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*FRM:*

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**IRAN.**

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**Heds.**

**“After Syria and North Korea, Trump Puts Iran on His List.”**

**Or**

**“Team Trump’s Latest: Iran’s as Dangerous as North Korea.”**

**Or**

**“Will Trump Scrap that ‘Worst Ever’ Nuclear Deal With Iran?”**

Is Iran next on the list of foreign-policy crises Team Trump proposes to fix? In a vigorously assertive statement Wednesday, Rex Tillerson just put it there.

The secretary of state didn’t invoke George W. Bush’s “axis of evil,” but he may as well have. Substitute Syria for Iraq and you’ve got the Trump administration’s version of Bush’s threesome.

“An unchecked Iran has the potential to follow the same path as North Korea and take the world along with it,” **Tillerson said**

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/tillerson-compares-iran-to-north-korea-vows-trump-administration-wont-pass-the-buck/2017/04/19/db7894d8-2535-11e7-a1b3-](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/tillerson-compares-iran-to-north-korea-vows-trump-administration-wont-pass-the-buck/2017/04/19/db7894d8-2535-11e7-a1b3-faff0034e2de_story.html?utm_term=.6ff101d2787b)

[faff0034e2de\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.6ff101d2787b](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/tillerson-compares-iran-to-north-korea-vows-trump-administration-wont-pass-the-buck/2017/04/19/db7894d8-2535-11e7-a1b3-faff0034e2de_story.html?utm_term=.6ff101d2787b) in a hastily called press conference at the State Department. “The United States is keen to

avoid a second piece of evidence that ‘strategic patience’ is a failed approach.”

Tillerson was especially critical of the Obama administration’s 2015 agreement governing Iran’s nuclear programs. Staying on message, he called it “the same failed approach to the past that brought us to the current imminent threat that we face from North Korea.”

That’s highly debatable but no surprise. During last year’s campaigns, Trump often termed the accord “the worst deal ever.”

But here’s the reality, like it or not: Scrapping that pact would be like pulling the keystone out of an arch: A pretty big policy framework would collapse into rubble.

It has been a stunning couple of weeks since Trump announced that he was giving the Pentagon “total authorization” <http://www.militarytimes.com/articles/trump-military-total-authorization-afghanistan-iraq> —effectively handing Defense the lead in foreign policy.

First came the cruise missile attack on a Syrian airfield in response to another deployment of chemical weapons. Days later the Pentagon dropped its largest non-nuclear bomb on an Islamic State complex in Afghanistan.

The face-off in North Korea followed. The Pentagon and the White House somehow **bungled the announcement** <http://www.latimes.com/politics/washington/la-na-essential-washington-updates-carrier-strike-group-wasn-t-headed-to-1492544753-htmlstory.html> , but the *U.S.S. Carl Vinson*, a carrier strike group, is headed toward Korean waters. The U.S. is now as close to open conflict on the Peninsula as it has been at least since the Clinton administration nearly tipped into war in 1994.

Now Iran's in the administration's sights.

Team Trump's moving too fast, and in a couple of cases too far. Iran will be one of them, depending on how drastically the Trump administration redraws current U.S. policy toward the Islamic Republic.

In his statement late Wednesday, Tillerson was also critical of Iran's support for the Assad government in Damascus and its interception of U.S. vessels in the Persian Gulf when they stray into Iranian waters.

Tillerson's right that the 2015 agreement's terms are narrow and leave out pretty much anything Iran may otherwise do. But as U.S. diplomats understood during negotiations, the accord wouldn't have been signed otherwise.

The National Security Council is currently midway in a policy review that includes consideration of sanctions that are now suspended and the nuclear deal. Tillerson just signaled that Trump's "worst ever" opinion may hold.

That would be a very poor judgment for a lot of reasons.

For one thing, five other nations negotiated and signed the agreement with Iran. Three of them—Britain, France, and Germany—are charter members of the trans-Atlantic alliance; all have signaled that they want this deal to hold, which brings relations with key allies into the picture.

For another, Tehran and Washington are awkward but effective allies in Syria and Iraq. Iranian-backed militias have proven key to progress against the Islamic State and other jihadist groups in both nations.

Tillerson's timing also seems badly calculated. Iran is to hold a presidential election in mid-June, and Hassan Rouhani, the reformist who saw the agreement through against a lot of resistance from conservatives, is standing for another term.

Sinking Rouhani's signature achievement will strengthen the hand of precisely those in Tehran the U.S. wants least to see back in power. This is an open-and-shut certainty.

Only a day before Tillerson spoke the State Department officially advised Congress that **Iran was fully conforming** <https://www.apnews.com/3b0e6e3cc254433ead3a283bb30d079b> to the nuclear accord's terms. That seems to make the secretary's timing doubly poor.

But maybe not. All of the pact's signatories are to meet in Vienna next week for an all-sides performance review. Tillerson may well intend just to prepare his ground so he can do some tough bargaining—with allies as well as Iran.

Not even the nuclear deal's most committed advocates ever argued it was perfect. It isn't. But it's there, there for a long time, and Tehran's sticking to it.

Is it in U.S. interests to tell Iran it can restart a program with the potential to make nuclear warheads? Where's the gain in such a move?

As of Rex Tillerson's harsh assertions Wednesday, these are Team Trump's next questions.

ENDIT REGARDS PATRICK NORFOLK.