and creating stability in Eastern Europe, and recognize what Russia's concerns are. And we have very important talks coming up on the START Treaty and the INF Treaty, as well.

QUESTION: You've said your redesign project is going to be the most important thing that you do here in terms of your legacy; more important than ending the conflicts in Syria or peace in North Korea. You're a year in now. Do you still feel that way?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: I think that was taken a bit out of context. It was – my redesign for the State Department, I think, is the most important thing I can do for the State Department –

QUESTION: For the long term and –

SECRETARY TILLERSON: – and I think it will have a very long-lasting impact on the effectiveness of the State Department for decades to come. The specific challenges of the day are clearly our highest priority.

QUESTION: Right.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Achieving a denuclearized North Korea, defeating terrorism and ISIS around the world, improving the Russian relationship, improving the relationship with China, and charting the way – those are all high-priority – but what will have a lasting effect for – because there will be other challenges that confront –

QUESTION: Right.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: – the State Department in the future. How do we become more effective, more capable, more nimble? To use the intellectual capacity of the people in this department, what we really want to unleash – that's what we produce here is ideas, we produce plans, we produce policies, and then we implement them. How do we unleash that human talent? And today, that human talent carries a lot of bags and weight around with it that gets in their way of being effective. That will have a very long-lasting effect here.

QUESTION: Look, there's a lot of unease in this building. You've seen it and you've seen the op-eds – Ryan Crocker for instance, star diplomat, him and Nick Burns, who have served in both administrations saying that some of the budget cuts, some of the leadership that you've put in the department is going to hamper diplomacy for years to come. How do you turn that around – perception around?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, first, I don't agree with their assessment. We'll see where our budgets ultimately end up, but in my engagements with OMB as well as my engagements with authorizers on the Hill, I've made the point that the State Department's budget – when we came to the State Department in February, we had a \$55 billion budget, all-time high. It was up from what – traditionally, if you look back eight to ten years ago, we operated at around 37, 38, 39 billion dollars. It is very hard to execute a \$55 billion budget and execute it well. And so –

QUESTION: Let me just stop you –

SECRETARY TILLERSON: And so part of this is what are our policy objectives, what does the Congress want us to achieve, and then what are the resources that are necessary to achieve that both in terms of dollars, but also human capability. And that's what I've focused on is how do we achieve the objectives that the President wants to achieve, and then we understand we have an equal branch of government in the Congress that have objectives they want to achieve. How do we accommodate all that and then how do we resource it? That's what's important for me to focus on.

QUESTION: If – we're surprised that we're having this conversation, because if you read the papers, you should be gone by now. What is with these rumors about you leaving? How long are you planning to stay, or are you planning to stick around for a while?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: I had a – we had a very productive 2017. And the 11 months I was here was an extraordinarily challenging period, because when the President came into office we had so many policies that the President ran on in his campaign and made clear to the American people he intends to pivot those policies in a different direction. It takes a lot of effort to do that in that first year so that your partners, your allies, and your adversaries understand you've moved.

We had a very successful, in my view, year of 2017 pivoting our policies and helping our partners understand those policies. We're now into the

implementation and execution against those policies. I think we're going to have a very productive 2018. Again, the State Department gets stronger every day understanding what we're trying to do, and I look forward to having a very, very successful 2018.

QUESTION: For the whole year?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: I intend to be here for the whole year.

QUESTION: I just – I mean, look, the President said these rumors are fake news. Why are these – these rumors are persisting. Is it a Washington thing?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: You tell me.

QUESTION: I don't know.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: You tell me.

QUESTION: Has the President given you any indication that you won't be around for a while?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: None.

QUESTION: None so – whatsoever?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: None whatsoever.

QUESTION: Look, I'm sure you've heard about this new book out there about the White House. It's the talk of the town. It describes a President whose foreign policy is uninformed, that he's not engaged, that's he not interested, that he gets up and leaves meetings with world leaders because he's bored. You're at the White House several times a week. Is that your experience?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: I think among all the cabinet secretaries I probably have spent more time with the President than perhaps Secretary of Defense Mattis, who spends a lot of time with him as well. I have never seen the President leave a meeting with a foreign leader. He is very engaged in these meetings. And in our policy deliberations and the meetings of the National Security Council with him, as I said, a big challenge was pivoting policies in a different direction than they were placed when the President took office, from North Korea to the Afghanistan/South Asia policy and Pakistan to the Defeat ISIS campaign. The President prioritized the threats early on, and that's the sequence within which we have addressed those. And in all those deliberations – and these have been – not been easy deliberations – these are not easy decisions for a president to make – he has been very deliberative. He has listened to the arguments. He argues back, as he should –

QUESTION: The thing is all – all of these –

SECRETARY TILLERSON: He pushes back. And in the end, he makes the decision which we then implement. I would tell you on all of the major policy areas the President has made the right decision on every one of those. How we got

there involves a lot of debate, and it should involve a lot of debate. It's a very – it's a very healthy exchange with the President and one which I think is important that we continue to have.

MODERATOR: Elise, last question.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, can you indulge me for just a couple more questions?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Okay, two questions.

QUESTION: Okay. Look, everybody in the – in this book questions his mental fitness. Do you – have you ever questioned his mental fitness? And describe your relationship with him, because some people would think it's – through his tweets and stuff, it's not a very good relationship.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: I've never questioned his mental fitness. I have no reason to question his mental fitness. My relationship with him – and it is a developing one, and I remind people and I think it's well known that he and I did not know one another before he asked me to serve as Secretary of State. So we don't have a lot of history and past, so part of this us knowing – coming to learn and understand one another.

QUESTION: You're also two different kinds of people.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, we have different management styles. How I make decisions, how I process information, I have – I have to learn how he takes information in and processes it and makes a decision. And that's my responsibility. I'm here to serve his presidency, so I've had to spend a lot of time understanding how to best communicate with him so I can serve his needs with information. I do think one of my roles is to always give him all sides of the issues even when I know it's not the side that he really wants to consider. I think it's part of making good decisions, is that I know he at least has had visibility to all aspects of the decision he's about to make – make.

And that's my role as Secretary of State, is to provide him that full 360 visibility of what these decisions mean for our foreign affairs with allies, with partners, and with adversaries. And I think what comes out sometimes, what people see then, is they think that is conflict when it's not. It's a normal process of having the president look at all sides and then saying I don't like that. And that's healthy. That's good. I mean, people should feel good about the way decisions are made because it's not just one of getting in to what you think the President wants, rather helping him see the full array of all the options and what the implications of those are, and then he decides. He's the Commander-in-Chief. He's the President. He decides. And then we'll implement against his decisions.

QUESTION: Just last – last question. You're a year into this job. What have you learned about yourself? You came in as a CEO, no government experience, working in an unorthodox administration. Reflecting back, what have you learned about yourself, and what might you do differently next year?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: You learn new things about yourself all the time. I was

learning things about myself the last year I was chairman and CEO at ExxonMobil. You never stop growing as an individual. So in terms of what I would do different, I'm going to build on my ability to communicate with the President better, my ability to communicate with others better. As I've said, it's something I've had to learn is what is effective with this President. He is not typical of presidents of the past. I think that's well recognized. That's also why the American people chose him. They were tired of what was being done in the past. They wanted something to change.

So I've learned over the past year better how to deal with the President to serve what I think he needs to know so he can make good decisions. And I've learned a lot about the interagency process, which was new to me, and that will get better all the time as well. But that is our role here at the State Department. We want to take the foreign policy back to the State Department. It's created here, it's developed here, then we take it into the interagency process where it gets a thorough vetting.

QUESTION: It doesn't seem like it's been that this year, though.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: No, that is exactly how policies have been developed. Every single one of those policies were germinated here at the State Department and then taken into the interagency process.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, thank you very much for joining us and good luck in the next year.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Thank you. I look forward to it.

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