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United States Senate

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SUITE SD-255
DIRKSEN BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-2107
202-224-2742

975 JFK FEDERAL BUILDING
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BOSTON, MA 02203
617-565-8519

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508-677-0523

1550 MAIN STREET, 4TH FLOOR
SPRINGFIELD, MA 01101
413-785-4610

The Honorable Rex W. Tillerson
U.S. Secretary of State
Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Tillerson:

I write to express concern about your decision to make an official trip to the Asia-Pacific region without an accompanying press pool. The presence of a traveling press corps is vital for keeping the American people informed about a trip with significant implications for U.S. national security and economic prosperity. The decision to exclude reporters from your trip falls into a broader pattern of efforts by the Trump administration to sideline and undermine the press. A robust and independent press is essential for informing the American people about U.S. foreign policy and holding the government accountable, and I urge you to reconsider your decision.

Your decision to travel without reporters sends a dangerous signal to other countries about the U.S. commitment to freedom of the press. As President George W. Bush recently noted, it is “hard to tell others to have an independent free press when we’re not willing to have one ourselves.” Particularly when traveling to China, a country without robust press freedoms, U.S. public servants must clearly demonstrate their commitment to a vibrant media.

President Trump has failed to demonstrate a commitment to free media access to his administration. President Trump has described unflattering reports about his administration as “fake news,” and his Press Secretary Sean Spicer selectively blocked a number of media outlets, including CNN, Politico, BuzzFeed News, the BBC, The New York Times, and The Los Angeles Times, from attending a press briefing at the White House. Most ominously, the President has derided the press as “the enemy of the American people” — a term with a dark totalitarian history.

So far, under your leadership, the State Department has a poor record of providing access to the press. Until this week, the department had not held a single press briefing. When NBC News journalist Andrea Mitchell recently attempted to ask you questions about U.S. policy toward China and Russia, she was escorted out of the room. Together with your decision to exclude reporters from your trip to Asia, actions such as these send a chilling message to the press.

Since the public presentation of U.S. policy is a key element of diplomacy, traveling without U.S. media outlets could also undermine the success of your trip. The absence of U.S. reporters will allow foreign governments and media outlets to shape the public narrative of your trip, as D.C. bureau chiefs from major news organizations recently noted in a letter to the State Department. Particularly in the case of China, that could have a deleterious impact on your ability to signal the direction and intent of U.S. foreign policy toward the Asia-Pacific region. Widespread media coverage of your meetings in Japan and South Korea are an important way to signal the strength of these critical Asia-Pacific alliances, especially in the face of North Korean provocations.

A vigorous and independent press is the backbone of American democracy. Without it, the American people will have few avenues for understanding and shaping the actions of their government. As our nation's top diplomat, you are subject to the need for discretion when dealing with sensitive national security issues. But as a public servant, you have a responsibility to provide as much transparency as possible into your official actions. Restricting the public's access to information only foments distrust. I urge you, then, to reconsider your decision to exclude the press, and make every effort to assure the American people of your commitment to a free and independent media.

Sincerely,



Senator Edward J. Markey
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on East Asia, the Pacific, and International
Cybersecurity Policy
Senate Foreign Relations Committee