

US-Cambodia Relations: Human Rights Is One Variable by Vannarith Chheang

Vannarith Chheang (chheangcam@gmail.com), a Pacific Forum CSIS young leader, is executive director of the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace.

The bilateral meeting between US President Barack Obama and Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen on Nov. 19 was in the spotlight, at least from the local reaction, during the 21st ASEAN Summit and related meetings. The meeting focused on human rights, fundamental political freedoms, and electoral democracy in Cambodia. The conversation was generally described as “tense” and straightforward since Obama touched a Cambodian nerve by raising concerns about the deteriorating human rights situation, the 2013 national election, and political prisoners. According to Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes, who accompanied Obama, it will be difficult to deepen bilateral relations if the Cambodian government does not improve its human rights record.

Although human rights are an impediment to strengthening bilateral relations, it is important to look at the broader implications of the visit. It was not only about human rights; wider US interests in the region including strategic and economic relations must be taken into account. The presence of President Obama in Cambodia was a significant event in the two countries’ diplomatic relations. It was the first time a sitting US president visited this small and poor country and it reaffirmed the long-term and sustainable US commitment to engagement in Asia.

US-Cambodia relations are shaped and framed by the US “pivot to Asia strategy,” which is dynamic and comprehensive. The strategy covers a wide range of activities including the strengthening of bilateral security alliances, forging a broad-based military presence, engaging regional multilateral institutions, expanding trade and investment, advancing democracy and human rights, and deepening working relationships with emerging powers. It is an extension of the US smart power project, which includes, as suggested by the 2007 CSIS *Commission on Smart Power*, five pillars: alliances, partnerships, and institutions; global development; public diplomacy; economic integration; and technology and innovation.

Issues surrounding human rights are the key stumbling block in advancing bilateral relations and need to be addressed objectively and collectively. Since 1992, the US has provided more than \$800 million to strengthen democracy and improve human rights conditions in Cambodia. USAID programs have been diversified to include aspects such as education, public health, infectious disease, food security, climate change, private-sector competitiveness, and good governance. The US has contributed a lot to strengthening the role of local civil

society organizations in addition to promoting democratic principles and protecting human rights.

Bilateral relations have steadily improved since the resumption of diplomatic relations in 1992. Cambodia was granted Most Favored Nation (MFN) status from the US in 1996 and in 1999 the two countries signed a Bilateral Textile Agreement (BTA) to link labor standards with trade. Under such favorable treatment, the US has become the biggest market for garments and footwear (about 70 percent) made in Cambodia. The industry employs 350,000 people, mostly young women.

The US private sector is very much interested in expanding and deepening investment and trade with the region in general and Cambodia in particular. In 2011, US investment in Cambodia was more than \$144 million, triple the amount invested in 2010. In remarks at the US-ASEAN Business Forum in Siem Reap in July 2012, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated “Our economic ties are already strong. ASEAN and the United States are large trading partners. Last year, US exports to ASEAN exceeded \$76 billion, and that was up 42 percent since 2009. We have more than twice as much investment in ASEAN as we do in China. So there is a great deal of potential for continuing to grow our economic activity.”

US-Cambodia defense cooperation has gained momentum since 2004 after many restrictions were eliminated, paving the way for direct military-to-military contact and engagement. Training and capacity building are the key areas of cooperation. Joint training and military exercises have been conducted regularly under the themes of disaster relief, counter-terrorism, demining activities, and peacekeeping operations.

During the visit of Cambodian Defense Minister Gen. Tea Banh to Washington in 2009, Defense Secretary Robert Gates reaffirmed the commitment to strengthen the capacity of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF) in peacekeeping operations, maritime security, and counter-terrorism. In 2010, Cambodia, with support from the US, participated in the *Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT)* program and co-hosted the *Angkor Sentinel* with the participation of 1,000 peacekeeping personnel from more than 20 countries. The second CARAT program was conducted in October 2012, focusing on maritime security skills such as maritime interdiction, diving and salvage operations, maneuvering, and disaster response

The annual Bilateral Defense Dialogue (BDD) established in 2008 is a foundation for dialogue, cooperation, and confidence-building measures. It focuses on operational topics of mutual concern and coordination of security cooperation activities. The BDD illustrates the broadening and deepening of the military-to-military relationship and is an additional

mechanism to further strengthen the bilateral relationship. In September 2009, Cambodia and the US created a Security Cooperation Coordination Group that meets regularly to discuss operational issues involving theater security cooperation.

In addition, there were several port visits by US naval forces to promote relations between militaries and strengthen mutual strategic trust between the two countries. The latest visit was on May 5, 2012 by sailors from the US 7th Fleet flagship *USS Blue Ridge* and Marines assigned to Fleet Antiterrorism Security Team Pacific.

The recent bilateral talks on Nov. 16 between US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta and Gen. Tea Banh in Siem Reap provided an opportunity for both countries to elaborate more on defense cooperation, especially in capacity building of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces, cooperation on the recovery of US soldiers missing in action from the Vietnam War era, and the new US strategy in the Asia Pacific. Panetta reaffirmed the US goal of ensuring that the Asia Pacific will be a zone of peace, stability, and prosperity, and the commitment to work with ASEAN to increase its capacity to maintain peace and stability in the region.

US-Cambodia relations have been improving over the last decade and reflect a promising trend. Defense and economic cooperation have taken significant steps to build trust and mutual accommodation with common interests. However, as the recent talks between President Obama and Prime Minister Hun Sen indicated, Cambodia needs to work harder to improve its record on human rights and democracy to advance relations with the US to a new level. It is not a big challenge for the current Cambodian administration to improve the situation since it has established a relatively good foundation to promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms. It is a matter of continued political will, leadership, and participation from the people.

Continued US engagement with Cambodia on the issue of human rights is necessary but it needs to be more objective and scientific. Both countries should concentrate on convergent forces – economic and strategic interests – and continue to sincerely work together to overcome remaining challenges. It is in the interests of the two people and the global community of nations to raise the standard of the universal values of human rights and fundamental freedom. Cambodia and the US can continue working together on this issue.

In the rapidly changing regional security and economic environment that is increasingly complex and uncertain, there is a need to build and nurture trust and confidence. A good and healthy US-Cambodian relationship can contribute to peace, stability and development in the Asia Pacific. It would be a serious setback if the human rights issue overshadows other areas of cooperation and needs to be addressed in a holistic way.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.