



## U.S.-CAMBODIA RELATIONS: GROWING STRATEGIC MISTRUST?

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US-Cambodia relations, particularly military-to-military relations, have dwindled over the last few years. Diplomatic tensions between the two countries flared once again in early June 2019, when the Ministry of National Defense of Cambodia sent a letter to the US Department of Defense declining US military assistance to Cambodia as “no longer necessary.” On July 15, the House of Representatives adopted H.R. 526, the Cambodia Democracy Act of 2019, a bill that would further sanction high-ranking Cambodian officials for undermining democracy and violating human rights. While the bill must be approved by the Senate to become a law, it is a sign of rising tensions. On July 21, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that Cambodia and China have signed a “secret agreement” that allows China to establish a naval base in Cambodia for 30 years. Gen. Socheat, a spokesman for Cambodia’s Ministry of National Defense rejected the report, calling it “fake.” These latest developments reflect the growing strategic mistrust between the two countries.

Ruined by chronic human-rights violations, rampant corruption, and decays in democracy in Cambodia, US-Cambodia relations have never been warm. Tensions reached new heights in late 2018 when Vice President Mike Pence wrote a letter to Prime Minister Hun Sen raising concerns over an alleged Chinese military base in Koh Kong. Referring to its so-called ‘policy of permanent neutrality’ and article 53 of its constitution prohibiting any foreign military from

setting up bases on its territory, Cambodia has repeatedly denied that it would host any foreign military, including that of China, on its sovereign territory.

While this legal clarification is strong, it might not be strong enough to reassure the US government. US suspicions about a Chinese military base in Cambodia are growing stronger after a number of physical infrastructure development projects by Chinese firms were spotted by satellite. For instance, a satellite image released by the *South China Morning Post* on March 5, 2019 depicted an unusually long runway in Koh Kong. According to Gregory Poling, director of the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington-based think tank, “the runway is about 3,400 meters long, which is larger than the international airport in Phnom Penh and could accommodate any plane in the Chinese air force.”

In late June 2019, the US again addressed that concern. In a letter to Gen. Tea Banh, Cambodia’s deputy prime minister and minister of national defense, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for South and Southeast Joseph Felter wrote that this recent activity “is fueling speculation that this sudden change of policy [by Cambodia] could indicate larger plan for changes at Ream Naval Base, particularly ones that involve hosting Chinese military assets.” This speculation will not end soon unless Cambodia assures the US with concrete evidence.

The US and Cambodia have made efforts to build confidence, but they are insufficient. In early 2019, the US and Cambodia militaries resumed dialogues and exchanged visits. In January 2019, Felter paid an official visit to Cambodia. The two countries signed a bilateral military cooperation agreement in March 2019. Gen. Tea Banh reciprocated with an official visit to the US in April 2019, while Lt Gen. Hun Manet, deputy commander-in-chief of the Royal Cambodia Armed Forces (RCAF) and Commander of Army (COA), was invited by the Department of Defense to join the Pacific Area Special Operations Conference in Honolulu, the same month. Unfortunately, these efforts to build trust and confidence have yielded little success.

Despite several instances of US speculation about possible Chinese military presence in Cambodia since 2018, the US has not yet formulated a coherent strategy to engage Cambodia. According to the recent *Wall Street Journal* report, the US debate over how to engage Cambodia “to reverse its decision on Ream” continues with no clear conclusion. However, continuing the current tough policy might not be a good choice for the US as it offers little incentive for Cambodia to change its political position.

The US is not the only country that sees Cambodia’s lean toward China as a security concern. Cambodia’s close ties to the Chinese military and speculation that it hosts a Chinese military base have provoked security concerns among other Asian countries, including Vietnam, Thailand, and Japan. Vietnam, in particular, is worried, given its longstanding mistrust and territorial disputes with China. Even though Cambodia and Vietnam enjoy warm diplomatic relations and Vietnam is assisting Cambodia’s armed forces, the rising influence of the Chinese military on Cambodia’s armed forces has weakened Vietnam’s strategic influence.

Like Vietnam, Thailand also considers growing Chinese influence in Cambodia to be worrisome despite the fact that Thailand has also moved closer to China after the Thai military staged a coup to remove former Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra from power in May 2014. Cambodia and Thailand have been locked in longstanding territorial disputes, historical conflicts, and mistrust. Bilateral relations are frequently trapped in political tensions fueled by nationalism and spillover effects of domestic politics. The latest military clashes between Cambodia and Thailand over the Preah Vihear temple reveal the strategic mistrust between the two countries.

In the wake of the military coup, the US imposed an arms embargo on the Thai military forcing Thailand to look for alternative suppliers, including Russia, Ukraine, and China. Of the alternative suppliers, China is the most important source for Thailand. During the last five years, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Arms Transfer Database 2019, massive Chinese weapons sale to Thailand include dozens of VT-4 main battle tanks, three S-26T diesel-electric submarines,

batteries of medium range surface-to-air missiles, armored personnel carriers, and other heavy military equipment.

While Cambodia-Thailand relations have been stable over the last five years, Thailand’s military hardware modernization is not good news for Cambodia. Conversely, the strengthening of Cambodia-China military ties and the prospect of a Chinese military base in Cambodia also pose a major security threat to Thailand. Even if Cambodia and Thailand are strengthening military relations with China, the two Southeast Asia Kingdoms still find it hard to trust each other.

Japan too has watched the development of China-Cambodian relations closely. Japan shares similar strategic interests with the US and Vietnam, seeing rising Chinese influence in Cambodia in zero-sum terms. Japan, however, has refrained from provoking diplomatic tension with Cambodia, partly because of its nonconfrontational diplomatic culture. More importantly, Japan may have calculated that tougher diplomacy tends to be counterproductive and will push Cambodia closer to China’s orbit.

The diplomatic tensions between the US and Cambodia show no sign of subsiding. Adoption of the Cambodia Democracy Act of 2019 by Congress would not save democracy in Cambodia but will instead exacerbate already declining diplomatic relations. Moreover, it is doubtful if the US can do anything for Cambodia, given the uncertainty of the Trump administration’s Asia strategy. Lao Mong Hay, a Cambodian political analyst, rightly observed, “if fully implemented, it [the Cambodia Democracy Act] will suck Cambodia into the quagmire of the current Sino-US conflict.” That prospect is something Cambodia wants to avoid if at all possible.

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