

FOREIGN POLICY
10-6-22)

Washington Should Chill About China's Cambodia Base

Americans need to recognize their own ugly history in Southeast Asia.

By *Blake Herzinger*, a civilian Indo-Pacific defense policy specialist and U.S. Navy Reserve officer.

Reports of a planned Chinese military base in Cambodia have been swirling around Southeast Asia for several years. On June 8, Cambodian and Chinese officials broke ground on an expansion of Ream Naval Base, with plans for new buildings as well as other improvements to the base's port facility. Both sides continue to deny that the secretive deal includes any concession for the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) to use the facility, a claim that is being loudly challenged by U.S. policymakers who believe it will be used as a forward base for Beijing's navy.

But even if the base ends up being used by the PLAN, hysterical moves—such as scolding the government and sanctioning its officials—are an overreaction that is only the latest in a long line of U.S. failures to interact productively with partners in Southeast Asia. It's a particularly tone-deaf attitude when considering the United States' own legacy in Cambodia. Although there are likely parts of this deal hidden from the public, this arrangement highlights a common shortfall in Washington's Asia policy, namely attacking countries for making bilateral deals with China without putting a credible offer of its own on the table.

Ream Naval Base is well known to U.S. forces and was the site of multiple bilateral exercises between the U.S. Navy and Royal Cambodian Navy between 2010 and 2016. In fact, the United States had funded and built a facility for the Royal Cambodian Navy's use on Ream Naval Base in 2012. However, as bilateral relations deteriorated and whispers of Chinese involvement on the base began to circulate, Cambodian forces demolished the structures in 2020.

The furor in Washington over this new arrangement is far greater than is warranted. For starters, Cambodian officials from across the government (including Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen) have repeatedly cited the fact that Cambodia's constitution prohibits the permanent basing of foreign troops on Cambodian soil. There is little reason to assume that Cambodian leaders would agree to Ream Naval Base being used for Chinese power projection in Southeast Asia or combat operations in the region. Any potential arrangement would be like the United States' own arrangement for support in Singapore, which hosts hundreds of U.S. military personnel as well as dozens of ship and aircraft visits every year, but it would never allow its soil to be used as a launch pad for attacks against other Southeast Asian states or China.

Cambodia is one of the weaker maritime states in Southeast Asia. Its navy is composed of a score of small patrol crafts, and between funding shortfalls and corruption, it commonly lacks the fuel to adequately patrol its small slice of the Gulf of Thailand against the illegal fishing operations and other criminal actors that plague the region. The navy's tasks include law enforcement and environmental protection, but endemic graft and corrupt elites restrain it from achieving much at all. Adm. Tea Vinh, commander of the Royal Cambodian Navy, was targeted

by U.S. sanctions under the Magnitsky Act in 2021, following the demolition of the second of the two U.S.-built structures at Ream Naval Base.

The portion of Ream Naval Base identified by the Washington Post as being partitioned off for China's use is miniscule. Measuring a purported 0.3 square kilometers (or 0.12 square miles), the area is hardly a Chinese Pearl Harbor in the Gulf of Thailand. A few details about the upgrade emerged at the groundbreaking ceremony: new buildings, a hospital, and a pier with space for two ships. New repair facilities will be added—including a workshop, dry dock, and slipway—and Chinese forces will train Cambodian sailors in the finer points of ship repair, provide them with new uniforms, and repair some of the Royal Cambodian Navy's existing fleet. But these facilities are, according to the Cambodians, for their own use, not the PLAN's. Even if the PLAN established a presence on the base, it would be ringed in by a U.S. ally and two Southeast Asian states that are increasingly wary of the Chinese navy: Vietnam and Malaysia.

Too many U.S. policymakers seem flummoxed about how things got to this point. To be sure, Hun Sen is a remorseless dictator who has cleaved closer and closer to Beijing as his actions at home have become more openly authoritarian. But the Cambodian government wants development finance, and China has provided it. And Washington appears to still be struggling to grasp the import of its own historical legacy in Cambodia.

Between 1965 and 1973, U.S. planes dropped nearly 3 million tons of explosives on Cambodia, killing tens of thousands of people and displacing many times more. This war's deadly legacy continues to plague Cambodia, with unexploded ordnance—bombs, mines, and cluster munitions—causing almost 65,000 deaths or injuries between 1979 and the present. Operation Ranch Hand, the almost 10-year-long U.S. effort to interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail using defoliants, poisoned multiple countries, including Cambodia, with long-lasting toxins that continue to cause profound physical and cognitive disabilities across multiple generations.

In addition to these burdens, Cambodia is still coping with the legacy of cataclysmic war that saw the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime rise to power and kill millions of people in its attempt to drag the country into an agrarian utopia. Of course, the Chinese Communist Party directly supported the Khmer Rouge's revolution, but elite capture and liberal application of development funds have helped push those inconvenient facts out of the public eye.

On the opposing side, although the United States has provided some assistance to Cambodia, it offers very little investment while also persisting in badgering Cambodia to settle a debt incurred at the height of the Cold War. A long-standing wedge between Phnom Penh and Washington is a \$700 million debt incurred by the government imposed by former Cambodian Prime Minister Lon Nol following his overthrow of the Cambodian monarchy in the 1970s. Originally \$274 million, this debt has ballooned over the years, and the United States has been seeking repayment from Cambodia since at least 1995. Hun Sen has previously claimed this "dirty debt" was used for weapons used in the fight against the Khmer Rouge, whereas Washington holds that the funds were associated with procuring food and agricultural goods.

Even as recently as last year, Hun Sen lobbied Washington to come to an agreement on the debt, suggesting either gradual repayment or that Washington might consider converting the majority of the debt into development aid and humanitarian demining assistance. Washington should forgive that debt immediately. The sums at stake are minuscule compared to the \$54 billion pledged to Ukraine over the course of the last eight years—or any other of a dozen recipients of U.S. military aid.

The Biden administration dispatched U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman to Phnom Penh in 2021. The most senior U.S. official to visit in nearly a decade, Sherman could have been an envoy to reopen productive engagement with Hun Sen's government. Instead, what emerged was a series of confrontations, from the subject of democracy and human rights to the destruction of the U.S.-built facility at Ream Naval Base. Sherman's urgings to "maintain an independent and balanced foreign policy, in the best interests of the Cambodian people" and observations "that a [Chinese] military base in Cambodia would undermine its sovereignty, threaten regional security, and negatively impact U.S.-Cambodia relations" were unfortunate and did nothing more than push Cambodia closer to Beijing. A valuable opportunity to conduct quiet diplomacy was cast aside in favor of publicly berating Hun Sen and making Washington look insecure.

Washington policymakers must realize that their leverage is limited in Southeast Asia. Pressure and coercion will accomplish little more than accelerating the region's turn toward China. Attempts at isolating the states that do cozy up to Beijing will fail to produce useful outcomes primarily because they will only make states more dependent on China, which will happily step in.

A limited Chinese presence in Cambodia is not the end of the world, nor is it likely to have appreciable effects on U.S. presence or operations in Asia. Overreacting to what is, for now, a very limited facility diminishes the United States and sends an unhelpful message to other partners in Southeast Asia. As China's economic and military heft continues to increase, it will seek overseas operating facilities much as the United States does.

Although Washington can and should work to keep countries out of Beijing's orbit, it is nonsensical to punish states that do elect to partner with China or, more commonly, play both sides of the fence. There are no states in the region that can afford to get along without China, but most still want some level of connection with the United States, whether that is an economic relationship or security partnership or both. By making a scene, Washington appears anxious rather than confident and less like a partner that has something of its own to offer.

Blake Herzinger is a civilian Indo-Pacific defense policy specialist and U.S. Navy Reserve officer. The views expressed in this article are those of the author alone and do not represent those of his civilian employer, the U.S. Navy, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. government. Twitter: @BDHerzinger