

Press Releases: Interview With Rich Edson of Fox News

Interview
Rex W. Tillerson

Secretary of State

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QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, thank you so much for joining us on Fox.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: It's my pleasure, Rich.

QUESTION: I'd like to begin with this trip. Minus your Mexico trip early last year, this is your first trip to the region. You've been Secretary of State for a year. There are concerns about the U.S. leaving the Trans-Pacific Partnership that maybe the United States isn't as connected with this region, or ceding any type of engagement with this region. Have you encountered that sentiment while you've been on this trip?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: None whatsoever. I've just – I've had a very warm welcome in every country we've visited. I think it's important to remember that out of the 20 trade agreements that the U.S. has in place, 12 of them are with countries in this hemisphere. So these are already very important trading partners with us, and we have very robust trade throughout the hemisphere.

So each country is – it's been a very good visit with each country. We've talked about the things that are important to them, the things that are important to us. But I don't sense any weakening of the bonds between the United States and these very important countries in our hemisphere at all.

QUESTION: And the world doesn't stop when you're in one region, of course. Since you've been here, there was another chlorine gas attack in Syria. There are reports now that Russian and Syrian jets have bombed civilians in northwestern Syria in the biggest attacks since Aleppo. Is partnering with Russia advancing U.S. interests there, and are you now re-evaluating that partnership?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, we're going to continue to work with Russia on the really difficult and complex situation in Syria, where we can. We maintain

very, very open lines of communication with them both through military channels, but also through the diplomatic channels.

We are very concerned about the reports of, yet again, use of chemical weapons, chlorine gas, reports in some instances of potential use of Sarin gas. And the bombing that is going on, obviously, it is very difficult not to kill civilians in those bombing attacks. Our objective from the beginning has been to defeat ISIS, and then to de-conflict the country and stop the violence and create the conditions for a reconciliation, peace talks, chart the way forward using the UN Security Council process and –

QUESTION: Does that seem anywhere close, though, now that you still have Sarin gas, you still have Iran's influence, Russia bombing civilians? How does this end, and any time soon?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, in the areas that we have our presence and work with our coalition forces, we've been able to stabilize areas once we've liberated them from ISIS control. And that is what we've worked with the Russians as well; we have an area to the south that we actually worked jointly with Jordan to stabilize.

QUESTION: And you want to build on that?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: And we'd like to build on that. As you know, Russia, Iran, and Turkey have worked on stabilizing some areas to the west and the northwest. But these are some of the more complicated areas. And we will hope that ceasefires can be put in place, the violence can stop, and we can get the parties to the negotiating table in Geneva. We believe we have rejuvenated the Geneva talks and we're hopeful that the two sides will begin a serious negotiation to write a new constitution in preparations for elections for all Syrians to vote.

But the first step is we have got to stop the use of these chemical weapons. We believe Russia can play a very important role. They need to play an important role. They are supporting –

QUESTION: And they're not right now, right?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: They don't appear to be – they're supporting the Assad regime, they're providing the air cover for the regime. Russia is responsible. They agreed that they would take care of the chemical weapons in Syria. Clearly, they failed to do that. And they're blocking the UN Security Council's ability to give the Joint Investigative Mechanism of the OPCW the mandate that it needs to go ahead and investigate these things.

So Russia really needs to move to a different place on this. And they can deny it all they want to, but facts are facts. And they need to go to another spot and support the new mandate, the JIM, support the elimination of these chemical weapons. They can put the pressure on the Assad regime and say, "Stop this."

QUESTION: More on Russia. You've warned Mexico about potential meddling. The United States has warned European countries. CIA director Mike Pompeo warned

about the U.S. midterms. Is this just an assumption, or does the U.S. have intelligence leading us to believe that they're going to try to meddle in the 2018 elections?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, there's a lot of ways that the Russians can meddle in the elections, a lot of different tools than can use. I think what we see – and some of this is through some of our own sharing with countries that are allies of ours and partners of ours – and we are seeing certain behaviors. As I said the other day, we see some of Russia's fingerprints around elections that have occurred in Europe, and the Europeans have shared that with us. We are seeing similar activity in this hemisphere. There are a number of important elections in this hemisphere this year.

QUESTION: And leading up to the U.S., too?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Leading up as well to the U.S. –

QUESTION: In the U.S. we're already seeing this?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: In the U.S. in 2018. So we really – I think it's important we just continue to say to Russia, look, if you think we don't see what you're doing, we do see it. You need to stop. If you don't, you're going to just continue to invite consequences for yourself.

QUESTION: Is the U.S. better prepared this time around than 2016?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, I don't know that I would say we're better prepared, because the Russians will adapt as well. If it is – if the point is if it's their intention to interfere, they're going to find ways to do that. And we can take steps we can take, but this is something that once they decide they're going to do it, it's very difficult to preempt it.

QUESTION: There have been demonstrations in Russia. The administration has loudly supported those demonstrators in Iran who were searching for democracy. Does the U.S. equally support, the administration equally support, those calling for democracy in Russia?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, yes, we think it's important that Russia ensure that they are conducting free and fair elections, allowing opposition voices to be heard, allowing opposition parties to organize, and at least give the Russian people that choice. The Russian people are the ones that need to have the opportunity to consider other candidates and other points of view and what they might do differently in terms of running Russia's affairs. So yes, we –

QUESTION: That's not happening now though there, is it?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, it certainly – as you know, one of the most popular opposition candidates has been prohibited from running in the election. And I don't – and the truth is I really don't think this serves Russia's purposes particularly well either. I think it would be important for them to allow greater participation in their elections.

QUESTION: On Korea, you and the Vice President are at least signaling to North Korea a willingness to talk – not negotiate – as you’ve made clear. But is the United States actively seeking a conversation with the North Koreans at the Olympics?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, look, the Vice President – the President asked the Vice President to lead the U.S. official delegation to the Opening Ceremony of the Olympics in Seoul. We’re there to first support the successful Olympics by the South Korean Government. We’re also there to support all the United States athletes that’ll be competing, and we expect to bring home a lot of medals. And whatever happens while the Vice President is there, we’ll just have to see. We’ll wait and see and –

QUESTION: But the U.S. isn’t going to initiate this, or does the U.S. want – someone has to make the first move.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, look, the Vice President’s there, and we’ll just have to see what happens.

QUESTION: The Olympics opened this week, and South Korea has agreed to essentially bring the North Korean team – the joint ice hockey team. Seems like they’re paying full freight for this. The U.S. has also agreed at the request of the South Koreans to suspend joint defensive military exercises during the Olympics. The North Koreans continue, assumingly, advancing their program. They’re having a military exercise later this week. Has the U.S. gotten anything out of all of this rapprochement, or has South Korea gotten anything out of this? Seems like North Korea’s gotten a lot and given nothing up.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Well, I’m not sure that the South or the U.S. expected to get anything out of this. In terms of the South Koreans allowing the North Koreans to participate, and with the approval of the IOC as well, our understanding is that what North Korea is receiving from the South Koreans is no more than what all the participants who are attending the Olympics are receiving. Also, the North – the South Koreans have been using some training facilities in the North, so our understanding is this is on a reciprocal basis and there is no gain, there is no cash or anything being paid to the North Koreans for their participation in the Olympics. So it’s very much just on an equal basis.

And I think in terms of the military demonstrations that the North Koreans may have, this is a military parade, is what we understand. We see a lot of these great parades they have in the square there in Pyongyang. And as to our military exercises, we agreed very early on that we did not want to detract from South Korea’s needs to ensure they could provide full security during the conduct of the Olympics, and so we –

QUESTION: So this doesn’t run pressure to the counter –

SECRETARY TILLERSON: No, this was really to allow all South Korea’s security and military assets to be focused on – just like any nation that would host an Olympics. It’s a big security challenge, and we didn’t need to be running

military exercises that require them to divert resources. That's the reason we said we would postpone these till the Olympics are over.

QUESTION: So I think we'll end on you're here, you're Secretary of State. There was lots of reporting that perhaps you wouldn't be. A State Department official says that the narrative you're leaving has been allowed to fester for some time and that's something that you would like to address in your second year as Secretary of State. Do you have a message for whoever is pushing the "Mr. Secretary Tillerson is leaving" narrative from the White House?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: I'm still here. Nothing has changed. My work I was doing last year – State Department did a lot of really important work in 2017 formulating the foreign policies that are necessary to carry out President Trump's agenda. I've said 2018 is a year of execution. The President has put some great policies in place; now we need to go execute against those and start winning for the American people.

QUESTION: And finally, do you believe there are still people in the White House who don't want you to be Secretary of State?

SECRETARY TILLERSON: I have no idea.

UNDER SECRETARY GOLDSTEIN: Okay, thank you so much.

QUESTION: All right. Mr. Secretary, thank you for your time, sir.

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