



Received: 12 September 2025

Revised: 30 October 2025

Accepted: 30 October 2025

NAVIGATING GREAT POWER RIVALRY: CAMBODIA'S STRATEGIC NEUTRALITY AND THE GEOPOLITICS OF THE REAM NAVAL BASE MODERNIZATION

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(This article belongs to the Theme 1: Humanities and Social Sciences for Sustainability)

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Abstract

This study investigates the complexities of Cambodia's foreign policy amid the intensifying United States-China strategic rivalry, specifically analyzing the geopolitical implications of the Chinese-funded modernization of the Ream Naval Base and employing a qualitative research design with thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews from diverse stakeholders—including scholars, diplomats, and activists—the paper examines how Phnom Penh navigates its constitutional commitment to "permanent neutrality" amid the pressures of great-power competition. The findings reveal a critical paradox: while Cambodia strives for strategic autonomy and strict adherence to a rules-based order, its heavy reliance on Chinese economic and military assistance, particularly for the Ream upgrade, has strained relations with Washington and raised concerns regarding regional stability. The study argues that Cambodia's maneuvering is not merely a choice between alignment and non-alignment but a survival strategy driven by domestic regime security and economic necessities. Ultimately, the research highlights the precarious dilemma faced by small states in the Indo-Pacific, suggesting that Cambodia seeks to maintain an equilibrium in which it can leverage Chinese support without alienating the U.S. export market, which remains essential to its sustainable development.

Keywords: Cambodia Foreign Policy, US-China Strategic Rivalry, Ream Naval Base, Permanent Neutrality, Small State Diplomacy

Citation Information: Chhorn, P., & Siriwato, S. (2025). Navigating Great Power Rivalry: Cambodia's Strategic Neutrality and the Geopolitics of the Ream Naval Base Modernization. *Asian Interdisciplinary and Sustainability Review*, 14(2), Article 35. <https://doi.org/10.14456/aisr.2025.46>

Introduction

Small states such as Cambodia often struggle to safeguard their sovereignty and security amid global power dynamics and rivalry. While its foreign policy has historically swung between neutrality, major power alliances, and isolation, Cambodia was entangled in decades of civil war, instability, and genocide. Once again, it continues to navigate the challenge of maintaining independence in international politics (Cheunboran, 2021). Nations shape foreign policy to protect territorial integrity and political independence, promote economic and social development, and strengthen their global standing. A core aim is to guard against threats from foreign powers or non-state actors that could undermine national security. Policy decisions begin with assessing domestic and international conditions, followed by determining objectives, evaluating options, and implementing through departments such as foreign affairs, trade, defense, and aid (Ahmed, 2020).

Cambodia's foreign policy presents a unique case study of a small state navigating the complex dynamics of great power rivalry. This paper examines the challenges and opportunities Cambodia faces in balancing its relations with the United States and China, while pursuing the modernization of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF), particularly the upgrade of Ream Naval Base, and promoting economic stability and development. Furthermore, the paper provides insights into Cambodia's navigation of its permanent neutrality policy in global politics, despite limited capabilities, and explores how the country strives to survive in a deteriorating rules-based global order. The ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) raised concerns over the escalating strategic rivalry between the United States and China, warning that it could undermine the country's sovereignty and its longstanding policy of permanent neutrality (Cambodian People's Party, 2023).

Cambodia's adherence to the principles of the United Nations (UN) and ASEAN is both strategic and principled. The 'independent' pillar reflects Cambodia's desire to pursue a foreign policy that is free from external influence, prioritizing the interests of its people and the region. The 'rule' pillar signified Cambodia's aim of maintaining a neutral and non-aligned foreign policy, as outlined in Article 53 of the country's constitution. This approach underpins Phnom Penh's adherence to international law, which is crucial to the survival of smaller states such as Cambodia (Bong, 2023b). Therefore, Cambodia condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine, co-sponsored UN resolutions against the aggression, and affirmed its commitment to sovereignty and a rules-based global order (Rim, 2023). Previous studies have often accused Cambodia of granting the PLA exclusive access to the Ream Naval Base, citing no concrete evidence, such as an alleged secret military agreement between Cambodia and China. Allegation that Chinese funding for military modernization could compromise Cambodia's policy autonomy. Such narratives often overlook Cambodia's legitimate pursuit of enhanced security capabilities, as exemplified by the modernization of Ream Naval Base. This paper examines how these developments shape Cambodia's foreign policy toward the US and China, arguing that such claims are either politically motivated or reflect Cambodia's entanglement in great power rivalry.

This thesis applies the model of three main Levels of foreign policy analysis to explain the characteristics of Cambodia's foreign policy and its relations with China and the United States. The framework comprises the Individual, State, and System (or Global) levels of analysis. The individual-level analysis highlights how leaders' personalities, experience, and emotions shape foreign policy. Emotional states like anxiety or joy can alter strategies, while frustration or satisfaction often sustain them. Impaired emotional processing can hinder even simple decisions, underscoring the vital role of emotions in policymaking (Morin & Paquin, 2018). The State-level analysis examines how internal factors, such as political systems, economies, and cultural values, shape a nation's foreign policy. Governance structures, from authoritarian regimes to democracies, along with ideologies and interest groups, play a central role in

shaping state behavior (Rourke, 2008). The systemic level of analysis focuses on how global norms, institutions, and alliances shape international relations. Major events such as the Bolshevik Revolution, China's rise to communism, and postcolonial independence movements have redefined global power dynamics and shaped national foreign policies (Bojang, 2018). Although Cambodia's desire to modernize the Ream Naval Base, funded by China, has raised tensions with the U.S., which suspects a secret deal granting China's PLA long-term access. This development has become a key flashpoint in the growing China-U.S. rivalry for regional influence (Poling, 2022). Cambodia's 2022 Defense White Paper, which also mentioned the Ream base upgrade, cited maritime security and the protection of economic routes as strategic priorities; however, the base's upgrade tests Phnom Penh's diplomatic balancing act between China and the U.S. (Policy Pulse, 2022). The Royal Cambodian Navy (RCN) is often portrayed as weaker and less equipped than its neighbors, Thailand and Vietnam. Upgrading the Ream Naval military port facilities and capabilities would enable more effective monitoring of extensive coastal infrastructure development, promote economic growth, and enhance marine border security (Bong, 2023a). China will "gift" Cambodia two Type 056C corvettes by 2025. The donation will build on earlier military aid from the 2000s, which included 14 patrol boats to combat piracy, smuggling, and other transnational crimes (Chou, 2024). In 2012, ASEAN's failure to issue a joint statement at its 45th foreign ministers' meeting in Cambodia exposed institutional limitations in its role as a regional connector and mediator. The growing rivalry between the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy and China's Belt and Road Initiative has challenged ASEAN's centrality, with frameworks like the Quad and BRI increasingly taking the lead in shaping regional dynamics (Paijuntuek & Pairoh, 2024)

Ream base, situated on the peninsula of Cambodia's Sihanouk province along the Gulf of Thailand, holds geostrategic value for the PLA due to its proximity to the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea. The waterways are critical to global trade; approximately 70 percent of China's energy supplies pass through these routes, making them critical to Beijing's maritime and economic strategy (Gupta & Sharma, 2024). Cambodia faces challenges in managing its diplomatic relations with both the US and China. Cambodia relies on the US as a vital export market while depending on China for FDI inflow and other essential forms of assistance (Agnihotri et al., 2022). Cambodian PM Hun Manet addressed the difficulties stemming from the ongoing geopolitical rivalry between the US and China, warning that such tensions could undermine the rule-based global order and weaken multilateralism. These external pressures test Cambodia's commitment to maintaining permanent neutrality, a non-aligned stance, and an interdependent, rules-based foreign policy (Council for the Development of Cambodia, 2023).

Cambodia's growing dependence on China for economic assistance, security cooperation, and political support has strained its relationship with the U.S., creating complex diplomatic challenges. Cambodia's strategic approach toward China has shifted from hedging to bandwagoning, largely driven by Hun Sen's priority of sustaining the CPP, evolving domestic political conditions, and perceptions of U.S. criticism and involvement in Cambodia's internal affairs (Doung et al., 2022). Cambodia's continued efforts to uphold permanent neutrality and implement a strategy of "minimizing foes and maximizing friends," Cambodia appears increasingly drawn into Beijing's sphere of influence. At Nikkei Asia's Future of Asia Forum in 2021, Hun Sen expressed this reliance, stating, "If I do not rely on China, who will I rely on? If I do not ask China, who am I to ask?" (Agnihotri et al., 2022). Cambodia's domestic political dynamic plays a major role in shaping the country's foreign policy. While CPP is widely recognized for its pro-China stance, Cambodia's only viable opposition, CNRP, is known for its pro-US stance. The CNRP stands to support the US's democratic initiative, including human rights promotion and anti-corruption measures. While the CNRP aims to reduce Cambodia's dependence on China and to enhance diplomatic relations with the US and

other Western countries, the CPP has maintained a pro-China stance, reflecting a significant divergence in their foreign policy strategies (Doung et al., 2022).

The US officials claimed that Cambodia-China military-to-military cooperation, particularly the Ream Base upgrade project, presents a potential security threat to the United States interests and its allies in Southeast Asia. The U.S. also repeatedly accused Cambodia of secretly allowing a Chinese PLA presence at the Ream base, asserting that this would jeopardize regional stability and weaken ASEAN's position (U.S. Department of State, 2020). Cambodian leaders denied claims of a secret base deal, citing constitutional bans on foreign military bases and a policy of neutrality. However, a PLA presence could enhance China's regional influence and challenge the U.S., making Cambodia's balancing act between the two powers crucial to its stability and development (Agnihotri et al., 2022).

China and the U.S., as strategic rivals, could pose significant challenges to Cambodia's development, security, and access to vital assistance. Cambodia must navigate creative diplomatic paths, ensuring neither power feels alienated. China, in particular, plays a dominant economic role, serving as the Kingdom's largest foreign investor and a key backer of major infrastructure projects, including transportation networks and hydropower facilities. Through the BRI, China has channeled billions into Cambodia's economy, making the Chinese market the second-largest destination for Cambodian exports (Lim, 2023). Cambodia exports approximately 40 percent of its total exports, mainly apparel, footwear, and travel goods, to the U.S. market, making the U.S. the largest export destination, accounting for approximately \$8.9 billion in exports. In the last three decades, the US assistance to Cambodia has been roughly \$3 billion, covering essential areas like health, education, food security, and clearance of unexploded ordnance and landmines (U.S. Department of State, 2022). Over the past decades, Cambodia-China relations have reached their highest point, with both sides announcing a new era characterized by their "most treasured ironclad friendship" and the establishment of a "China-Cambodia Community with a Shared Future. China has pledged unwavering support for Cambodia's national political agenda and firmly opposes any foreign interference in its internal affairs, including its independence, security, and development (State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2023).

Cambodia canceled an annual military exercise, known as Angkor Sentinel, with the US army and began a joint military drill, called Golden Dragon, with the Chinese PLA (Chhengpor, 2018). Critics observe that Cambodia risks falling into a 'debt trap' or becoming a client state of China, amid strained Western ties and growing competition among major powers for regional influence (Chhengpor, 2021). Cambodia's alignment with China stems from two key factors. Internally, the CPP government seeks economic growth through Chinese-funded projects to reinforce political stability. Externally, Cambodia relies on China's support to strengthen its position in Southeast Asia (Tongtagorn, 2022).

Cambodia - U.S. relations have soured, driven by American concerns over democratic backsliding and human rights violations in Cambodia. This led to sanctions and diplomatic strain. The bipartisan "Cambodia Democracy and Human Rights Act" targets individuals undermining democracy and condemns Chinese military influence, particularly alleged attempts by the PLA to establish bases in Cambodia (Markey et al., 2023). The CPP-led government launched a series of crackdowns on media outlets, NGOs, dissolved the opposition CNRP, and arrested its leader, Kem Sokha, for alleged treason, accusing U.S. involvement in an attempted overthrow (Paddock & Wallace, 2017). The Cambodian government portrayed its crackdown as defeating a "color revolution," but faced international condemnation. The U.S. denied involvement and imposed visa restrictions on 52 CPP officials (Chhengpor, 2017). The "Cambodian Trade Act 2019" urged a review of Cambodia's GSP trade privileges, citing election concerns and growing ties to China. Despite government appeals, the duty-free status, vital for key exports, remains suspended (Suy, 2021).

The US seeks to counter China's rising influence in Cambodia through aid, trade incentives, and military cooperation. Cambodia-US relations are due to Washington's ongoing criticism of Cambodia's democratic and human rights record. The trust gap and China's dominant presence continue to shape the bilateral ties. From Cambodia's perspective, it is less strategically important to U.S. interests in Southeast Asia than regional neighbors such as Vietnam and Thailand (Cheunboran, 2021). Cambodia cannot afford to distance itself from either power, as both relationships are highly critical to Cambodia's national development and stability. The strong relationship between China and Cambodia has enormously contributed to Cambodia's economic development and bolstered the Kingdom's national security. Cambodian policymakers attempted to improve their image and foster better relations with the US by engaging a US-based public relations firm to promote "positive understanding and shared interest". However, these efforts alone are insufficient (Kimseng, 2022).

This paper examines the characteristics of Cambodia's permanent neutrality policy and the challenges it faces. Policymakers in Phnom Penh now increasingly face provocation in balancing their diplomatic relations with the US and China, whose strategic rivalry for regional dominance has intensified. The deterioration of Cambodia-US diplomatic relations has also been influenced by Cambodia's ambition to modernize its coastal naval base in Preah Sihanouk province, with the financial assistance from China. As a small state, Cambodia appears to have limited diplomatic leverage, given its reliance on Chinese FDI and security assistance, while the US remains the largest market for Cambodian exports. This research paper also examines how Cambodia's pursuit of modernization of the Ream Naval Bases, financed by China, influences its trilateral diplomatic relations with China and the US. Particularly when policymakers in Washington, D.C., are concerned that China's growing influence in Cambodia could undermine U.S. interests in the region. The research objective of this thesis is to examine the characteristics of Cambodia's policy of permanent neutrality in its foreign policy, and how it serves the nation's interests, while investigating how the modernization of Cambodia's Ream Naval Base, financed by China, influences its trilateral foreign relations with China and the United States.

Three definitions are needed to clarify the discussion. The first term is foreign policy, defined as the approach by which governments or other foreign entities manage their diplomatic relations with other nations or entities. Foreign policy aims to achieve goals that reflect its values and identity on the regional and global stages within the international system. The second term is permanent neutrality, defined as a political status in which a state commits to maintaining neutrality and non-alignment in present or future conflicts, except in cases of self-defense. This policy prohibits a country from joining military alliances, participating in wars, or entering into agreements that could potentially draw it into hostilities. The last term is the upgrade or modernization of Ream Naval Base, which can be interpreted as an effort to reinforce the capability of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF), including navy, air force and air defense system, enabling more effective control over Cambodia's maritime zone and air space, and incorporating equipment with a range of advanced weaponry and defense capabilities.

Research Methodology

Participants were selected based on their expertise and experience in Cambodia's foreign policy and human rights. The study employed a qualitative research methodology, with interviews conducted using a semi-structured protocol. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the procedures outlined in the research instrument and the analytical framework for addressing the research questions. By adopting a thematic approach, the study aims to provide a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the topic under investigation.

To conduct this study, 10 participants were invited to share their insights, experiences, and knowledge regarding several key topics related to the characteristics of Cambodia’s foreign policy. The subtopics include Cambodia’s foreign policy direction, the modernization of Ream Naval Base with Chinese funding, and the complex tripartite relationship among Cambodia, the US, and China. Participants were divided into three groups: academic scholars, human rights activists, and politicians/diplomats. Participants A and J are research and academic scholars who currently hold senior positions at the government-affiliated Royal Academy of Cambodia (RAC). The institute promotes multidisciplinary research, fosters collaborative initiatives, and develops human resources through education to provide policy recommendations to the Royal Government of Cambodia, informed by scientific research. Participants B, C, and D are foreign scholars specializing in Cambodia's foreign affairs, global governance, international relations, and both traditional and non-traditional security. While Participants B and D are citizens of the United Kingdom, Participant C holds dual citizenship of Cambodia and the US. All three have either published academic works or demonstrated research interests in Cambodia’s foreign affairs and have provided commentary on both traditional and non-traditional issues in reputable international media outlets covering peace and conflict. Participants E and F are also scholars who frequently appear in local and international media, commenting on either Cambodia's foreign affairs or social issues. Both participants appear to hold critical views of Cambodia's domestic and foreign policies. Participants G and H have both been actively involved in Cambodia’s political and diplomatic affairs. Participant H previously held a senior position in the now-outlawed CNRP before founding his own political party. Participant G, meanwhile, served as a high-ranking official in Cambodia’s Ministry of Industry, Mines and Energy, a member of the National Assembly, and ambassador to Japan. Participant I is a prominent human rights advocate whose work focuses on addressing concerns about intimidation and freedom of expression in Cambodia. Throughout his career, he has faced public condemnation and alleged intimidation.

Table 1 Participant’s Information

No	Name	Position	Experience	Institution
1	A	Senior Scholar	Over 10	Royal Academy of Cambodia
2	B	Senior Fellow	Over 10	S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies
3	C	Lifetime member	Over 12	CFR/Arizona State University
4	D	Operation Director	Over 10	EyeWitness Project
5	E	Scholar/Analyst	Over 10	Social Issue Commentator
6	F	Scholar/Analyst	Over 10	Foreign Policy Commentator
7	G	Politician/Diplomat	Over 20	Cambodian Center for Regional Studies
8	H	President/Founder	Over 10	A Political Party in Cambodia
9	I	Senior Staff	Over 15	LICADHO (Human Rights Advocate)
10	J	Senior Scholar	Over 10	Royal Academy of Cambodia

To protect participants’ identities and privacy, scholars have been labeled A, B, C, D, E, F, and J, while politicians and diplomats have been labeled G and H. The human rights advocate has been labeled as I. The interviews were conducted between March and June 2025.

Research Findings

The analysis of the research findings has provided insights into the current tripartite relationship among Cambodia, the United States, and China. The findings explain Cambodia’s foreign policy posture and motivations, as well as the ongoing diplomatic and geopolitical tensions among the three countries. This section is divided into two main parts of analysis. The first part examines Cambodia’s foreign policy of permanent neutrality and its potential to serve

its national interests. The second part focuses on the modernization of Ream Naval Base, financed by China, and its influence on Cambodia's trilateral relations with the US and China. Cambodia's foreign and security policy rests on two pillars: constitutional neutrality and strategic cooperation with external partners. Limited domestic capacity drives its dependence on international support, while Chinese military aid to upgrade Ream Naval Base raises concerns about regional surveillance and U.S. influence. Navigating the U.S.-China rivalry remains a challenge for Cambodia's development and security. Like many small states, Cambodia invokes the principle of permanent neutrality (Article 53) to protect its autonomy and avoid entanglement in great-power politics. Its condemnation of Russia's invasion of Ukraine signals a commitment to sovereignty and rules-based order. However, growing close alignment with China has cast doubt on its neutral stance. This study highlights how a small Asian state like Cambodia balances superpower dynamics while pursuing internal stability and sustainable development. Strengthening trust between Cambodia and the U.S. could offer a perspective on how a small state manages its foreign affairs in international relations

Cambodia's Foreign Policy Characteristics

Cambodia is a small state with limited room to maneuver in its foreign policy. Around the world, many small and medium powers have adopted permanent neutrality as a strategic policy, a beacon of hope for safeguarding their sovereign independence while also allowing them to maintain their foreign policy autonomy. Cambodia is no exception. Due to its geopolitical location, Cambodia is particularly susceptible to entanglement in great-power rivalries and regional conflicts between the US and China. This section will be divided into three parts: Cambodia's permanent neutrality policy, its attitude toward the rules-based international order, and its foreign policy priorities and directions.

1) Cambodia's permanent neutrality policy: Cambodian policymakers are mandated to formulate a foreign policy principle consistent with Article 53 of the Constitution, which stipulates that Cambodia shall pursue a policy of permanent neutrality. As Participant B, C, E, and G stated, maintaining a neutral stance is commonly adopted by many countries worldwide, including small and middle powers, particularly in Southeast Asia, which serves as a meeting point for major powers such as the US and China. Cambodia's neutrality policy aims to prevent entanglement in superpower rivalries, particularly the US and China. ASEAN members generally seek to avoid turning the region into a theater for strategic competition between those superpowers. Participant B emphasized that some ASEAN member states remain skeptical of Cambodia's claim to permanent neutrality. While Participant C argued that Cambodia remains a member of ASEAN and the UN, its voting patterns, military ties, and economic dependence suggest a shift away from true neutrality. This doubt is further fueled by the ruling CPP-led government's refusal to acknowledge the Permanent Court of Arbitration's jurisdiction over the South China Sea dispute, even before the court's ruling. Such a stance has deepened regional concerns. Hun Sen stated that the tribunal's jurisdiction was "politically motivated" and that Cambodia would not acknowledge the decision (Xinhua, 2016).

Neutrality in foreign policy enables small states to safeguard their sovereignty by refraining from participation in international conflicts. For Cambodia, permanent neutrality is a strategic choice amid intensifying U.S.-China rivalry. Enshrined in Article 53 of its Constitution, this principle prohibits foreign military bases and reflects Cambodia's commitment to "not bringing fire into the house", as stated by Participant J. As a peacetime neutral state, Cambodia retains autonomy in defining its neutrality policy, guided by historical conventions and a defensive security posture aimed at preserving territorial integrity (Greminger & Rickli, 2023). As codified in the Paris (1856), Hague (1907), and London (1909) conventions, traditional neutrality laws, defined by abstention, impartiality, and prevention, apply only during wartime. States that adopt neutrality in peacetime become "permanent neutral" and are not subject to legal constraints, thereby allowing them to define their own neutrality policies. To ensure

credibility in future conflicts, such states must proactively demonstrate their commitment to neutrality through a coordinated approach across foreign policy, security, diplomacy, trade, and economic strategy (Greminger & Rickli, 2023). Cambodia's policy of permanent neutrality affords strategic flexibility, enabling it to adapt to evolving geopolitical tensions while safeguarding sovereignty. As global conflicts, such as those involving Russia, Iran, and Israel, strain multilateralism and the rules-based order, small states like Cambodia face pressure to seek protection from major powers. While Cambodia's constitution permits military assistance within collaborative frameworks, it prohibits hosting foreign military forces. The Cambodia-China relationship exemplifies how small states pursue security guarantees, yet neutrality remains a vital tool for avoiding entanglement in broader conflicts.

2) Cambodia's Attitude Towards Rules-Based International Orders: Cambodia has demonstrated a firm commitment on multiple fronts to engage and defend the rules-based international order, as evidenced by its response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its deployment of demining experts to help clear landmines laid by invading Russian forces. Participant A noted that, as a member of both ASEAN and the UN, Cambodia has upheld the core principles of these organizations. He further observed that Cambodia's position on complex policy issues often reflects the views of national policy decision-makers, as evidenced by its condemnation of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Cambodia refused to remain neutral regarding Russia's violations of the rules-based international order. When Russian President Vladimir Putin launched a "special military operation" on February 24, 2022, in eastern Ukraine, a move widely regarded as an invasion, it threatened global peace, security, and the principles of the rules-based international order. An overwhelming majority of the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution condemning Russia for its invasion of Ukraine and calling for its immediate withdrawal (Deutsche Welle, 2022).

Phnom Penh must have strong support for the respect for national sovereignty, particularly along its borders with regional powers such as Vietnam and Thailand, where relations can oscillate between affection and animosity. Cambodia's response to the breach of the rules-based global order is consistent with Participant C's viewpoint on the role of international organizations, including ASEAN and the UN. ASEAN provides Cambodia with regional legitimacy and economic benefits, while the UN offers diplomatic cover for sovereignty concerns. Russia's aggression against neighboring Ukraine has reinforced security concerns among small states, including Cambodia. Consequently, the Kingdom refused to remain neutral and strongly condemned the violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity (Rim, 2023). Cambodia opposes secession and territorial annexation by other states, and this position reflects the commitment of a small state to endorsing the rules-based international order.

Cambodia cannot remain neutral in Russia's invasion of Ukraine. If a country were to commit similar violations against Cambodia, who would come to our rescue? Showing respect for Ukraine's territorial sovereignty would mean respect for Cambodia's sovereignty. We must condemn the invasion, said Hun Sen (Fresh News, 2022).

Following months of full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia declared the annexation of four occupied Ukrainian regions, Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia, in September 2022. In response, the UN General Assembly overwhelmingly condemned Russia's attempt to incorporate these territories illegally and called for an immediate reversal of the seizure (Lederer, 2022). Cambodia denounced Russia's attempt to secede those four Ukrainian territories and vowed to endorse the UN resolution against Russia's action (Chanritheara, 2022). As Ukraine has intensified its efforts to mobilize international support amid Russia's invasion, Cambodia has taken further steps by advocating for Ukraine's accession to the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC). This regional accord promotes peaceful relations and prohibits the use of force among member states. Hun Sen voiced endorsement for Ukraine's pursuit of ASEAN Sectoral Dialogue Partner status. In a further display of solidarity,

Cambodia also pledged demining assistance by offering training to Ukrainian personnel (Hun Sen, 2022).

In discussions with Participants G and I, Cambodia appears to have deviated from universal norms, including respect for human rights and democratic principles, by restricting political freedom, freedom of expression, and press freedom. In 2017, the Supreme Court of Cambodia, under the influence of senior figures within the ruling CPP, outlawed the country's only viable opposition CNRP party, citing allegations of involvement in a US-backed conspiracy to overthrow the government. Most importantly, neglecting these principles can have long-term repercussions. If Cambodia aspires to become a respected nation with a credible foreign policy, it must engage more meaningfully with these fundamental values.

3) Cambodia's Foreign Policy Priority and Directions: Cambodia's foreign policy prioritizes security and stability, a narrative consistently promoted by the ruling CPP, while economic and diplomatic interests follow. Participant E has shared similar perspectives, emphasizing that such priorities have shaped Cambodia's foreign policy decisions. In pursuit of its strategic objectives, Cambodia has leaned toward China and emerged as a firm supporter of several Chinese global initiatives, including the One China Policy, the BRI, the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, and the Global Civilization Initiative (The Commissioner's Office of China's Foreign Ministry in the Hong Kong S.A.R, 2023). Cambodia and China have reached an unprecedented level of partnership, marked by their "ironclad friendship" and a shared commitment to a future together. China firmly backs Cambodia's sovereignty and opposes foreign interference in its internal affairs (State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2023).

Cambodia's domestic political landscape plays a pivotal role in shaping the country's foreign policy orientation. The ruling CPP is widely recognized for its alignment with China, whereas the main opposition, formerly the CNRP, has shown greater support for the United States. The CNRP expressed backing for US-led democratic initiatives, including efforts to promote human rights and combat corruption. In contrast to the CPP's China-leaning approach, the opposition sought to reduce Cambodia's reliance on Beijing and foster stronger ties with Washington and other Western partners. These divergent priorities underscore a fundamental split in the country's foreign policy vision between its dominant political factions (Doung et al., 2022).

Participant C cautioned that Cambodia's growing dependence on China poses a significant challenge to its autonomy, warning that such overreliance may constrain the country's ability to act independently. Concerns about the potential undermining of sovereignty have been amplified by reports of a potential Chinese military presence at the Ream Naval Base and by deep economic entanglements that risk turning Cambodia into a client state rather than a sovereign actor. Although the new government under Prime Minister Hun Manet, as reported by Participant D, has advocated adopting a multi-aligned diplomacy, Cambodia has sought to improve relations with countries such as Japan, South Korea, Australia, and the US. Given the volume of FDI, rising foreign debt, and several projects under the BOI model, China has become deeply invested in Cambodia. The Communist Party of China (CPC) and the CPP have repeatedly pledged mutual support, not only through broader bilateral cooperation, but also through direct party-to-party engagement. This collaboration has primarily focused on security, economic development, and cultural exchange. China has become a key strategic ally for Cambodia, consistently affirming its commitment to safeguarding the country's territorial integrity, sovereignty, and national security.

In addition to financial and political backing, China has extended security assurances to the Hun Sen family and the CPP, reinforcing the party's political resilience. China's foreign policy focuses on an elite-oriented diplomatic strategy that prioritizes engagement with ruling elites, political leaders, influential figures, and state institutions in partner nations (Lim, 2023). The

relationship between Cambodia and China could serve as a clear example. Participant H argued that Cambodia should adopt a more transparent and open approach to international relations, exercising caution when publicly criticizing major powers, particularly the United States and other Western nations. Meanwhile, Cambodia's foreign policymakers must acknowledge the growing importance of its relationship with China, which remains central to its strategic approach. When Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Phnom Penh in 2024, Yi reaffirmed China's commitment to supporting the security and legitimacy of the CPP, with particular emphasis on safeguarding Hun Sen and his family. Following the meeting, former Prime Minister Hun Sen reiterated this endorsement in a Facebook post on April 22, 2024:

"...His Excellency [Wang Yi] pledged that China would strengthen cooperation with the new government, including security assurance for Samdech [Hun Sen] and his family. The two parties, the CPC and the CPP, collaborate to share intelligence to counter potential threats posed by color revolutions. This agreement aligns with previous commitments to deepen bilateral cooperation" (Hun Sen, 2024).

Since the launch of China's BRI, Cambodia's economy, road infrastructure, energy sector, and bilateral relations have all improved. This is no coincidence; these developments can be attributed to the 'ironclad' partnership between China and Cambodia. During Xi Jinping's April 2025 visit, Cambodia and China committed to advancing the development of an "all-weather Cambodia-China Community with a Shared Future." As part of this initiative, the two countries agreed to launch a 2+2 dialogue framework, enabling their respective foreign and defense ministers to coordinate positions on key issues more effectively and strengthen bilateral cooperation. They also emphasized the continuation of the Cambodia-China Intergovernmental Coordination Committee to facilitate ongoing collaboration (Press and Quick Reaction Unit, 2025).

This diplomatic approach has become a symbol of China's international outreach and has been instrumental in cultivating political trust and deepening ties with Cambodia's leadership, particularly the Hun Sen family. Cambodia's foreign policy risks compromising its autonomy unless policymakers diversify its strategic orientations. Chinese support for the ruling CPP has proven especially vital during periods of heightened scrutiny by Western governments, particularly the United States, regarding issues such as human rights, democratic governance, and the rule of law. The CPP-led government has increasingly relied on Chinese investment, aid, and diplomatic endorsement to bolster its legitimacy (Lim, 2023). Participant F argued that Cambodia risks drifting into the orbit of a major global power, an alignment the CPP party views as a strategic guarantor of its continued dominance or power, and cautioned that distancing from a democratic, multilateral political system and domestic checks and balances could leave Cambodia vulnerable to interference from rival powers, China, and the U.S. For instance, China may leverage Cambodia's ASEAN membership to advance its regional strategic goals. Cambodia's democratic and human rights record led the U.S. to impose sanctions and economic restrictions (Poling, 2022).

Cambodia's Controversial Ream Naval Base Upgrade

Some scholars, politicians, and policymakers have criticized Cambodia over the possibility that a portion of the Ream Base might be offered for the exclusive use of the PLA or have explicitly accused Cambodia of hosting PLA forces. Critics have also urged the Cambodian government to demonstrate transparency by allowing a full inspection of the Ream Naval Base. This section is divided into three parts: the author's argument refuting allegations of a secret military deal between China and Cambodia; the distrust between Cambodian and US policymakers; and Cambodia's anxieties about being entangled in the China-US geopolitical rivalry.

1) No Secret Military Base Deal: Participant G described the accusation that Cambodia is hosting a Chinese military presence at the Ream Naval Base as a "myth," aligning with Participant A, who characterized the allegation as "politically motivated". An unnamed U.S.

official told the U.S.-based news outlet The Wall Street Journal that Cambodia and China had signed a secret agreement granting the PLA access to the Ream Naval Base in exchange for the construction of new infrastructure. The official also claimed to have seen an early draft of the agreement, which would permit Chinese troops, weapons, and ships to use the base for 30 years, with automatic renewal every 10 years thereafter (Poling, 2022). Hun Sen strongly denied the claims and publicly challenged U.S. officials to release the alleged agreement, stating that, in the absence of evidence, the accusation amounts to dishonesty. His remarks reflect Cambodia's frustration over persistent allegations and its demand for transparency from critics (Fresh News, 2025). Several senior US figures, including former Vice President Mike Pence, former Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, former Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, and General Ronald Clark (Commander of the US Army Pacific) and Admiral Samuel J. Paparo (head of US Indo-Pacific Command) have, on separate occasions, expressed concerns over the possibility of Cambodia granting exclusive use of the base to the PLA.

Some speculations, including those by Participant F, suggest that Cambodia should allow concerned parties to inspect all sections of the Ream Naval Base. This approach, he argued, would address the concerns of all parties and could help reset the U.S.- Cambodia relationship. (RFI Khmer, 2025). Participant E emphasized that Cambodia should go beyond verbal denials and provide concrete evidence to refute allegations of a PLA presence. While allowing foreign naval visits may signal transparency, more substantial actions are needed. At the conclusion of the Cambodia-China Golden Dragon exercise, Defense Minister Tea Seiha clarified that international vessels may dock at the Ream Naval Base. However, access must be limited to approved areas, with restricted zones designated for national security and classified information (RFI Khmer, 2025). No country should permit foreign military forces to inspect its military capabilities. Participant E mentioned that Ream Nava Base should not be subject to full inspection. That would violate, or permit a violation of, Cambodia's independent sovereign territory, unless such a demand poses an immediate threat, in which case Cambodia may have no choice but to comply. Small states must adapt and survive. Another allegation is that Chinese military aid helped build a command-and-control center, install radar systems to enhance air and sea surveillance, and develop an air defense system (Yaacob, 2024). If proven true, PLA could gain a strategic foothold for its defense posture in a key location within Southeast Asia.

2) Distrust between Cambodian - US Policymakers: Washington has consistently criticized the CPPPP's government for undermining democratic norms and the rule of law. In turn, Cambodian officials remained cautious of U.S. intentions, perceptions of political interference, and accusations of inconsistent support for democracy. During the 2nd ASEAN Summit, US President Biden urged Hun Sen to pursue democratic reforms and raised concerns about China's expanding influence in Cambodia. Despite the CPP's sweeping victory in the 2023 election, the process was widely condemned for stifling opposition. The U.S. imposed restrictions halting certain aid programs to Cambodia (Lum, 2023). Participant I identified the dissolution of the CNRP as a turning point in U.S.-Cambodia relations, prompting concerns about the erosion of human rights and democratic standards. In response, the US and EU urged Cambodia to restore universal norms. At the same time, Washington's criticism prompted sanctions and the bipartisan "Cambodia Democracy and Human Rights Act," which targets rights violators and condemns alleged PLA military ambitions in Cambodia (Markey et al., 2023). The Cambodian government accused the U.S. of backing a CNRP-led conspiracy to destabilize the CPP, claiming support from the U.S.-linked organizations. These accusations culminated in the Cambodia Supreme Court's verdict to outlaw the CNRP and ban 118 of its leaders for five years (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Cambodia, 2018).

Participant F noted that China views Cambodia as moving away from democracy and multilateral politics, instead prioritizing the CPP's hold on power. The move has constrained Cambodia's strategic options and increased the likelihood that it will align with China's interests in its rivalry with the U.S. In response, US Senator Ted Cruz and Chris Coons introduced the "Cambodian Trade Act" that proposed a review of Cambodia's eligibility for duty-free exports under the Generalized System of Preference. Travel goods under this scheme accounted for 12 to 30 percent of Cambodia's export volume to the U.S., while also urging Cambodia to address concerns about declining electoral transparency and to deepen ties with China (Suy, 2021). Washington has opted for punitive measures, which yielded limited success. In September 2020, the US government imposed Global Magnitsky sanctions on the Union Development Group (UDG), which had been granted a license for development projects in Koh Kong province, on the grounds of corruption and environmental degradation. Subsequently, additional sanctions under the same act targeted Cambodian Navy Commander Tea Vinh and Defense Ministry Director-General Chau Phirun for allegedly illicitly profiting from construction activities at Ream Naval Base. These sanctions were followed by Cambodia's decision to demolish US-funded facilities within the Ream Naval Base (Bismonte, 2020).

3) Cambodia Amidst China - US Strategic Regional Rivalry: In 2024, during Former US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's visit to Phnom Penh, Hun Sen urged the US and other major powers to avoid drawing Cambodia into their geopolitical rivalries or "use it as a battlefield". His appeal followed allegations that Cambodia had granted the PLA exclusive access to the Ream Naval Base (Narim, 2024). These concerns were amplified by the 2022 U.S. Defense Strategy, which identified China as the foremost threat to U.S. national security and criticized its "coercive and assertive" behavior, underscoring intensifying strategic competition in the region (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022). Participant E noted that Cambodia has been drawn into the U.S.-China strategic rivalry, straining its relations with Washington. The U.S. remains concerned about China's growing economic influence in Cambodia, which could lead to a reassessment of bilateral relations. These concerns have intensified scrutiny of the Chinese-financed Ream Naval Base upgrade project, which is funded by the state-owned Tianjin Union Development Group (Poling, 2022).

Participant D stated that Cambodia's key traditional security concern is the risk of becoming a staging ground for regional conflict, particularly involving China over the South China Sea or Taiwan. The Ream Naval Base is regarded as a strategic asset in such a scenario, keeping Cambodia central to major-power security assessments. The rising China - U.S. competition in SEA has challenged Cambodia's stance of permanent neutrality and its ability to make independent foreign policy decisions. While Cambodia relies heavily on China for aid and military support, this dependence may conflict with its economic reliance on the US as a major export destination (Var, 2017).

The US has further alleged that China is actively seeking to reshape the Indo-Pacific region and the broader international system to advance its strategic interests. Beijing has employed economic leverage and military assertiveness to pressure neighboring states, erode US alliances, and expand its influence. China's military expansion in the South China Sea has raised concerns about regional stability. US officials contend that China's growing military influence is intended to secure dominance in the Indo-Pacific and displace the US as the leading global power (U.S. Department of Defense, 2018). The CPP's 2023 Extraordinary General Assembly highlighted the challenges to Cambodia's sovereignty and neutrality posed by escalating rivalry. The party also noted other external conflicts, such as the Russia-Ukraine war, the crisis in Myanmar, tensions in the Korean Peninsula, the Taiwan Strait, and the South China Sea (Cambodian People's Party, 2023). Participant E stated that the increased US military presence in the Asia-Pacific strengthened the US-Vietnam alliance, prompting closer

China-Cambodia ties and raising US concerns. If tensions escalate, the Ream Naval Base could confer a strategic advantage on China by reducing the time required for naval deployments to the South China Sea. Following the US withdrawal of military aid in 2018, China expanded its support with a commitment of \$588 million between 2018-2021, including \$100 million for defense. By 2024, total Chinese aid to Cambodia had reached \$17.7 billion, filling the strategic gap left by the U.S. (Lim & Try, 2024).

Conclusion

Cambodia's foreign and security policy rests on two pillars: constitutional neutrality and strategic cooperation with external partners. Limited domestic capacity drives its dependence on international support, while Chinese military aid to upgrade the Ream Naval Base raises concerns about regional surveillance and U.S. influence. Navigating the U.S.-China rivalry remains a persistent challenge for Cambodia's development and security. Like many small states, Cambodia invokes the principle of permanent neutrality (Article 53) to protect its autonomy and avoid entanglement in great-power politics. Its condemnation of Russia's invasion of Ukraine signals a commitment to sovereignty and a rules-based order; however, growing alignment with China has cast doubt on this neutral stance.

To sustain this delicate balance, Cambodia must uphold its neutral foreign policy and commitment to the rules-based international order while addressing ongoing human rights and democratic concerns. Reducing external vulnerability requires reinforcing democratic multilateralism and engaging constructively with U.S. concerns over the Ream Naval Base through innovative diplomacy. Simultaneously, given the strong Cambodia-China partnership, greater transparency regarding the base's modernization is essential to ease international anxieties and foster global accountability. Finally, strengthening trust requires a recalibrated approach from Washington. The U.S. should prioritize quiet diplomacy over public criticism, recognizing Cambodia's sovereignty and Prime Minister Hun Manet's background. By deepening military cooperation and fostering constructive engagement instead of relying solely on pressure, the U.S. can help Cambodia maintain its strategic autonomy and offer a model for managing international relations in this complex era.

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Data Availability Statement: The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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