

Philippine President Marcos meets with Trump in the White House

John Malvar
22 July 2025

Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr met with President Donald Trump in the White House Tuesday to discuss tariffs, trade relations, and preparations for war with China. The meeting in the Oval Office was part of a series of meetings held in Washington between the Philippine delegation and leading US officials, including Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth and Secretary of State Marco Rubio.

The visit by Marcos to the United States was the first official trip by a Southeast Asian leader to the United States during Trump's second term. The announcement by the Trump administration in April of a slate of tariffs imposed on nearly every country on the planet has thrown governments in the Southeast Asian region, like the rest of the world, into a state of uncertainty and panic.

In April, the Trump White House announced that it would be imposing a 17 percent tariff on Philippines exports to the United States. While a potentially devastating blow to the Philippine export economy, it was significantly less than the tariffs threatened to be imposed on other countries throughout the region.

The Philippines exported \$14 billion worth of commodities to the United States in 2024. The United States is the Philippines largest trading partner and is the leading destination for Philippine exports, accounting for nearly 17 percent of all Philippine exports.

Trump temporarily paused the threatened April tariff. Then, without any explanation for the altered rate, on July 9, the White House issued a letter to Manila informing it that the Philippines would be subject to a 20 percent tariff.

Marcos responded by announcing that he would be traveling to the White House at Trump's invitation. The Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) held a meeting on July 16, in which Marcos declared: "The Philippines needs the US; we cannot live without them." The meeting made a recommended list of concessions to offer the US to secure a reduction in the threatened tariff.

The terms of any deal struck by Trump and Marcos on Tuesday are not yet public. However, the terms proposed in the July 16 memo of the DTI are colonial in character,

giving US business interests nearly limitless access to the country's resources and economy. The proposals included giving the US preferential access to Philippine reserves of nickel, cobalt and copper, the elimination of nearly all Philippine tariffs on US goods, import commitments favoring US exports, and approving special access to American firms in the vital areas of energy, infrastructure, and mineral resources.

There was a somewhat performative character to the affair: the increase, for unspecified reasons, of 3 percent to the threatened tariff, the hastily agreed upon concessions, many of which trample upon provisions in the Philippine Constitution defending national economic sovereignty, and the trip to Washington.

After his meeting with Marcos, Trump announced on social media that the United States had concluded a trade deal with the Philippines, imposing a 19 percent tariff on Philippine exports to the US. The Philippines he claimed was giving the US "open access" to its markets and imposing zero tariffs on US exports. As with the recently announced trade deals with Vietnam and Indonesia, the actual deal has not been made public, nor have any the concrete details been published.

Alongside the economic negotiations, were discussions of the ongoing preparations for war with China, discussions pitched as being about the "security of the Indo-Pacific theater."

Hegseth told the press during his meeting with Marcos that the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) between the United States and the Philippines, signed in 1951, committed the two countries to mutual defense in response to any actions taken against either country's forces "including our Coast Guard, anywhere in the Pacific, including the South China Sea."

This expansive language is nowhere to be found in the MDT which mentions neither the South China Sea, nor the Coast Guard. Hegseth's statement was calculated to bring the repeated and dangerous confrontations between Philippine and Chinese Coast Guard vessels in the disputed

waters of the South China Sea within the ambit of the MDT's terms of war.

Over the past two years, abetted by Marcos, Washington has dramatically increased its military provocations and escalatory preparations for war with China in the Philippines. It has established nearly 10 military bases in the country. It has deployed troops and weapons systems to the Philippines, including the Typhon missile system with the capacity to launch missiles over much of mainland China. Using aerial and marine drone systems, US troops secretly supervise and coordinate each of the Philippines' confrontations with Chinese vessels in the South China Sea. The Philippines has begun military and strategic preparations to go to war with China in the event of an invasion of Taiwan, preparations that are a matter of public discussion.

The tariffs threatened by the Trump White House are the desperate, bullying politics of US imperialism, which aims to shore up its own economic weakness by dominating the economies of countries around the globe, while at the same time seeking to array them into a war camp against China. The drive to dominate, however, threatens to hasten a realignment of geopolitical interests away from Washington. Every country throughout Southeast Asia feels this pressure and the politics of the region are increasingly torn asunder by it.

This phenomenon is particularly marked in the Philippines, the former colony of the United States. A political civil war is raging between rival factions of the elite, those aligned with former President Rodrigo Duterte and those with Marcos. Duterte has been arrested and stands trial in the Hague for crimes against humanity; his daughter, Vice President Sara Duterte, faces an impeachment trial in the Senate. Despite all of this, their political backing among significant sections of the elite remains strong.

Behind all of the scandals and infighting are Washington's preparations for war with China. Duterte sought to reorient Philippine economic ties toward China and attempted to do so by distancing the Philippines from Washington's warmongering. Marcos, on taking office in 2022, reoriented the Philippines back to the United States.

This was openly discussed in the Oval Office on Tuesday. Trump remarked, "I know you had some problems with another president [meaning Duterte], and it was not your fault. It was the president's fault, and the country was maybe tilting toward China. But we untilted it very, very quickly. But, you know, you had a country that was tilting toward China for a period of time. And I just don't think that would have been good for you."

Trump has long-standing ties to the Marcos family. The real estate tycoon was on very chummy terms with the

conjugal dictators, Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos, and met Imelda regularly at parties in New York and elsewhere. Trump told the press during his meeting with Marcos Jr that the Marcoses were "a great family, great family legacy, and highly respected in this country."

This "great family," with the enthusiastic backing of Democratic and Republican administrations in Washington, oversaw a brutal military dictatorship that murdered more than 3,000 people, imprisoned tens of thousands without warrant, and pillaged billions of dollars from the coffers of the impoverished country. Ferdinand Marcos Jr faces over \$350 million dollars in contempt of court charges in the United States for cases involving the victims of human rights abuses during his parents' dictatorship.

The Marcoses have always been welcomed by the White House because they served the interests of US imperialism. Marcos Sr committed Philippine troops to America's war in Vietnam and personally received millions of dollars in secret pay-off funds from the Johnson administration for doing so. The Marcoses guaranteed the stability of the US military bases at Clark and Subic, which were instrumental in the US projection of military power in Asia. The dictatorship of the Marcoses was not merely tolerated by Washington, it was encouraged and abetted. Washington made possible the Marcos dictatorship.

The justification routinely given by both Washington and Manila for the advanced preparations for war with China in the Philippines and the South China Sea is the defense of national sovereignty. But it is Washington, with the full support of the Marcos administration, that tramples on Philippine sovereignty, not Beijing. It is the United States, and not China, that exercises extra-territorial sovereignty over military bases in the country, deploys long-range missiles on Philippine soil, and bullies the Philippines into opening its economy to exploitation by American business interests.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact