

EU, Asia to trade free in face of Trump's US first

● More than 50 senior figures from Asia and Europe gathered in Brussels

● The summit voiced support to WTO

● The EU inked a landmark trade deal with Singapore

AFP | Brussels, Belgium

More than 50 European and Asian leaders backed free trade and the fight against climate change on Friday in a veiled swipe at US President Donald Trump and his increasingly protectionist approach.

As disputes fester with Washington, the 12th summit of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) gave its support to the World Trade Organization (WTO), which Trump has accused of treating the US unfairly.

Senior figures from Asia and Europe gathered in Brussels for talks over two days, including the prime ministers of China, Japan and Russia.

The leaders "committed to ensure free and open trade on a level playing field and fight



(L/R): Austria's Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, Thailand's Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha, Hungary's Prime minister Viktor Orban, Sultan of Brunei Haji Hassanal Bolkiah, European Council President Donald Tusk, Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen, EU's High representative for foreign affairs and security policy Federica Mogherini, China's Premier Li Keqiang, Netherland's Prime minister Mark Rutte, Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel, Malta's Prime minister Joseph Muscat, Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and officials look up as an unseen drone passes overhead while they pose for a family photograph

all forms of protectionism, including protectionist unilateral measures and unfair trade practices", in a statement issued after the summit.

The US president has relentlessly pursued a confrontational trade policy, including imposing

harsh tariffs on steel and aluminium, and on \$250 billion in annual imports from China.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, the head of Europe's biggest economy which Trump has targeted for criticism, rejected the idea that trade deals must

be about winners and losers.

"The summit shows that countries from Europe and Asia, which all want a rule-based world trade, are gathering here to commit themselves to multilateralism and this is an important signal," Merkel told



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reporters. "I believe that we can make it clear that the world is about creating win-win situations, making it clear that what benefits one can also benefit the other."

The EU inked a landmark trade deal with Singapore on Friday in what Brussels hopes will be a clear rebuttal of rising US protectionism.

The Korean peace process was also on the agenda, with senior EU officials holding talks with South Korean President Moon Jae-in.

Desperate pleas

Earlier this week Moon said world powers needed to reassure the North Korean leader Kim Jong Un that he had taken the right decision in committing to scrap his nuclear weapons programme.

Leaders at the summit also "reiterated their collective support" for the beleaguered Iran nuclear deal, which suffered a hammer blow when the US pulled out earlier this year and reimposed sanctions on Tehran -- despite the desperate pleas of European allies.

But Europe's desire to build a united front with Asian powers is tempered by grave concerns about numerous human rights issues in countries across the continent.

The EU warned Cambodia and Myanmar that they could face losing preferential trading privileges with the bloc over election irregularities and the Rohingya crisis, respectively.

The summit statement stressed the need to find a solution to the unrest and to "establish conducive conditions for the safe, voluntary, dignified, and sustainable return and reintegration of displaced persons" to Rakhine, but did not refer to the Rohingya by name.

Brexit deal: What happens next?

AFP | Brussels, Belgium

A European Union summit this week broke up with little progress towards a Brexit deal, just months before Britain is due to leave the bloc on March 29, 2019.

EU leaders agreed to keep talking but refused to confirm a special meeting in November to seal the agreement, pushing any possible deal back to a December summit.

Before that, British Prime Minister Theresa May must win a parliamentary vote on her government's budget on November



President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker (R) welcomes Britain's Prime Minister Theresa May upon her arrival at the European Commission in Brussels



Anti-Brexit campaigner Steve Bray walks along colleague green outside the Houses of Parliament in central London

1, a test of her ability to get the final Brexit deal approved.

Here is an outline of what

could happen next:

Budget day

May's Conservative government depends on its majority in the House of Commons on the 10 MPs from Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party.

The DUP has threatened to vote against the budget if May agrees a Brexit deal with the EU that threatens the status of Northern Ireland in the United Kingdom.

Media reports suggest some hardline eurosceptic Conservative MPs, who believe May has already conceded too much to Brussels, could also use the budget vote as a show of strength.

Leadership challenge?

Losing the budget vote could spark a challenge against May from inside her Conservative party.

The support of 48 MPs -- 15 percent of the parliamentary party -- is needed to trigger a vote of confidence.

Her critics have the numbers to do this but say they have held off so far because they believe she would survive.

May needs a simple majority to win any such vote.

If May loses, there would be a leadership contest with the winner becoming prime minister, without the need for new elections.

New elections?

In the past, budget votes have been viewed as votes of confidence in the British government and losing one would trigger a new election.

A 2011 law changed this, setting a programme of elections every five years except in two specific circumstances.

Either two-thirds of MPs back a new election, or they pass a motion of no confidence in the government and fail to agree an alternative within a fortnight.

Brexit deal?

If the prime minister survives the November 1 vote she will press on with Brexit negotiations.

Agreement at a formal December summit is viewed by all sides as the final deadline, to leave enough time for its ratification by the British and European parliaments before Brexit day.

It will become clear then if there is no deal.

Will British MPs accept it?

If there is a Brexit deal with the EU, it will be presented to the 650 MPs in the House of Commons for their approval.

May's Conservatives have 315 MPs and with the support of the DUP's 10 lawmakers could get the deal through.

But if the DUP or her hardline eurosceptics fail to support her, she must turn to the opposition Labour party.

Labour, which has 257 MPs, has warned it will probably oppose the deal but some MPs have indicated they would defy their party to avoid a damaging no-deal Brexit.

No deal

Failure to reach any agreement on Britain's exit could see legal, security and economic ties with the EU severed overnight, leaving planes grounded, expatriates left with no rights and goods stuck at borders.

If the December summit breaks up without an agreement, there could still be some mini-deals in areas such as aviation to avert a potential catastrophe.

If British MPs reject the plan, they might demand the government try to negotiate a new deal, but that would require more time.

London is set to leave the EU on March 29, 2019, although the bloc's leaders could agree to delay this.

The question is, with the Conservatives and Labour divided over Brexit, whether there is a majority in the House of Commons for any other withdrawal plan.

Failure to agree a deal at any stage is also likely to spark a leadership challenge against May, which in turn could see new elections.

Forget Brexit?

There are growing calls in Britain for a referendum on the Brexit deal, possibly with an option of staying in the EU.

But a majority of MPs must agree and May's government is opposed, although Labour has refused to rule it out.