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Tillerson's first China visit to build on positive momentum in China-U.S. ties

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U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's upcoming first visit to China is to build on positive momentum in the relations between China and the Trump administration, experts said.

Tillerson began Wednesday his first three-nation Asian tour that will take him to Japan, South Korea and China. He is to visit Beijing Saturday to hold talks with Chinese leaders and senior officials on a range of bilateral and multilateral issues.

PAVING WAY FOR FIRST XI-TRUMP SUMMIT

Tillerson's first China trip attracts the most attention as the two sides are finalizing details for the first summit between Chinese President Xi Jinping and his U.S. counterpart Donald Trump, amid media reports that it could take place in early April.

The two sides are also expected to discuss the nuclear and missile programs of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), as well as bilateral trade and security issues.

"The visit is important for establishing the tone even more than the substance of relations between China and the new (Trump) administration," Ted Carpenter, senior fellow in defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, told Xinhua.

Agreement on the schedule and agenda for the Xi-Trump summit would be an important measure of how successful Tillerson's visit will be, Carpenter said.

Once the summit takes place, the two leaders are likely to talk about the DPRK, South China Sea and bilateral trade relations, among other issues, he added.

"The visit should leave the two nations closer to determining a time and agenda for the leaders to meet," Douglas Paal, vice president for studies at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, told Xinhua.

Paal expected that the two leaders would instruct their ministers how to hold a follow-on forum for dialogues, such as the Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED), a cabinet-level annual talks held under the Obama administration.

NO READY SOLUTION TO DPRK ISSUE

Tillerson's visit came at a time when the crisis on the Korean Peninsula was aggravated by the recent test firing of missiles by the DPRK, so far the most substantial reaction to the Seoul-Washington military exercises, and the controversial U.S. deployment of the THAAD anti-missile systems in South Korea.

Due to complexity of the crisis, experts are cautious about any breakthrough from the China-U.S. talks on the issues during Tillerson's visit.

Carpenter believed that the U.S. and South Korea will not even delay, much less abandon, the THAAD deployment.

"American leaders are concerned that elections in South Korea might produce a president opposed to THAAD, but unless that happens, the deployment will go forward," Carpenter said, referring to the upcoming election in South Korea following the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye.

Paal said he did not expect any deal on the DPRK issue from Tillerson's meetings in Beijing, as there is "no ready solution" to it.

The U.S. is in the midst of a policy review and lacks many of the personnel necessary to conduct the review thoroughly, so it will take much longer than next week to find a solution. Moreover, South Korea is now in the midst of changing administration and not ready to make new initiatives with the DPRK, Paal said.

Nevertheless, if the DPRK issue can bring China and the U.S. together, it will surely help Trump realize the importance of getting China's help on tackling global challenges, he said.

BUILDING ON POSITIVE MOMENTUM

Tillerson's China visit is to build on the positive momentum that has already emerged in the China-U.S. relations after a rocky start following Trump's victory in the U.S. presidential election in November, experts said.

Ahead of Tillerson's visit, the U.S. State Department already sent out a positive signal, saying that Washington intends to pursue "a more constructive relationship with China" and look for areas to expand bilateral cooperation.

Indeed, the visit will help dispel the cloud hanging over the bilateral ties due to the tough rhetoric made by Trump during and after his campaign. Trump further irked Beijing by taking a call from the leader of Taiwan, regarded by China as integral part of its territories, and claiming that the one-China policy was up for negotiation.

But positive signs have emerged, especially after Xi-Trump phone talk in February, during which Trump pledged to honor the one-China policy.

This removed a major stumbling block that could explode into a crisis never seen in the past decades, by shaking the foundation of the China-U.S. ties.

After the Xi-Trump phone talk, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi held his first meeting with Tillerson in Germany on Feb. 17. It was followed by the first visit to the U.S. by Chinese State Councilor Yang Jiechi, who met with Trump and his top aides at the White House.

The Trump administration has so far held back from taking aggressive actions against China on currency, trade and the South China Sea issues.

Commenting on the new positive signs, Paal said he is now "more optimistic" about the China-U.S. ties than when Trump was inaugurated on Jan. 20.

"I give considerable credit to China's diplomats, who have shown energy and flexibility to move through the extended Trump transition period when most formal linkages are functioning only partially," Paal said.

With the Tillerson visit, China and the U.S. have incentives to send messages that urge restraint on the Korean Peninsula, and on other regional flash points, he added.

Still, difficulties remain on trade, currency and certain security issues that concern the Trump administration, which vows to cut its trade deficit with China and bring jobs home.

Paal said that, during Tillerson's visit, the two sides are likely to spend much time discussing the Trump administration's economic concerns about China.

During the campaign last year, Trump vowed to impose high tax on Chinese imports, exert pressure on China on its currency policy and urge for increased intellectual property protection.

"But we still have not heard a comprehensive statement of the new administration's global, regional, or China strategies, so there may be surprises, especially on the trade and economic fronts," Paal said.

Carpenter said though Trump has retreated on a number of foreign policy positions that he took during the campaign, "there will be some difficulties and tensions between Beijing and Washington in the future, especially regarding trade practices."