

REAM NAVAL BASE UPGRADE PROJECT IN CAMBODIA: NEW POINT FOR GEOPOLITICAL CONTESTATION IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

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Abstract

A resurgent China aspires to be a great maritime power with a vision to maintain a naval presence in distant seas across the globe. Recognising that this presence can only be sustained through logistics and administrative support, Beijing seeks to establish military bases across the Indo-Pacific. China's engagement with Cambodia to upgrade the Ream Naval Base near Sihanoukville, with a possible objective of securing some part of it as a Chinese naval base, is an example of this. The Ream Naval Base project has elicited much concern from international quarters - the US, and ASEAN countries in particular. While Cambodia cites its constitution to quell these concerns, the absolute power of the current political party renders this a weakened defence. A review of the geographical, naval and political topography of Ream reveals significant strategic and military issues that China will have to resolve in order to leverage a military presence in Cambodia. China's involvement in the project has created an Indo-Pacific axis of uneasy informal alliances, with China-Cambodia on one side and US-Vietnam on the other. Further, the ten ASEAN nations and their unity are also impacted by this development, which only exacerbates their negative reaction to China's unduly aggressive stance on ongoing disputes in the South China Sea. With the South China Sea being part of India's secondary area of maritime interest, there is reasonable scope for the Indian Navy to leverage the additional concern of neighbouring Southeast Asian nations such as Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia, to strengthen naval diplomacy in furtherance of India's maritime security vis-à-vis China.

Keywords: Ream, Indo-Pacific, DOC, COC, Indian Navy, Cambodia, Vietnam, ASEAN

This article endeavours to examine, from multiple perspectives, the impact of China's financial and strategic involvement in the Ream Naval Base. Beginning with an evaluation of the decision to develop and modernise Ream from a Cambodian domestic and foreign policy perspective, the article will continue with an exploration of China's strategic interest in this base. The impact of this development upon the broader ASEAN community, as well as on the already deteriorating US-Cambodia relationship, will then be examined. Finally, the emerging policy-options for India will be discussed.

Over the past few years, as the geopolitical jockeying between Beijing and Washington has intensified, the possibility of China securing a military base in Cambodia has been in the spotlight. In 2019, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that China would construct additional jetties and related infrastructure as part of the Ream Naval Base modernisation project. The report alleged that Cambodia had, in this secret deal, agreed to grant China exclusive rights to a certain

portion of the newly expanded naval base for 30 years, with the option to extend these rights for additional periods of 10 years at a time.¹

‘Ream’, named after ‘Lord *Rama*’ — the main protagonist in the Indian epic, *Ramayana* — is situated in Cambodia’s southwestern coastal province of Preah Sihanouk (also known as Sihanoukville). Ream is about 220 km from the national capital Phnom Penh, connected by the American-funded National Road No 4, which had been built in the Sangkum era of the mid-1950s. In 2019, construction began on the Phnom Penh-Sihanoukville Expressway. The US \$2 billion project, funded by China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) under a build-operate-transfer financial model, is likely to be completed by 2023. Despite being the oldest and largest base in Cambodia, Ream remained underdeveloped for a long time. On June 8, 2022, long overdue plans to upgrade and expand Ream were jointly announced by Cambodia and China in a public ground-breaking ceremony. The event, however, sparked serious global concerns over China’s intended military presence in the kingdom, and the consequent enhancement of its military power-projection capability in the region.

Cambodian Perspective vis-à-vis Ream Naval Base Developments

Beijing’s involvement in the Ream Naval Base expansion project, with the potential for future Chinese military use, is, in fact, an indicator of a much broader Cambodia-China partnership. An overview of the national political backdrop in Cambodia will further illuminate the interplay between domestic politics and the significance of Chinese involvement in Ream in the regional and international theatre.

Domestic Political Backdrop in Cambodia

Domestic power politics in Cambodia have been a major force in driving the kingdom progressively into China’s embrace while widening its rift with the west. Two main political parties have struggled for power in Cambodian politics — the ruling Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) and the opposition Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP). The CNRP — a coalition of the Sam Rainsy Party (SRP) and the Human Rights Party (HRP) — emerged as the imminent challenger to Prime Minister Hun Sen’s CPP in the 2013 general election. The CNRP won 56 out of 123 seats in the National Assembly, despite alleged polling irregularities by the ruling CPP², resulting in the CPP — which had dominated the Cambodian political arena for over three decades — having its lowest share in the National Assembly since 1998.

A survey conducted by a foreign firm — which appeared to have been hired by Cambodia’s high-ranking officials — suggested that the CNRP could supersede the ruling party in the next

¹Jeremy Page, Gordon Lubold and Rob Taylor, “Deal for Naval Outpost in Cambodia Furthers China’s Quest for Military Network”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 22 July 2019. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/secret-deal-for-chinese-naval-outpost-in-cambodia-raises-u-s-fears-of-beijings-ambitions-11563732482>

² Thomas Fuller, “Cambodian Opposition Rejects Election Results”, *The New York Times*, 29 July 2013. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/30/world/asia/cambodian-opposition-rejects-election-results.html>

general election in 2018³. Quite determined to stay in power by whatever means necessary, Prime Minister Hun Sen of the CPP enacted the ‘Political Party Law’ in November of 2017, one year before the general elections and six months after the commune elections which had reinforced the increasing threat of the CNRP. The CNRP was dissolved by a Supreme Court ruling under the newly enacted law. The reason cited was that the President of the CNRP was involved in treason, allegedly in collusion with US agencies. Concurrently, a five-year ban on active politics was imposed on 118 top party leaders.⁴ The dissolution of the only credible opposition party marked a death of sorts for Cambodian democracy. This was also followed by restrictions on press freedom, and the suspension of US affiliated organisations working to promote human rights in the country.

In response, the US imposed sanctions against a variety of individuals in the Cambodian government. In August 2020, the European Union (EU) withdrew 20 per cent of the EBA (Everything But Arms) trade privileges that had been granted to Cambodia (under which the latter was allowed to export goods to the European market without quotas and tariffs). This partial withdrawal of EBA privileges has cost Cambodia US\$ 1.09 billion annually.⁵ In May 2022, the EU further threatened to withdraw the EBA completely if Cambodia did not conduct free and fair commune and national elections in 2022 and 2023, respectively.⁶

The US and the EU combined accounted for over 60% of Cambodia’s total exports in 2016, compared to China’s share which was only 6 % in the same period.⁷ Special trade agreements with the US and EU have helped sustain Cambodia’s rapid growth over the past decades, giving the Western world substantial economic leverage in the small nation. Although Phnom Penh has maintained a tough public stance in the face of Western sanctions, the severity of the ensuing economic loss has driven the government to actively take steps to help improve the kingdom’s image and enhance its bilateral ties with Washington.

It is instructive to note that just before the dissolution of the CNRP in 2017, Cambodia had suspended its bilateral military exercise ANGKOR SENTINEL with the US Army, which had been an annual feature since 2010. In 2018⁸, the country began the GOLDEN DRAGON military drills with China. A few months thereafter, Phnom Penh also cancelled its annual

³ Ben Paviour, “Official, Pollster Confirm CPP Polling After Findings Leaked”, *The Cambodia Daily*, 19 June 2017. <https://english.cambodiadaily.com/news/official-pollster-confirm-cpp-polling-after-findings-leaked-131470/>

⁴ Ben Sokhean et al., “Death of democracy’: CNRP dissolved by Supreme Court ruling”, *The Phnom Penh Post*, 17 November 2017. <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national-post-depth-politics/death-democracy-cnrrp-dissolved-supreme-court-ruling>

⁵ European Commission, “Trade/Human Rights: Commission decides to partially withdraw Cambodia’s preferential access to the E.U. market”, 12 February 2020. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/document/print/en/ip_20_229/IP_20_229_EN.pdf

⁶ European Parliament, “The continuous crackdown of political opposition in Cambodia”, 5 May 2022, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0201_EN.pdf (accessed 03 February 2022)

⁷ Royal Government of Cambodia, *Cambodia Trade Integration Strategy 2019-2023: Main Report, Action Matrix*, Ministry of Commerce, 2019, <https://cambodiancorner.files.wordpress.com/2019/12/cambodia-trade-integratio-strategy-2019-2023-1.pdf>

⁸ Aun Chhengpor, “Cambodia Joins China for Military Drills as U.S. Relations Cool”, VOA, 18 March 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/a/cambodia-china-joint-military-drills-us-relations-cool/4302875.html>

counter-terrorism military exercise with Australia.⁹ In the run-up to the general election in July 2018 — in which the CPP won all the National Assembly seats — China pledged a US\$ 100 million defence package to Cambodia, becoming its largest military donor besides being the largest creditor, investor and bilateral trading partner of the country.¹⁰

These actions clearly signalled Cambodia's pivot to China for political backing and as a counterfoil to Western politico-economic pressures. It is through this lens that the US and its regional allies view China's growing military influence in Cambodia

Breaking News: Ream Naval Base Modernisation Project

Since July 2019, when *The Wall Street Journal* broke its story, the Ream Naval Base has remained the subject of headlines in the international media. Some reports, based on satellite imagery, have revealed details of China's construction and upgradation activities, including dredging, landfill, and demolition. In early June 2021, on a visit to Phnom Penh, the US Deputy Secretary of State, Wendy Sherman, voiced "*serious concerns*" over China's prospective military presence in the country. The Cambodian Defence Minister, Tea Banh, is reported to have responded with an admission that Beijing was, indeed, helping Cambodia to construct the naval base but with "*no strings attached*".¹¹ The US military attaché was also invited to visit the base in June 2021, although the trip apparently ended in disappointment as the visitors were not allowed access to certain areas.¹²

As recently as June 2022, *The Washington Post* reported that unnamed yet credible Western officials were claiming that "*China was secretly building a naval facility in Cambodia for the exclusive use of its military*" and that the two countries had taken "*extraordinary measures to conceal the operation.*"¹³ While analysts appear to still be unclear about the exact scope of the Chinese-built facilities at Ream, it is speculated that the project will include a new command centre with meeting- and medical halls, a drydock, a slipway, and two new piers. Dredging to deepen the channel may also

⁹ Liam Cochrane, "Cambodia scraps counter-terrorism exercise with Australia, says it is occupied by elections", *ABC News*, 28 February 2017. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-02-28/cambodia-scraps-counter-terror-exercise-with-australia/8309162>

¹⁰ Reuters, "China pledges over \$100 million military aid to Cambodia", 19 June 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cambodia-china/china-pledges-over-100-million-military-aid-to-cambodia-idUSKBN1JF0KQ>

¹¹ U.S. Department of State, "Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman's Visit to Cambodia", June 1, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/deputy-secretary-of-state-wendy-shermans-visit-to-cambodia/>. Also see Sun Narin, "Defense Minister Says China Helping with Ream Overhaul, but 'No Strings Attached'", *VOA Cambodia*, 3 June 2021. <https://www.voacambodia.com/a/defense-minister-says-china-helping-with-ream-overhaul-but-no-strings-attached-/5914977.html>

¹² Khuon Narim, "U.S. military attache visit Ream Naval Base but says Cambodian military did not allow full access", *Camboja News*, 11 June 2021, <https://cambojanews.com/u-s-military-attache-visit-ream-naval-base-but-says-cambodian-military-did-not-allow-full-access/>

¹³ Ellen Nakashima and Cate Cadell, "China secretly building naval facility in Cambodia Western officials say", *The Washington Post*, 7 June 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/06/06/cambodia-china-navy-base-ream/>

take place to allow larger vessels to berth, although the depth to be maintained remains unclear.¹⁴ According to Professor Carl Thayer of the University of New South Wales in Australia, the total area allocated to the Chinese for renovation of the base is about 0.3 square kilometres.¹⁵

A day after report by *The Washington Post*, Cambodia's Defence Minister, Tea Banh, used the ground-breaking ceremony of the Ream Naval Base construction to rebuff the US media report. Citing the attendance of foreign diplomats, including Australian ambassador, Pablo Kang, and Indian ambassador, Devyani Khobragade, the Defence Minister stated:

*"I invited our friends to see that there is nothing going on like what is being alleged by people saying that the Ream base modernisation is for the exclusive use of China's People's Liberation Army. It is not true, but they come to these conclusions anyways. It just isn't possible..."*¹⁶

Chinese Ambassador, Wang Wentian, also debunked the theory of his country's 'exclusive use of the base' as reported by *The Washington Post*. Speaking at the ceremony, he clarified:

*"This project respects the laws of Cambodia. Honestly speaking, this project has mutual benefits for both countries. But some other countries criticise it with bad intent. They say wrong things in order to do wrong things..."*¹⁷

To further dispel global concerns, Cambodia organised official visits to the base — a rather unprecedented measure from a nation's military perspective. A tour for local media reporters and journalists was arranged within weeks of *The Wall Street Journal's* report. However, news analysts speculated that they only saw "exactly what the Cambodian government wanted them to see".¹⁸

Cambodian Constitution and the Ream Naval Base

As has already been indicated, Cambodian leaders have gone to great lengths to deny the allegation that the country will provide China with exclusive access to as strategically important a location as the Ream Naval Base. They cite the kingdom's Constitution, which 'prohibits foreign military bases on its soil' and requires it to pursue a foreign policy of 'permanent neutrality'.¹⁹ They state that the Chinese involvement in Ream falls under a constitutionally given permission for Cambodia to receive defence aid and assistance from a variety of sources to meet the nation's security challenges — much like any other nation.

¹⁴David Hutt, "Vietnam warily weighs a China base in Cambodia" *Asia Times*, 30 June 2022. <https://asiatimes.com/2022/06/vietnam-warily-weighs-a-china-base-in-cambodia/>

¹⁵David Hutt, "Vietnam warily weighs a China base in Cambodia".

¹⁶NiemChheng and Ry Sochan, "Fresh Ream claims shot down at groundbreaking", *The Phnom Penh Post*, 9 June 2022, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national-politics/fresh-ream-claims-shot-down-groundbreaking>

¹⁷NiemChheng and Ry Sochan, "Fresh Ream claims shot down at groundbreaking", *The Phnom Penh Post*, 9 June 2022, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national-politics/fresh-ream-claims-shot-down-groundbreaking>

¹⁸David Hutt, "A bad day all around for Cambodian media", *Asia Times*, 31 July 2019, <https://asiatimes.com/2019/07/a-bad-day-all-around-for-cambodian-media/>

¹⁹Article 53 of the Cambodia's Constitution provides the fundamental principles for the conduct of Cambodia's foreign policy, which includes a policy of permanent neutrality and non-alignment, peaceful co-existence, no invasion of any country and no interference in any other country's internal affairs, peaceful settlement of disputes, not joining any military alliance and military agreement incompatible with its policy of neutrality, and no establishment of foreign military bases on its territory.

Prior to the ASEAN-US Special Summit in Washington DC in May 2022, Cambodian Foreign Minister, Prak Sokhonn, who was also the erstwhile Chair of ASEAN, in a briefing to the US Deputy Secretary of State, Wendy Sherman, about the Ream Naval Base, emphasised “*Cambodia’s adherence to its own constitutional principles in forbidding the presence of foreign military.*”²⁰ On the sidelines of the same meeting, in a press statement along with his US counterpart, Anthony Blinken, Sokhonn reiterated Cambodia’s firm adherence to its Constitution on the issue, emphasising that “*the renovation of the base served solely to strengthen the Cambodian naval capacities to protect its maritime integrity and combat crimes.*”²¹ He also delivered a similar message telephonically in response to an inquiry by Penny Wong, the Australian Foreign Minister, about *The Washington Post* report concerning the Ream Naval Base.²²

In May 2022, amidst these conflicting narratives concerning the Ream naval base and Phnom Penh’s all-encompassing embrace of Beijing, Cambodia released its latest Defence White Paper entitled, “National Defence Policy” — a move that could well be interpreted as a direct effort to assuage the general consternation over Ream. The paper outlines the need for the modernisation of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF) and specifically covers the Ream Naval Base modernisation policy.²³ Quoting the entire Article 53 of the Constitution, it seeks to quell the fears of neighbouring nations, stating that the modernisation of the Ream Naval Base did not aim to “*threaten any particular nation in the region while Cambodia did not permit any foreign military base on its sovereign territory.*”²⁴

However, historical precedent would suggest that the invoking of the Cambodian constitution does not, in fact, provide an ironclad guarantee against granting China a military presence in Cambodia. In the 1960s, Prince Norodom Sihanouk forged military deals with China and North Vietnam with no regard for the Constitution or, for that matter, the 1954 Geneva Accord. Under those unpublicised deals, China could use the port of Sihanoukville to transport military equipment to Vietnam during the Vietnam War.

Prominent opposition leader Sam Rainsy, in self-imposed exile in Paris since 2015, also refutes the Cambodian government’s claim of upholding their Constitution, and has publicly argued that a [Chinese] base in Cambodia only marks the beginning of China’s designs on democracy in

²⁰ MFAIC, “Bilateral Meeting between H.E. Deputy Prime Minister PRAK Sokhonn and The Honourable Deputy Secretary Wendy Sherman”, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Kingdom of Cambodia*, 11 May 2022.

²¹ MFAIC, “Meeting between H.E. Deputy Prime Minister Prak Sokhonn, Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Cambodia, and H.E. Anthony Blinken, Secretary of State of the United States”, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Kingdom of Cambodia*, 13 May 2022.

²² MFAIC, “Deputy PM PRAK Sokhonn Rejects Accusations Concerning Ream Naval Base”, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Kingdom of Cambodia*, 7 June 2022.

²³ Ministry of Defence, “National Defence Policy”, 12 May 2022.

<https://dot.mod.gov.kh/stores/2022/05/National-Defence-Policy-English.pdf>

²⁴ Kingdom of Cambodia, Nation Religion King, *The Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia*, 1993.

<https://www.ccc.gov.kh/datapublic/subdata/Constitution%20of%20the%20Kingdom%20of%20Cambodia.pdf>

Southeast Asia, stating, “...as if the very existence of the prohibition made a Chinese troop presence impossible.”²⁵

The current political stranglehold of Prime Minister Hun Sen’s CPP on the National Assembly further weakens Cambodia’s defence of adherence to the Constitution. With all State institutions, including the National Assembly, under the firm control of the ruling CPP, an amendment-of or exception-to the Constitution to allow China’s military presence in Cambodia is entirely plausible.

Geopolitical Significance of Ream Naval Base

Despite the insistent chorus of opinions from all players, the crucial questions that remain to be answered are the actual scope of the upgrade and, more significantly, China’s role and future military and/or strategic intent in the Ream Naval Base project. While an answer would require far greater transparency on the part of both protagonists, an analysis of the geographical significance of the base for China and the other nations in the region reveals much.

Geographical Importance of Ream Naval Base

The Ream Naval Base is located adjacent to the Ream National Park, a heavily forested area on the coastline of the Gulf of Thailand. It is the largest naval base in Cambodia, covering about 190 acres and lies about eight kilometres from the Sihanoukville International Airport. The nearest Vietnamese island, Phu Quoc — pronounced *Fu Kuod* in Vietnamese — lies barely 15 nautical miles (nm) away, while the distance to the nearest Vietnamese mainland is 55 nm. Phu Quoc has an international airport with a 3,000 m runway. **Figure 1** provides a visual representation.

²⁵ Sam Rainsy, “China Has Designs on Democracy in Southeast Asia”, *Foreign Affairs*, 10 June 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-06-10/china-has-designs-democracy-southeast-asia>



Figure 1: Location of The Ream Naval Base vis-à-vis Vietnam
 Source: Map from Google Earth; markings by the Authors

A wider perspective brings in the context of the South China Sea and highlights the geopolitical significance of the Ream Naval Base. Ream lies quite deep into the Gulf of Thailand, about 130 nm from the southern tip of Vietnam. Ships heading to the Ream Naval Base — particularly from Chinese ports and the South China Sea — would have to traverse significant distances in waters proximate to the Vietnamese seaboard. **Figure 2** provides a spatial perspective of the area under discussion, with the relevant distances marked.

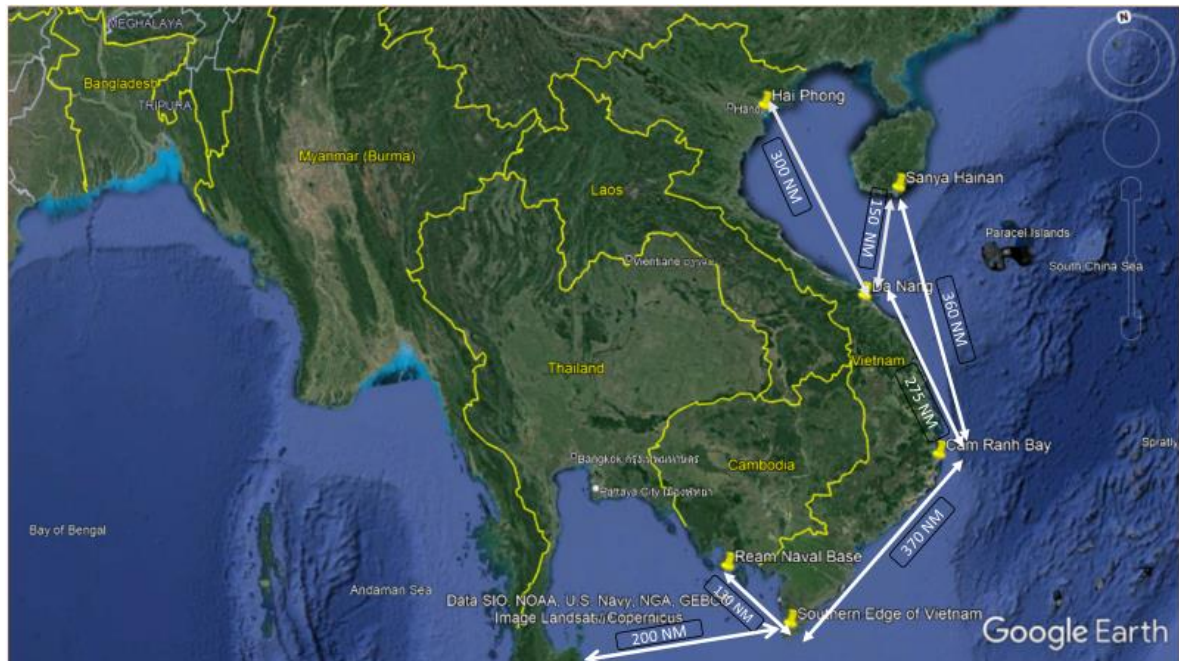


Figure 2: Ream Naval Base – Locational perspective vis-à-vis South China Sea
 Source: Map from Google Earth; markings by the Authors

Relevant point-to-point distances are tabulated below:

From	To	Distance	Remarks
Hai Phong, Vietnam	Da Nang	300 NM	
Da Nang, Vietnam	Cam Ranh Bay	275 NM	
Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam	Southern Edge of Vietnam	370 NM	
Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam	Ream Naval Base	500 NM	Close Coast
Southern Edge of Vietnam	Ream Naval Base	130 NM	
Sanya, Hainan, China	Da Nang	150 NM	
Sanya, Hainan, China	Cam Ranh Bay	360 NM	
Sanya, Hainan, China	Ream Naval Base	900 NM	Close Coast
Gulf of Thailand	-	200 NM	Narrowest part

Table 1: Point-to-point Distances – China-Vietnam-Cambodia

Source: Authors

An assessment of any Chinese decision to base PLA Navy ships at the Ream Naval Base, whether as part of some ‘forward deployment’ or as a temporary outpost, would require a critical look at these distances between key strategic locations. The close-coast distance from the Sanya Naval Base in Hainan, the Chinese port closest to Cambodia, is around 900 nm. The South Sea Fleet headquarters of Zhanjiang in Guangdong province lies a farther 250 nm to the north. PLA Navy ships in transit would have to add at least another 200 nm to the above distances to maintain a reasonable separation from Vietnamese maritime zones. This will make the total passage from the Ream Naval Base to Sanya and Zhanjiang, 1,100 nm and 1,350 nm, respectively. A PLA Navy flotilla moving at an average speed of 20 knots (kn) will require approximately 55 to 65 hours of transit time and will be under the constant watch of the Vietnamese Navy and Air Force. In times of hostility, this passage will most certainly become untenable for the PLA Navy.

Besides the issue of a long and potentially hostile transit, it does not seem strategically prudent for the PLA Navy to station its ships so far into the Gulf of Thailand (130 nm or approximately seven hours sailing-time from the southern tip of Vietnam) with the only ingress and egress route being through the mouth of the Gulf. The proximity of the Vietnamese coastline and the location of Phu Quoc Island with its large airfield and (albeit uncorroborated) military installations would pose a significant naval strategic issue for the PLA.

All these geographical factors, even without a consideration of the regional geostrategic environment, lead to the conclusion that a Chinese naval base in Ream does not come with clear strategic or military advantages for the Chinese. This, then begs the question — why might China be interested in naval presence at Ream?

Chinese Interest in the Ream Naval Base

To understand why China is interested in establishing a military presence in Cambodia, one must first evaluate China’s geopolitical ambitions and power-projection intent in the Indo-Pacific.

Military bases are no rarity in the Asia-Pacific. They are an important manifestation of national power projection strategies. Being cost-intensive to build and requiring vast financial resources to maintain, military bases are generally indicators of the long-term intentions and priorities of nations. Politically, they demonstrate a level of national commitment and deter potential adversaries in a way that naval fleet deployments cannot. Militarily, they extend capabilities by serving as platforms from which countries can monitor and exert influence on the proximate domain. Beijing has, largely through economic prowess, progressively cultivated influence in its immediate surrounding areas and beyond. It has promised to invest more than US\$ 1 trillion in infrastructure under the Belt and Road Initiative, which will impact more than 60 nations.²⁶

Since President Xi Jinping's election in 2012, one of the central components of China's ambition has been to enhance and expand the nation's military capabilities, with the goal of executing military reform and modernisation by 2035, and becoming a world-class force by 2050.²⁷ Its target for military growth in the Western Pacific Ocean is to match that of the US by 2027. Having established its first overseas base in Djibouti in 2017, at the western extremity of the Indo-Pacific region as India sees it, and given its above stated military ambition, Beijing's possible intent to establish a naval presence in Ream seems quite plausible. It would extend China's regional influence and power-projection capacity in the Indo-Pacific. In terms of logistics, it would reduce the distance from, say, Hainan to the Malacca Strait, and consequently to the Indian Ocean, by more than 500 nm or 25 hours, at a speed of 20 kn, thereby significantly improving its logistical capabilities.²⁸

Impact on Cambodia's Immediate Neighbourhood and ASEAN

A Chinese naval base at Ream would enable China to severely constrain Vietnam's autonomy by engaging in pre-emptive, close-quarter coercive diplomacy. Other nations in the Gulf of Thailand littoral as well as the larger grouping of ASEAN member-states — barring Myanmar and Laos — will also be subject to an ominous 'new normal' of Chinese presence right at their doorstep. Gregory Poling, from the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), has stated that "*while access to Ream facility may not mean China's navy is geographically closer to the Strait of Malacca; it would enhance China's ability for surveillance and intelligence collection around the Gulf of Thailand*".²⁹ It is considered opinions such as these that have led to the conclusion that a Chinese naval presence at the Ream Naval Base in Cambodia will pose a direct threat to Cambodia's neighbours and disrupt the peace and stability of the eastern segment of the Indo-Pacific.

The above assessment, coupled with Cambodia's lack of sufficient transparency, reinforces global suspicions that the Ream upgrades are part of a much larger clandestine strategy to enable

²⁶ OECD (2018), "China's Belt and Road Initiative in the Global Trade, Investment and Finance Landscape", <https://www.oecd.org/finance/Chinas-Belt-and-Road-Initiative-in-the-global-trade-investment-and-finance-landscape.pdf>

²⁷ Zhao Lei, "PLA to be world-class force by 2050", *China Daily*, 27 October 2017, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-10/27/content_33756453.html

²⁸ Charlie Campbell, "A Chinese Naval Base in Cambodia Signals a New Era of Competition in the Asia-Pacific Region", *Time*, June 7, 2022, <https://time.com/6185021/china-cambodia-ream-naval-base/>

²⁹ David Hutt, "Is China building a military base in Cambodia?" *Deutsche Welle*, 14 June 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/is-china-building-a-military-base-in-cambodia/a-62124251>

Beijing to project power into the region and beyond, potentially as far as the Indian Ocean.³⁰ These suspicions gain ground from an emerging pattern of Chinese engagement in constructing port infrastructure and managing port operations in various countries in the Pacific and the northern Indian Ocean. According to the US Department of Defense (2021), China is *“seeking to establish a more robust overseas logistics and basing infrastructure to support naval, air, ground, cyber, and space power projection. Other than Cambodia, it has likely considered a number of countries, including Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Tanzania.”*³¹ The April 2022 Security Agreement signed between China and the Solomon Islands is an extension of the same expansive pattern. It supposedly allows Beijing to station armed police and military troops in the South Pacific Island,³² in what could be a forerunner to a permanent military presence.

A Chinese military presence in Cambodia by way of a naval base also has the potential to disrupt ASEAN’s supposedly united stance vis-a-vis the South China Sea Code of Conduct (COC) — an agreement that has been under negotiation with China for more than a decade with no tangible progress. Furthermore, it may foreclose the possibilities for maritime security enhancement, limit the freedom of navigation and overflight, and hinder peaceful dispute-resolution in the South China Sea and related maritime zones. The Paracel and the Spratly group of islands offer a case in point. Beijing is leveraging its militarisation of certain features in the Paracel island chain to coerce the disputants and undermine their efforts to exercise their sovereign rights under international law.³³ This is a matter of great concern to ASEAN nations.

To date, ASEAN has been conspicuously silent on the Ream Naval Base controversy, an indication of the Association’s overtly cautious approach to matters involving China. Since its inception, ASEAN has had a chequered track record. Two success stories are the resolution of Vietnam’s occupation of Cambodia from 1978 to 1989, and the Preah Vihear Temple dispute between Thailand and Cambodia in 2011.³⁴ On the other hand, ASEAN faced criticism for its lack of response to Myanmar’s military coup in February 2021³⁵ and its lack of effectiveness in resolving the South China Sea conflict. The ‘non-binding’ Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) was signed by ASEAN in 2002. In 2012, under Cambodia’s rotating presidency of ASEAN, the grouping failed to issue a joint communique for the first time in its history, thanks to disagreements on South China Sea issues. Interestingly, especially with the Ream Naval Base in play, Cambodia’s chairmanship of ASEAN this year (2022) has raised concerns that the South China Sea issue will be sidelined once again.

³⁰ Craig Singleton, “Beijing Eyes New Military Bases Across the Indo-Pacific”, *Foreign Policy*, 7 July 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/07/china-pla-military-bases-kiribati-uae-cambodia-tanzania-djibouti-indo-pacific-ports-airfields/>

³¹ US Department of Defense, “Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2021” (2021), <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Nov/03/2002885874/-1/-1/0/2021-CMPR-FINAL.PDF>

³² Zongyuan Zoe Liu, “What the China-Solomon Islands Pact Means for the U.S. and South Pacific”, *Council on Foreign Relations*, 20 June 2022. <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/china-solomon-islands-security-pact-us-south-pacific>

³³ US Department of State, “China’s Military Aggression in the Indo-Pacific Region”, 3 December 2020, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/chinas-military-aggression-in-the-indo-pacific-region/index.html>

³⁴ Sebastian Strangio, “Amitav Acharya on ASEAN and Its Discontents”, *The Diplomat*, 29 September 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/09/amitav-acharya-on-asean-and-its-discontents/>

³⁵ *ibid*

With the recent formation of new groupings such as QUAD and AUKUS, ASEAN's centrality has been called into question, even though several major nations — the US, Japan, Australia and India — continue to highlight the importance of ASEAN in their official Indo-Pacific policies and declarations. The fact of the matter is that ASEAN's *de facto* centrality can only be determined by clearly demonstrated ASEAN unity, with the successful negotiation of the Code of Conduct (COC) foremost on its agenda.

ASEAN's questionable centrality notwithstanding, there is no question but that a Chinese military presence in Ream will catalyse Cambodia's neighbours — Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia and Singapore — into jointly raising their readiness levels and augmenting preparedness, both conceptually and materially. It will most likely also cement their mutual resolve and strengthen ties as they look to confront Beijing's ever-increasing assertiveness in the Western Pacific.

China-US rivalry – Effect on Subregional Dynamics

The rivalry between the US and China has been ongoing for at least the last five years, and the strategic fault lines are, at present, at their widest ever. US House Speaker, Nancy Pelosi's, visit to Taiwan in August 2022, where she pledged US "*commitment to Taiwan's vibrant democracy*" led to China issuing diplomatic warnings and commencing military exercises encircling Taiwan. This kind of military brinkmanship in the region could very well lead to a Cold War-like situation in global politics with potentially dangerous, uncertain, and unpredictable outcomes. Caught between China's economic influence in the region (with trade volumes crossing US \$878 billion in 2021) and the Washington-Beijing rivalry, Southeast Asian nations are finding themselves unable to choose sides.

As a small and economically vulnerable nation, Cambodia finds itself trapped in the middle of the Sino-American jockeying for influence in the region. Cambodia is dependent on the US for its exports and on China for direct foreign investment. To exacerbate matters further, the authoritarian nature of the Phnom Penh government has invited economic sanctions from the US and a reduction in EBA trade privileges from the EU. Despite trying to maintain 'permanent neutrality' in its foreign policy and pursuing a diversification strategy of 'minimising foes' and 'maximising friends', Cambodia cannot resist being drawn into Beijing's orbit. Summarising the situation quite candidly and succinctly at Nikkei's 'Future of Asia Forum 2021', Hun Sen said, "*If I don't rely on China, who will I rely on? If I don't ask China, who am I to ask?*"³⁶ (sic)

Besides the China-US rivalry, the Ream Naval Base developments have played out against a backdrop of worsening political, economic, and military interactions between the US and Cambodia. The US imposed sanctions on the Union Development Group, a Chinese company, involved in the Ream project.³⁷ Subsequently, the Phnom Penh government ordered the

³⁶“Cambodia's Hun Sen: 'If I don't rely on China, who will I rely on?'”, *Nikkei Asia*, 20 May 2021. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/The-Future-of-Asia/The-Future-of-Asia-2021/Cambodia-s-Hun-Sen-If-I-don-t-rely-on-China-who-will-I-rely-on> (accessed July 2, 2022)

³⁷ Gordon Lubold, Ian Talley, “U.S. Sanctions Chinese Firm Helping Build Military Base in Cambodia,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 15 September 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-sanctions-chinese-firm-helping-build-military-base-in-cambodia-11600181357>

demolition of two American-funded facilities in the naval base despite Washington's offer to renovate them.³⁸ The US retaliated with further sanctions on two high ranking officials in Cambodia's Ministry of Defence,³⁹ to which Cambodia responded with ordering the recall and destruction of American-made weapons in the Cambodian military inventory.⁴⁰

Perhaps the most effective strategy for Washington in response to China's quest for greater influence in the Kingdom would be to convince Cambodia to adopt an independent and neutral position vis-à-vis China. However, its strident criticisms of the Hun Sen government's disregard for democratic processes, and human rights violations, remain major barriers to bilateral relations between the US and Cambodia. In contrast, helping Prime Minister Hun Sen and his party to stay in power serves Beijing's broader strategic interest. Cambodia can serve as a model for other countries in the region, for allying or band-wagging with China. Analyst opinions regarding the matter have ranged from, "*China intends to use Cambodia as its beachhead in Southeast Asia and as a showcase for Chinese soft power*"⁴¹ to "...with its growing influence on world and Asian affairs in recent decades, Beijing continues to display an interest in keeping Cambodia as close to China as possible;" and "*for his part, Hun Sen treats China as the most credible protector of his regime*"⁴².

Since both countries mutually benefit from their comprehensive strategic partnership, there is no reason to expect a reversal, at least not in the near future. If Ream does, in fact, become China's first naval base in Southeast Asia, it would mark a new highpoint in their bilateral relations and significantly change the power balance in the region. That said, the Cambodian government remains cautious about over-reliance on a single power. In recent years, Cambodia has sought to forge Free Trade Agreements with major Asian powers such as South Korea, Japan and India. It has also, since 2021, indefinitely postponed its annual military drills with China.

With all these dynamics in play, a somewhat discordant and tense axis of alliances is beginning to emerge in the region. The US and its regional allies continue to exert pressure on Cambodia to reconsider its military dealings with Beijing and be more transparent about the Ream Naval Base. Vietnam, traditionally an ally of Cambodia, is slowly but surely aligning with the US on the issue of Chinese involvement in Cambodia's defence modernisation. The Vietnamese island of Phu Quoc is extremely close to Ream and a Chinese military presence there is understandably perceived as a serious security threat. Vietnam's concern presents the US with an opportunity to better its relations with Vietnam, which is a longstanding strategic goal. The US has occasionally

³⁸ Charlie Campbell, "A Chinese Naval Base in Cambodia Signals a New Era of Competition in the Asia-Pacific Region", *Time*, 7 June 2022. <https://time.com/6185021/china-cambodia-ream-naval-base/>

³⁹ Philip Heijmans, "U.S. Sanctions Cambodian Officials Over China-Linked Base," *Bloomberg Asia Edition*, 11 November 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-11-11/u-s-sanctions-cambodian-officials-over-china-linked-navy-base>.

⁴⁰ Bangkok Post, "Angry Hun Sen orders US weapons destroyed," 10 December 2021, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/world/2230015/angry-hun-sen-orders-us-weapons-destroyed>.

⁴¹ Kheang Un and Jing Jing Luo, "Cambodia in 2019", *Southeast Asian Affairs*, (2020), p. 125.

⁴² Sorpong Peou, "Cambodia in 2018: A Year of Setbacks and Successes", *Southeast Asian Affairs*, (2019) p. 113.

sent its naval ships, including its aircraft carrier group, to Vietnamese ports, and engaged with senior members of Vietnam’s political and military hierarchy on such occasions.⁴³

How might a tactical scenario look in a region defined by this US-Vietnam and Cambodia-China axis? If PLA naval ships were to be deployed at the Ream Naval Base, a US Carrier Strike Group (CSG) positioned astride the mouth of the Gulf of Thailand — just about 200 nm wide at its narrowest point — would effectively leave the Chinese ships stranded in Ream. With constant US overtures towards Hanoi and other Gulf littorals, a tactical scenario such as the above seems entirely plausible and serves to clearly illustrate the dynamics of the power projection strategies and emerging alliances in the region.

Policy Options for India in Support of National Interests

The Indian Navy has always been an active instrument of Indian diplomatic outreach towards Southeast Asian countries as part of the India’s ‘Look East’ policy, followed by the more comprehensive ‘Act East’ one.

In particular, India and Vietnam have had a vibrant bilateral relationship for more than half a century. The two countries have robust political, military, and economic engagements, predicated upon the mutual complementarities of their respective national interests. In December 2020, the Prime Ministers of both nations adopted a historic “*Joint Vision for Peace, Prosperity and People*” policy document to guide the future development of these bilateral relations.⁴⁴ In fact, the Indian Maritime Doctrine 2009 mentions the South China Sea as a secondary area of Maritime interest for India.⁴⁵ The Indian Navy’s warships regularly call at Vietnamese ports as part of their overseas deployments. A review of these visits over the last decade (**Table 2** refers) indicates that they have become an annual feature and demonstrates the close navy-to-navy relations between India and Vietnam.

Year	Indian Navy Ships	Vietnamese Ports visited
2010 (30 May - 2 June)	INS Ranjit and INS Kulish	Ho Chi Minh City, Haiphong
2011 (19 July, 28 July)	INS Airavat	Nha Rong Port, Ho Chi Minh City, Haiphong
2012-2013 (31 Dec 12 - 3 Jan 13)	INS Sudarshini	Da Nang

⁴³The first US aircraft carrier to make a port call in Vietnam after the Vietnam war was the USS Carl Vinson, in March 2018. It was followed by a five-day visit by USS Theodore Roosevelt to Danang port in March 2020. It was also speculated that the currently deployed US carrier Ronald Reagan would visit Vietnam in July 2022. See Radio Free Asia, “US aircraft carrier to visit Vietnam as Western allies stage war games,” 05 July 2022, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/vietnam/us-aircraft-carrier-to-visit-vietnam-as-western-allies-stage-wargames-07052022021627.html>

⁴⁴ Indian Ministry of External Affairs, “India-Vietnam Relations,” June 2021, https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Vietnam_new2021.pdf

⁴⁵ Indian Maritime Doctrine, Indian Navy, 2009. <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/sites/default/files/Indian-Maritime-Doctrine-2009-Updated-12Feb16.pdf>

2014 (August)	INS Shivalik	Hai Phong
2015 (October)	INS Sahyadri	Da Nang
2016 (30 May - 3 June)	INS Satpura and INS Kirch	Cam Ranh
2017 (23 September)	INS Satpura, INS Kadmatt	Hai Phong
2018 (27 September)	INS Sahyadri	Da Nang
2019 (29 Oct - 1 Nov)	INS Sahyadri	Da Nang
2020 (25 December)	INS Kiltan	Nha Rong Port, Ho Chi Minh City
2021 (15 August)	INS Ranvijay and INS Kora	Cam Ranh
2022 (24 - 26 June)	INS Sahyadri, INS Kadmatt	Nha Rong Port, Ho Chi Minh City

Table 2: Indian Navy Warship Port Calls in Vietnam – 2010 Onwards

Source: Authors' compilation from various news reports

India could leverage its regular presence in Vietnamese waters and proximate seas to build collaborative frameworks, structures, and develop Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for the collection of hydrological data, Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), underwater surveillance, and aerial reconnaissance. An augmentation of the Vietnamese aerial reconnaissance capabilities would enable the monitoring and profiling of all ships that transit through the Vietnamese maritime zones. Similarly, an underwater domain awareness project predicated upon the laying of seabed sensors across the mouth of the Gulf of Thailand would ensure that no submarines can proceed in or out without being detected. With its sizable maritime training infrastructure and established prowess in sonar, remote-sensing satellites, space-based positioning systems, and hypersonic anti-ship missile technologies, India can support Vietnam in securing its maritime interests against external threats. Developments such as these will significantly restrict the capability of the PLA Navy to conduct operations, clandestine or otherwise, in the Gulf.

In summary, furthering the traditionally strong India-Vietnam ties ensures mutually beneficial outcomes for both countries against a common challenge. While the effect of such synergistic collaboration may not be immediately apparent, it will certainly constrain Beijing's capacity to leverage the Ream Naval Base as a means of gaining influence and projecting power in the sub-region.

Conclusion

The developing informal alliances between Cambodia and China and US-Vietnam are playing out in an international theatre where the power dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region have gained much significance and attention in recent years. The perceived decline of American influence,

juxtaposed against the rise of China, India, and other select nations, has significantly altered the power structure, allowing new players to jockey for supremacy. China views this as a grand opportunity to become the major maritime power in the Indo-Pacific and challenge US hegemony.

While it may well be in Cambodia's legitimate national interest to modernise its defence capacity, it must take into account the regional and international concern being generated by Chinese involvement in the Ream Naval Base. Given its strategic and foreign policy limitations and the geopolitical consequences of over-reliance on Beijing for military modernisation, Cambodia cannot afford to jeopardize its relationships with its ASEAN neighbours and friendly Indo-Pacific nations such as Japan and Australia. It would do well to remember the tragedy of its Cold War history where it was a mere pawn on the superpower chessboard, and safeguard against alliances that could jeopardise not only its own national security but the entire region's peace and stability as well.

There is no doubt that both, Beijing and Phnom Penh, aim to reap mutual benefits from their close relationship as 'ironclad friends'. However, if China actually aims to establish a naval base there — as the world believes — then it must factor in the geopolitical, military and diplomatic implications of such a move in the immediate Gulf of Thailand littoral, the South China Sea, and the greater Indo-Pacific region.

While China also benefits from an 'ironclad friends' relationship with Cambodia, it must similarly take into account the significant levels of mistrust it elicits from the ASEAN group due to longstanding territorial and maritime disputes. Its aggressive posture and non-negotiable stance have further widened the internecine fault lines. Although it's economic centrality to Southeast Asia means that those nations remain eager to expand their economic ties with China, they will hesitate if doing so comes at the expense of their autonomy. Ream might well be the perfect launching point to China's ambition of building new military bases in the Indo-Pacific but it also places China in direct confrontation with the common desire of Southeast Asian nations for an 'open and inclusive' regional order, where freedom of the seas is guaranteed — a desire that is supported by all the other stakeholders in the Indo-Pacific region, including India

Views expressed in this article are personal and attributable solely to the authors themselves.

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