Cambodia’s New Naval Base: China Makes Waves, U.S. Feels Ripples

When Chinese and Cambodian officials cut the ribbon this weekend to inaugurate expansive new facilities at Ream Naval Base, the shimmering waters of the Gulf of Thailand became a flashpoint once again in the chessboard of geopolitics. To some, the ceremony represented the successful fruits of diplomatic friendship and infrastructure cooperation. To others, it was a stark confirmation of fears long-held in Washington—that Beijing is methodically expanding its military influence right under the noses of U.S. strategists.

Since 2022, with impressive speed and scale, China has quietly funded and overseen an extensive makeover of Cambodia’s most important naval asset, Ream Naval Base, just thirty kilometers from the coastal city of Sihanoukville. The newly unveiled facilities include a sophisticated 300-meter pier designed to accommodate significant naval vessels, a sizable dry dock, and a Cambodia-China Joint Logistics and Training Center. These upgrades might seem innocuous if viewed through the narrow lens of infrastructure development alone. Yet beneath the surface simmers a web of strategic consequences that threaten to redefine regional dynamics and challenge America’s longstanding commitment to stability and freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific.

It would be naïve to ignore the historical context. In 2019, unsettling reports surfaced alleging a clandestine deal that granted China exclusive military access to portions of the base for thirty years—a claim fervently denied by Phnom Penh, despite mounting evidence suggesting otherwise. Subsequent restrictions, such as denying routine U.S. requests for visits, dismantling American-funded structures, and favoring Beijing’s overtures, have only deepened the suspicion. Satellite imagery and intelligence assessments reveal patterns unmistakably aligned with Beijing’s strategic agenda rather than Cambodia’s modest maritime needs. What other purpose, analysts ask, might these extensive new installations serve if not to welcome the Chinese People’s Liberation Army Navy?



The strategic calculus is undeniable. Sitting at the doorstep of critical maritime arteries such as the Malacca Strait and South China Sea, Ream’s position represents a potential dagger pointed at vital global trading routes. With Chinese warships a near-permanent fixture at the base since 2023, Beijing’s regional influence has shifted from hypothetical concern to tangible reality. Cambodia’s joint military drills with China—aptly titled the “Golden Dragon” exercises—further solidify the reality of Beijing’s expanding operational footprint in a region vital to American allies and partners.

America’s strategic anxieties are compounded by the troubling pattern of diminished U.S.-Cambodia relations, as Phnom Penh embraces Beijing’s overtures.

Cambodian leaders have consistently proclaimed neutrality, assuring the international community of open access. Yet their actions—particularly barring larger vessels such as American aircraft carriers from docking at Ream—cast serious doubts about transparency and neutrality. The discrepancy between rhetoric and reality has grown too wide to ignore.

From the vantage point of U.S. strategic planners, Ream Naval Base encapsulates the broader geopolitical tension playing out across Southeast Asia. The base serves as a poignant emblem of China’s incremental and persistent efforts to reshape the regional security architecture in its favor. Cambodia’s tilt towards China, driven by billions of dollars in infrastructure and defense investments, has set a troubling precedent that other regional powers closely observe. ASEAN nations, long striving for neutrality amid great power rivalries, now face the difficult question of how to maintain balance as Chinese military and economic influence penetrates deeper into their neighborhood.

Should Washington be alarmed? Undoubtedly, yes. The recent developments at Ream underscore the urgent need for recalibrating U.S. diplomatic and security strategy in the Indo-Pacific. China’s strategic foothold at this base could, in a crisis, significantly compromise America’s regional operations—from safeguarding vital sea lanes to protecting allied interests. Indeed, in a hypothetical conflict scenario involving Taiwan or contested maritime territories in the South China Sea, China’s presence at Ream could seriously hamper U.S. response capabilities.

The quiet inauguration at Ream Naval Base is thus a clarion call. It signals not merely the unveiling of a few facilities but a reshaping of strategic realities. For America and its regional partners, the stakes couldn’t be clearer: Will the Indo-Pacific remain an arena defined by shared rules, openness, and cooperation—or will it descend into spheres of influence, driven by coercion and strategic encirclement?

Washington and its allies must move beyond mere concern to strategic action—engaging diplomatically with Southeast Asian nations, reinforcing alliances, and revitalizing commitments to regional stability. Without decisive steps, the waters around Ream Naval Base may well become the harbingers of a new, uncertain era in the Indo-Pacific.