

From carpet-bombing to friendship-building

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As Cambodia and the United States celebrate six decades of diplomatic ties, the Post looks back at a relationship that has moved from alliance to alienation and back



Photo by: Private Collection of Ambassador Julio Jeldres

Prince Norodom Sihanouk and his wife Monique fete Jacqueline Kennedy at Chamkarmon Palace during her visit to Cambodia in November 1967. She came to fulfill “a lifelong dream of seeing Angkor Wat”.

WHEN the United States and Cambodia celebrate six decades of diplomatic ties next week, they will look back on a relationship that has seen its fair share of ups and downs. Launched at the beginning of the cold war in 1950, the relationship has been fraught with ideological passions, experiencing periods of intimacy, violent disagreement and chilly silence.

It remains young: Less than two decades have passed since diplomatic ties were re-

established at the end of the cold war, and barely 10 years since the end of the ensuing civil war. For 20 years out of 60, there was little or no relationship at all.

Observers and officials from both countries, however, say the current bond – which they describe as built on solid foundations and enduring mutual interests – anticipates a long-term US presence in Cambodia.

Koy Kuong, spokesman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said this week that since the re-establishment of relations in November 1991, the two countries had rebuilt strong political, commercial and military ties.

“Our diplomatic relations are developing, and we hope that after the 60th anniversary, Cambodia-USA relations will progress again,” he said.

The administration of US President Barack Obama has identified Southeast Asia as a focal point of a foreign policy that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, in a speech last year, described as “neither impulsive nor ideological”.

Instead, that policy was geared towards creating “dynamic and productive partnerships that can address both the challenge and the promise of this new century”.

US Ambassador Carol Rodley said last week that since 1950, Phnom Penh and Washington have oscillated between close cooperation and periods in which they “were seriously at odds” with each other.

“For some significant amount of time”, she said, “we looked past each other or we saw each other through lenses that confused rather than clarified the picture for both sides.”

Rodley, who first served in Cambodia as US deputy head of mission between 1997 and 2000, said that “dramatic” changes during her first posting, including the end of the decade-long civil war and Cambodia’s entry into ASEAN, had fostered a more lasting relationship.

“We’ve come to a more mature relationship and a more mature understanding of each other, which I think is a good thing,” she said.

Past troubles

At the time Ambassador Donald Heath, a career foreign serviceman, presented his credentials to then-King Norodom Sihanouk on July 11, 1950, US policymakers saw Cambodia as both a potential ally and a potential threat.

A bastion of Western influence, the country – like the remaining French territories in Indochina – was also seen as a domino teetering on the edge of a red abyss.

Sihanouk, who skillfully courted all sides of the growing Indochina conflagration from 1955 until his overthrow 15 years later, was perhaps the prime embodiment of this

relationship. In the mid-1960s, he broke off and then restored diplomatic relations with the US as part of his delicate dance between the cold war superpowers.

On March 18, 1970, it became clear, however, that Sihanouk had overplayed his hand.

Amid increasing anger over what many viewed as the prince's tacit approval of Vietcong encroachments into Cambodian territory, he was overthrown by a US-supported general and close adviser, Lon Nol, in a right-wing coup d'etat. For the next five years US-Cambodia relations during the Cold War era reached their high-water mark.

This period of cooperation was premised on a relationship of patronage with the US government, which provided military, economic and political support to the government.

But this relationship also came at a steep price. As it poured military and economic aid into the country in a bid to stave off a communist victory, the US also executed a bombing campaign that some historians say aided the Khmer Rouge in their rise from a ragtag jungle insurgency to the country's iron-fisted rulers.

Journalist Elizabeth Becker writes in her book *When the War Was Over* that in 1973 alone, the US dropped 257,465 tonnes of explosives on Cambodia – around 50 percent more than the amount dropped on Japan during the second world war.

The plains of eastern Cambodia, scarred by the campaign before it was halted by the US congress in August 1973, remain today a vivid reminder of the cataclysm that befell Cambodia following America's entry into the Indochina conflict.

Ros Chantraboth, a professor of political science at the Royal Academy of Cambodia, described the regime's fall to the Khmer Rouge in April 1975 as the "abandonment of 7 million Khmer people" and a betrayal of the US commitment to the country.

"This showed that the USA didn't recognise the responsibility of their policies," he said, adding that in 60 years of relations, the two countries had rarely seen eye to eye.

"The Cambodian side doesn't understand the USA and the USA doesn't know Cambodia well – they don't know what the Khmer mind and consciousness is," he said.

Starting afresh

Despite the weight of history – and the brief chilling of relations that followed the factional fighting of July 1997 – the US-Cambodia relationship has flowered in the past decade.

Carl Thayer, a professor at the Australian Defence Force Academy in Sydney, said the last years of the Bush administration saw significant steps forward.

In August 2005, restrictions on US military assistance to Cambodia were lifted, and the following year Defence Minister Tea Banh paid a visit to the US Pacific Command to

request American military support.

In 2007, Thayer said, the US resumed direct foreign assistance, making Cambodia the third-largest recipient of US foreign assistance in East Asia after Indonesia and the Philippines.

“The Obama administration has built on the foundation laid by President Bush by responding to Cambodian willingness to advance defence and security ties, especially in counterterrorism and UN peacekeeping,” Thayer said.

He said the visit of Tea Banh to Washington in September last year – during which he and Defence Secretary Robert Gates mooted closer ties between RCAF and the US military – was a “high point” in the new relationship.

In June 2009, the US also removed Cambodia and Laos from a Cold War-era blacklist of Marxist-Leninist nations, paving the way for US support for American companies operating in both countries.

Chheang Vannarith, executive director of the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, said Cambodia’s place as a “strategic rudder” of the US in Southeast Asia ensured it would remain a key component of Washington’s engagement with the region.

He said that despite diplomatic disagreements – particularly over human rights and US\$300 million of debt incurred during the Lon Nol era – the two countries had “good space” for further cooperation.

As US-Cambodia relations advance apace, peace and stability have also fuelled stellar economic growth in China, and the recent reassertion of that country’s historical role at the centre of Asia is set to have far-reaching effects on Washington’s engagement with Cambodia.

China rises again

The nature of this new balance of power became clear in December, when the Cambodian government deported 20 ethnic Uighur asylum seekers at Beijing’s request.

The return of the Uighurs, who fled ethnic rioting in China’s Xinjiang province in July 2009 and had applied for asylum through the United Nations refugee office in Phnom Penh, was followed a day later by the visit of Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping, who approved \$1.2 billion in Chinese investments and other economic assistance to the Kingdom. The deals came on top of \$880 million in loans and grants already offered since 2006.



Photo by: Sovan Philong

US Ambassador Carol Rodley addresses a ceremony marking the start of the US-funded Angkor Sentinel military exercises on Monday. “I think [Cambodia] is an instructive example of a country that used to be a source of instability in the region that is no longer,” she said in an interview last week.

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IN DATES 60 years of US-Cambodia relations



COURTESY Ambassador Julio A. Jeldres

February 7, 1950

The United States recognises Cambodia as an independent member of the French Union. Its first ambassador, Donald Heath, presents his credentials to King Norodom Sihanouk in July.

1950s

After Cambodia gains full independence from France in November 1953, US support pours in. From 1955 until 1963, the US gives an estimated US\$83.7 million in assistance to the Kingdom to help keep communism at bay.

November 1963

Prince Norodom Sihanouk rejects US military aid, chilling relations with Washington. The following year, he refuses to accredit a new US ambassador, and relations are broken off altogether in May 1965.

March 18, 1969

US begins the B-52 carpet-bombing of Vietnamese communist sanctuaries in eastern Cambodia. On July 2, Sihanouk re-establishes diplomatic relations with Washington.

March 18, 1970

Sihanouk is overthrown by General Lon Nol in a coup d'état backed by the US. Relations immediately warm and US economic and military assistance pours into the country.

April 30, 1970

US President Richard Nixon sends American troops into Cambodia to destroy Vietnamese communist bases thought to lie along the country's eastern fringe.

April 17, 1975

Phnom Penh falls to the Khmer Rouge, beginning a 16-year period in which the two countries have no diplomatic relationship.

January 7, 1979

The Khmer Rouge regime falls to a Vietnamese-backed invasion. For the next decade, the US provides diplomatic and military support to resistance factions, including the Khmer Rouge, based on the Thai-Cambodian border.

November 11, 1991

The US and Cambodia re-establish diplomatic relations after the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in October. A US mission opens in Phnom Penh, headed by Charles Twining Jr.

September 24, 1993

Full diplomatic relations are restored between the countries after the elected Cambodian government takes office. The US mission is upgraded to an embassy in May 1994, and Twining becomes ambassador.

July 1997

The US suspends bilateral assistance to Cambodia following factional fighting that sees Prime Minister Hun Sen vanquish his royalist opponents.

August 2005

The US lifts restrictions on military funding to Cambodia. The following year, both countries sign the bilateral Trade and Investment Framework Agreement to facilitate bilateral trade between the two countries.

June 2009

The US removes Cambodia and Laos from a Cold War-era trade blacklist. The move paves the way for US funding for American companies operating in Cambodia.

Josh Kurlantzick, a fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington and the author of *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power Is Transforming the World*, said China's financial support for Cambodia – free of good governance and human rights requirements – would act as an obvious counterweight to Western influence in the region.

“They give Cambodia more leverage, in that it now has another potential partner in China, and that allows the Cambodian government to take a tougher line in dealing with the US,” he said.

In April, the US decided to suspend a shipment of military lorries in response to the deportation of the Uighurs. A month later, China offered a similar shipment in its place. The diplomatic tit-for-tat highlighted Washington's challenge in maintaining its commitment to human rights and good governance while pursuing wider strategic goals.

When asked if the “idealistic” side of America's engagement in Cambodia clashed with the country's broader diplomatic or commercial interests, Ambassador Rodley demurred.

“For me, it's all pragmatic – the question is, how do you get there?” she said.

“There's no tension between wanting to see respect for human rights, rule of law and better accountability and a lot of the other things that we want to do. It's just a question of what's going to work.”

Rodley also questioned the perception of foreign aid as “leverage” that can be used to extract reforms or other behaviour from recipient countries. US aid to Cambodia is lined up behind development priorities the government itself has outlined, she said.

“I never saw aid in terms of leverage as directly as it's frequently written about,” Rodley said. “I like to see it as more of a partnership.”

Room for two

Despite the Uighur affair, analysts say the US remains in a solid position in Cambodia. “Every Chinese gain is not a loss for the United States; it is not a zero-sum game,” said Kenton Clymer, a professor at Northern Illinois University and the author of several books on US-Cambodia relations.

He said a stable, prosperous Southeast Asia is in the interest of both powers, and that many Asian leaders would likely welcome the US presence as a counterweight against the influence of Beijing.

“China might well appreciate this as well”, he added, “since it will benefit if Southeast Asia feels secure.”

Thayer described the Chinese lorry ploy as an example of its ability to seize the moment.

After the suppression of the Myanmar democracy movement following elections in 1990 led to economic sanctions from the West, China moved to fill the vacuum left by the withdrawal of Western aid, offering military assistance.

It followed a similar route after the US suspended military assistance to Thailand in response to the military coup that overthrew Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in 2006.

“China is the consummate political opportunist,” Clymer said. “China plays the role of spoiler and can always step in when Hun Sen or other Cambodian People’s Party officials bristle at US interference.”

Even as China offers of millions in “no-strings” investments and other assistance, the US remains Cambodia’s largest trade partner – and a vital market for the country’s garment exports.

It has also given Cambodia the opportunity to expand its role in the region, a chance that has come to a head this month with the holding of the Angkor Sentinel military exercise in Cambodia, involving more than 1,000 troops from 26 countries.

“The US is offering Cambodia an alternate path in terms of domestic development where US assistance is devoted to improving public health and promoting sustainable development,” Thayer said.

At a government-donor forum in Phnom Penh last month, the US indicated it would provide \$68.5 million in development assistance for the 2010 financial year – the third-largest single-country total after Japan and China.

From a Cambodian perspective, the US is a logical choice to balance the influence of the giant neighbour to the north – historically a source of consternation for small nations in the region.

“Cambodia still wants to be neutral and independent from the dominance of any country. This is the principle of Cambodian foreign policy,” Chheang Vannarith said.

Nations like Cambodia are used to balancing great powers, he said, and will remain

cautious, even in times when relations are warm. “When the two elephants fight, the grass is damaged,” he said, recounting the old Khmer proverb. “But when the two elephants make love, the grass is also damaged.”

‘Fixable’ problems

Moving forward, Rodley said, a new generation of leadership in the two countries – including young Cambodians living and going to school in the US, and Americans with firsthand experience in Cambodia – would create a national conversation that goes beyond past relations.

She added that her diplomatic experience, which includes a posting at the US embassy in Kabul and involvement in the Dayton Accord negotiations that ended the war in Bosnia, make her optimistic about the future of American engagement with Cambodia.

“I think [Cambodia] is an instructive example of a country that used to be a source of instability in the region that is no longer,” she said. “Having been in a place like Afghanistan ... makes everything here look fixable.”

Chheang Vannarith agreed, saying an influx of young Cambodians into positions of leadership would open up more avenues for cooperation with Washington.

“I think the older generation still have a very vivid memory of the bombing, the CIA-backed coup d’etat of Lon Nol,” he said.

“But for the young generation – those who are less than 35 years old – I think they have different perspectives looking at the US. They tend to look forward to the future, rather than being hostage to the past.”