



**REBUILDING CAMBODIA-U.S.
RELATIONS: A COUPLES THERAPY
APPROACH**

BY DANA LEE

Dana Lee is a master's student in Peace and Conflict Studies at the Australian National University and a Young Leader at the Pacific Forum. With a sharp focus on Southeast Asian security dynamics, war studies—particularly in Mainland Southeast Asia—and the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, Dana brings both academic rigor and lived experience into global policy spaces. She has represented her work at high-level ASEAN, United Nations, and many other international conferences, often as one of the few women in the room of security studies. But she doesn't just take a seat—she uses her voice to amplify others. Passionate about breaking barriers in male-dominated fields, Dana is fiercely committed to empowering women in peacebuilding and security dialogues.



Photo: United States and Cambodia two folded flags together. Credit: Aleks Taurus

Relations between Cambodia and the United States have been strained for decades, characterized by moments of cooperation overshadowed by deep-rooted distrust and historical trauma. The ties between these two nations have been tested time and again, from the devastating legacy of the Vietnam War to recent political-economic tensions and shifts in global alliances. Today, Cambodia-U.S. relations are further strained by Cambodia's increasing alignment with

China, and a lack of effective communication. These issues, if left unresolved, threaten to undermine future cooperation and prevent both countries from moving forward in a productive and peaceful way. But there is a path to reconciliation, one that draws on the principles of couples therapy, a process of addressing past wounds, improving communication, and rebuilding trust.

I. From Cambodia's Perception

A Legacy of Trauma: The bombings of the Vietnam War

The stain on Cambodia-U.S. relations is rooted in the traumatic legacy of the Vietnam War. From the late 1960s to the early 1970s, the U.S. dropped more bombs on Cambodia and Laos than on the entire European continent during World War II, an attempt to destroy the Viet Cong's supply routes (Kiernan & Owen, 2023). This relentless bombing campaign triggered one of the largest internal migrations to Phnom Penh, devastated infrastructure, and pushed many Cambodians into the forests, where they eventually joined Pol Pot's communist movement.

In 1973, the U.S. withdrew from the Vietnam War. Just two years later, all of Indochina fell to communism. The U.S., once a close partner of the Lon Nol government, abandoned Cambodia amid the global struggle between the free and communist blocs. From that collapse rose the Khmer Rouge—a regime that subjected Cambodia to nearly four years of unimaginable horror, killing almost 3 million people and scarring generations.

That trauma remains a deep, unhealed wound, one that continues to shape Cambodia's national psyche and political decisions. Yet the U.S. has never fully acknowledged its role, nor has it forgiven the debt incurred by the Lon Nol government for purchasing American weapons.

The question still remains: Can Cambodia truly trust the U.S. as a partner again?

The Shift Toward China: A Third-Party Response

Since the 2013 Cambodian election, Cambodia's foreign policy has increasingly aligned with China, a shift that has sparked concern and frustration in Washington. This realignment was not purely strategic; it was also political. At the time, the Cambodian government was facing a sharp decline in popularity. In the 2008 general election, the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) secured 90 out of 123 seats in the National Assembly, but in 2013, its

count dropped to 68, marking the largest seat loss by the party to date since 1998 (Open Development Cambodia, 2013). Its longstanding closeness with Vietnam, coupled with a growing influx of Vietnamese migrants, had fueled public resentment rooted in centuries of historical tension and territorial loss.

In an effort to maintain power, the government sought to redefine its foreign policy, ideally pivoting toward a non-neighboring power. But why wasn't the United States a viable alternative?

Part of the answer lies in the growing U.S. criticism of Cambodia's internal politics, particularly its human rights record and democratic backsliding. As Washington's pressure increased, Cambodia turned to China, a partner that offered substantial economic support without demanding political reform.

While this move brought short-term benefits, it also deepened tensions with the U.S. Washington views Cambodia's growing ties with Beijing with suspicion, fearing it could destabilize the region and erode American influence in Southeast Asia.

Yet this rift is about more than just geopolitics. It is rooted in longstanding distrust, historical grievances, and a persistent sense that the U.S. sees Cambodia primarily through the lens of its rivalry with China, rather than as an independent nation with its own agency.

Unless these deeper issues are addressed, U.S.–Cambodia relations will continue to deteriorate, driven as much by misunderstanding as by strategic misalignment.

Trump's approach to immigration and trade

Under the 2nd Trump administration, Cambodia is being placed on the "yellow list" for travel restrictions and being impacted by the highest tariff increases in the region. The analysis on the reasoning behind this new measurement is beyond the scope of this paper, but really, what went wrong between the two nations? Many affected countries, including Cambodia, have requested the US for a tariff negotiation, while Trump proudly bragged in the media that countries are "kissing my ass" to negotiate tariffs. While the U.S. administration viewed these measures as necessary for enforcing international standards without any changes, this could damage relations between these two countries even more. Higher tariffs could affect trade relations between Cambodia and the US, encouraging Cambodia to look for other better markets, with China coming as a consideration for

substitution. Rather than fostering dialogue, these actions push Cambodia further away from the U.S. and make any future cooperation seem less likely.

II. The US's perception of Cambodia

From the American perspective, can Cambodia be a trustworthy partner?

Through the lens of the US, Cambodia remains a complex and often mistrusted partner. As Cambodia draws closer to China, the U.S. increasingly views it through the prism of its rivalry with Beijing. The U.S. has increasingly moved closer to Vietnam in recent years, even though it is a communist country, largely due to Vietnam's growing economic and strategic importance. Trade deals with Vietnam have surged as the country has become a regional manufacturing hub, especially as U.S. companies look for alternatives to China amid ongoing trade tensions.

However, despite the shift in trade preferences, Cambodia has not received the same level of attention as Vietnam when it comes to moving U.S. companies out of China. Why is this the case? One key reason is Cambodia's perceived alignment with China. Over the years, Cambodia has developed close political and economic ties with Beijing, which has led many in the U.S. to view Cambodia as a potential proxy for Chinese interests. This perception has made it difficult for Cambodia to position itself as a reliable alternative for U.S. companies looking to relocate operations out of China. On a comparative level, China-Vietnam relations have been shaped by historical resentment, such as during the Sino-Vietnamese war in 1979 (a surprise invasion of Northern Vietnam), and ongoing South China Sea disputes. Moving to Vietnam means that the technology transfer and confidentiality of the U.S. government or private companies are kept in the country and not further transferred to China.

Trust Issues and Security Concerns

When considering the trustworthiness of a partner like Cambodia, the U.S. is cautious about the possibility of sensitive information being leaked to China. This concern is particularly prominent in areas such as cybersecurity, technology, and defense. The U.S. has long harbored concerns about China's influence over Cambodia, particularly after the controversy surrounding Ream Naval Base. Reports emerged that Cambodia had granted China exclusive military access to the base, raising alarms in Washington over potential Chinese military expansion in the Gulf of Thailand and the broader Indo-Pacific region (Davidson, 2022). Cambodia's seemingly growing closeness to China only reinforces these concerns,

with critics arguing that Cambodia's foreign policy is being heavily influenced, if not dictated, by Beijing. The presence of a Chinese military facility in Cambodia would reinforce the notion that Cambodia is acting as a "puppet" of China, as the U.S. has often framed it.

This mistrust extends to U.S. companies contemplating investment or relocation to Cambodia. The fear is that, with Cambodia's political alignment with China and the country's corruption, there may be risks that U.S. companies' trade secrets or sensitive data could be compromised or handed over to Chinese authorities. This is a significant barrier to deeper economic cooperation between Cambodia and the U.S. because American businesses need assurance that their intellectual property and data will not be at risk.

The Ream Naval Base Case

The situation surrounding the Ream Naval Base underscores this ongoing suspicion. The U.S. has consistently raised concerns about the alleged Chinese military presence in Cambodia and the potential for the Cambodian government to allow Chinese military operations in the country. The U.S. has framed this as part of a broader Chinese strategy to extend its military and strategic footprint across the Indo-Pacific, which directly threatens U.S. interests in the region. Cambodia discontinued the Angkor Sentinel joint military exercises with the United States after holding them seven times, with the final drill taking place in 2016 (Xinhua Net, 2017). In contrast, the Golden Dragon joint military exercise between Cambodia and China was launched in December 2016 and has continued since then.

III. What Went Wrong? The Need for Healing

The current state of Cambodia-U.S. relations is the result of a combination of factors: unresolved historical trauma, shifting political ideologies, and poor communication. The U.S. has failed to effectively acknowledge Cambodia's past pain, while Cambodia has increasingly turned toward China. The emotional distance between the two nations has created a vicious cycle: the more the U.S. pressures Cambodia on issues like human rights, the more Cambodia seeks refuge in China, and the more the U.S. feels alienated.

This breakdown in communication and empathy has created a toxic dynamic, one that resembles a relationship where both partners are stuck in a cycle of frustration, misunderstanding, and emotional withdrawal. To break this cycle, both Cambodia and the U.S. must address the root causes of their

tensions—just as a couple in therapy would need to confront the issues that have led to their discontent.

IV. The Couples Therapy Approach to Healing

The solution to Cambodia-U.S. relations lies in adopting a couples therapy approach—a method focused on healing past wounds, improving communication, and rebuilding trust. In relationships, the first step toward healing is acknowledging the pain and emotional wounds that have been inflicted. For Cambodia, this means acknowledging the trauma caused by the U.S. bombing campaign during the Vietnam War that later led to the genocidal regime. The U.S. must openly recognize the lasting impact that this event has had on Cambodia and establish a form of developmental assistance not in the name of "aid" but in the name of "compensation" after the war. This recognition doesn't require assigning blame but rather shows empathy and a commitment to moving forward.

The next step is open communication. In couples therapy, partners are encouraged to listen actively and speak honestly about their concerns and desires. In this case, more dialogues and visits between the two governments are highly encouraged as a part of trust building. Effective communication is means not just speaking, but truly listening, acknowledging the other's perspective, and working toward understanding. The U.S. must respect Cambodia as an independent sovereign state while Cambodia must understand how to effectively present itself as a trustworthy partner, especially under Trump 2.0.

Another critical aspect of healing is respect for sovereignty. Just as in personal relationships, each partner must respect the other's independence and decisions. The U.S. should respect Cambodia's right to form alliances that serve its interests, including its relations with China, without seeking to dictate Cambodia's foreign policy. Likewise, Cambodia must consider the U.S.'s concerns about regional stability and the broader international order. By respecting each other's sovereignty, both countries can begin to rebuild trust and work together more effectively.

Finally, building trust requires transparency, consistency and gradual progress. Trust isn't restored overnight, but through consistent actions, both nations can demonstrate their commitment to a more constructive relationship. The U.S. has criticized Cambodia regarding the Ream Naval Base issue, raising concerns about the potential transfer of sensitive U.S. information to China. To rebuild trust, transparency is necessary to address the

controversy surrounding Ream Naval Base. But what level of transparency can the Cambodian government show that does not threaten to national security? The government's efforts in rebuilding strong institutions, justice, and eliminating corruption are the most important steps to present Cambodia as a trustworthy partner. The consistency and efforts of both governments in rebuilding the relationship is key to establishing a trustworthy partnership between Cambodia and the US. Small steps in cooperation—whether in trade, regional security, or cultural exchange—can help pave the way for deeper collaboration in the future.