

# “Lone Sniper” in White House “Wounds” Secretary of State Tillerson

Mad Trump firing from golf resort nails Tillerson in Beijing

By [William Boardman](#)

Global Research, October 06, 2017

Region: [Asia](#), [USA](#)

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*We're at the point as a country where even the renewed threat of a preemptive nuclear war on North Korea can't compete with media coverage of the latest mass shooting in Las Vegas. What were the odds we'd end up like this?*

On October 1, the hint of back-channel contact between the US and North Korea was [front page news](#). While visiting China, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson [told reporters](#) that the US was exploring the possibility of talks with North Korea in an effort to de-escalate and eventually resolve conflict over North Korea's nuclear weapons program. Tillerson said:

We are probing, so stay tuned. We asked, “Would you like to talk?” We have lines of communication to Pyongyang [the North Korean capital] — we're not in a dark situation, a blackout. We have a couple, three channels open to Pyongyang. We can talk to them. We do talk to them directly through our own channels.

This echoed Donald Trump's 2016 campaign promise to sit down with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, although Tillerson did not mention it. According to [The New York Times](#),

“Tillerson said the most important thing was to lower the temperature of the threats being exchanged in recent days between Mr. Kim and President Trump.”

These included North Korea's threat of an atmospheric test of a hydrogen bomb and Trump's threat of genocide against 25 million Koreans. Tillerson commented dryly:

The whole situation is a bit overheated right now. If North Korea would stop firing its missiles, that would calm things down a lot.... I think everyone would like for it to calm down.

Well not everyone, as it turned out. Tweeting from the hip not a day later, the US sniper-in-chief got off a few rounds:

I told Rex Tillerson, our wonderful Secretary of State, that he is wasting his time trying to negotiate with Little Rocket Man.... Save your energy Rex, we'll

do what has to be done!

This, too, made front page news till it was blown away by the Las Vegas massacre. The US Secretary of State looking to calm things down is a soft story and even the President putting nuclear war back on the table has an old news quality that can't compete with fresh blood here and now.

This turn of events prompted the Atlantic to run a story headlined: "[Rex Tillerson Must Go.](#)" The argument was that Tillerson can't stay after being humiliated like that, since the President's repudiation has destroyed the Secretary of State's credibility. If Tillerson stays, Eliot Cohen argues, he will be reduced to a moral weakling and lickspittle. That assumes he's not one now, and the record is mixed.

Others suggested that Trump and Tillerson are playing good cop, bad cop, an analogy that's hard to apply, since the resulting confusion only leaves North Korea scratching its head. More likely they're playing bad cop, worse cop. Most likely they're not playing anything conceptualized and coordinated. Tillerson seems to be trying to be the grown-up in the room, and Trump is having none of it.

And at about 6 a.m. on October 4, NBC News ran a story with this hopeful headline: "[Tillerson's Fury at Trump](#) Required an Intervention From Pence." But it was not a current story, it was a mostly hyped-up report of a July meeting in a secure room in the Pentagon where Tillerson, meeting with top national security officials, called Trump a "moron" and wanted to resign, but the Vice President talked him out of it. That report was based on anonymous sources, some of whom were in the secure room. Now everyone, including Tillerson, denies he called the President a "moron." There has been no denial that the President is a moron. A few hours after the NBC story broke, Tillerson called a news conference to affirm his loyalty to the President. Refusing to address the "moron" element, calling it "petty nonsense," Tillerson said:

I have never considered leaving this post.... I have answered that question repeatedly. For some reason it continues to be mis-reported. There has never been a consideration in my mind to leave. I serve at the appointment of the President and I'm here for as long as the President feels I can be useful to achieving his objectives.

Tillerson has performed as Trump's faithful toady in his adoration of totalitarian Saudi Arabia, his praise for the emerging dictatorship in Turkey, and his support for selling F-16s to the police state of Bahrain. At other times, Tillerson has put on a show of being independent and clearheaded, as in a late August interview where Chris Wallace questioned whether the US still lives by [traditional American values](#):

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson: "I don't believe anyone doubts the American people's values or the commitment of the American government or the government's agencies to advancing those values and defending those values."

Chris Wallace: "And the president's values?"

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson: "The president speaks for himself, Chris."

To pretend that the commander-in-chief speaks only for himself is truly whistling past the graveyard. And Tillerson has done that before, in early August, when he played [the minimization card](#) instead of the calm-things-down card:

I think Americans should sleep well at night, have no concerns about this particular rhetoric of the last few days. I think the president, again, as commander-in-chief — think he felt it necessary to issue a very strong statement directly to North Korea.

This was the same time that Secretary of Defense James Mattis was joining Trump in [threatening a nuclear attack](#), as reported by Democracy Now:

Defense Secretary James Mattis threatened a nuclear attack. On Wednesday, Mattis warned North Korea not to take any action that could result in the “end of its regime” and the “destruction of its people.” His comments came a day after Trump startled the world — and, reportedly, his own advisers — threatening North Korea with “[fire and fury](#) like the world has never seen.”

A month earlier, perhaps just by coincidence, Tillerson moved to shut the State Department’s Office of Global Criminal Justice that worked to hold war criminals accountable for their war crimes, of which a first strike nuclear war would be one. What was that Tillerson was saying about American values? As David Scheffer, who was the first US ambassador-at-large for [war crimes issues](#), said:

“This sends a strong signal to perpetrators of mass atrocities that the United States is not watching you anymore.”

This news broke the same day that a [Human Rights Watch](#) report described US complicity in a torture regime in southern Yemen. Run by the United Arab Emirates, an ally of Saudi Arabia in the US-backed genocidal war on Yemen, the torture program is run in a secret network of prisons operated on behalf of the Yemeni government-in-exile in Saudi Arabia — all of which comprises a nexus of international war crimes that the US has supported for more than two years.

Back in April there was an earlier run of the North Korea nuclear war bait and switch. Then [Trump fulminated](#):

“There’s a chance that we could end up having a major, major conflict with North Korea. Absolutely.”

At the same time, Tillerson was soft-shoeing about the US being open to negotiations with North Korea over its nuclear program. Pay no attention to what we say, watch what we do.

That was also when the THAAD missile defense program made a brief appearance in the news. THAAD is expensive military technology intended to intercept short range missiles heading for South Korea, especially the capital, Seoul. [THAAD’s reliability is uncertain](#). THAAD is useless against the major threat to Seoul, massive North Korean artillery batteries some 30 miles away. But it is a provocation to North Korea. The US more or less forced an

unwilling South Korea to accept some THAAD batteries, then secretly installed more than South Korea had agreed to. In late April, Trump started demanding that South Korea pay the US \$1 billion for the unwanted THAAD installation, or else the US might cancel a free trade deal between the two countries.

What is that called? A shakedown? Extortion? New York real estate dealing?

Meanwhile at the State Department, Tillerson has gone for months with staff positions unfilled amid reports of the agency functioning uncertainly, with chronic low morale. Tillerson has long endorsed significant budget cuts at State with little public discussion of the reasoning or the consequences. General James Mattis, not Secretary of Defense, once said,

“If you don’t fund the State Department fully, than I need to buy more ammunition.”

Back in March, while visiting Seoul, Tillerson [took a hard line](#) on North Korea:

“Let me be very clear: The policy of strategic patience has ended. We’re exploring a new range of diplomatic, security and economic measures. All options are on the table.”

Tillerson just does his job and maybe Exxon gets to [drill in the Arctic](#) some day.

Now it all makes a kind of sense, maybe. The policy of strategic patience ended just as South Korea elected a new president committed to talking to the North. The US could lose control of such bi-lateral negotiations. Create enough fear and uncertainty all around and everyone has to buy more military hardware, even unwanted, ineffective missile defense systems. Let the good times roll, right up to the brink of Armageddon, whoo-eee!

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*This article was originally published by [Reader Supported News](#).*

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