Trump in Manila: Praise for dictatorship, preparations for war

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17 November 2026

US President Donald Trump arrived in Manila on November 17 to begin an Asian tour encompassing regional summits and talks with Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin in Shenzhen. Hosted by Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., the visit provided a platform for Washington's drive to expand military coordination against Beijing, secure control over critical minerals and push for American dominance of artificial intelligence.

That a great deal is riding on Trump's trip to Asia for US imperialism is signalled by the high-powered team of accompanying officials. It included Secretary of State and national security adviser Marco Rubio, Secretary of Treasury Scott Bessent, his new fascistic chief of staff Stephen Miller, US Secretary of Commerce Howard Lutnick and US trade representative Jamieson Greer.

Trump arrived as the main proceedings of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) were closing. Bypassing those proceedings, he went first to a meeting of the Quad—the strategic grouping of the United States, Japan, Australia and India—to advance military coordination against China. Only afterward did he join his Southeast Asian hosts for a working dinner and closed-door discussions.

ASEAN ended the Philippine chairmanship without concluding a South China Sea Code of Conduct, which the Marcos administration had pledged to secure during its year as chair. The negotiations have become a ritual of deadlines and declarations of progress. In 2002, ASEAN and China signed a non-binding declaration that envisaged a future code; nearly a quarter-century later, they remain unable to agree on its geographic scope or whether it will be legally binding. Manila's announcement that approximately 80 percent of the text had been provisionally agreed only underscored how little such measurements reveal: the outstanding questions concern where the agreement applies and whether its provisions must be obeyed.

This protracted diplomatic exercise is increasingly overtaken by preparations for war. One central dispute is whether the code would restrict joint military exercises with countries outside the region, particularly the United States. China has sought such restrictions; Manila insists on preserving its military cooperation with Washington—the very cooperation being expanded at the summit.

Trump arrived as a guest of a regional summit whose efforts to restrain maritime conflict his administration's war preparations were undermining. He used the occasion to convene the Quad leaders' summit—the first since 2024—with Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The Philippines has no seat in the grouping, yet Marcos hosted preparations for a war that threatens to place its population on the front lines. Two members of the Quad—the United States and Japan—had ravaged the Philippines through conquest and occupation; the starvation and bombardment of Manila remain within living memory. Marcos welcomed them as protectors against China, a country that has never invaded or occupied the Philippines.

Agreement on preparations for war proved considerably easier than agreement on rules to restrain conflict. The Quad unveiled an Indo-Pacific Maritime Surveillance Collaboration and announced a joint patrol aircraft exercise. "In 2027, our respective P-8 and P-3C patrol aircraft are scheduled to fly in a maritime exercise for the first time in a Quad context," its statement declared, presenting this expansion of military surveillance and operational coordination as "making our seas safer."

These military arrangements were accompanied by efforts to secure control over strategic resources and technologies. Trump announced critical-minerals agreements intended to prevent "coercion by any single foreign supplier." The agreements form part of a broader drive to organize supply chains outside China, also pursued through Washington's separate Pax Silica initiative linking critical minerals, semiconductors and artificial intelligence.

The Quad's artificial-intelligence initiative made the ambition explicit. "We want to ensure that the future of this critical technology is dominated by nations that share our values and our common interests," Trump declared. He spoke not of leading scientific development, but of dominating it. Washington regards AI as a weapon of economic and military warfare, to be controlled by an American-led bloc and wielded against its rivals. The leaders endorsed an "AI accelerator," a financing and technical-assistance program to promote the

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adoption of "trusted" AI systems across the Indo-Pacific—"trusted," in Washington's strategic vocabulary, meaning supplied by the United States and its partners rather than China.

Having declared their intention to dominate AI and organize strategic supply chains outside China, the Quad leaders denounced "economic coercion," including export restrictions—a reference to Beijing's restrictions on rare earths. The hypocrisy was compounded by subservience: themselves subject to Trump's punitive tariffs, the leaders of Japan, Australia and India dutifully echoed Washington's accusations, condemning in Beijing the methods they submitted to from their American patron.

Marcos has placed Philippine territory and military operations at Washington's disposal. American Typhon launchers deployed in the country can fire missiles into China, while joint exercises have rehearsed blocking Chinese naval passage through the waterways north of Luzon. Task Force Philippines, established in 2025 under an American commander, oversees surveillance and coordinates maritime operations around the archipelago, including the strategically vital straits facing Taiwan. Washington is not merely backing Manila's confrontations with Beijing from a distance; American personnel and surveillance systems are integrated into their planning and coordination.

At the ASEAN–US dinner, Marcos declared: "There is no part of our lives in the Philippines that is not involved with the United States in some way." The statement was true in a sense he did not intend: Washington crushed the Philippine struggle for independence in a bloody war of colonial conquest and later sustained his parents' dictatorship, under which thousands were murdered and billions stolen. Marcos celebrated as an enduring partnership the imperial relationship on which his own dynasty's power rested.

"I knew your parents very well, and they were great," Trump told Marcos. "I believe in genetics, and they did a good job. You have very good genetics." Parasites and the offspring of parasites, the two men attribute to heredity what they owe to plunder. The fascistic occupant of the White House pays tribute to the brutal Marcos dictatorship. Trump did know Imelda Marcos: the New York real-estate con man and the profligate kleptocrat belonged to the same social world.

Trump's praise accompanied demands for resources and markets. He promoted American energy, artificial intelligence and weapons, and solicited critical minerals and magnets. "We want magnets," he declared. Invoking American operations in Venezuela and Iran, he boasted: "We make the greatest equipment.… Everybody's buying it."

Preparations for the summit revived a practice dating back to the Marcos dictatorship, when Imelda—who found the poor unsightly—had walls erected to hide Manila's slums from foreign visitors. Along J. W. Diokno Boulevard in Pasay, temporary barriers displaying reproductions of artworks concealed informal settlements.

The walls hid sprawling communities, routinely flooded with contaminated storm runoff; families queued for water, shared inadequate sanitation, and made homes here. Children attend school here, generations had worked and died here, but Trump's motorcade would be passing, and so the government that would not house them, put up walls so that he would not see them.

Opposition was met with mass arrests. More than 200 people arrested during the November 15 demonstrations against Trump's visit and the US-led Pax Silica initiative remained detained without charge two days later. Among those held were university students and campus journalists. They were taken to Camp Bagong Diwa in Bicutan, where the Marcos dictatorship imprisoned and tortured its political opponents. As Marcos's son held protesters without charge in the same camp, Trump praised the dictator and his wife as "great."

Pax Silica seeks to organize critical minerals, semiconductor production and AI infrastructure into supply chains excluding China. In the Philippines, this means dispossession. The government is taking ancestral land for a 3,618-hectare industrial hub in Capas, Tarlac, threatening to uproot Indigenous Aeta communities and strip farmers of land their families have cultivated for generations. The Aeta are among the poorest and most oppressed people in a country of mass poverty, their livelihoods already eroded by generations of encroachment on their ancestral lands.

Human Rights Watch found no indication that authorities had secured the communities' free, prior and informed consent. Farmers who refused compensation reported repeated visits from officials insisting that their land would be taken. Nearby, a bulldozer had already dug up an Aeta cemetery in what residents described as the beginning of the project. Even the dead stood in the way.

Trump is scheduled to receive a formal welcome at Malacañang Palace on November 18, followed by talks and lunch with Marcos. He then travels to Shenzhen for APEC and anticipated meetings with Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin. He will arrive not simply with proposals for negotiation, but with new commitments from Washington's regional partners to place their territory, resources and industries at the service of its confrontation with China.

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