

US, China broker uneasy Thai-Cambodian ceasefire

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After five days of fighting over a long-running border dispute, the Thai and Cambodian governments agreed to an immediate ceasefire that went into effect at midnight on Monday. While US President Donald Trump bragged that he had brought about the truce, the Chinese government played a significant role in brokering the fragile ceasefire.

Fighting broke out last Thursday, which, according to Thailand, had been triggered by two landmine incidents in which Thai soldiers were injured. Clashes opened up along hundreds of kilometres of disputed border between the two countries in the fiercest fighting involving tanks, artillery and rockets since clashes in 2011. Thai fighter jets hit targets inside Cambodia.

At least 42 people, including civilians, were killed in the five days of conflict and around 200 were injured. About 300,000 civilians fled the border areas and are slowly returning to their homes amid fears that the ceasefire will not hold.

Over the weekend, Trump spoke to Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet and Thai acting Prime Minister, Phumtham Wechayachai, warning that he would call off trade talks with both countries unless the fighting stopped. Cambodia and Thailand face the imposition of across-the-board tariffs of 36 percent on all exports to the US on August 1, unless other agreements are reached.

Trump wrote on social media: "We happen to be, by coincidence, currently dealing on Trade with both Countries, but do not want to make any Deal, with either Country, if they are fighting—And I have told them so! I am trying to simplify a complex situation!" Both countries rely on exports to the US. For Cambodia, in particular, America is the destination for 40 percent of its total exports.

Fighting continued on Monday as talks involving the

Thai and Cambodian leaders convened in Malaysia, which currently holds the chair of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN). The US and China, which is the largest trading partner of both countries, were closely involved in organising the talks. US Secretary of State Marco Rubio told the media that US State Department officials were present in Malaysia to "assist these peace efforts."

China has also had a hand in the ceasefire talks. After their meeting in Kuala Lumpur on Monday, the Thai and Cambodian prime ministers met with Chinese officials, including Vice Foreign Minister Sun Weidong, in Shanghai and reaffirmed the ceasefire. The Chinese foreign ministry stated that the informal talks were to facilitate the truce.

With the announcement of a ceasefire, Trump quickly claimed credit, absurdly declaring on social media, "I am proud to be the President of PEACE!" On the face of it, Trump is waging a tariff war against the world that as in the 1930s is plunging the globe into conflict. Moreover, he is increasingly wielding this economic weapon for overtly geopolitical and political ends.

Far from being a president of peace, Trump is fully backing Israel's genocide in Gaza and wider aggression throughout the Middle East. Late last month, the US in league with Israel carried out unprovoked attacks on Iran—a blatant act of war. Following Israel's strikes on military targets and civilian infrastructure, as well as the assassination of top Iranian officials, the US carried out its own strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities.

While Thailand has attempted to balance between China and the US, it does have a formal treaty with Washington and its military has longstanding ties with the US, including regular, large-scale war games. While dependent on exports to the US, Cambodia is closely

aligned with China. As part of its Belt and Road Initiative, China has helped to finance and build key infrastructure, including new airports in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap, and an expressway linking the capital to the port city of Sihanoukville.

The Trump administration, which is engaged in an accelerating military build-up throughout the Indo-Pacific directed against China, has wielded the tariff weapon throughout the region to bully countries to line up with the US and to demand that its allies, such as Japan and Australia, dramatically boost military spending. In other circumstances, Washington could well have sought to exploit the conflict between Thailand and Cambodia as a means of undercutting Chinese influence, particularly in Cambodia.

If Trump has decided to play the peace card in this case, it could be that he wants to defuse issues that could stand in the way of a summit meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping, which is yet to be confirmed. Last week, Trump claimed to have been invited by Xi to visit China; yesterday on his social media, he declared no invitation has been received and he was not seeking a summit.

Nevertheless, an article in yesterday's *Washington Post* noted that the administration softened its approach to China, including taking steps to ease tensions over Taiwan. Having waged a full-throated economic war on China, Trump has been forced to back off temporarily, at least after Beijing imposed heavy restrictions on rare earth exports which are vital for numerous industrial and military applications.

Trade talks between the US and both countries resumed on Monday. Speaking to reporters on Tuesday, Thai Finance Minister Pichai Chunhavajira was upbeat on the prospects of a deal, saying it could be announced by this Friday or Saturday. He said the country made more concessions in addition to an earlier proposal that offered zero tariffs on many American products.

While Trump boasts that he brought about the Thai-Cambodian ceasefire, the truce remains fragile. The Thai military has accused its Cambodian counterparts of breaches both on Tuesday and Wednesday. A Thai military statement yesterday listed seven alleged hostile actions and truce violations by Cambodia, accusing its forces of "reckless and irresponsible actions" and warning of "appropriate and decisive measures" should violations persist.

While the unresolved border disputes have their roots in the region's colonial past, the latest clashes are being fuelled by worsening economic conditions and social tensions in both countries.

In Thailand, political infighting in the ruling class resulted in the suspension of Thai Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra from office on July 1. Opponents of her government denounced her, claiming that she had been too deferential in a leaked phone call with former Cambodian leader Hun Sen over a previous military clash in late May and had denigrated the Thai military.

None of the underlying economic and political issues that triggered last week's clashes have been resolved.



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