

Press Releases: Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis at a Joint Press Availability

Press Availability
Rex W. Tillerson

Secretary of State

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SECRETARY TILLERSON: Hello. Good afternoon, all. I do want to thank Secretary Mattis, State Councilor Yang Jiechi, and PLA Chief of Joint Staff Fang Fenghui for a day of very productive meetings.

Secretary Mattis and I were quite pleased to host the first session of the Diplomatic Security Dialogue since we agreed on this format at the presidential summit in Mar-a-Lago. This is one of four distinct dialogue areas that will implement our President's vision for constructive, results-oriented bilateral relations. We're sustaining these regular talks at a much higher level than in previous years and among principals in both the civilian and the military agencies. President Trump, I know, looks forward to his state visit to China later this year.

As we've said before, U.S. and China have undergone – relations have undergone a profound transformation over the past 40 years. These dialogues provide an opportunity to consider how we're going to engage and how we're going to live with one another over the next 40 years. In furthering this relationship, we need to work to expand areas of cooperation, as we did today, on issues where we have shared security interest. But we also need to address, directly and very frankly, areas where we face threats or areas where we have differences so that we can narrow these differences and solve the problems.

The most acute threat in the region today is posed by the DPRK. We both call for complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. And we call on the DPRK to halt its illegal nuclear weapons program and its ballistic missile test as stipulated in the UN Security Council resolutions. We reaffirmed our commitment to implement in full all relevant UN Security Council resolutions.

For example, we both agreed that our companies should not do business with any UN-designated North Korean entities in accordance with these resolutions. China understands that the United States regards North Korea as our top security threat. We reiterated to China that they have a diplomatic responsibility to exert much greater economic and diplomatic pressure on the regime if they want to prevent further escalation in the region.

Whether it is money laundering, extorting Korean expatriates, or malicious cyber activity, North Korea has engaged in a number of criminal enterprises that help fund its weapons programs. We must step up our efforts to help to curtail these sources of revenue. Countries around the world and in the UN Security Council are joining in this effort and we hope China will do their part as well.

The United States remains committed to building North – to commit – is committed to holding North Korea accountable for multiple violations of UN Security Council resolutions which expressly prohibit its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs. We regret that it is the North Korean people who suffer when the regime diverts resources to these prohibited programs, and we urge the DPRK regime to choose a better path for its people.

We also had a frank exchange of views on the South China Sea. Secretary Mattis and I were clear that the U.S. position remains unchanged. We oppose changes to the status quo of the past through the militarization of outposts in the South China Sea and excessive maritime claims unsupported by international law, and we uphold the freedom of navigation and overflight.

With that said, China has committed to resolve their disputes peacefully and in accordance with recognized principles of international law, including the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. During the dialogue, we also decided to adopt greater coordination to face the global threat posed by terrorism. We will be looking to China to help the Iraqi Government in specific meaningful ways to ensure the country's long-term stability and economic growth as it battles ISIS and begins its long process of rebuilding.

An important part of our discussion about the next 40 years was the – was increasing mutual trust and working toward a long-term risk reduction effort between our two militaries and our government. Building on what we've done in the air and maritime spaces, U.S. and Chinese civilian and military teams start discussions in new areas of strategic concern like space, cyberspace, nuclear forces, and nonproliferation issues. We need to enhance stability and develop strong international standards in these areas, and we need China to play a major role.

Lastly, we discussed how this administration will stand up for American and universal values like human rights. We will not be shy about raising our concerns about China's human rights record, and I was direct and candid in our meetings today. Talk is not enough when it comes to increasing cooperation and narrowing differences between our two sides. The action items we have agreed upon today have set a foundation for additional areas of cooperation and we look forward to our next interaction at this level and between our two presidents.

And I'll turn it to Secretary Mattis.

SECRETARY MATTIS: Well, thank you, Secretary Tillerson. Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. A few words to add to Secretary Tillerson's report, to give you something from the defense perspective. This has been a unique opportunity for our nations to engage in philosophical-level discussions about how we discuss these issues and to discuss the way ahead, together hosting our counterparts, State Councilor Yang and General Fang.

In this first round of dialogues agreed to by our presidents at the summit at Mar-a-Lago, we gained a glimpse of a mutually beneficial future that we can create. As Secretary Tillerson mentioned, the United State seeks a constructive and a results-oriented relationship with China. Events like the Diplomatic and Security Dialogue we just completed represent our effort to elevate and focus our bilateral discussions. I'm committed to improving the U.S.-China defense relationship so that it remains a stabilizing element in our overall relationship. Our two nations can and do cooperate in mutually beneficial ways.

We prioritize mechanisms that contribute to greater risk reduction between our armed forces, that open and maintain effective channels of communication between us, and that expand areas of cooperation where we can. At the same time, we do manage our differences where we have them, and while competition between our nations is bound to occur, conflict is not inevitable.

This afternoon, we affirmed North Korea's nuclear missile program is a threat to peace and security in the Asia Pacific region. We also affirmed our strong commitment to cooperate, including through the UN, to realize our shared goal of denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Meanwhile, we will continue to take necessary measures to defend ourselves and our allies.

We also discussed the importance of freedom of navigation elsewhere in the region, and the peaceful resolution of those disputes in the maritime space, and we discussed ways to decrease tension and reduce risk in the South China Sea. As we maintain open dialogue on this topic, the United States will continue to fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows.

And third, the United States and China agreed to explore new areas of mil-to-mil cooperation, including exchange of officers to improve transparency and mutual understanding, and to discuss strategic issues that Secretary Tillerson mentioned. We welcome the opportunity to engage with the Chinese counterparts on strategic topics to discuss our differences, and will now press forward where we can work together.

Thank you.

MS NAUERT: We have two questions today. First, we'll start out with Nike Ching from Voice of America. Nike.

QUESTION: Thank you very much, Mr. Secretary Tillerson. After your last visit to China in March, a Vietnamese American from Houston, Sandy Phan-Gillis was released. Now today, after your discussion with Chinese State Councilor Yang

Jiechi, should we expect good news to come soon on the release of the three more Americans detained in North Korea?

Separately, on Qatar, in a statement on Qatar issued by the State Department yesterday, the administration seems to have acknowledged that it's being played by the Saudis over the Qatar crisis. Isn't that embarrassing? Thank you.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: With respect to the three additional American citizens that have been illegally detained, unlawfully detained by the regime in North Korea, our efforts continue towards their release. I have nothing to report further on that at this time.

With respect to the situation in the Middle East between Qatar and the four countries who have issues with Qatar, our role has been to encourage the parties to get their issues on the table, clearly articulated, so that those issues can be addressed and some resolution process can get underway to bring this to a conclusion. Our desire is for unity within the Gulf, and unity within the GCC, and that we redirect all of our efforts on the war against terror, the war to defeat ISIS and Daesh in the region.

MS NAUERT: Barbara Plett from BBC.

QUESTION: Thank you. Secretary Mattis, the President seemed to signal yesterday that he was extremely angry and frustrated with North Korea, and that China had failed in its attempt to help on that. Despite these continued efforts at cooperation, is the administration beginning to think that China will not be able to rein North Korea in, and is there any consideration of new, direct action? In particular, has the military posture changed in any way?

And if I may, a question on the South China Sea. Control of the South China Sea is a fundamental part of China's strategic policy. Freedom of navigation efforts notwithstanding, how far is the U.S. willing to go to prevent militarization? Thank you.

SECRETARY MATTIS: In regards to the President's view of North Korea, I believe he represents the American people's view of North Korea right now. We see a young man go over there healthy, and with a minor act of mischief, come home dead, basically – die shortly – immediately after he gets here. There is no way that we can look at a situation like this with any kind of understanding. This is – goes beyond any kind of understanding of law and order, of humanity, of responsibility towards any human being. So what you're seeing, I think, is the American people's frustration with a regime that provokes, and provokes, and provokes, and basically plays outside the rules, plays fast and loose with the truth, that sort of thing.

As far as China's role, China continues to work these issues. We – the reason for this dialogue that we had today was to have an open and frank dialogue about what more can be done in areas of common interest. I would point out to you that China's end state on the Korean Peninsula in terms of nuclear weapons is the same as ours, and we continue to work towards that end state.

On South China Sea, this is a dialogue where we identify areas where we can work together and to understand those areas where we have, I would call them disconnects, where are our understanding of the problem is very different from theirs. And we had that discussion here today, and we'll continue to work – to close gaps in our understanding and to work some kind of manner in the future that removes these irritants. But I would say for right now that's the whole purpose for the dialogue that we held here today, and we will be holding more in the future.

MS NAUERT: Thank you, everyone.

SECRETARY TILLERSON: Thank you.

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