

The US-Cambodia Relationship: A Work in Progress

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United States-Cambodia relations began when US Envoy Donald Heath presented his credentials to King Norodom Sihanouk on July 11, 1950. Yet more than 60 years later, the relationship is still very young, and in its current form began only in 1991 after the signing of the Paris Peace Agreements that helped put an end to more than two decades of bloodshed due to civil war and genocide. Since that time, Cambodia has achieved a number of significant successes. Halving the HIV/AIDS prevalence rate; reducing the number of casualties from mines and unexploded ordnance from 4,320 in 1996 to 185 in 2012; and cutting the poverty rate from roughly 47 percent in 1993 to about 28 percent in 2011 are accomplishments in which Cambodia takes great pride, and the United States was a valued partner in each of these efforts. Given where Cambodia was 20 years ago, it has come a long way. Given where Cambodia needs to be, however, it still has much to do. The United States remains committed to supporting Cambodia as it continues to integrate into the region and the world community and meet the challenges that still lie before it.

Strengthening Democracy and Human Rights

Cambodia stepped into the world spotlight during its 2012 chairmanship of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). While much of the international attention focused on perceptions that the Cambodian government was overly protective of Chinese interests in the region, particularly on the contentious South China Sea issue, the ASEAN events provided unique opportunities for high-level US engagement with Cambodia's leadership. In November 2012, President Barack Obama became the first incumbent US president to visit the Kingdom of Cambodia when he attended the East Asia Summit (EAS) in Phnom Penh. Other high-level visitors during the year included Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, and US Trade Representative Ron Kirk. The increased attention to Cambodia highlighted the potential for our bilateral relationship but also threw into stark relief the challenges that remain to forging closer ties. As President Obama made clear in his meeting with Prime Minister Hun Sen on the margins of the EAS, lack of progress on issues related to democracy and human rights is an impediment to the United States and Cambodia developing a deeper bilateral relationship.

We are committed to a stable Cambodia, and it is clear that civic participation, respect for human rights, rule of law and accountable governance are key to Cambodia's future growth. For this reason, the highest US priority in the country is cementing past democratic gains and building a sustainable democracy. We continue to support Cambodia's development through programs that foster demand for democratization and political accountability. Over the past year, we have increased our already robust work on human rights by engaging our government counterparts in a sustained press for progress on these issues. Cambodia's national elections in July will be an important test of the

government's commitment to promoting multi-party democracy. We are looking to the Cambodian government to take concrete steps to ensure that the election and the campaign that precedes it are free and fair and allow for vigorous, peaceful and public debate.

Cambodia's vibrant civil society is a key partner of the Embassy in advancing these goals. The Embassy's newly created NGO Advisory Council, composed of Cambodia's leading civil society activists, is providing us with advice for constructive engagement on human rights and democracy. This collaboration has led to specific recommendations for action by the Cambodian government, including fully implementing a moratorium on economic land concessions, reforming the judiciary, respecting freedom of expression and association, and enacting electoral reform. Civil society members must be allowed and encouraged to carry out their vital work without threat of retribution, burdensome legal restrictions, or harassment. The United States remains focused on these issues, and the Cambodian government is well aware that human rights abuses will not escape our attention.

Another key group in our efforts to promote peace and prosperity in Cambodia is the nation's young people. Nearly 70 percent of the population is under the age of 30, while only nine percent is 55 and older. Recognizing the importance of the youth demographic to attaining long-term US strategic goals in Cambodia, the Embassy created an Ambassador's Youth Council to engage Cambodian youth directly. Through the Council, we are working to cultivate young leaders from around the country, engage Cambodian youth on topics of interest to them, and receive input on US programs and policies in Cambodia. The United States is strongly committed to Cambodia's success, and it is with this youth focus that the United States continues to work to help Cambodia become a more democratic and secure regional partner.

Our Continuing Commitment

Our commitment to Cambodia is strong. In 2012, the Mission directly managed approximately \$75 million to assist Cambodia's development in a wide range of areas, including health, climate change and food security. US-supported programs have been critical to assisting Cambodia in reaching its 2015 Millennium Development Goals for reducing mortality of children under the age of five, maternal mortality, and HIV/AIDS prevalence. Our long-time engagement on legacy of war issues—demining, explosive ordnance disposal, and prisoner of war/missing in action recovery efforts—remains active and productive. We are working to prevent trafficking in persons (TIP) through programs that raise awareness among youth and provide critical support to victims, and to combat the worst forms of child labor by decreasing social exclusion and promoting economic opportunity for vulnerable families. At the same time, representatives of US law enforcement agencies are working with their counterparts to build Cambodia's capacity to combat TIP and other crimes, while educating them on the importance of respect for human rights.

Similarly, we are using our military-to-military relationship to assist in the reform and professionalization of the Cambodian military forces, using every training opportunity

and exercise to promote the values of human rights and civilian control. This military-to-military outreach has enabled Cambodia to move quickly from being a recipient of UN peacekeeping to being a valued provider of international security, while humanitarian assistance efforts such as Pacific Partnership 2012 have brought lifesaving benefits to tens of thousands of Cambodians. Other areas of progress include capacity building for disaster relief, border and maritime security, and countering transnational threats. These efforts protect US interests by facilitating our response to regional contingencies, while also contributing to Cambodia's security and encouraging the country's military institutions and norms to evolve in line with international standards.

To maximize taxpayer return on the entire range of US government-funded programs in country, including those funded and/or run out of offices in the United States or regional hubs such as Thailand and Vietnam, our Embassy has put into place a comprehensive assistance coordination architecture. In line with Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review recommendations, the USAID Mission Director has been designated as the post's Senior Development Coordinator, with responsibility for ensuring all US government-funded programs in country are coordinated and aligned with US goals and objectives. A key part of this effort was conducting a comprehensive inventory of all US government-supported programs in Cambodia, which is allowing the Mission to identify and eliminate redundancies, increase synergies among complementary programs, and ensure that the US government receives full credit for its entire range of investments. Our Embassy is in the process of producing an integrated strategic plan, which will capture every program in the inventory and align them along priority foreign policy goals and objectives. This assistance coordination architecture is proving effective in managing the varied streams of funding and programs used to support Cambodia's development and could serve as a model for US embassies worldwide.

Promoting Prosperity

Over the last decade Cambodia has enjoyed substantial economic growth, and its gross domestic product (GDP) grew at an average rate of about eight percent. We want to help sustain this growth in a manner that will allow all Cambodians to share in the benefits. Much of Cambodia's growth can be attributed to increased trade, primarily with the United States. The United States is Cambodia's largest trading partner, with approximately 41 percent of all Cambodian exports (primarily garments) destined for the United States. Total bilateral trade between Cambodia and the United States contributes about 21 percent to Cambodia's GDP, more than any other single country. Only about three percent of Cambodia's total imports, however, come from the United States, and investment between our countries is minimal. We want to encourage economic growth that is inclusive and brings more people—especially women—into the formal economy. To achieve this, we are working to support an effective industrial relations system, to extend rights to a broader range of workers, and to increase bilateral trade and investment to make our economic relationship broader and more multi-dimensional. Greater transparency, reduced corruption, and faster government approval of business-related paperwork would do much to encourage additional US trade and investment, to the benefit of both Cambodia and the United States.

Challenges Remain

As we continue our engagement with Cambodia, we are mindful of the challenges Cambodia still needs to overcome to reach its full potential. Political space for the opposition, civil society, and some media remains limited, and corruption and weak institutions impair the rule of law. Land disputes continue to be a high-profile problem linked to other concerns, including an opaque judiciary and insufficient protections for political dissent and free expression. Corruption is rampant and continues to hinder democratic processes and economic development, including US investment. Structural weaknesses are a further hindrance to economic growth. Infrastructure is poor and electricity prices are three times higher than in Vietnam. There are no dedicated air-cargo links, Cambodia's seaport is the most expensive in Asia, and poor irrigation systems have stunted the country's agricultural outputs. Little has been done to address Cambodia's low productivity rates, and employers complain about a shortage of skilled workers.

The challenge posed by Cambodia's growing but still weak economy cannot be overstated. According to the United Nations, every year between 250,000 and 300,000 young Cambodians enter the job market, but find limited options. These young entrants to the workforce need education, support, and the confidence of knowing that they are valued members of Cambodia's society. They need to see before them a path to opportunity that includes decent work and greater integration into the regional and global economy. With renewed progress, particularly on human rights and democratic development, these young Cambodians can meet their full potential, to the benefit of both our countries and the region.

Onward

The United States sees Cambodia as an important partner in a growing and increasingly vibrant region. We are determined to build a deeper, more effective relationship with Cambodia's government, civil society, business community, and young and increasingly engaged population. Although Cambodia's tragic history should not be an excuse for failing to address its current problems, that history does largely set the parameters for how fast it can evolve into the kind of nation and society we all hope it will someday become. Continual US engagement at all levels and in all fields will remain crucial for effecting the changes needed, particularly in securing democracy, transparency, accountability, and full respect for human rights. The United States is committed to helping Cambodia reach these goals and ensure peace, prosperity, and security for all its people, but there is no doubt that this effort remains a work in progress.