

US ex-basketballer heads to North Korea to “open door”

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Amid acute tensions on the Korean Peninsula, US ex-basketball star Dennis Rodman returned to North Korea on Tuesday to meet with the country’s leader Kim Jong-un. While the US State Department downplayed the trip as being undertaken in a private capacity, Rodman’s visit has all the hallmarks of a last-ditch attempt to open up a channel of communications between the two leaderships.

Rodman, an unlikely diplomatic go-between, travelled to Pyongyang in 2013 and 2014 and met with Kim Jong-un, even staging a basketball match for the North Korean leader, who is reportedly a basketball fan. Rodman, who was undoubtedly debriefed by the State Department and US intelligence agencies, opened up no diplomatic channels at the time and was heavily criticised in the American media.

The Trump administration has pressured China to force North Korea to abandon its nuclear and missile programs, and repeatedly threatened to use military measures against the Pyongyang regime. According to the *Washington Post*, “multiple people involved in unofficial talks with North Korea say the Trump administration has been making overtures toward the Kim regime,” including efforts to set up a secret back channel to the North Korean leader using “an associate of Trump’s.”

While a strange choice to facilitate talks, Rodman is an acquaintance and supporter of Trump, and endorsed the billionaire in 2015 for the US presidency. Rodman appeared on Trump’s reality TV show, “Celebrity Apprentice” in 2009 and 2013.

North Korean analyst Daniel Pinkston told the *Washington Post* that Rodman had a “long-standing invitation” to return to Pyongyang. “I heard that the North Korean Foreign Ministry had a desire for a visit by him to reduce tensions with the United States,” he

said. “They’ve been looking at ways to do that.”

Just before Rodman’s arrival in Pyongyang, the regime released Otto Warmbier, one of four American citizens convicted and jailed in North Korea. The US State Department’s top official on North Korea, Joseph Yun, secretly travelled to Pyongyang to bring Warmbier home and was permitted to meet the other three. Yun, who had already met with high-level North Korean officials in Oslo last month, would have used the opportunity to discuss other matters, including Washington’s demands that Pyongyang dismantle its nuclear arsenal.

Rodman himself has given few hints about the purpose of his trip. Bizarrely, it is being sponsored by PotCoin, which proclaims itself to be “banking for the marijuana industry.” He told reporters at Beijing’s airport he was “just trying to open the door” and would discuss his “mission” when he returned to the US. Asked if Trump knew about his trip, Rodman said: “I’m pretty sure he’s happy at the fact I’m over here trying to accomplish something we both need.”

The US continues to ratchet up the pressure on North Korea and China. Speaking at the Senate Foreign Affairs committee, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson warned that Washington was preparing to impose sanctions on countries and companies that did not clamp down on North Korea. He said the US was moving into the next stage of taking secondary sanctions against entities that have not imposed their own sanctions against Pyongyang.

Above all, the target is China, North Korea’s ally and largest trading partner. Asked if Beijing had lived up to its promises to sanction Pyongyang, Tillerson said its actions had been “uneven.” He added: “They have taken steps, visible steps that we can confirm. We are in discussions with them about entities inside of China.”

Tillerson said the question of whether China was applying enough pressure on North Korea would be the top item when senior American and Chinese officials met next week.

On Tuesday, the FBI and US Department of Homeland Security issued an alert accusing North Korea of cyber-attacks extending back to 2009 and warning that more were likely. The statement claimed that “cyber actors of the North Korean government,” had targeted the media, aerospace and financial sectors, as well as critical infrastructure, in the United States and globally.

Accusations of cyber-attacks are just part of the US campaign of vilification being drummed up in preparation for war against North Korea. The claims are completely hypocritical given the extensive cyber warfare measures that the US has used against North Korea. Earlier this year, the *New York Times* reveals that the Obama administration authorised cyber-attacks designed to cause North Korean missiles to malfunction. The Trump administration reportedly continued the program.

In 2013 and 2014, when Rodman headed to North Korea, President Barack Obama was steadily ramping up pressure on Pyongyang through sanctions and indirectly through Beijing. Trump officials, however, have declared that the policy of “strategic patience” is finished. They have warned that the US will not sit by indefinitely as North Korea develops the capacity to launch an inter-continental ballistic missile (ICBM) that could reach the American mainland.

Speaking this week before the Senate Armed Services committee, Defence Secretary James Mattis and Joint Chiefs chairman General Joseph Dunford again warned of the growing nuclear threat allegedly posed by North Korea. Mattis declared that Pyongyang’s pursuit of nuclear weapons and delivery systems were “most urgent and dangerous threat to peace and security.”

The Pentagon has two nuclear aircraft carriers and their strike groups off the Korean Peninsula and a third on its way. A US nuclear submarine capable of launching cruise missiles recently docked in South Korea. South Korean and US military forces recently completed their annual joint exercises involving more than 300,000 personnel backed by armour, warships and war planes.

The alleged threat posed by North Korea provides a

convenient pretext for the US to continue its military build-up in Asia. This is primarily directed at war with China, which Washington regards as its main obstacle to hegemony in Asia. Mattis has said that any attempt by North Korea to use its nuclear arsenal would be met with an “effective and overwhelming” response—that is, nuclear annihilation.

North Korea’s belligerent response and threats only play into Washington’s hands and heighten the danger of war. Last Saturday, the state-owned *Rodong Sinmun* boasted that “the recent tests of our strategic weapons confirm that the time for a test of an intercontinental ballistic missile is never far away.”

Given the accelerating US confrontation with North Korea, the chances that Rodman’s visit can open meaningful talks between the two countries appear remote.



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