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Tillerson's tough talk on North Korea garners mixed reviews

U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson issued bold proclamations during his visits to Japan and South Korea this week, claiming that “all options are on the table” in dealing with the growing threat from nuclear-armed North Korea.

According to Japanese officials, Tillerson — who railed against the U.S. diplomatic approach to the North over the past 20 years — told both Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida on Thursday that Washington had ruled nothing out.

On Friday, during a visit to South Korea, Tillerson took his comments even further.

“Let me be very clear: the policy of strategic patience has ended,” media reports quoted him as saying in reference to the previous administration’s approach to the North. “We are exploring a new range of security and diplomatic measures. All options are on the table.”

He said any North Korean actions that threatened the South would be met with “an appropriate response.”

“If they elevate the threat of their weapons program to a level that we believe requires action, that option is on the table,” Tillerson said.

But is the new secretary of state, with no prior experience in government, really ready to offer new strategies on halting the North’s advances?

Experts interviewed by The Japan Times were split over the question.

“I think the Tillerson statement is empty rhetoric. ... (It) sounds good, but (there is) nothing there,” said Jeffrey Lewis, an arms control expert with the Center for Nonproliferation Studies at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies in California.

“The general thinking in D.C. is that Tillerson is an empty suit,” he said.

Indeed, some observers now argue Tillerson may have much less influence on the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump than his predecessors at the State Department.

“Tillerson has ... been absent for most of Trump’s meetings with visiting leaders. He likewise does not seem to be playing a central role in the few foreign-policy decisions that the Trump administration has made,” Robert Jervis, a professor of international politics at Columbia University in New York, wrote in a March 10 article for Foreign Policy.

“There is no evidence that his advice was sought when Trump huddled with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in January after a North Korean missile launch,” he wrote.

But Tsuneno Watanabe, a senior research fellow at the Sasagawa Peace Foundation in Tokyo, said Tillerson at least sent a strong message to the North while visiting Japan — that Washington has yet to rule anything out.

“North Korea would strike a compromise only if it is convinced that America may actually resort to a military option,” Watanabe said.

And given the widespread public image of Trump as a volatile leader, Pyongyang might believe Trump could actually be thinking of using military force, Watanabe said.

“It is believed worldwide that Trump is just unpredictable,” he said.

Watanabe pointed to the “madman theory” employed by U.S. President Richard Nixon. During the Vietnam War, Nixon reportedly wanted the North Vietnamese to believe that he was obsessed with eradicating communism and that he could not restrain himself when angry.

The theory states that only by convincing your enemy of your apparent recklessness and volatility, can you win concessions in tough diplomatic negotiations.

But adopting such tactics would raise tensions and involve substantial risks.

To manage these, cooperation with related parties such as Japan, South Korea, China and Russia would be necessary in dealing with North Korea, Watanabe said.

While in Tokyo, Tillerson indeed repeatedly emphasized the importance of trilateral cooperation between Tokyo, Seoul and Washington in dealing with the North’s military threat.

In this context, Tillerson urged Japan and South Korea to quickly overcome obstacles to improved ties that have arisen over the “comfort women” issue. Observing the landmark 2015 agreement between Seoul and Tokyo remains key to closer cooperation, he said.

Comfort women refers to those forced to work in Japanese wartime military brothels, including many who hailed from the Korean Peninsula.

In December 2015, the two countries agreed to settle all outstanding diplomatic disputes over the issue, but the matter has remained a hotly contested impediment to improved ties.

“(The U.S.) can’t take a decisive attitude toward North Korea unless the Japan-South Korean relationship is being well managed,” Watanabe said.

But for now, the political prospects of a Japan-South Korea rapprochement appear uncertain, if not outright bleak.

Former South Korean President Park Geun-hye, who agreed to the comfort women deal in 2015, was ousted from the presidency on March 10 after the country’s Constitutional Court ruled in favor of her impeachment.

Top candidates for the upcoming presidential election to replace her in May have all called for a review of the 2015 agreement, a move that would likely further raise tensions between Seoul and Tokyo.

The U.S. is also proceeding with a review of its North Korea policy, according to Japanese officials. Tillerson, they said, offered up “several ideas” during his meeting with Kishida.

But time may be running out for Tillerson to craft a new policy, given the apparently rapid pace of the North’s nuclear weapons and ballistic missile developments.

Kishida said Japan is now facing a “new, higher stage of threat” from North Korea after it test-fired four missiles into the Sea of Japan on March 6. One of those missiles landed just 200 km away from Japan’s mainland.

In its quest to top a long-range ballistic missile with a nuclear warhead, the North last year launched a barrage of more than 20 ballistic missiles into the same waters while also conducting an unprecedented two nuclear tests.

Japanese officials have not ruled out the possibility that Pyongyang may have already succeeded in developing a nuclear warhead small enough to mount on such a missile.

While some experts believe that the North has yet to master the technology to develop a missile capable of hitting the U.S. mainland, its weapons programs have made steady progress and it could eventually win “some nuclear deterrent power to not only threaten Japan, but U.S. bases in Japan and even the continental” United States, said Christopher Hughes, a professor of international politics and Japanese studies at the University of Warwick in England.

“Moreover, given the domestic political picture in North Korea is more opaque than ever, perhaps the feeling is that North Korea is harder to read in intentions and thus harder to deter,” Hughes said.

“I think the effect will be to again create momentum for the gradual expansion of U.S.-Japan alliance cooperation and certainly add grist to the mill for Abe’s security reforms, including constitutional revision,” he said.