

Rex Tillerson meets Chinese President Xi Jinping, discusses North Korea, Trump visit

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Beijing: US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson today met with Chinese President Xi Jinping and other officials on issues including trade, North Korea and preparations for an anticipated visit by President Donald Trump to China in November. Tillerson told top Chinese foreign policy adviser Yang Jiechi that Trump and Xi had developed a "very regular and close working relationship".

Rex Tillerson shakes hands with Xi Jinping at the Great Hall of the People

His visit, Tillerson said, also provided an opportunity to assess progress made between the sides since Xi and Trump met in April at the US president's estate in Florida.

Tillerson is making his second visit as secretary of state to the world's No 2 economy and chief American rival for influence in Asia, and increasingly, the world.

Along with Xi and Yang, he met with Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who told Tillerson that China-US relations "overall have a positive momentum and have arrived at an important opportunity to progress further."

Neither Tillerson nor the Chinese officials mentioned North Korea in opening remarks made in the presence of journalists.

Ties between Beijing and Washington are considered more crucial than ever with the standoff over Pyongyang's nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles entering a new, more dangerous phase as its leader, Kim Jong Un, and Trump exchange personal insults and threats of war with no sign of a diplomatic solution.

Trump has been pressing for tougher measures on Pyongyang from China, the North's chief trading partner and source of aid and diplomatic support.

Although adamantly opposed to steps that could bring down Kim's regime, Beijing appears increasingly willing to tighten the screws on Pyongyang, and agreed to tough new United Nations sanctions that would substantially cut foreign revenue for the isolated North.

On Thursday, Beijing ordered North Korean-owned businesses and ventures with Chinese partners to close by early January, days after it said it would cut off gas and limit shipments of refined petroleum products, effective January 1.

It made no mention of crude oil, which makes up the bulk of Chinese energy supplies to North Korea and is not covered by the UN sanctions. China has also banned imports of North Korean coal, iron and lead ore, and seafood since early September.

Still, Washington hopes China will exert even greater pressure, even while Beijing says the impasse cannot be solved by sanctions alone and calls on Washington to cool its rhetoric and open dialogue with Pyongyang.

Other than North Korea, the US and China have other security concerns to address. They remain at odds over Beijing's military buildup and assertive claims to disputed islands in the South China Sea.

Tillerson is also expected to restate concerns about China's massive trade surplus with the USD 347 billion last year

and what American companies say are unfair barriers to investment, including pressure to hand over their technology.

Washington wants Beijing to make good on its promise to let market forces have a bigger role in its economy, give equal treatment to foreign and Chinese companies and roll back state industry's dominance.

Trump's planned visit to China in November will come just weeks after Xi is expected to receive a new five-year term as leader of the ruling Communist Party.

Despite his tough criticism of China's trade practices, Trump has forged a personal connection with Xi over phone calls and while hosting him in Florida, during which they agreed on four high-level dialogues to cover various aspects of relations.

The November meeting of the two leaders will be grander and more choreographed than the informal talks in Florida that were most memorable for Trump's ordering a missile strike on Syria and then informing Xi about it afterward as they ate chocolate cake.

Tillerson, facing criticism at home for his muted impact as the top US diplomat, may also be seeking to put his own stamp on the relationship. He surprised some observers during his first official visit to China in March when he employed China's own words to characterise relations between the sides language the Obama administration had largely rejected as an attempt by Beijing to establish a type of moral parity between the sides.

- AP