

Cambodia Demolishes US-built Naval Facility

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For the second time, Cambodia has demolished a US-constructed naval facility at Ream Naval Base, operated by the Royal Cambodian Navy.

The facility, built in 2017, was a relatively small boat maintenance building.

US State Department-funded media outlet Voice of America in an article titled, “Cambodia Demolishes Second US-Built Facility at Ream Naval Base,” would note:

The Cambodian defense minister on Tuesday said that another United States-built facility at the Ream Naval Base had been demolished recently, confirming satellite images released by a think-tank early this week.

The article also noted:

The US Embassy in Phnom Penh on Tuesday expressed its displeasure at the demolition of facilities it had funded at the Ream Naval Base.

“We are disappointed that Cambodian military authorities have demolished another maritime security facility funded by the United States, without notification or explanation,” said US Embassy spokesperson Chad Roedemeier in an email.

US media and the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies who first broke the story have speculated that the move was made in preparations for Chinese-built facilities to take their place, though Cambodia itself has so far denied this.

Inroads by China in Cambodia, particularly if they were military in nature, would further check US attempts to reassert itself in the Indo-Pacific region. It would also provide China a strategic location to protect the passage of vessels engaged in commerce (mainly carrying Chinese-made goods abroad and raw materials back home) especially if progress is made regarding nearby Thailand and the much-discussed Kra Canal or an alternative land bridge that would allow ships to bypass the lengthy trip around Singapore and through the Malacca Strait more than 1,000 km to the south.

Explaining Cambodia’s Undeniable Tilt Toward Beijing

Whether or not Cambodia replaces US facilities with those built by China, one thing cannot be denied and that’s the hard pivot from West to East Cambodia has made in recent years.

The expanding ties between Cambodia and China have only been spurred further by coercive strategies adopted by Washington in an attempt to halt or reverse this trend. Similar pressure on Cambodia from the European Union has prompted statements from Phnom Penh openly vowing to replace any gaps in trade with further and closer ties with China.

The simmering tensions are best illustrated by an episode in late 2019 mentioned in a Reuters article titled, “Cambodian PM says China ready to help if EU imposes sanctions,” which stated:

China will help Cambodia if the European Union (EU) withdraws special market access over its rights record, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen said on Monday as he announced a 600 million yuan (\$89 million) Chinese aid package for his military.

More recently, the EU has continued attaching political obligations to economic relations with Cambodia, only further encouraging greater ties between it and nearby China.

DW in an article titled, “EU to slap sanctions on Cambodia over human rights,” would claim:

The EU “will not stand and watch as democracy is eroded,” the bloc’s top diplomat Josep Borrell said while announcing trade sanctions on Cambodia. The Asian country has been ruled by strongman Hun Sen for 35 years.

The article cites Kem Sokha and his disbanded political party as one key issue the West is pressuring Cambodia over. But what is not mentioned is the extensive US and European support that has created and directed Kem Sokha’s opposition party over the years, constituting foreign interference in Cambodia’s internal affairs, a matter Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen addressed directly, as the article noted:

The nation’s leader Hun Sen, who has ruled Cambodia since 1985, previously said that the country would “not bow its head” to EU criticism. He also said that it was more important to maintain independence and sovereignty than retaining trade privileges.

While both the US and EU have insisted this pressure is owed to “human rights concerns,” in reality the West has been funding and supporting opposition figures like Kem Sokha within Cambodia for decades in the hope of eventually ousting the current government in Phnom Penh headed by Prime Minister Hun Sen and replacing it with a pro-Western regime.

Snowballing Effect of Multipolarism

China’s offer of economic trade, investment, military hardware and infrastructure development absent of Western-style political interference has shifted the calculus in Phnom Penh increasingly in favour of its continuous shift from West to East.

What is working in Cambodia’s favour is the fact that China is rising economically both in the region and around the globe. At the same time, the West, who insists on adhering to its dated and coercive brand of foreign policy and international relations, is fading economically

and even militarily.

When nations like Cambodia express upon the global stage indifference to Western threats of sanctions and appear able or even willing to replace trade gaps left by Western stubbornness and coercion with greater trade with China, it sends a signal to other nations in the region and around the world that tolerating such stubbornness and coercion is no longer necessary.

As smaller nations once fearful of Western pressure and even retaliation begin slipping out from under the shadow of Washington's once formidable global hegemony, the process of transforming the world from a Western-dominated unipolar order to a more multipolar world will only accelerate further.

Cambodia's decision to knock down a rather simple structure shouldn't have been a news item in the West, but apparently the realization of just how much the US has alienated the region may finally be beginning to sink in.

What remains to be seen is if the US and its European allies can recognize the global tidal changes taking place and can find a constructive place within this new world to work alongside other nations rather than insisting on ruling above them all, a prospect all but entirely relegated to history.

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