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US-Cambodia Relations: New Momentum

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During her sixth trip to the Asia-Pacific in the last twenty months, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit to Cambodia from October 30 through November 1 continues to reinforce US engagement throughout the region in general, and US-Cambodia relations in particular. It is worth noting that this is the first trip by a Secretary of State to Cambodia since Colin Powell went in 2003 for the ASEAN Regional Forum.

During her visit, Secretary Clinton paid a courtesy call to His Majesty the King of Cambodia Norodom Sihamoni and held separate meetings with Prime Minister Hun Sen and Hor Namhong, the deputy prime minister and foreign minister. She also met with Ms. Mu Sochua, the deputy secretary general of the opposition Sam Rainsy Party, visited several US-supported non-governmental organizations, and conducted a town hall meeting with Cambodian students. In addition to diplomatic talks on US-Cambodia relations, bilateral engagement focused on the issues of outstanding debt from the Lon Nol era, human rights, and the UN-sponsored Extraordinary Chambers in the Court of Cambodia (ECCC), otherwise known as the Khmer Rouge Tribunal. On the cultural and humanitarian side, Secretary Clinton visited the Angkor temple complex, a UNESCO world heritage site in Siem Reap province, followed by a visit to the Tuol Sleng Khmer Rouge genocide and torture museum in the capital Phnom Penh. Overall, Secretary Clinton's visit is a significant milestone for US-Cambodian bilateral cooperation, and her presence encourages progress in promoting and protecting human rights in Cambodia.

However, the outstanding Lon Nol debt of US\$445 million, assumed during the pro-American Lon Nol administration in the early 1970s, is still an obstacle in bilateral relations. The United States would like to see Cambodia sign a bilateral agreement to settle the debt but Cambodia has refused to do so, referring to it as a "dirty debt." In addition, Cambodians hold the United States partly responsible for igniting the Cambodian civil war. During her visit, Secretary Clinton proposed to resume bilateral negotiations regarding the debt issue that have been stalled since 2006. Another stumbling block in bilateral relations continues to revolve around the issues of human rights and democratic restraints within Cambodia.

US-Cambodian diplomatic relations were first established in 1950. Looking back over the past sixty years, the US-Cambodia relationship can generally be characterized as a relationship with high degrees of fluctuation. In the early years, the United States provided Cambodia assistance with development projects including the construction of a highway connecting Phnom Penh to the port of Sihanoukville. However, the Vietnam War led to serious diplomatic friction between the two countries, with diplomatic relations officially severed in 1965, then briefly resumed in 1969 before being severed again in 1975. The United States supported the Lon Nol regime (1970-1975) that overthrew Prince Norodom Sihanouk in 1970 through a coup d'état, and carried out aerial bombardments over Cambodia from 1965 to 1973 in order to destroy Vietcong safe havens and supply lines. Bilateral relations were yet again completely absent from the mid-1970s through to the early 1990s. Normal official diplomatic relations resumed in 1994 after

Vannarith Chheang, Visiting Fellow at the East-West Center in Washington and Executive Director of the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, outlines how US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit to Cambodia "... continues to reinforce US engagement throughout the region in general, and US-Cambodia relations in particular."



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Cambodia elected a new government under the supervision of the United Nations.

After the resumption of official diplomatic relations, the United States has supported Cambodia across a wide range of developmental and good governance issues. Since 1992, the United States has provided over US\$700 million in development assistance to Cambodia. To date in 2010, the United States has provided more than US\$70 million in development assistance. Also this year, the United States gave US\$5 million to the ECCC, in order to prosecute former Khmer Rouge leaders and to further strengthen Cambodia’s judicial system. Furthermore, in mid-2010, Cambodia was selected among twenty countries to receive US assistance under President Barack Obama’s new *Feed the Future* food-security initiative. Since 1998, the United States has been the top export market for Cambodian products, especially textiles. Total Cambodian exports to the United States encompassed approximately 17 percent of Cambodia’s gross domestic product in 2009. However, US foreign direct investment in Cambodia is very limited as the country’s institutional and physical infrastructure is not yet attractive to US investors.

Regarding military cooperation, the United States resumed military assistance to Cambodia in 2005, paving the way for improving military-to-military cooperation. Since 2006, the United States has provided over US\$4.5 million worth of military equipment and training to the Cambodian Royal Armed Forces. To date, the Cambodian military has contributed to United Nations peacekeeping operations in Sudan, Chad, the Central African Republic, and Lebanon. In 2010, the United States helped construct a United Nations Peacekeeping Operations training center in Kompong Speu province where a joint-training exercise under the Global Peace Operations Initiative, “Angkor Sentinel,” was conducted this past summer. This exercise involved over 1,200 participants from twenty-two countries.

This ongoing development and military support to Cambodia is part of the United States’ attention and interest in helping Cambodia develop and engage more actively in regional and global affairs. The development assistance and engagement also aims to assist Cambodia in having a strong balance in its external relations. During her talk with Cambodian students, Secretary Clinton stated, “It’s like our relationship with other countries. You look for balance. You don’t want to get too dependent on any one country.” In this case, “any one country” referred to China. After meeting with Cambodian Foreign Minister Hor Namhong, she expressed her optimism about Cambodia’s future and that of US-Cambodia bilateral relations, “I am very optimistic about Cambodia’s future.... And I hope that the United States can be a good partner and a friend.” In a letter to His Majesty King Norodom Sihamoni on the occasion of the Sixtieth Anniversary of Diplomatic Relations between the United States and Cambodia, President Barrack Obama reaffirmed that, “In the coming years, we look forward to taking advantage of the positive momentum that has been created, and to see the partnership between our two nations grow stronger and deeper in areas such as food security, climate change, health, education, human rights, and strengthening democratic institutions.” Current bilateral relations between the United States and Cambodia are more stable and positive than they have ever been over the last six decades.

For Cambodia, one of the poorest countries in the region, national interest is generally understood as economic development and poverty reduction, and its diversified foreign policy is aimed to serve this purpose. Securing development assistance, promoting exports, and attracting foreign direct investment are the means to achieving this goal. As for Cambodia’s defense policy, it is aimed at modernizing its defense forces with emphasis upon capacity building and professionalism. The United States has played a significant role in meeting Cambodia’s needs. Increasing trust and good relations between Cambodia and the United States will significantly contribute to the vibrant and active neutrality of Cambodia, which will serve the interests of United States throughout the region.