

# Trump's phony posturing as peacemaker in Asia

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US President Trump landed in Malaysia on Sunday beginning a tour of Asia—the first since his second term in office commenced in January. While nominally present to take part in a summit of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), the one-day stop was chiefly to grandstand as a peacemaker in the border clashes between Thailand and Cambodia and to formalise punitive US trade deals with ASEAN members.

Fighting between Thailand and Cambodia broke out in July, which, according to Thailand, was triggered by two landmine incidents that injured its soldiers. Clashes opened up along hundreds of kilometres of disputed border involving tanks, artillery and rockets in the fiercest fighting since 2011. At least 40 people, including civilians, were killed in the five days of conflict and some 300,000 civilians fled the border areas.

As Malaysia, which is the current ASEAN chair, brokered talks for a ceasefire, Trump stepped in with a big economic stick and threatened to call off trade talks with the two countries unless fighting stopped. Both countries, which are heavily dependent on exports to the US, were facing huge across the board tariffs. While Trump grabbed the limelight, China, which has close relations with Cambodia in particular, held talks with Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet and then acting Thai Prime Minister, Phumtham Wechayachai.

As soon as the truce was announced, Trump immediately claimed credit, absurdly declaring on social media, “I am proud to be the President of PEACE!” The price of his presence in Malaysia on Sunday appears to have been a televised appearance with the Thai, Cambodian and Malaysian prime ministers co-signing an updated truce agreement amid great fanfare.

On the same day, hundreds of people protested in the Malaysia capital of Kuala Lumpur against the presence of Trump and the backing of US imperialism for the Israeli genocide in Gaza. As one protester told Al Jazeera: “People who have a conscience know that Trump is a genocide enabler. Without him, Israel cannot kill all the children and people in Gaza.”

Trump's so-called “peace” agreement in the Middle East signed on October 9 has rapidly been exposed as nothing more than another stage in the US-backed Israeli ethnic cleansing and genocide in Gaza. It has sanctified the permanent Israeli occupation and annexation of a large part of Gaza, even as the daily mass killing and the deliberate starvation of the population continues.

The peace deal between Thailand and Cambodia is likewise a fraud. Heavy weapons and mines are to be removed from border areas, Thailand is to release 18 Cambodian soldiers held since July and Malaysian troops are to be deployed to monitor the ceasefire. However, while fighting has halted, temporarily at least, none of the underlying issues—the longstanding legacy of imperialist domination and intrigue—have been resolved.

The disputes have their origins in a 1907 map drawn by French officials in Indochina to demarcate France's colonial possessions from the Kingdom of Siam (now Thailand), which was nominally independent, sandwiched between French Indochina and British colonial Burma. The map was the basis for Cambodia's claims to the areas around the Preah Vihear temple. Thailand, which signed a military alliance with the US in 1954, has never accepted an International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling in Cambodia's favour in 1962.

Economic slowdown and rising social tensions, which will inevitably be exacerbated by Trump's

tariffs, are fuelling a turn to the whipping up of reactionary nationalism in both countries. In Thailand, the right-wing establishment, based on the military and monarchy, exploited incidents earlier in the year to undermine and oust Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra over an allegedly deferential phone call to Cambodian strongman Hun Sen.

The current right-wing, pro-military Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul heads a fragile, minority government that has committed to a new election next March. It proposes to simultaneously hold a referendum to revoke two agreements with Cambodia setting out processes to resolve disputed land and maritime boundaries. Trump's piece of political theatre on Sunday simply sets the stage for a new round of hostilities between Thailand and Cambodia.

Trump has not the slightest concern for peace in South East Asia or the lives of Cambodians and Thais. His economic thuggery is being wielded in Asia and internationally to advance the economic and strategic interests of American imperialism. Trump is recklessly preparing for a far more dangerous conflict with China, which the US political establishment as a whole regards as the chief threat to American global hegemony.

Trump is already locked in an economic war with China. He is due to meet with Chinese President Xi Jinping in South Korea on Thursday amid escalating economic threats on both sides. China has announced new restrictions on the export of critical minerals to the US, while Trump has threatened a hike of 100 percent on top of existing tariffs on Chinese imports. An extension of a truce in the economic war appears to have been agreed in negotiations in Malaysia but will only finally be decided when Trump and Xi meet.

Trump used the remainder of Sunday to reach a series of agreements with Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia and Vietnam that impose reduced but still large tariffs on their exports to the US, boost sales of US goods to these countries and, in the case of Malaysia, mandates \$70 billion of investment into the US.

Significantly, the agreements also sought to boost access to critical minerals whose production is currently dominated by China across the whole range. So essential are these minerals to the US economy and war machine that the Trump administration is desperately seeking to establish alternative supply chains as it prepares for conflict with China.

The US and Malaysia signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to expand trade and investment on critical minerals, including in exploration, extraction, refinement, manufacturing, recovery and recycling. Malaysia also agreed to refrain from banning or imposing quotas on exports to the US of critical minerals or rare earth elements. Trump signed a similar agreement with the Thai prime minister.

Trump also made moves to strengthen security ties with Cambodia in return for halving the planned tariffs on its exports to the US and for removing the US arms embargo on the country, which has been closely aligned with China. The two countries will restart their annual bilateral Angkor Sentinel military drills last held in 2017 and the US will increase access for Cambodian officers to train at US military colleges.

All of these measures are geared towards war, not peace. As in the 1930s, global economic warfare is the prelude to a catastrophic global military conflict, which is already underway and intensifying in Europe and the Middle East.

In his glib, Orwellian doublespeak, Trump summed up his stop in Malaysia on social media: "Signed major Trade and Rare Earth Deals, and yesterday, most importantly, signed the Peace Treaty between Thailand and Cambodia. NO WAR! Now, off to Japan!!!"

In Japan, Trump will meet with the new right-wing, militarist prime minister, Sanae Takaichi, who has already pledged to accelerate the country's remilitarisation in preparation for a US-led war on China. In South Korea, he will attempt to bludgeon concessions from Xi, who is not blind to US war preparations and is increasingly determined to trade economic blow for blow.



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