

Rex Tillerson's Korea Summit in Vancouver Should be Met with Protest

In a game of chicken between callow man-children, Trump is the greatest danger to peace

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[War](#)

On the weekend before launching the Iraq War in 2003, U.S. President George W. Bush met with key war allies on Terceira, one of Portugal's Azores islands in the North Atlantic. At their remote retreat, Bush, the UK's Tony Blair and Spain's José María Aznar put the finishing touches on their "Coalition of the Willing," the multilateral figleaf assembled to cover the illegal American-led invasion.

Later this month, an aggressive U.S. administration is once again gathering its war allies together for planning and discussion. This time the meeting will take place in Vancouver on Jan. 15-16, and the subject will be Korea. The summit will be co-hosted by Donald Trump's secretary of state, Rex Tillerson, and Justin Trudeau's foreign minister, Chrystia Freeland. More than a dozen other countries who deployed troops as part of the Korean War will [reportedly](#) also be in attendance, including: Belgium, Colombia, Ethiopia, France, Greece, Japan, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Philippines, South Africa, South Korea, Thailand, Turkey and the United Kingdom.

During a visit to Ottawa last month, Tillerson [explained](#) the purpose of the "Vancouver Group" like this:

"to advance the pressure campaign against North Korea, and send a unified message from the international community: 'We will not accept you as a nuclear weapons nation.'"

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The CBC described the Vancouver meeting as part of "an aggressive diplomatic campaign designed to force the rogue regime to the negotiation table and avoid devastating military action." Our public broadcaster is too imprecise. There's more than one rogue regime in question, and it's the rogue administration represented by the ex-CEO of Exxon Tillerson that poses the greatest danger of unleashing a devastating — if not unimaginably catastrophic — military exchange.

On Tuesday, in response to a New Year's speech from North Korea's Kim Jong Un, Trump [tweeted](#),

“North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un just stated that the ‘Nuclear Button is on his desk at all times.’ Will someone from his depleted and food starved regime please inform him that I too have a Nuclear Button, but it is a much bigger & more powerful one than his, and my Button works!”

President Trump’s Twitter taunts in recent days underline the danger of the Canadian government’s offer to co-host a Korea summit at this perilous moment, and the remarkable irresponsibility of the Liberal government’s near-total refusal to differentiate itself from — let alone speak out against — U.S. foreign policy.

Although Freeland has said the Canadian government views a diplomatic solution to the Korea crisis as “essential and possible,” the U.S. approach, complicated by Trump’s oafish impulsiveness, is fundamentally dangerous and irresponsible.

Here we must pause to assert some basics that cut against the usual ahistorical portrayal of the madman in Pyongyang and his hermetic kingdom. As repressive and brutal as the Kim family dynasty is, there’s no evidence that they are suicidal. The regime’s obsession with military firepower didn’t emerge *ex nihilo*, and has its roots in reaction to the [utter decimation](#) of northern Korea by the U.S. and its allies during the 1950s war. As The Washington Post noted a couple of years ago:

The bombing was long, leisurely and merciless, even by the assessment of America’s own leaders. “Over a period of three years or so, we killed off — what — 20 percent of the population,” Air Force Gen. Curtis LeMay, head of the Strategic Air Command during the Korean War, told the Office of Air Force History in 1984. Dean Rusk, a supporter of the war and later secretary of state, said the United States bombed “everything that moved in North Korea, every brick standing on top of another.” After running low on urban targets, U.S. bombers destroyed hydroelectric and irrigation dams in the later stages of the war, flooding farmland and destroying crops.

Turning to more recent history, the DPRK’s dogged pursuit of nuclear weapons capabilities and its chest-beating after every successful missile test is a predictable outcome of 2003 regime change in Iraq. When neoconservative David Frum penned Bush’s [“axis of evil”](#) line, he was putting Iran and North Korea on notice. They responded logically: by accelerating their pursuit of weapons of mass destruction to give themselves bargaining power or a sufficient military deterrent to avoid a regime change invasion.

As Tillerson and Freeland prepare to meet in Vancouver, it’s clear we’re at a dangerous juncture. The U.S., led by a mentally and temperamentally unfit commander-in-chief under heat from the FBI’s Russia probe and prone to tweeting insulting threats of nuclear war, says that if North Korea continues its development of nuclear weapons it will be wiped off the face of the Earth; North Korea, meanwhile, believes that it must continue to build up its nuclear capacity lest it leave itself vulnerable to obliteration.

Contrary to the common “we’re all going to die” framing, the risks of a resumed Korean War are not equally distributed. If this game of chicken led by callow man-children goes wrong, hundreds of thousands or even millions of Koreans on both sides of the armistice line could die. There is no full-blown war scenario in which Kim and his generals could even contemplate surviving, let alone winning.

For Trump and U.S. generals, it's a different story — and that's the greatest danger of all. That's why Tillerson's "Vancouver Group" summit this month should be greeted with a call for peace on the Korean Peninsula.

Vancouver would once have been an unthinkable location for such a summit. In the 1980s, Vancouver erected signs declaring the city [a nuclear weapons free zone](#) and organized massive annual peace walks. In 2003, the municipal government led by the Coalition of Progressive Electors declared its opposition to the Iraq invasion and their peace and justice committee supported protests of tens of thousands at the Vancouver Art Gallery.

The city's nuclear-free signs are long gone (some were replaced with Olympics signs in the run-up to the 2010 Winter Games) and the peace and justice committee was disbanded. Maybe it's time to bring them back, along with renewed anti-war activism.

Against the bluster of POTUS Ignoramus, Canadian civil society and political leaders should use the occasion of the Vancouver Korea summit to speak out against war.

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