



**STRATEGIC CROSSROADS:  
NAVIGATING DIVERGING  
PERSPECTIVES TO ENHANCE  
CAMBODIA-US TIES**

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Cambodia and the United States share a complex, evolving relationship shaped by historical, geopolitical, and strategic factors. The partnership between the two countries has undergone a variety of transformations, oscillating between cooperation and tension, particularly in the face of broader dynamics in Southeast Asia. This relationship has been defined by the broader context of great power rivalry, where Cambodia's deep-rooted ties with China and its sovereignty concerns intersect with American priorities.

**Cambodia in the context of great power rivalry**

A dominant thread in discussions about Cambodia's international position is its growing alignment with China, sparking significant concern in Washington. Cambodia's increasingly close relationship with Beijing leads some US analysts to question Cambodia's long-term alignment, raising doubts about its geopolitical neutrality and future role in the Indo-Pacific security architecture. Critics suggest Cambodia's deepening economic and military ties with China might limit its ability to act as a neutral player within ASEAN and shift regional power dynamics in China's favor.

This skepticism is often framed within the broader narrative of US-China strategic competition, where

Cambodia is viewed by some as a potential “proxy” for China. This view is fueled by China's growing investments, infrastructure projects, and military cooperation with Cambodia, particularly around projects like modernization of the Ream Naval Base. Some American analysts see such developments as strategic moves to further China's regional influence, complicating ASEAN's collective response to regional issues such as South China Sea disputes.

**The Ream Naval Base controversy**

Nowhere is US anxiety over Cambodia's ties with China more pronounced than in the ongoing debate over the Ream Naval Base on Cambodia's southern coast. Washington has raised concerns that the modernization of this naval facility could allow China to establish a dual-use military presence in the region, with significant implications for the naval balance in the Gulf of Thailand and broader South China Sea.

From the Cambodian perspective, however, this overlooks key constitutional, historical, and strategic realities shaping the country's foreign policy decisions. Constitutionally, Cambodia maintains a firm legal prohibition against any foreign military bases on its soil—as enshrined in its 1993 Constitution and reinforced through successive administrations as a safeguard of national sovereignty. Historically, the country's experiences with colonial occupation, Cold War entanglements, and devastating civil conflict instill a deep-seated commitment to preserving independence from foreign domination. Strategically, Cambodia seeks to maintain a balanced and pragmatic foreign policy avoiding overreliance on any single power, while pursuing national development, regional integration, and security cooperation on its own terms. Framing Cambodia as a mere proxy of another state not only underestimates its agency but ignores its deliberate efforts to engage constructively with a broad range of international partners, including the US.

The Cambodian government frames the ongoing upgrade to the Ream Naval Base not as a concession to any external power, but a sovereign initiative aligned with its national security priorities and regional responsibilities. Cambodian officials stressed

that the modernization of Ream is part of a broader strategy to enhance maritime capabilities in response to non-traditional security threats. Notably, Cambodia affirm that the upgraded base will remain open to all international partners, including the US, Australia, Japan, South Korea, and other Western nations. This inclusive stance underscores Cambodia's commitment to multilateralism in defense diplomacy and aims to dispel strategic misperceptions through transparency and cooperation.

### **US concerns over democratic backsliding**

A recurring theme in discussions on Cambodia-US relations is governance and democracy. US analysts have repeatedly expressed concerns over what they perceive as democratic backsliding in Cambodia, particularly regarding consolidation of power by the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP), the marginalization of opposition voices, and restrictions on media and civil society organizations. These concerns are compounded by Cambodia's political landscape, which US policymakers view as increasingly autocratic.

From the US perspective, these developments run counter to the values enshrined in Washington's foreign policy, which champion democracy promotion, human rights, and institutional transparency as prerequisites for partnerships. As such, US engagement with Cambodia has frequently been conditioned on progress in these areas, including calls for the release of opposition leaders and greater openness in the political sphere.

However, Cambodia offered a markedly different interpretation—one rooted in the country's historical, socio-political, and developmental context. Emerging from decades of civil war, genocide, and foreign occupation, Cambodia's modern political leadership views national stability, social cohesion, and economic growth not merely as complementary to liberal democracy, but as essential preconditions. The CPP-led government defends its model of governance as tailored to the nation's post-conflict recovery needs and informed by local conditions rather than external templates. According to this view, liberal democratic institutions cannot take root without first ensuring

peace, law and order, and a minimum threshold of prosperity.

In addressing US critiques, Cambodia points to the country's engagement with international human rights frameworks as evidence of its commitment to gradual, structured political development. Cambodia is a signatory to eight of the nine core United Nations human rights conventions and continues to host the only permanent regional office of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Asia. Moreover, since the early 1990s, the country has regularly conducted multiparty elections. While the fairness of these elections remains a point of debate, they nonetheless reflect a functioning electoral process within a complex political environment.

This divergence in political philosophy underscores one of the enduring complexities in Cambodia-US relations. While the US continues to promote a values-based foreign policy—increasingly influenced by transactional impulses during the Trump administration—Cambodia's leadership emphasizes sovereignty, historical experiences, and a development-first path to democratization. Rather than being a cause for irreconcilable division, this tension presents an opportunity. By fostering candid dialogue and mutual understanding, both sides can identify pragmatic ways to bridge their differences—balancing normative ideals with on-the-ground realities. To facilitate this process, it is crucial to institutionalize a regular high-level strategic dialogue, providing a sustained platform where sensitive political issues can be addressed openly, constructively, and without preconditions.

### **Military and defense cooperation: Rebuilding trust through pragmatism**

Following the suspension of joint military exercises in the mid-2010s, most notably the "Angkor Sentinel" drills, defense ties between Cambodia and the US entered a prolonged period of dormancy. The halt in military cooperation reflected growing mistrust and diverging strategic priorities, particularly amid US concerns over Cambodia's deepening defense ties with China and perceived limitations on political freedoms. For nearly a decade, bilateral defense

activities remained minimal, and opportunities for collaboration in areas such as training, logistics, and humanitarian assistance languished.

However, recent developments suggest a cautious yet encouraging shift toward re-engagement. The high-profile visit of Adm. Samuel Paparo, commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command, signals Washington's interest in restoring channels of defense dialogue and cooperation. The subsequent docking of the USS Savannah in Sihanoukville, one of the first US naval port calls in years, underscored this renewed momentum. Both events were widely interpreted as efforts to rebuild confidence and explore new avenues for military-to-military engagement in a rapidly evolving regional security landscape.

In response, the Cambodian government has expressed a clear willingness to resume bilateral military training and expand cooperation in areas of shared interest, particularly non-traditional security threats. In tandem, Cambodia has emphasized that this renewed engagement should not be misconstrued as a shift toward exclusive military cooperation with Washington. Rather, it reflects a broader strategy of diversification and openness in defense partnerships. By engaging with a range of partners, including China, Australia, Japan, and other ASEAN members, Cambodia seeks to reinforce its sovereignty, enhance defense capabilities, and contribute meaningfully to regional peace and stability.

### **A path forward rooted in dialogue and mutual understanding**

Washington's direct engagement with Cambodia is becoming increasingly crucial due to the country's strategic location, growing economic potential, and deepening ties with China. Strengthening bilateral relations, rather than relying solely on engagement through ASEAN, allows the U.S. to maintain influence and counterbalance China's expanding presence.

Looking ahead, the future of Cambodia-US relations rests on the cultivation of a more balanced, pragmatic partnership. Both countries must move beyond one-dimensional frameworks of competition or

ideological discord and embrace the complexities of their relationship. By fostering sustained dialogue, transparent communication, and mutual respect, both nations can build a foundation for deeper cooperation on shared priorities, ranging from security challenges to economic development and human rights.

By anchoring their engagement in principles of mutual respect and inclusive development, Cambodia and the US can work toward a more resilient and prosperous Indo-Pacific. Their relationship need not be defined by historical tensions or geopolitical rivalries, but rather by the opportunity to shape a more peaceful, stable, and collaborative regional order.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.*