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Xi Jinping's Southeast Asian Tour: A Three-Stop Diplomatic Journey

Between April 14 and 18, Chinese leader Xi Jinping embarked on his first overseas tour of the year, visiting three countries in the Southeast Asian subregion — Vietnam, Malaysia, and Cambodia.

A Snapshot of the Emerging Landscape in Southeast Asia

At the heart of the matter lies a key aspect that underpins the current situation unfolding in Southeast Asia: the escalating Sino-American rivalry for influence over this critically important subregion. From a historical standpoint, the growing strategic and political dimensions of this struggle are nothing new. They first revealed themselves during the two world wars of the last century, and today, the renewed sharpening of tensions can't help but stir grim reflections.

The looming “tariff club” waved by Trump on the horizon has naturally prompted nearly all Southeast Asian nations to seek warmer, more trusting relations with China

Lately, however, the trade and economic dimensions of this confrontation have taken center stage. This is, first of all, due to Southeast Asia's emergence as an increasingly vital cog in the global economic machinery. The ten countries of the subregion are home to 650 million people who collectively generate goods worth \$3.2 trillion. Secondly, the tremors set off by the “tariff war” launched by the 47th President of the United States have sent seismic ripples across the region's economic terrain.

While China was the main target of this tariff offensive, Southeast Asian countries did not escape unscathed. Tariffs have sprung up on imports from Vietnam, Malaysia, and Cambodia

— to the tune of 46%, 24%, and 49%, respectively. For now, these barriers have been postponed for three months, a grace period granted to U.S. partners for “deal-making.” The terms of these deals will likely be tailored individually and are almost certain to reflect the political and strategic threads woven into Washington’s broader struggle with Beijing — and, by extension, each partner’s own stance in this contest.

All signs suggest that the three Southeast Asian nations mentioned above are already queuing up as would-be “negotiating partners” of Donald Trump. And one can hardly blame them. Firstly, the United States remains a major economic partner for two of them — Vietnam and Malaysia. Secondly, both these countries, like several others in the region, find themselves entangled in territorial disputes with China, to varying degrees of severity. As such, they are eager to retain a measure of political-strategic leverage in their relationships with Beijing’s geopolitical adversaries — first and foremost, Washington, but increasingly also Tokyo.

Still, the looming “tariff club” waved by Trump on the horizon has naturally prompted nearly all Southeast Asian nations — save for the Philippines — to seek warmer, more trusting relations with China. This undoubtedly paved the way for the success of Xi Jinping’s regional tour.

Xi Jinping in Vietnam

Leaving aside the Philippines, where the “pro-American” tilt in foreign policy runs deep and historic, [even Vietnam — a key player in Southeast Asia](#) — has in recent years signaled a pivot toward normalization and even rapprochement with the United States. And yet, China remains Vietnam’s leading trade and economic partner, as it does for nearly every other country in the region. Beijing has had to exert considerable effort to rein in this politically inconvenient trend in the foreign policy of such a strategically important neighbor. The bulk of this work has played out through dialogue between the ruling parties, ideologically aligned and structurally similar.

This time, too, Xi Jinping, in his dual role as China’s leader and head of the Communist Party of China, sat down primarily with his Vietnamese counterpart To Lam, who now leads the Communist Party of Vietnam. Following their talks, as well as discussions with Vietnamese President Luong Cuong, [a “Joint Statement” was issued](#), along with a number of other documents covering specific areas of bilateral cooperation.

As for the rather voluminous Joint Statement, which touches upon virtually every aspect of interstate relations, I’d draw attention to two particularly timely themes. One of them picked up the thread of veiled criticism aimed at Donald Trump’s behavior in the global economic system — a critique that had already surfaced two weeks earlier [during talks](#) between

Japanese Prime Minister Seiko Ishiba and Brazilian President Lula da Silva. Specifically, paragraph 8 of the document refers to “trade and economic restrictions” and underscores the need to maintain an open, transparent, inclusive, and non-discriminatory multilateral trading regime, with the WTO at its core.

That same paragraph also reflects Vietnam’s intent to support China’s accession to the emerging regional free trade area, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). It’s worth noting that while [Japan is the informal leader of this pact](#), it is precisely thanks to Tokyo’s backing that the CPTPP welcomed a decidedly non-regional member: the United Kingdom.

Clearly, a complicated “stew” is beginning to simmer in the global politico-economic kitchen, and one of the chief “chefs” stirring the pot is none other than the current U.S. president.

The Visit to Malaysia

If the sincerity of the emotions displayed by the Vietnamese — who flooded the streets of Hanoi at the arrival of the high-ranking Chinese guest — may be open to debate, then the feelings of the residents of Malaysia’s capital, Kuala Lumpur, leave no room for doubt. Perhaps this is due to the fact that Malaysia shares no land border with China, and its territorial disputes with Beijing in the South China Sea are incomparably smaller in scale. (Such claims do exist, but they belong to the “Eastern” part of the country located on the island of Borneo.) And still, one is quite justified in trusting certain polls [showing that](#) 77% of Malaysians hold a favorable view of the PRC.

[The Global Times presentation](#) offers some impressive figures reflecting the current level of bilateral cooperation. Yet during meetings with the King of Malaysia, Sultan Ibrahim, and Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, [the Chinese leader](#) was already speaking of a forthcoming “50-year golden era” in bilateral relations. And judging by [the contents of the main document](#) signed following these talks, this evocative phrase is far from an exaggeration.

What caught my authorial eye were points 47, 49, 50, and 52 of the aforementioned main document — sections that directly address the pressing issues of today’s international environment. Among other things, they speak of the need to preserve peace in the Indo-Pacific, to prevent the deployment of nuclear weapons in Southeast Asia, to uphold the principles enshrined in the UN’s foundational documents, and to reaffirm the relevance of those norms of international conduct developed precisely 70 years ago in Bandung. Nor are we spared a return to the same old issues in the global economy — set in motion by the infamous “tariff war.”

Xi Jinping in Cambodia

From Beijing's perspective, things ought to look quite straightforward in the third country visited during this Southeast Asian tour — Cambodia. Until quite recently, this country (along with Laos) was branded by China's critics as “pro-Beijing.” And, I must say, not without good reason. In addition to Cambodia's traditionally China-leaning political stance, its entire foreign trade is effectively tied to Beijing — and that trade, for the most part, consists of Cambodian goods exported to China. Half of all foreign investment in Cambodia comes from China, and so far, Phnom Penh has signed its only free trade agreement in Southeast Asia with Beijing.

A while back, Western media made a lot of noise about what they claimed was the “construction of a Chinese naval base” in Sihanoukville. That's why it came as quite a surprise when, in December last year, [the latest U.S. Navy vessel — the Savannah](#) — made port there and was received with a warm welcome. More surprisingly still, just four months later and a single day after Xi Jinping's departure from Cambodia, two Japanese Navy ships [docked at](#) the very same spot.

Even so, it's too early to talk about any disquieting “nuances” in Cambodia's foreign policy that might be unfavorable to China. Still, it's entirely possible that “on-site probing” of this very issue was among the key objectives behind the Chinese leader's visit to this country.

Finally, I was struck by [a piece in China's Global Times](#), written by an Australian author who, reflecting on recent events on the global stage, arrived at the conclusion that “globalization has not ended, because it is only just beginning.” Though not, as he noted, “in its Western form.” And it's not out of the question that he might be right.

At any rate, this is precisely the direction Xi Jinping's trip to three Southeast Asian nations was aimed toward — among other things.

[Vladimir Terehov](#), April 24, 2025

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