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ASIA

# Deal for Naval Outpost in Cambodia Furthers China's Quest for Military Network

Use of Ream naval base would help China's military project power across a broad swath of Southeast Asia

By [Jeremy Page](#), [Gordon Lubold](#) and [Rob Taylor](#)

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SIHANOUKVILLE, Cambodia—China has signed a secret agreement allowing its armed forces to use a Cambodian navy base near here, as Beijing works to boost its ability to project military power around the globe, according to U.S. and allied officials familiar with the matter.

The pact—signed this spring but not disclosed by either side—gives China exclusive rights to part of a Cambodian naval installation on the Gulf of Thailand, not far from a large airport now being constructed by a Chinese company.

Some details of the final deal were unclear, the officials said, but an early draft, seen by U.S. officials, would allow China to use the base for 30 years, with automatic renewals every 10 years after that. China would be able to post military personnel, store weapons and berth warships, according to the draft.

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Military operations from the naval base, airport, or both, would sharply increase Beijing's capacity to enforce territorial claims and economic interests in the South China Sea, to threaten U.S. allies in Southeast Asia and to extend its influence over the

strategically important Malacca Strait.

Chinese and Cambodian officials have denied there are any plans for a Chinese military base in the country. “Nothing is happening like that,” Phay Siphon, a Cambodian government spokesman, said on Friday. He called it “fake news.”

U.S. and allied officials, however, said a deal had been done that, while stopping short of a full-scale Chinese base, would give Beijing its first dedicated naval staging facility in Southeast Asia and a second outpost in what the Pentagon sees as a Chinese quest for a global network of military and dual-use sites.

Washington is “concerned that any steps by the Cambodian government to invite a foreign military presence in Cambodia” would disturb regional peace and stability, said Emily Zeeberg, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Embassy in Phnom Penh.

Surrounded by dense jungle and mangroves, and overlooked by a Buddhist temple, the naval installation in question, at Ream, covers about 190 acres and includes two facilities built with U.S. funding and used by the Cambodian navy, and a single pier where a dozen patrol craft dock.

According to the early draft of the base accord, China would build two new piers—one for Chinese use, one for Cambodian, U.S. officials said. U.S. officials said further dredging would likely be needed for the base to host larger Chinese navy ships.

The draft also allows China's personnel to carry weapons and Cambodian passports and requires Cambodians to get Chinese permission to enter the 62-acre Chinese section of Ream, U.S. officials said.

The U.S.-funded facilities at Ream are to be relocated to allow “further infrastructure development and security enhancement,” according to a July letter from Cambodia's defense ministry to the U.S. seen by The Wall Street Journal.

U.S. officials are debating whether Washington can persuade Phnom Penh to reverse its decision on Ream. Some U.S. officials and analysts believe the U.S. wielded too many sticks in its relationship with Cambodia, frequently criticizing the government's human-rights record, and didn't offer enough carrots.

A senior Pentagon official said the U.S. wanted Cambodia to be a “preferred security partner,” but other officials said it appeared Phnom Penh had turned toward Beijing. There was no response to requests for comment from the White House.

U.S. and allied counterparts are also lobbying Cambodia not to allow China's military to



Sihanoukville has attracted large numbers of Chinese tourists, and millions of dollars of investment, mostly going into casinos and beachfront hotels.

use the large new airport being built at Dara Sakor, about 40 miles northwest of Ream, by a private Chinese company with a 99-year lease on a sparsely populated stretch of coastal Cambodia.

Recent satellite images show that work has progressed rapidly in the past year. The site now features a 2-mile-long runway—big enough for Boeing 747s and Airbus A380s, and for China's long-range bombers and military transports.

The images, according to U.S. and allied officials, also show what appear to be preparations for the runway turns needed for quick takeoffs and landings by military aircraft, particularly fighters. The company building the airport has said it is purely commercial.

Warplanes flying from Dara Sakor would be able to strike targets in Thailand, Vietnam, Singapore and elsewhere.

China opened its first military outpost abroad, in the east African nation of Djibouti, in 2017, to facilitate operations around the Indian Ocean and Africa. Since 2014, China has also built seven heavily fortified artificial islands—three with airstrips—in the South China Sea.

A Cambodian outpost would further cement China's grip on a country whose authoritarian government is backed by Chinese loans, investment and diplomatic clout, as Beijing increasingly challenges Washington for economic and military influence across the developing world.



Dara Sakor international airport is located in a national park in sparsely populated Koh Kong province and will be Cambodia's largest.

Prime Minister Hun Sen of Cambodia, in power for decades, denied there was any plan for a Chinese military base in Cambodia in November, after U.S. Vice President Mike Pence wrote to him expressing concern over the issue.

Cambodian media quoted Mr. Hun Sen repeating that denial on Monday, saying his country's constitution forbade the establishment of foreign military bases.

Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang, at a regular news briefing on Monday, cited the fresh Cambodian denial, adding that China and Cambodia cooperated "in various areas" and that their cooperation was transparent.





Dara Sakor International Airport in Koh Kong province, Cambodia.

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China's defense minister denied in June that Beijing was establishing a military presence in Cambodia. China's defense ministry didn't respond to a request for comment.

Until shortly before China opened its Djibouti outpost, which it calls a naval "logistics support facility," Beijing repeatedly denied having any plans for bases abroad.

Combining Cambodian facilities with China's military outposts in the South China Sea, "you basically have a triangular perimeter boxing in all of mainland Southeast Asia," said Charles Edel, a former adviser to the U.S. secretary of state who is now an analyst at the United States Studies Centre in Sydney.

A Chinese presence at either facility would also "greatly complicate" the ability of the U.S. to come to the aid of Taiwan if Beijing decides to attack the island, a U.S. official said, as some American forces would arrive via the Strait of Malacca or the outer reaches of the South China Sea.

Ream has been embroiled in great power competition before, attracting both U.S. and Soviet attention in the Cold War.



A model of the Dara Sakor project shows hotels, luxury housing and at least one container port, as well as the airport.

The U.S. bombed the base at the tail end of the Vietnam War in 1975 after China-backed Khmer Rouge forces took power in Cambodia and seized a U.S. container ship. After Vietnam invaded Cambodia in 1978, the Soviet navy visited Ream repeatedly and helped repair and upgrade facilities there, deepening its waters.

Washington sought to rebuild ties with Cambodia in the past decade, resuming aid in 2007, carrying out joint military exercises and financing the Ream facilities. Tensions have mounted again as Hun Sen has tightened his grip on power.

China has made rapid inroads meanwhile, bringing in millions of tourists and billions of dollars of investment and loans; much of it is part of Beijing's Belt and Road global infrastructure plan and focused around the deep-water port of Sihanoukville, about 10 miles from Ream.

U.S. officials said they first learned about negotiations between China and Cambodia over Ream about a year ago, prompting the letter from Mr. Pence.

Their suspicions grew early this year when Cambodia's defense ministry first requested, then refused, U.S. funding to renovate the facilities at Ream, according to letters between the two governments seen by the Journal.

Recent satellite images show that an area inside the Ream base has recently been cleared in apparent preparation for construction work. A bridge at the entrance is also being repaired.

Meanwhile, a state-run Chinese construction company is working on Dara Sakor airport, which is due to open next year and will be Cambodia's largest despite being in a

province with a population of 200,000 people.

The Chinese company behind the new airport, Union Group, has said it is part of a \$3.8 billion plan to develop the 36,000 hectares (89,000 acres) of land—including about 20% of Cambodia's coastline—that it leased in 2008.



The Dara Sakor resort has failed to attract many visitors since opening, and one of its main buildings, seen here, is undergoing renovation.

The company's showroom in Phnom Penh displays plans to build five-star tourist resorts, golf courses, marinas, two container ports, high-tech industrial zones and a "new city" of luxury residences.

So far, however, the single casino and golf resort completed in 2014 has failed to attract many tourists. On a recent visit, seven of about 100 hotel rooms were occupied, staff said, and little progress has been made on other promised facilities.

Union Group representatives say they underestimated transport difficulties and believe the airport will bring in 300,000 Chinese visitors annually. Western officials are skeptical.

The Cambodian runway "seems far longer than needed for any normal commercial purpose or aircraft, and certainly longer than necessary for any tourist development envisaged there," an Australian intelligence official said.

"We have some concern that China is using the same playbook used in the South China Sea, creating facts on the ground until such time that it is too late for anyone to object."

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