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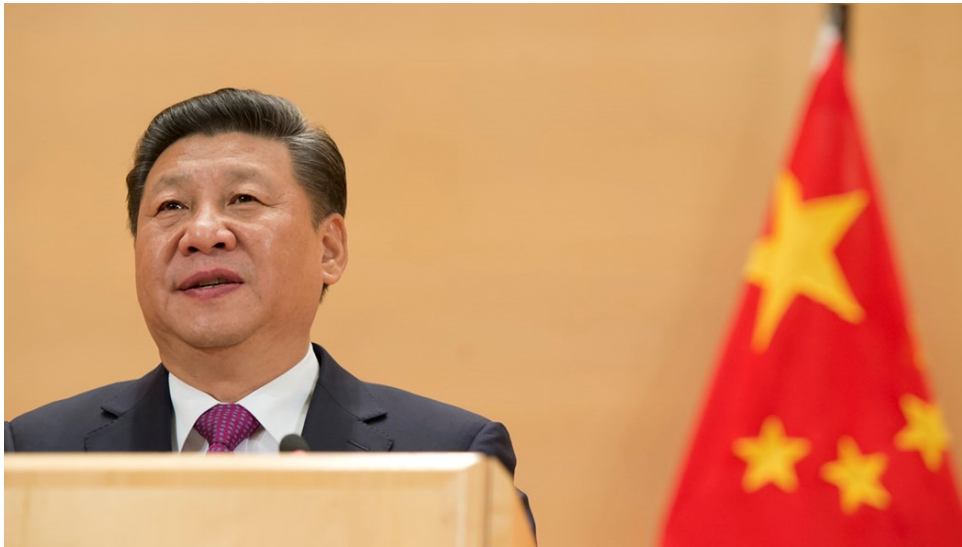
زبانهای اروپایی

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## *Trump's trade war will deepen the Chinese footprint in Southeast Asia*

When the US Secretary of Defence vowed to counter China during his maiden visit to Asia, he likely did not realise how his administration's imposition of tariffs would deepen China's ties with Southeast Asian nations, leaving Washington's broader geopolitical interests in unstable territories.



### **China's Countermoves Are Anything but Isolated**

President Xi Jinping's upcoming tour of Southeast Asia—encompassing Vietnam, Malaysia, and Cambodia from April 14 to 18—reflects Beijing's strategic recalibration in response to the escalating trade war initiated by the Trump administration. While China has retaliated with tariffs of its own, its broader counterstrategy involves strengthening economic ties with neighbouring markets to stabilize exports amid diminished access to the US market. This

strategy offers a leeway not only to Beijing but also to countries in Southeast Asia affected, just like China, by the trade war.

Washington's bet appears to be that economic containment will unravel China's integration into global value chains

A central objective of Washington's tariff campaign has been to constrain China's long-term economic ascent. The explicitly China-focused nature of these measures is underscored by the Trump administration's decision to offer a 90-day tariff reprieve to other nations—excluding China—to renegotiate their trade terms. Ironically, this carveout may end up accelerating Beijing's efforts to foster new regional partnerships, especially with economies also feeling the ripple effects of American protectionism.

China's pitch to Southeast Asia is clear: while Washington raises trade barriers, regional economies can benefit from moving in the opposite direction. By lowering intra-regional trade restrictions via trade negotiations with China, ASEAN nations could not only shield themselves from the fallout but also potentially enhance their own trade resilience. That message appears to be resonating.

Southeast Asia, far from being a passive recipient of great power manoeuvres, is taking active steps to protect its economic interests. Malaysia's Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, who currently chairs ASEAN, addressed this directly at the ASEAN Investment Conference on April 8. "While we intend to remain steadfast trade partners with the US," he stated, "we will, in tandem, do whatever it takes to safeguard our economic interests. This includes engaging proactively with the US towards achieving a mutually beneficial outcome and at the same time, diversifying and strengthening our ties with all major trade markets across the EU, Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, and particularly China, Korea, and Japan."

China, unlike the US, finds itself with willing economic partners in the region. The notion that Washington can pressure regional economies through tariffs while simultaneously urging them to isolate China is not only unrealistic but also overtly simplistic, unlikely to yield desired results. It makes no sense for Washington be the party that imposes trade barriers and threatens economic instability, while telling countries in Southeast Asia that the 'real threat' is China! China, as it stands, is threatening nothing, at least in the present context. In fact, Xi's Southeast Asia tour underscores a key Chinese message: work collectively to design flexible, mutually beneficial trade frameworks that offer stability in a volatile global environment.

### **Reciprocity, Not Dominance**

The realignment of trade flows resulting from US-China tensions is not a one-way street. While Chinese goods may gain easier access to ASEAN markets as a result of the trade war, Beijing is also looking to Southeast Asia to fill gaps left by reduced American imports. China's strategy is rooted less in dominance and more in reciprocity, thus promoting a balance that could help offset the structural imbalances that often accompany global trade realignments.

At the China Development Forum 2025 held in Beijing on March 23, Premier Li Qiang reiterated China's commitment to global trade openness. "China will continue to welcome enterprises from around the world with open arms," Li said, adding that Beijing remains dedicated to safeguarding free trade and ensuring the stability of global supply chains.

Recent data from the World Openness Report 2024, which evaluates 129 global economies, reinforces this narrative. While developed economies saw a 7.7% decline in their openness index between 2008 and 2023, emerging and developing markets recorded a 5% increase. China's own openness index rose by 11.89%, which is among the highest globally. These figures bolster Beijing's self-positioning as a champion of globalization, standing in stark contrast to the economic nationalism espoused by the Trump administration.

### **Washington's Gamble**

The larger strategic question remains: can Washington achieve its goal of economically weakening China? The U.S. strategy appears predicated on the assumption that isolating China will erode its economic dominance. But the challenge for Washington is twofold—it lacks the coalition of allies necessary to enforce such isolation, and China has proven adept at diversifying both its export markets and import sources.

Contrary to American expectations, China has not suffered a major economic setback. As of 2024, it will remain the world's top trading nation, accounting for 14.5% of global exports—nearly double the US share of 8.5%. Exports to the US represent just 12.3% of China's total export volume, which stood at approximately \$3.6 trillion. These numbers underscore Beijing's strategic foresight in reducing dependency on any single market and its flexibility to keep diversifying its trade ties.

Washington's bet appears to be that economic containment will unravel China's integration into global value chains. Yet, imposing trade disruptions may only deepen those very connections elsewhere, especially across Asia, where many countries are increasingly aligning themselves with Beijing's pragmatic approach to trade. In this shifting global landscape, China's moves are far from isolated. Quite the contrary – and increasingly – it is Washington that appears cornered.

Salman Rafi Sheikh, April 20, 2025

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