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Chinese Military Basing in Cambodia: Why Be So Up in Arms?

John Frederick Bradford



A US Navy Admiral receives honours when visiting Cambodia's Ream Navy Base in 2015. The appearance of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.

SYNOPSIS

An upgraded naval base and an airstrip in Cambodia are likely to start hosting Chinese military forces soon. As the Chinese military does not currently enjoy similar access in any Southeast Asia state, this will be seen as a geopolitical inflection point. However,

these facilities will offer few new operational advantages for the Chinese military. In this context, the US protests regarding the arrangement appear poorly aligned with American strategic interests.

COMMENTARY

China appears poised to gain regular access to a pair of military facilities in Cambodia, the Royal Cambodian Navy (RCN) Ream Naval Base and an airstrip in the Dara Sakor resort area. In January 2022, commercial satellites [spotted two dredges at work](#) in Ream undertaking the sort of activities necessary to enable large military ships to access the harbour. Meanwhile, the [Dara Sakor airport](#) is reportedly being configured to support military aircraft. Both locations were discussed in a [2019 Wall Street Journal exposé](#) citing anonymous US and allied government sources, who exposed a secret China-Cambodia agreement granting the People's Liberation Army (PLA) unfettered access to these facilities. Cambodian officials deny the existence of such an agreement but have confirmed the construction is backed by China.

Were the PLA to begin regularly accessing these facilities, it would be a geopolitical watershed. Unlike the United States, China does not currently have such options at the bases of any Southeast Asian nation. However, access to these facilities does not offer China consequential military power, and the American diplomatic response seems ham-fisted or even counterproductive.

Some might imagine the facilities becoming full-fledged "PLA bases" similar to that which China controls in Djibouti. However, a "base" can take many forms, including one where forces are not permanently stationed and the host nation retains its agency and sovereignty.

A base in Cambodia akin to that of Djibouti would sharply contradict Cambodian ruler Hun Sen's [unreserved statements](#) that permanently hosting foreign troops violates the Cambodian constitution. It, therefore, seems more likely that these facilities will be logistics hubs supporting regular visits by PLA forces. These arrangements would be similar to those the United States has enjoyed at Thailand's Utapao Airfield or in various locations in the Philippines under the auspices of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation and Visiting Forces Agreements.

Current port capacity in Ream is limited, but the pier construction and dredging could create opportunities for the routine maintenance of mid-sized vessels from the PLA Navy, an arrangement similar to that enjoyed by the US Navy with its [littoral combat ships in Singapore](#).

Supporting ships and aircraft from Cambodian facilities would deliver the PLA new operational advantages in Southeast Asia, but it would have modest impact on the overall military balance. The direct access to the Gulf of Thailand that the facilities offer would be of limited value given the lack of threat to Chinese shipping in those waters and the absence of Sino-Thai political tensions. The facilities could open a new axis of approach to conflict zones in the South China Sea, but this line of attack would be vulnerable to interdiction from southern Vietnam and the Malay peninsula. The existing major PRC bases on Hainan are closer to the theatre and less exposed.

Cambodian facilities could put Chinese forces on Vietnam's flank. This would trouble Hanoi, but Vietnam already contends with a deep conventional military overmatch.

US-Cambodia Relationship Sails into Shoal Water

The Chinese-backed construction at Ream seems particularly troubling for Americans as it involved the demolishing of facilities built by the US Navy. This development serves as an analogy for the recent history of US-Cambodia relations. Not long ago this was a slowly growing partnership, but the United States has now been almost completely supplanted by the PRC. The story traces back to 2007, when the US Congress lifted its prohibition on assistance to the Cambodian government. In 2008, the two countries started a series of bilateral exercises known as CARAT, and US Navy Mobile Construction Battalion personnel (Seabees) began pairing with the Cambodian military to complete small-scale construction projects.

Also in 2008, China's state-controlled Union Development Group secured [a 99-year lease on Dara Sakor](#), a huge territory that includes 20% of Cambodia's coastline. When Washington suspended the delivery of military vehicles in 2010 following Phnom Penh's deportation of Uyghur asylum seekers, Beijing stepped in to provide [257 trucks](#) and 50,000 uniforms. As the Cambodian government steadily tightened domestic political restrictions, the United States became increasingly critical. In 2017, Hun Sen responded to American derision regarding his human rights record by suspending [bilateral military engagements, including the Seabee projects](#).

In November 2018, the developments at Ream took centre stage in [diplomatic frictions](#) between Hun Sen and then US vice president Michael Pence. The next year, Cambodia declined US offers to renovate American-built boat maintenance facilities at Ream. Notably, the location of those facilities is now inside the zone of Chinese-backed construction work. Four months later, the United States [announced new sanctions](#) on Cambodian leaders associated with the development work at Dara Sakor, specifically linking the sanction to illegal land seizures and the "neutrality" of Cambodian military bases. With bilateral military cooperation off the table, US engagement with the Cambodian military was limited to intermittent multilateral events such as the [2019 ASEAN-US Maritime Exercise](#).

In stark contrast, the PLA began [exercising with Cambodia in 2016](#), and the 2020 iteration of the annual [Sino-Cambodian "Golden Dragon" military exercise](#) was the largest partnership event the PLA has ever conducted in Southeast Asia. In October 2020 Cambodian authorities [confirmed destruction](#) of a US-Australia-funded headquarters building at Ream as part of planned upgrades.

Ream and Dara Sakor were central to 2021 events that brought the US-Cambodian relationship back to a pre-2007 low. In June, US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman visited Phnom Penh, making it one of three stops in the first visit to the region by a senior official from the Biden administration. She [expressed concerns](#) about Cambodia's human rights record, and, declaring that a "PRC military base in Cambodia would undermine its sovereignty, threaten regional security, and negatively impact US-Cambodia relations", urged Cambodia to "[maintain an independent and balanced foreign policy](#)". Less than two weeks later, the US embassy complained it had been denied full access to inspect the Ream base, and Cambodia's [Ministry of Defence responded](#) that

the US demands violated Cambodian sovereignty and represented “hidden agendas for geopolitical gains”. By the end of the year, the United States had [sanctioned additional senior Cambodian leaders](#), including the chief of navy, for personally profiting from the Ream upgrades and imposed an [arms embargo](#) on Cambodia.

Southeast Asian Watchers Evaluate the American Response

Southeast Asian reactions to the potential PLA access to Cambodian facilities have been more poised than the American actions. While few strategic thinkers are pleased with the developments, they recognise these as a natural progression [given PRC influence in Cambodia](#) and the United States’ failure to offer reasonable alternatives. They also wonder why the United States appears so concerned given the limited military value the facilities will deliver.

While most Chinese and Cambodian statements regarding the developments are seen as obscurations, American talking points also fall flat. In particular, American arguments that PLA facilities in Cambodia would turn Phnom Penh into a Chinese vassal do not reconcile with the fact that the Philippines, Thailand and Singapore all provide routine access to US forces without sacrificing their strategic autonomy. [American statements](#), such as “any steps by the Cambodian government to invite a foreign military presence in Cambodia would threaten the coherence and centrality of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations”, contradict arguments that the presence of forces from the United States and its friends are stabilising. Therefore, discussions of righteousness are quickly set aside in favour of realpolitik analysis.

Regional watchers who assume Cambodia has retained some degree of autonomy conclude that American sanctions only drive Cambodia more strongly into China’s embrace. Others assume that Cambodia is already firmly [entrapped](#) by China’s economic pull and therefore believe US sanctions consume diplomatic capital while having little impact one way or another on Phnom Penh.

Making Sense of the American Approach

Considering that many Americans write off Cambodia as a [faithful Chinese client](#), perhaps the sanctions are not primarily to deter other regional states from bending too far towards Beijing. If so, the approach sets up non-democratic regimes to choose between relaxing their domestic power to meet American preferences or gaining near-term political and economic support from their northerly neighbour. All would prefer to avoid making this decision, but, if forced by these terms, are unlikely to break in the American direction.

So, given these regional dynamics, why does the United States seem so up in arms about PLA access to Cambodian facilities?

There is probably more US intelligence and strategic gamesmanship in play than is being publicly acknowledged. If so, US leaders may have good reason to hold back on details. On the other hand, without transparency, the American approach appears sea blind and clumsy. In fact, for many regional observers, the United States seems to be simply flailing about to compensate for its relative loss of geopolitical influence.

John Frederick BRADFORD is a Senior Fellow in the Maritime Security Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS).

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
T: +65 6790 6982 | E: rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg | W: www.rsis.edu.sg