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## **The Evolving Dynamics of Cambodia-US Security Relations: A Path to Rapprochement?**

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### **Introduction**

On August 10, 2024, the US Air Force Montana Air National Guard landed two C-130H aircraft in Cambodia's capital, giving the Royal Cambodian Air Force officers an informative aircraft tour to strengthen bilateral relations between the two states.<sup>1</sup> This was done after the visit of the US Secretary of Defense, Lloyd Austin, in early June to Cambodia this year to discuss the possible redemption of joint military exercises. This comes as a surprise considering that Cambodia-US relations, especially in the security sector, have turned sour over the past years, such as the 2017 suspension of the Angkor Sentinel exercise, the accusation of China's influence on Ream Naval Base, and the exclusion of Cambodian students from the West Point military. This paper argues that Cambodia and the US are slowly reconciling their frosty relations in the security sector due to the multifaceted interests of the two countries.

### **Cambodia-US Security Relations: A Historical Overview**

Since the first diplomatic relations in 1950, Cambodia-US relations have been more or less rocky. From the different foreign policy approaches between Phnom Penh and Washington during the Cold War to having China build solid trust with the Kingdom, Washington has a key mission to

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<sup>1</sup> Nhoem, Sopha . 2024. “ស្ថានភាពសហប្រតិបត្តិការយោធារវាងកម្ពុជា-អាមេរិក” RFI. RFI. August 13, 2024. <https://shorturl.at/euOtI>.

keep strong relations with Phnom Penh.<sup>2</sup> However, the bilateral connection seems to drift apart year after year. A notable drift was in 1997 when the US halted its military assistance to Cambodia following the domestic issues of the election. The absence of aid continued until 2006, and it remained at a small portion of \$70 million annually, with \$4,5 million worth of military equipment and training for the Cambodian military.

The relationship seemed to improve after 2007 when Cambodia hosted two US Navy ships—the first to visit in over 30 years<sup>3</sup>—and the establishment of the Peace Corps Programs. That same year, Cambodia received \$62 million to cover an array of development programs after the US lifted a ten-year ban on direct bilateral aid to Cambodia<sup>4</sup>. Pledging to send nearly \$3.2 million in military aid to Cambodia, the US also sent 31 used trucks—the first deliverables—in its efforts to improve border security and peacekeeping operations<sup>5</sup>. This is an approach to using aid to influence and shape the climate of Cambodia in accordance with US values and integrity.

The 2008 Dara Sakor Project faced significant opposition from the US when a Chinese-owned Union Development Group (UDG), a subsidiary of Wanlong Group based in Tianjin, was equipped with a 99-year lease to build a mega project at Cambodia's coastline. The former US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, said that there were credible reports that the project could be used to host (Chinese) military assets<sup>6</sup>. In response, the Cambodian authorities repeated that this was unconstitutional. Ultimately, the project aims to improve infrastructure, attract tourists, and boost

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<sup>2</sup> Pou, Sothirak. 2020. "Into the 70th Anniversary of Cambodia-US Relations and Beyond: The Rebalancing Dilemma and New Era of Relations." Foundation Office Cambodia. May 26, 2020. <https://www.kas.de/en/web/kambodscha/single-title/-/content/into-the-70th-anniversary-of-cambodia-us-relations-and-beyond-the-rebalancing-dilemma-and-new-era-of-6>.

<sup>3</sup> VOA. 2007. "First U.S. Navy Ship in over 30 Years Visits Cambodia." Voice of America. VOA Cambodia. February 9, 2007. <https://www.voacambodia.com/a/a-40-2007-02-09-voa1-90155237/1356302.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Lum, Thomas . 2007. "Cambodia: Background and U.S. Relations." [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/118517/2007-07-18\\_Cambodia-US\\_Relations.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/118517/2007-07-18_Cambodia-US_Relations.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> News, NBC. 2008. "U.S. Donates Military Trucks to Cambodia." NBC News. NBC News. May 30, 2008. <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna24892889>.

<sup>6</sup> Men, Kimseng , Reaksmeay Hul, and Chhengpor Aun. 2020. "US Sanctions Chinese Company Developing Resort in Cambodia." VOA. September 19, 2020. <https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific-us-sanctions-chinese-company-developing-resort-cambodia/6196093.html>.

transportation efforts, which will benefit the surrounding people enormously.<sup>7</sup> The US later sanctioned the company, citing that it had seized lands and displaced families.

2017 Cambodia canceled the “Angkor Sentinel” initiative with the US, a bilateral military exercise between the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces and the U.S. Army Pacific. The Defense Ministry spokesman, Gen. Chhum Socheath, said it had to be canceled due to the lack of participation in the national election and the anti-drug campaign. While the exercise indicated a new reconciliation of the tensioned relation, Cambodia dealt with multiple events, such as the 2018 elections, which required significant attention and resources. Moreover, the US's continuous watch over Cambodia pressured Cambodia and needed a space between the two states. This caused the US to suspend its full military assistance to Cambodia.<sup>8</sup>

Aside from halting the military exercise, the US stopped its assistance to Cambodia, and the relationship became strained, especially after the Cambodian Supreme Court disbanded the opposition party, the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP), in 2017<sup>9</sup>. This marked the second time the two states saw a large cooperation gap.

The controversy surrounding the Ream Naval Base also arose in 2019 when the Wall Street Journal reported an early draft seen by a U.S. official that would allow China to use the base for 30 years to post military personnel and store weapons. However, Cambodia and China denied such claims, with the Cambodian Defense Minister claiming that Cambodia would not allow foreign forces to deploy in the territory under the Constitution. The presence of Chinese ships sitting at the dock for five months was because of the upcoming “Golden Dragon” exercise and the training of the personnel.<sup>10</sup> This marks the US military absence and the growth of careful interaction with

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<sup>7</sup> Rim, Sokvy. 2023. “Reflecting on China-Cambodia’s Dara Sakor Project, 15 Years In.” The China-Global South Project. June 28, 2023. <https://chinaglobalsouth.com/analysis/reflecting-on-china-cambodias-dara-sakor-project-15-years-in/>.

<sup>8</sup> Reuters. 2017. “Cambodia Suspends Annual Military Drill with United States.” Reuters. Reuters. January 16, 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/cambodia-suspends-annual-military-drill-with-united-states-idUSKBN1501YL/>.

<sup>9</sup> Poling, Gregory B., Charles Dunst, and Simon Tran Hudes. 2022. “Pariah or Partner? Clarifying the U.S. Approach to Cambodia.” Wwww.csis.org. June 14, 2022. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/pariah-or-partner-clarifying-us-approach-cambodia>

<sup>10</sup> CHEANG, SOPHENG, and DAVID RISING. 2024. “Chinese Warships Have Been Docked in Cambodia for 5

Cambodia. The US-built Tactical Headquarters was abolished, which caused a reaction from the US; however, the abolishment was taken to improve and modernize the facility<sup>11</sup>.

In 2021, the Kingdom lost its eligibility to enroll students in the West Point Military. The US invoked its scholarship, stating that Cambodia has not been active in several traditional bilateral military-military engagement areas.<sup>12</sup> The question raised is: What is this about? While Cambodia may not follow the US's value-based foreign policy of being democratic and upholding human rights standards (considering that Cambodia is a sovereign state and is free from external pressure), this is also about the concern of Cambodia's close ties with China.

Since 1997, Cambodia and the US have seen seesawing security relations, from suspending military aid to excluding Cambodian students from joining the academy. However, seeing Cambodia's continuous growth of close ties with China, the US feels threatened by its interests and is trying to reconcile the relations. From Cambodia's perspective, it has no ill intentions and only wants what is best for its interests and the people. Cambodia is willing to do so if reconciling the relationship with the US offers interest.

## **The US sanctions on Cambodia**

The US-Cambodia relations are deteriorating not exclusively because of security alone but also due to Cambodia's domestic climate, which differs widely from the value-based Foreign Policy of the US. The US is a notable speaker in calling out Cambodia for violations that led to various sanctions such as the Global Magnitsky Act and more.<sup>13</sup>

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Months, but Government Says It's Not Permanent." AP News. AP News. May 8, 2024.

<https://apnews.com/article/cambodia-china-naval-base-warships-ream-d4571e2ca53e682ce17c121312443b52>.

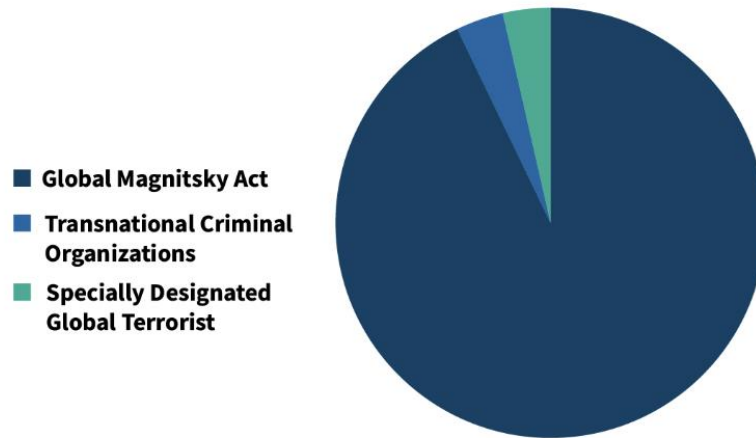
<sup>11</sup> Cambodianess. 2020. "Second US-Built Facility Demolished at Ream Naval Base." Cambodianess. November 10, 2020. <https://cambodianess.com/article/second-us-built-facility-demolished-at-ream-naval-base>.

<sup>12</sup> Ry, Sochan, and Chheng Niem. 2021. "US Dangles Cash for Cambodian Cadets." Phnompenhpost.com. 2021. <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national-politics/us-dangles-cash-cambodian-cadets>.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

Sources: U.S. Treasury Office of Foreign Asset<sup>14</sup>

## U.S. Sanctions on Cambodia by Program



s Control, "Sanctions List Search," database, accessed June 8, 2022, <https://sanctionssearch.ofac.treas.gov/>  
(Poling et al, 2022)

### Rationales of Llyod's Visit

The US Secretary of Defense, Lloyd Austin, stopped in Cambodia after the initial visit to the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore. Austin discussed global issues and indicated a milestone in improving US-Cambodia relations ever since Cambodia decided to end military operations with the US in 2017. Meeting with Cambodian officials, such as Prime Minister Hun Manet, Senate President Hun Sen, and Defense Minister Tea Seiha, Austin discussed various issues that signal the presence of the US military in the Kingdom again.

After the scholarship suspension in 2021, Austin mentioned that the US would reopen enrollment for Cambodians to study at the West Point military academy and participate in exchange programs

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<sup>14</sup> The Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act gives the US executive branch the authority to target foreign government officials who have committed serious corruption or extrajudicial killings, among other crimes, and to impose targeted sanctions and restrictions on their ability to obtain visas. Under the program, a few officials from Cambodia faced sanctions. The Transnational Criminal Organizations Sanctions program represents the application of several legal authorities. Entities and individuals classified as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGs) are those that the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) determines have committed acts of terrorism or pose a serious risk of doing so, or who OFAC determines provides support, services, or assistance to, or otherwise associate with, terrorists and terrorist organizations designated.

in the joint military exercise as preparations. Similarly to the meeting with Hun Manet, the US and Cambodia aim to enhance relations and cooperation, especially in the defense sector.

Major General Pat Ryder, the Pentagon press secretary, released a statement in which Austin discussed ways to enhance bilateral defense connections with Cambodia to foster regional peace and security.<sup>15</sup> This will include "the resumption of military training exchanges on disaster assistance and United Nations peacekeeping, training and exchanges on demining and unexploded ordnance clearance, and Cambodia's access to US professional military education programs".<sup>16</sup>

Surprisingly, the Pentagon's readout did not mention the Ream Naval Base, which remains controversial. Austin's visit did not also discuss Cambodia's democratic practices and human rights.<sup>17</sup> While it may remain a hidden agenda, the Secretary's visit outcomes exclusively focus on how defense can reshape and restore lost relationships. It is a signal that the US's strategy of pushing its agenda on Cambodia is no longer applicable, and now it is trying to cooperate and reconcile the relation.

## **Reproaching Relations: Cambodia and the US at a Crossroad**

Lloyd's visit and the aircraft tour are indications that the US and Cambodia are moving in the right direction to restore the sensitivity of their past 8-year relationship. But why now? It is as simple as saying that the US and Cambodia need each other regardless.

Cambodia considers the US a strong power in the Indo-Pacific region, and its economy relies on the US and vice versa. In 2023, the US remained Cambodia's largest trading partner abroad, accounting for 19.55% of total foreign trade worth \$46.83 billion.<sup>18</sup> The US presence also offers a sense of security in the region, and Cambodia needs to hedge in this geopolitical tension to grow

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<sup>15</sup> U.S. Department of Defense. 2024. "Readout of Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III's Meetings with Cambodian Prime Minist." U.S. Department of Defense. 2024.  
<https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3795409/readout-of-secretary-of-defense-lloyd-j-austin-ills-meetings-with-cambodian-pri/>.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup> Sam, Seun . 2024. "Strengthening Cambodia's Trade Relations with the US." Phnompenhpost.com. 2024.  
<https://www.phnompenhpost.com/opinion/strengthening-cambodia-s-trade-relations-with-the-us>.

and survive. The United States has given Cambodia over \$1 billion since 1992. Between 2010 and 2019, the largest aid recipient was the health and population sector, which came in at roughly \$339 million. The governance and education sectors were the largest recipients, at \$217 and \$134 million, respectively. The US government provided \$152 million in aid to several industries in Cambodia in just 2018 alone.<sup>19</sup>

For the US, Cambodia is a vital player in the region. China's continuous influence on Southeast Asia indicates that America needs to find a balance to contain the tension. Cambodia just concluded its annual Golden Dragon joint military exercise with China.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, Cambodia recently named a southern ring road in Phnom Penh after Chinese leader Xi Jinping.<sup>21</sup> China remains a top-tier friend of Cambodia, and the long-lasting relations will continue. The US's determination to pressure Cambodia to follow its agenda will only drive Cambodia away. Instead, the US can support Cambodia without prior commitments and conditions. As a key player in the Indo-Pacific region, the US cannot afford to lose its relationship with Cambodia entirely; thus, employing Austin to visit the kingdom marks a new strategy to interact and reconcile both states' interests.

Evidently, Cambodia and the US are on the path to healing their relations. Although China remains at the top of the list, Cambodia's new leader, Hun Manet, a former student in the US, has a more strategic approach to dealing with geopolitical tension by diversifying and restoring Cambodia's relations, which differ significantly from those of his father. Cambodia also seeks to establish a diversified, independent, and balanced foreign policy, seeking good relations with all external partners, including Japan.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Open Development Cambodia. 2020. "United States Aid | Open Development Cambodia (ODC)." ODC. June 1, 2020. <https://opendevelopmentcambodia.net/topics/united-states-aid/#:~:text=Since%201992%2C%20the%20US%20has>.

<sup>20</sup> Congyi, Lin. 2024. "China-Cambodia 'Golden Dragon 2024' Joint Exercise Concludes –China Military." Chinamil.com.cn. 2024. [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA\\_209163/TopStories\\_209189/16313159.html](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/TopStories_209189/16313159.html).

<sup>21</sup> Ry, Sochan. 2024. "Xi Jinping Boulevard Set for Official Opening." <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/xi-jinping-boulevard-set-for-official-opening> 2024. <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/xi-jinping-boulevard-set-for-official-opening>.

<sup>22</sup> Sun, Kim, and Chhengpor Aun. 2024. "After Pentagon Chief's Visit, Is There Hope for a Recovery in Cambodia-US Ties?" Thediplomat.com. The Diplomat. June 14, 2024. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/06/after-pentagon-chiefs-visit-hope-for-recovery-in-cambodia-us-ties/>.

## Conclusion

The recent visit of US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and the presence of US Air Force aircraft in Cambodia indicate a gradual but significant thawing of Cambodia-US military relations. Despite years of rocky relations caused by Cambodia's alliance with China and US worries about human rights, both countries appear to acknowledge the strategic benefits of collaboration. Engaging with the US balances Cambodia's tight relationship with China, while the US sees benefit in preserving regional influence. This renewed engagement highlights the intricacies of Southeast Asia's geopolitical landscape and Cambodia's developing approach to foreign relations.

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