

## U.S. POLICY TOWARDS CAMBODIA AFTER THE END OF THE COLD WAR

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### Abstract

*After the demise of the Soviet Union, the U.S. gained a worldwide leadership position as a significant power in 20th-century international affairs. Second World War devastated ancient political systems, and dualistic world power, which emerged from the residues of the former, endeavored to establish a new image in the world. The entire world became a battlefield between the Soviet Union and the United States, particularly after the 1950s. This ideology-driven geopolitical conflict drew Cambodia into the portrait and caused it to compensate a high price as indemnity damage during the Soviet-American proxy war in Vietnam. In the global system, Cambodia found itself in a game that had neither been initiated nor been prepared. This study will outline Cambodia-U.S. relations from the baffling initial meetings to the devastating Cold War years and the restorative post-Cold War era.*

**Keywords:** US-Cambodia relations, Cold war, Military Co-operations, Economic and Financial Assistance

### Introduction

During the Cold War, U.S. geopolitical and security concerns largely influenced the evolution of Cambodian nationalism and government. However, France could not continue its support of a lengthy colonial conflict by 1954. The U.S.'s globalist, geopolitical, and strategic military inclinations progressively shaped the structure of Cambodia's government as it started to replace France militarily in Vietnam. Throughout the conflict, the political, military, and economic conditions brought about by American actions in the area contributed significantly to the rise to power of the Cambodian monarchy, military, and dissident parties. These organizations' rise to power was not supported by the rhetorical application of American democracy statehood. Instead, the political ascent was a by-product of American geopolitical and military policy during the Cold War. Ironically, after the Vietnam War, the violence that had characterized South East Asia throughout that conflict reached a peak.

Following Second World War, the U.S. started pressuring European nations to end their empires' colonial ties. European powers frequently hesitated to completely give up colonies crucial to their political and economic systems. In the framework of the Cold War, the political structure and ideologies of these countries were closely related to the geopolitical, ideological, and strategic objectives of rival superpowers. The National Security Council said in 1949 that restraining communism was a key component of American foreign strategy in the area. Doing this aimed to "develop sufficient military force in a few Asiatic non-communist countries to ensure domestic security and to prevent further incursion by communism."

Throughout the First Indo-China War, Cambodian nationalism was mainly suppressed. Although France gave King Sihanouk a semblance of independence over Cambodia in the middle of the 1940s, France retained ultimate control. Indeed, France was determined to hang onto its colonial territories, but the United States was more concerned with halting the spread of communism than colonization. Additionally, it is crucial to remember that the independence given to the monarchy of Cambodia was distant from its subjects. "The new accord, combined with Sihanouk's peremptory dismissal of the Assembly in September 1949, only encouraged internal Cambodian discontent," argues Kenton Clymer (Clymer, 2004). The political elite controlled the minimal role that the government was granted, keeping the bulk of Cambodians out of the political arena. The 1954 Geneva Convention also clarified the exclusion of specific communities within Cambodia. Dissident organizations in Cambodia and Laos were disregarded, despite the Viet Minh being recognized by the government of Vietnam (Clymer, 2004). As a result, early support for the political system in Cambodia tended to drift toward individuals who could most effectively reflect American anti-communist views rather than those who accurately represented Cambodia's diverse political spectrum.

Throughout the Cold War, globalism was the foundation of American policy towards Cambodia. Subsequent American administrations saw these emerging nations within an overwhelmingly constrained security framework rather than considering the nuances of the many South East Asian nationalisms. The nationalist rhetoric that the U.S. has previously preached was in stark contrast to this. The United Government would be compelled to win the loyalty of emerging states at any cost if they believed communism was a real threat. The support of authoritarian governments trumped legitimate democratization. In

supporting King Sihanouk's absolutist rule, "the United States thought that with a possible obstructionist administration out of the way, Sihanouk could shift his attention to eliminating subversive groups" (Clymer, 2004.)

Sihanouk was supposed to show tight loyalty to his American sponsors, although he was undoubtedly still motivated to increase Cambodia's independence. The Khmer people have inhabited Cambodia much longer than the United States has been in Southeast Asia. During this period, Cambodia has developed partnerships with its neighboring nations. The United States' cosmopolitan worldview overlooked these old links. Undoubtedly, Cambodia feared South Vietnam's infringement of its territorial sovereignty. Cambodia vented its anger diplomatically by recognizing communist China in reaction to the United States' support for South Vietnam's frequent border incursions (Clymer, 2004). Washington was outraged, but Sihanouk had a different perspective on the situation (Clymer, 2004). However, he also knew that robust enforcement undermined his dominance. This affected how the United States perceived Cambodia during the conflict. In actuality, most Cambodians understood that their financial and institutional requirements were subordinate to the United States' principal interest in Vietnam.

As American public support for the war's path began to erode, the U.S. adopted a more hostile stance towards Cambodia. This did not signify a significant shift in its stance toward Cambodia. Since the commencement of the conflict in 1965, a military solution to Cambodia's instability has been paramount. By the time President Nixon had been in office for over a year, the total amount of bombs dropped by the United States had reached approximately 500,000 tonnes. Nixon leaned more and more on attacking communist strongholds in reaction to his inability to utilize troops in Cambodia. Nixon almost grew obsessed with the bombing. In a telephone discussion with Henry Kissinger, Nixon instructs Kissinger to design a plan in which "every goddamn thing that can fly enters Cambodia and hits every available target." In essence, any regard for Cambodia's territorial or national integrity has been utterly overshadowed by U.S. security concerns.

The bombing and invasion of Cambodia had a dramatic effect on the political stability of the country's interior. Lon Nol, the military commander, deposed Sihanouk. Since the late

1960s, even Lon Nol could not stop the mounting dissent. A civil war had been waging in the countryside since 1967, with the communist Khmer Rouge gaining a significant foothold (Kiernan, 2002). The communist Vietnamese and Khmer Forces were pushed further into South Vietnam and Cambodia. Nation, encountering increasingly crowded regions. The bombing campaign drove a large number of individuals into the arms of the Khmer troops. At this juncture, the US was less concerned with Cambodia's internal dynamics than with the Vietnam conflict. Once again, the United States demonstrated that Cambodian nationalism and statehood were subordinate to its ultimate regional security plan.

After the Vietnam War, the Khmer Rouge overthrew the government of Lon Nol and established a communist regime. Throughout the conflict, the US occupied a crucial part in the Khmer Rouge's ascent. It fuelled civil war throughout Cambodia's border areas through persistent bombing and support for political persecution. In addition, its withdrawal left the Lon Nol administration defenseless and unable to defend itself. American ship Mayaguez was captured by the newly constituted Khmer regime in May 1975. It was the first confrontation between the United States and a South East Asian nation since the conclusion of World War

I. Despite Khmer assertions that they would free the captives, the United States replied with brutal force in an attempt to rescue them (Monchau, 2005). It was a show of power and a brazen effort to rectify Vietnam's shortcomings and bolster American confidence in the area. In a secret effort to rescue 39 hostages, 41 Marines tragically lost their lives (Monchau, 2005). It was quickly discovered that the Khmer had already freed these prisoners, which contributed to the failure of this expedition. The episode at Mayaguez is another illustration of the United States faulty globalist worldview during the Cold War. "Washington viewed the capture of the ship and her crew as a planned communist scheme, as opposed to a result of local nationalist beliefs" (Monchau, 2005). This globalist policy did not cease to exist despite its failure.

To combat Communist Vietnam, the United States would continue to take sides. Kissinger told the Thai Prime Minister in the fall of 1975 about the Khmer Rouge, "You should also inform the Cambodians that we will be their allies. The fact that they are violent thugs will not deter us, however. We are willing to enhance our contacts with them." Even after the war, security and geopolitical strategy remained the dominant concern of the United States,

despite the massively negative consequences this had for the prospects of peace and legitimate democratization in the area.

The United States failed to harness Cambodian nationalism throughout the Cold War properly. Instead, geopolitical and security considerations drove China's stance toward Cambodia. The United States read Indo-events China's through a globalist lens, neglecting the many subtleties and complexities of nationalism in the area. As the United States became mired in the Vietnam War, disrespect for Cambodian independence decreased. Concerns about military security dominated the policy conversation. The intensity of the bombing undermined the legitimacy of the government and strengthened support for the Khmer Rouge. The subsequent genocide was unspeakably horrible and was similarly confronted with obstinacy. The United States continued to assist organizations in balancing Vietnam's regional strength. The stark inconsistencies of the U.S. globalist viewpoint persisted long into the twenty-first century's last decades. On the one hand, the Cold War stemmed from a desire to preserve democracy. On the other hand, the policies of the United States suppressed the same principles for which it professed to be fighting.

## **Initial Confrontations**

The U.S. views Cambodia as a tiny but strategically significant nation in Southeast Asia due to its position, antiquity, and political contacts. Cambodia is a rising nation with a thriving market economy and a youthful and active population. Despite the difficulties and losses the mutual relations undergo, Cambodian society maintains a hopeful outlook. However, the initial American experiences with Cambodia and Cambodians were not very favorable. After the collapse of the Angkor Empire, Cambodia fell victim to its more powerful neighbors and regional rivalry. The time under the French protectorate, beginning in 1863, marked a departure from Cambodia's neighbors' continuous and piecemeal growth. His book, *The Land of the White Elephant*, was the first American account of Cambodia. While he described the temples as "stupendous" and "splendid," he used a considerably more negative tone when discussing the residents of the region (Clymer, 2004). Cambodia has seen several transformations, including the downfall and collapse of the domain, French colonialism,

and the effects of the Second World Wars. One thing, however, remained unchanged: the Cambodians' dread of extinction and their determination to control their destinies.

## **U.S. and Cambodia's relationship during the Cold War Years**

The Angkor Empire collapsed in the fifteenth century, and Cambodia was suspicious of its more giant neighbors, Thailand and Vietnam. The choices were defined by a desire for autonomy and a commitment to neutrality. Cambodian foreign policy has been profoundly influenced by the legends and history of the Khmer empire's collapse and final demise. In 1957, Penn Nouth, a notable Cambodian statesman, delivered a portion of a speech to the United Nations that exemplifies this point. When Cambodian civilization reached its zenith, around the twelfth century, it appeared inconceivable that such a vast and robust kingdom could endure such a protracted fall, he added. No victory is conceivable if the people in issue do not participate with conviction in the battle, that is, if these populations do not think that this effort will lead to their prosperity. Achieving genuine independence for these Indochina republics would require them to assume full responsibility for their roles in this conflict, which concerns the whole democratic world.

### **A. Neutrality Policy and a Peacetime Period of Observance (1955 to 1970)**

Cambodia joined the United Nations on December 14, 1955, following its independence from France in 1953. Cambodia's neutrality was subject to foreign and inside burdens, especially from the late 1960s to March 18, 1970, despite the country's commitment to preserving this stance. Cambodia was strategically subordinated in the continuous fight for supremacy in Southeast Asia during the Cold War because of its geographical location (Widyono, 2008). Despite external and internal problems in managing its international relations, Cambodia was deemed a peaceful country for seventeen years. As Cambacérés recounted in his book, the majority of Cambodians of older generations referred to this period (1954-1970) as the "Golden Age." At that period, the nation was renowned as the "Island of Peace" (Deth, 2016).

### **A. A time of conflict both inside the country and among its neighbors (1970-1991)**

Cambodia was engulfed in a horrific civil war and conflicts on March 18, 1970. From March 18, 1970, until April 17, 1975, the Khmer Republic had no neutrality. Cambodia was drawn into the fight between worldwide and provincial powers (Keller, 2005). During Cambodia's infamous "killing fields" period, about two to three million Cambodians were killed using mass forced labor, persecution, disease, or famine during the control of the Khmer Rouge. The dictatorship was infamous for being one of the worst human rights violators since World War II.

In contrast, by the time the United Nations launched its inquiry into the case in late 1978, the D.K. administration was on the verge of collapse, and the situation in Cambodia had altered dramatically. Cambodia was thus liberated from the dictatorship of the Khmer Rouge and called "The People Republic of Kampuchea" ("The State of Cambodia" or "SOC").

### **Involvement of the United States in the Peace Process in Cambodia (1979-1993)**

- **The Completion of Political Agreements Regarding the Cambodian Conflict (1979-1991)**

During the 1980s, major and ally nations pursued a political resolution to the Cambodian conflict through initiatives and diplomatic efforts (Widyono; 2008). All parties involved in the war, particularly those of major, provincial, and other forefront nations, pursued a connection with one or more Cambodian groups to find a resolution (Widyono, 2008). Real progress became apparent when Cambodians determined they were also prepared. The two days of historic meetings were crucial in breaking the impasse. However, the discussions required an additional two years to make advancement (Widyono, 2008).

- **The United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) (1992-1993)**

UNTAC was an unparalleled peacekeeping operation (PKO) in the history of the United Nations when it was founded. It was conceived as a complicated and multi-function operation with additional non-traditional responsibilities beyond the main terms of the Contracts. The

Mission was staffed with up to sixteen thousand military men and several thousand civilians. The procedure was costly, with Akashi noting that the budget was projected to surpass USD 1.8 billion - more than usual budgets at the time. The international community contributed the most financial backing for a U.N. peacekeeping mission ever at the time to help end the violence and reinstall a freshly elected administration of the war-ravaged nation through an UN-sponsored election.

- **Evaluation of the Functioning of the UNTAC**

After UNTAC's departure, there were conflicting valuations of Mission operating consequences. After its meeting, while lauding UNTAC's efforts, the Security Council described the Mission as a remarkable accomplishment of the United Nations. When the United Nations evaluated additional peacekeeping missions following defeats, such as in Somalia, Rwanda, and Bosnia, the supporting evidence for this judgment became more convincing. Then it could claim that its Mission in Cambodia was a success. However, most commentators thought that the Mission fell short of its objectives. They characterized the conclusion of UNTAC's terminated Mission as incomplete or faulty. The following were among the most prominent aspects of successful accomplishments: UNTAC successfully arranged the UN-sponsored election despite the Khmer Rouge's boycott of the electoral process. As a consequence of the Khmer Rouge's boycott, a few other commentators asserted that the Mission came dangerously close to collapsing (Alldén and Amer 2007). In conclusion, it is reasonable to conclude that UNTAC's 18-month operation was not entirely effective, although it was endowed with multiple varied tasks and an unduly ambitious mission.

## **Post-Cold War Relations**

- **Military Co-operation**

In July 1997, interactions between the U.S. and Cambodia were prohibited, but by 2004 many of the limitations had been loosened, allowing for an increase in military-to-military engagements with Cambodia. Regardless of the strain, both parties were still eager to continue a positive relationship. Angkor Sentinel was the first large-scale peacekeeping exercise conducted by Cambodia and the United States in July 2010. It took off in Phnom Penh with over 1,000 troops from 26 nations. Cambodia is hosting a multinational military drill for the

first time. In the same year, the Royal Government notified the U.S. Embassy in Phnom Penh that the U.S. Navy Mobile Construction Battalion that is also known as the Seabees was ordered to leave the country. The program started to end in 2008 and primarily engrossed on civilian construction, hospital, and school development projects was met with wonder and dismay by the US side, which conveyed regret over the end of a program whose outstanding achievements were a source of national superiority. The ultimate disappointment occurred when the United States began to enforce a visa block, mainly on members and their families of the Cambodian foreign policy apparatus. The Cambodian side replied by terminating assistance with the U.S. in the examination for missing Vietnam War soldiers and requesting that Peace Corps volunteers be withdrawn from Cambodia.

- **Economic Relations**

Despite the occasional diplomatic and political tug-of-war between Cambodia and the US, practicality won on the economic front, as seen by the figures. While commercial relations flourished and grew steadily, the United States' financial and humanitarian aid has been devoid of criticism, disagreement, and oscillations. Even though Cambodia became the first non-communist recipient of Chinese grant money when it received USD 22.4 million in 1956, "U.S. financial assistance programs predate Chinese initiatives; between 1955 and 1963, Washington provided USD 409.6 million in economic aid, primarily to repair the damage caused by the first Indochina War". Regarding the US-funded initiatives, Prime Minister Hun Sen said that the planned decrease would not impact the government because the money flows to NGOs and programs supervised by U.S. agencies and organizations. He continued, "If an additional USD 1 million in U.S. military funding were stopped, there

would be no problem. The last time they (the United States) withdrew our help, they planned to send us a hundred old trucks. The Chinese recognized this and supplied us with 257 trucks".

## **Country Overview in the Post-Cold War Multilateral Context**

- **Outside of the Scope of UNTAC**

Cambodia entered the post-UNTAC era in 1993 when the globe was just beginning to transition into the post-Cold War period. In the interim, though, peace had not yet wholly spread over the nation. There was a brief period of administrative instability between the two major administrative parties of the coalition government following the violent skirmishes of 5-6 July 1997, which aroused worldwide alarm. Again, ASEAN was requested to referee the issue, and subsequent U.N. action helped relieve the situation in the post-conflict era. The U.N. seat remained empty at the time (Widyono, 2008).

- **A Partnership with the United Nations on the National Level**

After the departure of UNTAC, the U.N. collaboration commenced with the conclusion of the repatriation of Cambodian refugees and displaced people. Cambodia has had five nationwide and four local/community council elections since the 1993 elections sponsored by UNTAC. To guarantee verifiable progress and accomplishments, including resource mobilization and coherence, the U.N. side established its coordinating structures within the U.N. system, referred to as the "U.N. Country Team-UNCT". The council for the Development of Cambodia (CDC) was established on the Cambodian side. Since 2007, the "Cambodia Development Cooperation Forum" has replaced this mechanism. The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) envisages Cambodia's economic progress to remain at seven percent in 2017-2018. (Khmer Times, 2017). Despite improvement, it was claimed that there are associated inadequacies, such as a community divide and other socio-economic issues that have given birth to new experiments in the context of the nation's continued growth.

- **Cambodia's Participation in several Multilateral Organizations**

In the 1993 elections supported by the United Nations, Cambodia reactivated its association with important global specialized institutions, such as the Bretton Woods institutions, to advance its integration into the international community.

**A ). WTO Membership**

Cambodia became a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO), marking a significant step in its integration into the global trade system in 2004. Cambodia, as a least developed country (LDC), was experiencing an economic revolution throughout the first decade of the new century, notably in the garment manufacturing sector. At the same time, trading under the

global quotas system was anticipated to terminate (Sok, 2005). The admission was a crucial component of Cambodia's agenda to encourage further growth, development, and poverty reduction through a trade-and-investment-based approach. At that time, the country's entry into the WTO had a governmental aspect. It provided a background globally recognized for Cambodia to carry out the compulsory significant programs.

**B ) Status of Membership and Related Activities in Other Multilateral Affairs**

In addition to the nation's assimilation into the WTO, Cambodian delegates from appropriate organizations participated in several multilateral diplomatic operations relating to the U.N. system. Cambodia has been chosen to serve in a variety of positions in several international organizations and associated organizations, including Vice-President of UNGA for two distinct periods (1994-1995 and 2001-2002). The United Kingdom will preside over the 11th Meeting of State Parties to the Ottawa Convention (or Landmine Ban Treaty) for 2011-2012. According to a UNDP report, Cambodia is among the ten most vulnerable nations to climate change. On April 22, 2016, the nation was one of the earliest signatories of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change.

**C ) Peace, International Security, and Disarmament**

Promoting peace and maintaining international security are pillars of Cambodia's foreign policy. This stance is reflected in articles of the Constitution of 1993 that ban, among other things, "the production, use, and possession of nuclear, chemical, and bacteriological weapons" (article 54). Cambodia was a signatory to several international and regional accords concerning disarmament, weapons control, and nonproliferation. The Kingdom supported several measures to prohibit all criminal operations involving nuclear and associated materials, especially weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Cambodia is determined to enhance its anti-terrorism capabilities through regional and worldwide training and international collaboration. Due to the country's history of conflicts, Cambodia was renowned for its involvement in the battle to remove landmines. Since 1998, the nation has been an active signatory of the Ottawa Convention.

### **The Prospects for Relations**

Regarding the prospects of US-Cambodia relations, we must examine what each side expects from the other and the likelihood that those potentials will be realized in the current governmental and financial environment. Despite its tiny size, Cambodia is intentionally vital to the United States. Their interests include "counterterrorism, promotion of democracy, respect for human rights, trade facilitation, control of the spread of infectious illnesses, anti-trafficking measures, growth of civil society, and improved fiscal policies." Moreover, oil assets and China's rising power compel the United States to interact with Cambodia. Beginning with Obama's second term in office, the United States took a harsher position on human rights problems and began to voice its apprehensions more publicly and with more robust language, despite the stable rise in economic connections and expanding trade volumes. (Bulut and Serkan, 2017). Cambodia anticipates the continuance and expansion of commerce between the two nations. It is anticipated that the United States would focus less on Cambodian domestic events and more on country-to-country, government-to-government interactions. The Cambodian government applauded Trump's campaign and subsequent election because he was anticipated to be more business- and trade-oriented. The events demonstrated otherwise.

### **Conclusion**

There are different means to examine the intricate and multifaceted organization of foreign policymaking and its methods and doctrines in the U.S. However, it boils down to advancing ideals and also safeguarding their welfare. This is the certified saying of the United States that their leaders are frequently confronted with difficult decisions that pit value promotion against

the pursuit of self-interest. This constant clash between ideals and interests impacted American ties with other nations and the US. The fall and ultimate failure of the empire, the loss of territory and national pride, and existential challenges to the nation's very existence dictated Cambodia's destiny during the latter years of French control and in its ties with superpowers throughout the Cold War era. The contemporary U.S.–Cambodian relationship is characterized by economic realism, with human rights concerns prowling in the base. Considering the 60 years of the modern history of the association between the two nations, it is not unexpected that the association is fragile, marked by highs and lows whose course is not only controlled by the two countries but fashioned by time and a significant third party, China. Similar to the early 1960s, when ties worsened, Cambodia looked to China to balance and compensate for the United States. The gentle game of balancing between China and the United States is still present in Cambodia, despite the end of the Cold War. History is an excellent resource for determining what occurs when the equilibrium is lost. For the relationship to remain amicable and productive, it is in the best interests of both countries to adopt reasonable methods. Having experienced such adversity, Cambodia deserves nothing less (Clymer, 2004). The United Nations became one of the key players in the Cambodian peace process and beyond. The UNTAC experience shown the United Nations peacekeeping in Cambodia was incapable of resolving all conflict-related issues. Given the country's terrible history of war and violence over the last decades, none of these duties were simple to implement. Since the departure of UNTAC, Cambodia has made consistent strides in improving its political role and improving the country's capabilities in global affairs. Cambodia's efforts to identify the best tactics and prioritize core nation-wide interest's constant with legal principles and regional commitments would be aided by multilateral practices and the country's legacy, particularly in multilateral institutions.

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