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Trump calls for free passage of American ships through Suez and Panama canals

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April 28, 2025

The White House



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US president Donald Trump has called for free passage of American ships through two of the vital shipping waterways, the Panama and Suez canals.

Trump said in a social media post on Saturday that American ships, both military and commercial, should be allowed to travel, free of charge, through the two canals, adding that the two routes “would not exist” without the US and that he had asked Secretary of State Marco Rubio to “immediately take care of” the situation.

The Panama Canal in Central America connects the Pacific and the Atlantic. The Suez Canal in the Middle East links the Mediterranean to the Red Sea.

The Trump administration has repeatedly insisted that the US will take back control of the [Panama Canal](#) in Central America, which links the Pacific and the Atlantic, and which he claims to be under China’s influence.

The US largely built the canal in the 1900s and administered the territory surrounding the passage for decades. Washington handed control of the waterway to Panama in 1999 under a treaty signed in 1977 under President Jimmy Carter after a period of joint administration.

An estimated 5% of global seaborne trade sails through the artificial 82-km waterway in an average year. The shortcut dramatically reduces the time for ships to travel between the two oceans, enabling them to avoid the route around the southernmost tip of South America via the Drake Passage or Strait of Magellan. It helps move roughly \$270bn worth of cargo annually, including about 40% of all US container traffic.

The US defence secretary, Pete Hegseth, said during a recent visit to Panama City that the US was seeking a deal under which its warships could pass through the canal “first and free”. He also floated the idea of US troops returning to Panama to “secure” its strategically vital canal.

Meanwhile, Trump’s demand on the Suez route —a major economic lifeline for Egypt delivering billions in revenue and a vital shipping artery— represents a new shift of focus.

The 193-km link between the Red Sea and the Mediterranean, launched in 1869, attracted about 12% to 15% of worldwide trade and about 30% of global container traffic before attacks by Yemen’s Houthis on shipping routes in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.

The Red Sea crisis saw Egypt’s revenue stream from the operation plunge by more than 50% as ships started taking a long detour around the southern tip of Africa. The US has been attacking Houthis since January last year, and that campaign has intensified under Trump, who has pledged to pressure the Iran-backed militants until they are no longer a threat to shipping.