

US secretary of state fobs off concerns in Asia over Trump tariffs

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In his first official trip to Asia, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio faced considerable hostility over the Trump administration's new tariffs when he attended the foreign ministers' meeting of the 10-member Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Kuala Lumpur late last week.

The tariffs had been announced in April then paused for 90 days to allow for negotiations. But in a slap in the face to ASEAN countries, the Trump administration sent out a batch of letters earlier in the week announcing new tariffs to come into force on August 1.

All ASEAN members, except Singapore, have now been notified and will be impacted by some of the highest tariffs in the world. Most are heavily dependent on exports to the United States. Some, including Indonesia and Malaysia, are engaged in negotiations with the US to reach a deal. However, with a little over a fortnight to go, only two such agreements have been reached—with Britain and Vietnam.

These agreements make clear that the Trump administration is not only demanding economic concessions. It is pushing for far closer alignment with the US as its preparations for war with China accelerate. The tentative deal with Vietnam involves two tariff levels on its exports to the US—20 percent broadly on exports to the US, but 40 percent on items judged by Washington to be transhipments from China.

The joint communique issued by ASEAN foreign ministers did not name the US, but its opposition to the tariffs was obvious. It expressed concern over “rising global trade tensions and growing uncertainties,” focussing in particular on “unilateral actions relating to tariffs.”

These tariffs, it declared, were “counterproductive and risk exacerbating global economic fragmentation and pose complex challenges to ASEAN’s economic

stability and growth.” Last year, the combined exports of ASEAN countries to the US were a huge \$352.3 billion, with Vietnam by far the largest exporter, followed by Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore.

Prior to Rubio’s arrival in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim condemned the tariffs, warning they were not just a “passing storm.” They were instead “the new weather of our time... Across the world, tools once used to generate growth are now wielded to pressure, isolate and contain.”

Reflecting the content of the communique, Anwar told ASEAN leaders: “As we navigate external pressures, we need to fortify our foundations. Trade among ourselves. Invest more in one another.” However, many South East Asian countries are already facing a marked economic slowdown that will only worsen with the impact of the Trump tariffs, exacerbating regional rivalry.

Rubio dismissed concerns about the tariffs, declaring that they were being imposed globally to address trade imbalances. “I would say that when all is said and done, many of the countries in South East Asia are going to have tariff rates that are actually better than countries in other parts of the world,” he said.

ASEAN countries are actually among the hardest hit. Tariffs or levies loom over eight out of 10 ASEAN member states, including a tariff of 20 percent on the Philippines, 25 percent on Malaysia and Brunei, 32 percent on Indonesia and 36 percent on Cambodia and Thailand. The tariff levels on Laos and Myanmar are among the highest globally—40 percent—just below the maximum impost of 50 percent.

Rubio also used the opportunity to lash out at China over disputes in the South China Sea, noting that nine years ago the Arbitral Tribunal in The Hague ruled against China’s maritime claims under the UN

Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The US has exploited the longstanding maritime disputes between China and its neighbours in a bid to drive a wedge between them. The US, which has not ratified UNCLOS, used the Philippines as its legal proxy in The Hague to push through the court decision.

Rubio denounced China for ignoring the ruling and “continuing to assert unlawful and expansive maritime claims and taking increasingly aggressive actions against its neighbours.” In reality, US imperialism has deliberately stoked tensions in the South China Sea and other dangerous flashpoints in Asia to justify its accelerating preparations for war against China.

Rubio emphasised the Trump administration’s commitment to Asia, declaring: “This is where much of the story of the 21st century is going to be written. This is where two-thirds of economic growth is going to happen over the next 25 or 30 years.... We have over 6,000 American companies that have invested heavily in these economies over the last 20 or 30 years. We’re not abandoning those relationships... The story of the 21st century will be written in the Indo-Pacific.”

Rubio’s paean to the Indo-Pacific inadvertently highlights the underlying driving force behind Washington’s drive to war against China. Amid its own historic decline, US imperialism fears that it will be eclipsed by China, which has rapidly risen to become the world’s second largest economy and largest producer of manufactured goods. Washington is determined to use its residual military might to shore up American global dominance, in particular against China, which it regards as the chief threat.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who was also present at the ASEAN meeting, has in the past condemned US bullying on trade with its Asian counterparts. Seeking to counter US influence and pressure, he told the meeting: “China has always been the most reliable stabilising force in a turbulent world and the most reliable partner for ASEAN countries in addressing challenges.”

Rubio held talks on the sidelines of the ASEAN gathering, including with Wang. Neither side provided any detail as to the matters discussed. The US secretary of state simply declared that the meeting had been “very positive” and noted the “high probability” that Chinese President Xi Jinping would meet with Trump soon.

Rubio also met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. Discussions focussed on the US-NATO war in Ukraine, but again few details were made public beyond vague talk of a possible “new and different approach” to reviving peace efforts. “I wouldn’t characterise it as something that guarantees peace,” Rubio commented.

Rubio held individual meetings with most ASEAN foreign ministers but the most significant involved trilateral talks with the Philippines and Japan. The Philippines under President Ferdinand Marcos Jnr has been in the forefront of military provocations against China in the South China Sea. It has expanded US basing arrangements and joined drills. Japan has joined the US in bolstering the military capacities of the Philippines.

“We have a great relationship with Japan and the Philippines, and work very closely with them,” Rubio said, highlighting “maritime security” and “territorial integrity” in particular. Marcos is about to travel to the US to meet with Trump.

The tripartite meeting underscored the real purpose of Rubio’s presence in Kuala Lumpur: To pressure and bully ASEAN countries into aligning with the US-led war drive against China.



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