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China's Security Force Posture in Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia

By John Bradford



A soldier from Laos and a Chinese paramilitary police officer stand at an army post on the Mekong River on March 1, 2016. (Photo by Jorge Silva/Reuters)

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Summary

- China's growing geo-economic influence in Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia is reflected in an increased security force posture in all three nations.
- The three countries, however, have not lost their strategic autonomy: Cambodia's closest military partner is China, Thailand's is the United States, and Laos's is Vietnam.
- Chinese combined military exercises with each nation are increasing in frequency. Exercises help normalize People's Liberation Army (PLA) activities in the region and provided intelligence-gathering opportunities.
- Mekong River patrols and other transnational law enforcement operations in Thailand and Laos reflect strategic accommodation of Chinese geo-economic power and assist efforts in countering crime in and around the Golden Triangle.
- Were China to establish military bases in Cambodia, these would provide useful operational capacity for the PLA. They would not, however, be strategic game changers given the existing geography of Chinese military bases.
- A growing Chinese security force posture in Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia reflects national tilts toward China and trends unfavorable to US interests. No single development, though, is specifically alarming.



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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report examines China's force presence in Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia and the implications of that presence for Southeast Asia and the United States, focusing on three particular elements: combined military exercises, Mekong River joint patrols, and potential People's Liberation Army bases. The report was commissioned by the Southeast Asia Program at the United States Institute of Peace.

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The views expressed in this report are those of the author alone. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Institute of Peace. An online edition of this and related reports can be found on our website (www.usip.org), together with additional information on the subject.

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A worker stands on the site of a Chinese construction project in Dara Sakor on August 8, 2019. In 2008, a Chinese state-controlled company secured a ninety-nine-year lease on the area, which includes 20 percent of Cambodia's coastline. (Photo by Adam Dean/New York Times)

Introduction

The People's Republic of China (PRC) has been amassing significant geo-economic power over its neighbors in the Lower Mekong region: Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Although some of these states have been more resistant than others, this power is being transferred into political leverage. Numerous studies, reports, and journal articles have documented and analyzed these trends. Beijing's influence over the Lower Mekong states, for example, is a central focus of at least four high-profile books published in 2020.¹ China's economic and political leverage creates a preconditioning dynamic that results in more frequent visits by armed PRC security forces to these nations for operations and exercises and enables reasonable speculation about arrangements that would enable the permanent presence of Chinese forces in the Lower Mekong.

This report examines China's security force posture in the three states at the geographic core of mainland Southeast Asia—Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia—and the implications of that posture for maritime Southeast Asia and the United States. It looks at three elements of that posture in particular: combined military exercises, the Mekong River joint patrols, and potential People's Liberation Army (PLA) bases. These elements do not represent the entirety of China's security force posture in the three states, but they do encompass the most significant activities and together make up the bulk of that posture. Key issues include the degree to which geo-economic power enables the posture, the limits it places on the three states' strategic autonomy, and how they are each searching for opportunities to balance economic and strategic relations with China and the United States.²

The strengthening posture should be of concern to both maritime Southeast Asia and the United States. To date, it is not a game changer for the military balance of power in the region, but it does offer Beijing improved relationships, regional familiarity, opportunities for intelligence gathering, and normalization of force presence. Chinese military bases in Cambodia would also offer the PLA expanded operational flexibility for regional contingencies.

Security Partnerships

China categorizes all five of its Lower Mekong neighbors as Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partners, its highest tier of partnership relations with other countries.

THAILAND

Thailand is arguably the PRC's most useful and important Southeast Asian partner.³ Often a host nation for groundbreaking, first-ever Chinese military exercises, it is also—after Russia, the United States, and Pakistan—China's fourth-most-frequent partner in military diplomacy activities.⁴ It is thus an essential enabler of PRC security force posture in Southeast Asia and has accordingly played an important role in conditioning the region to engagement with visiting PRC forces. At the same time, given Thailand's relatively large economy and military alliance with the United States, it is more flexible in the face of China's demands than Laos and Cambodia. Thailand can selectively accommodate Chinese initiatives with confidence that they will not impinge on Thailand's sovereign power.

The Sino-Thai relationship was normalized in 1975. After Vietnam's 1978 invasion of Cambodia, Bangkok and Beijing entered a *de facto* alliance under which Beijing discontinued support for Thai communists and Bangkok delivered Chinese military supplies to Khmer Rouge guerrillas.⁵ A 1987 Thai order of tanks, armored personnel carriers, and anti-aircraft guns was the first purchase of PRC military equipment by an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member.⁶ In 1991, the end of the Cambodian civil war meant that China ended its commitment to support the rebels who had been helping contain a rising Vietnam. The resultant reduction in mutual benefit weakened the Sino-Thai security partnership, but the expanded strategic trust between China and Thailand enabled the continued expansion of bilateral relations in other areas, especially economic cooperation. China's assistance during the 1997 Asian financial crisis was welcome in Bangkok.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, Bangkok responded to Beijing's economic ascendancy by seeking a closer economic and security relationship with China while also expanding the scope of its military partnership with the United States. In 2001, Thailand became the first ASEAN member to establish annual defense and security talks with China. After 9/11, Thailand supported the US global war on terror by making its air bases available as hubs for transporting war material to Afghanistan and conducting cooperative law enforcement operations. The law enforcement cooperation is perhaps best exemplified by the 2003 joint Thai-US operation that captured the Indonesian terrorist known as Hambali, the orchestrator of the 2002 Bali bombing, and delivered him to Guantanamo Bay prison. This support earned Thailand the designation by Washington as a major non-NATO ally.⁷ Meanwhile, in 2002, Thailand also began hosting visiting PRC military forces for exercises. In 2003, it entered into the first free trade agreement between China and an ASEAN member.



A military band from Thailand performs during a concert featuring Chinese and foreign military bands in Qingdao, China, on April 22, 2019. (Photo by Mark Schiefelbein/AP)

When the Thai military seized power in 2006, its first nonconstitutional change of government in fifteen years, Thailand's new leaders—many of whom had personal histories of fighting domestic communist rebels and thus might have viewed Communist China as a threat—pursued an even stronger embrace with the PRC. The military government welcomed an expansion of Chinese military assistance, made major purchases of military hardware, and signed the 2007 Joint Action Plan on Thailand-China Strategic Cooperation, which focused on expanding trade and economic ties.⁸

Since then, successive Thai governments, elected or otherwise, have shared a generally positive view of the benefits of cooperating with the PRC. Surveys have found that memories of past animosity, such as those related to communism, have nearly been eliminated within the military.⁹ By 2010, narratives describing China as a threat had lost most of their credibility. In 2013, China became Thailand's top trading partner.¹⁰ In 2015, Thailand forcibly repatriated more than one hundred Uyghurs—accused by the Foreign Ministry in Beijing of being “illegal smugglers”—about a month after it decided to purchase three Chinese submarines at a bargain price.¹¹ China's backing of the Eastern Economic Corridor, a regional development project the Thai parliament approved in 2018, is expected to improve infrastructure and manufacturing capability along Thailand's eastern seaboard.

TABLE 1. ARMS IMPORTS BY SOURCE NATION, 2010–2020

	Thailand	Laos	Cambodia	Total
China	415	93	57	565
Ukraine	436		54	490
Sweden	453			453
South Korea	434			434
United States	343			343
Russia	47	113		160
Others	784	15	72	871
Total	2,912	221	183	3,316

Source: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, <http://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/page/values.php>. Figures are trend indicator values (military capacity rather than financial value) expressed in millions.

Unlike other regional states, Thailand does not have any territorial disputes with China. From a strict interest point of view, the two nations have noteworthy strategic and security convergences and relatively few areas of divergence. As a result of this alignment, Thailand does not always accommodate China but is likely, as strategic convergence and geo-economic reliance increase over time, to more often support Chinese preferences in a range of decisions.¹² Decisions now are made on a case-by-case basis. Bangkok has also declined infrastructure projects—such as the proposed Kra canal across Thailand that would enable Chinese vessels to bypass the Strait of Malacca and gain easier access to the Indian Ocean—that did not support Thai priorities.¹³

Despite Thailand’s tilt toward the PRC, which is described as an institutional, cultural, and national consensus transcending domestic political divisions, the United States remains its preferred security partner.¹⁴ As a result of the busy Thai-US exercise schedule and the availability of US military training courses, Thai military officers are more likely to have professional ties to the United States. In addition, US equipment is preferred when available because of its high quality. Military relations with the United States also help counterbalance growing economic dependency on China.

Just as Thailand does not always make the decisions that China might prefer, it also does not consistently accommodate US preferences, especially those that conflict with PRC interests. US suspension of military aid and other sanctions after the coups d’état of 2006 (mentioned earlier) and 2014 (the twelfth since 1932) reinforced this tendency. The origins of the 2008 global financial crisis in the US economy also sharpened questions about the reliability of US partnership. More recently, a 2020 RAND study found that the United States had less influence in Thailand than China.¹⁵

China’s consistent readiness to deliver arms sales at discount prices has been an important motivation behind Bangkok’s looking to Beijing for more military hardware.¹⁶ In 2017, Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha explained the decision to purchase three Yuan-class submarines: “The submarines from China are the cheapest with the quality *relatively acceptable*” (emphasis added).¹⁷ For context regarding this decision, figure 1 provides a comparative reference on defense equipment providers to the three Lower Mekong nations over the last decade.

LAOS

Sharing a land border with China and being the least-populous ASEAN member, Laos is generally seen as the regional country most vulnerable to PRC power.¹⁸ Shortly after Vientiane and Beijing established diplomatic ties in 1961, China began providing military training for the Royal Lao Armed Forces and constructing road links between the two nations to bolster resistance to interventions by either Vietnam or the United States. When the Pentagon began deploying military forces to Indochina, however, Washington became the main supporter of Laos's royal family. China then refocused its support on the Lao People's Party, also known as Pathet Lao, a fellow communist force that from 1964 became the target of a US bombing campaign. The US withdrawal from its war with Vietnam in 1975 enabled the Pathet Lao later in the year to secure a victory in what it called its Thirty-Year Struggle, taking control of the state, abolishing the monarchy, and establishing the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

In the late 1970s, the Pathet Lao government and the communist government in Hanoi signed a treaty agreement that included stationing tens of thousands of Vietnamese military personnel in Laos. Meanwhile, Vientiane sought continued support from Beijing. Infrastructure support and interest-free loans flowed until Laos chose Vietnam over China in the wake of the Sino-Vietnamese conflict of 1979. During the 1980s, the Sino-Laotian relationship turned adversarial as the PRC provided military support to guerillas in northern Laos and several skirmishes took place along the poorly demarcated border. The renewal of normalized relations between China and Vietnam meant the withdrawal of Vietnamese forces from Laos and the restoration of Sino-Laotian relations in 1988. The relationship between Laos and China then warmed quickly. In 1989, Laotian President Kaysone Phomvihane became the first foreign head of state to visit Beijing after the Tiananmen Square incident, and Chinese infrastructure development assistance resumed immediately.¹⁹ The correlation suggests China may have provided a reward for the supporting gesture. During the same period, Laos took advantage of the Cold War's denouement as an opportunity to expand its economic ties with Thailand.²⁰

During the 1997 financial crisis, China stepped up to stabilize the Laotian economy and Sino-Laotian relations soared. Chinese investments have since become essential to the development of Laos's mining and hydroelectric export sectors and the support of its land transportation infrastructure.²¹ Thailand, Vietnam, Japan, Korea, and bodies such as the Asian Development Bank remain important development partners, but since 2013 China has been Laos's biggest investor.²² Completion of land links such as the Kunming-Bangkok Highway and the China-Laos high-speed railway has strengthened China's influence over its diminutive neighbor. Laos's debt to China has reached an estimated 45 percent of gross domestic product; and the payments have become so large that Vientiane has been forced to sell critical state assets, including its national power grid, to Chinese investors. Laos has sought to balance this economic dependence by maintaining Vietnam as its most important political and security partner. It also increasingly seeks to create options by strengthening economic ties with Thailand.

In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, Chinese support for the small Laotian military has remained relatively moderate. For example, in 2003 Beijing reportedly gave \$1.3 million in unspecified military equipment, and in 2008 provided \$100 million in credit for helicopters and other vehicles.²³ Laotian military officers receive some training in China, but it is unclear whether this program is distinct from the development programs aimed at party cadres.

Military support from China has been central to Cambodia's postcolonial efforts to ward off controlling influences from its larger neighbors, Thailand and Vietnam, as well as the United States.

The Sino-Laotian law enforcement partnership is more robust than the military-to-military relationship. In 2010, the Chinese and Laotian Public Security Ministries signed a pact aimed at enhancing cooperation to combat cross-border crime, control borders, prohibit drugs and gambling, counter terrorism, improve law enforcement abilities, investigate judicial cases, and repatriate criminal suspects.²⁴ This appears

to have facilitated the conditions for PRC law enforcement and operations within Laos. Chinese nationals, many employees of the firms under the control of Chinese casino mogul Zhao Wei, openly provide security within the Laotian territory that hosts borderland casino zones.²⁵ In these concessions, China also controls customs and border operations and exerts extraterritorial control that is greater than in other locations that have received more visibility as Chinese proxy cities, such as Gwadar (Pakistan), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), and Forest City (Malaysia).²⁶

CAMBODIA

Cambodia is often referred to as China's closest partner in Southeast Asia. Military support from China has been central to Cambodia's postcolonial efforts to ward off controlling influences from its larger neighbors, Thailand and Vietnam, as well as the United States. In more recent years, Phnom Penh has been Beijing's diplomatic champion within ASEAN and other regional bodies.

The 1960 Sino-Cambodian Treaty of Friendship and Nonaggression established that Cambodia would not join the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (an anticommunist collective defense alliance formed in 1954 and dissolved in 1977) or other entities that opposed Chinese interests. In 1964, Beijing declined a request from Phnom Penh for a security guarantee but agreed to supply military aid. Chinese arms then flowed through Cambodia to support the communist forces waging war against the United States in the region, which triggered massive US bombings, destabilized the nation, and set conditions for the US-aligned Lon Nol to overthrow the Chinese-friendly Norodom Sihanouk in 1972. Lon Nol ruled for less than five years before the PRC-backed Khmer Rouge seized power. China adopted the Khmer Rouge as a key force for containing Vietnamese expansionism and provided the regime with military equipment as well as tens of thousands of advisers, engineers, and laborers supporting massive civil-military infrastructure projects. It continued to decline requests to deploy forces to Cambodia but sustained material support for the Khmer Rouge when they were deposed by Vietnam in 1979 and became a guerrilla force.²⁷

Under the terms of the 1991 agreement that ended Cambodia's civil war, Beijing discontinued support to the Khmer Rouge and Prince Norodom Ranariddh entered a power-sharing arrangement with Hun Sen, a Khmer Rouge leader who had defected to the Vietnamese-sponsored regime. Although Hun Sen had previously adopted strong anti-Chinese public stances, even disparaging China as "the root of all evil," he took advantage of Chinese support as he positioned himself to seize power in 1997. Once solely in charge, Hun Sen responded to sanctions from Western powers and a cold shoulder from ASEAN members by strengthening alignment with Beijing.

Between 1992 and 2007, Sino-Cambodian trade expanded by a factor of seventy-two, and China cemented its position as Cambodia's most important development partner.²⁸ Cambodia has reciprocated by supporting efforts to block Taiwanese expressions of sovereignty,

suppressing operations of the Falun Gong movement, extraditing Uyghurs, withdrawing support for a Japanese seat on the UN Security Council, and advocating for Chinese interests within ASEAN on fraught topics such as the South China Sea. Still, China's geo-economic influence over Cambodia is not absolute. The United States, Singapore, Thailand, Germany, and Japan are all more important markets for Cambodian exports; and Japan remains an essential investor.²⁹

The robust Sino-Cambodian economic and development partnership set the stage for an expansion of the security partnership. The 2006 Comprehensive Partnership for Cooperation committed the partners to military exchanges and cooperation in nontraditional security and expanded the provision of military equipment.³⁰ In 2010, when Washington suspended the delivery of two hundred military vehicles in response to Phnom Penh's deportation of Uyghur asylum seekers that year, Beijing stepped in to provide 257 vehicles and fifty thousand uniforms to the Cambodian military.³¹ By that time, Ream Naval Base, the Royal Cambodian Navy's base on the Gulf of Thailand, was home to more than a dozen navy vessels supplied through Chinese grants and soft loans.³²

In the last decade, China drew closer to Cambodia by sustaining support for Hun Sen as his government arrested opposition leaders and dismantled political opposition. Ahead of the 2018 elections, which the international community expected would be a sham designed to strengthen the regime, China granted Cambodia more than \$100 million in military aid.³³ Between 2016 and 2018, the United States took the opposite path by sanctioning associates of Hun Sen and senior members of government. Even as the Donald Trump administration made diplomatic efforts to reset relations, Washington widened its sanctions, adding a top general tied to the Chinese-backed development work at the Dara Sakor resort area to the individuals already targeted and tying assistance to political reform and the neutrality of Cambodian military bases.³⁴ In his response, Hun Sen stirred anti-US nationalism by expressing his rage that Washington was seeking repayment of \$500 million in debt incurred decades earlier by the Lon Nol government (1972–75).³⁵

Military Exercises

As is typical of nations building political and security relationships, Chinese military exercises with Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia have generally begun as small events designed to build mutual confidence, enhance familiarity, and signal friendship. Some have matured to include more meaningful military dimensions and possibly lay the foundations for developing future interoperability. For the three smaller states, accommodating these exercises helps maintain good relations with China. Contrary to what some might expect, the rate of expansion of the exercises does not appear to correlate with the degree of Beijing's economic and political influence. For China, the symbolic value of the events may often be as important as the practical outcomes.

SINO-THAI EXERCISES

The deep-rooted nature of the Sino-Thai security relationship has established Thailand as one of China's most significant international training venues. In fact, Thailand has been the partner of choice for many groundbreaking PLA international exercises, making the Royal Thai Armed

[The 2002–2015 exercises] set important precedents for PLA engagements in Southeast Asia, normalizing such exercises and lowering the political costs associated with starting exercises with other regional states.

Forces one of the PLA's most important training partners. Thailand could be China's partner of choice because the pairing sends a strong diplomatic signal to the other ASEAN states. Alternatively, it could be that Thailand is more agreeable to Chinese overtures because, given its relatively large size and military ties with the United States, it can better afford the risks associated with accommodation.

In 2002, Thailand was the first ASEAN state to host the PLA during a large-scale military exercise. Notably, this step was taken in full partnership with the United States as PLA officers observed that year's iteration of the US-Thai Cobra Gold exercise. Three years later, a Sino-Thai landmine clearing exercise marked the first PLA bilateral exercise in Southeast Asia. Later in 2005, the Royal Thai Navy hosted China's first bilateral naval exercise in the region.³⁶ In 2007, Thailand also hosted PLA special forces for their first military exercise in the region, an event dubbed Strike.³⁷ In 2010, Chinese marines conducted their first overseas military exercise alongside Thai partners at the Sattahip Naval Base during Blue Strike.³⁸ The 2015 Falcon Strike was the first bilateral Sino-Thai air force exercise.³⁹

Although basic in scope and small in scale, these exercises have been important for several reasons. They set important precedents for PLA engagements in Southeast Asia, normalizing such exercises and lowering the political costs associated with starting exercises with other regional states. They also enable the PLA to become familiar with strategic geography and develop logistics networks to project forces into that space should the need arise. Even though the events are highly scripted and serialized rather than integrated, because the PLA's options for training against advanced forces are limited, the value of the exercises may be quite high. Specifically, the PLA gains new opportunities to gather intelligence and become more familiar with Western hardware, tactics, techniques, and procedures. This value is apparent in the content of a lecture by a PLA Air Force test pilot that gave in-depth after-action analysis of the interaction between China's Su-27SK Flankers (Russian technology) and Thailand's Gripen-C fighters (Swedish technology).⁴⁰

These initial exercises established precedents. Strike, Blue Strike, and Falcon Strike are all now recurring events. Similarly, PLA Navy (PLAN) ship visits and at-sea exercises have become routine. It was business as usual in 2016 when the frigates *Liuzhu* and *Sanya*, alongside the supply ship *Quanghaihu*, made a goodwill visit and drilled with Thai Navy units. The Chinese ships then sailed for a more significant engagement with Cambodia.⁴¹

Still, these exercises with the PLAN are minuscule relative to those with the United States. Even when Cobra Gold was scaled back after the 2014 coup, the bilateral events still included thirteen thousand personnel and dwarfed Sino-Thai exercises.⁴² In 2020, Cobra Gold was again full size and included high mobility artillery rocket systems, commonly referred to as HIMARS, F-35 fighters flying from the USS *America*, senior command elements embarked on the Seventh Fleet flagship USS *Blue Ridge*, and cyberwarfare activities.⁴³ Sino-Thai exercises come nowhere close in terms of trust, joint capabilities, or integrated command and control.

The US-Thai exercises are also larger, more frequent, and more sophisticated. In fact, Cobra Gold is merely the highlight event among approximately fifty US-Thai exercises and four hundred military engagements each year.⁴⁴ US analysts count fewer than thirty Sino-Thai military exercises as having taken place since 2002.⁴⁵ Common doctrine, relatively high levels of

English-language competency, and general familiarity mean that the Royal Thai Armed Forces are far more interoperable with the US military than with the PLA.

SINO-LAO EXERCISES

Combined military exercises between the PRC and Laos appear to be relatively few and infrequent. The only significant event publicized in China's English-language media outlets and noted in US government reports is a recurring medical training exercise known as Peace Train. The inaugural exercise took place in 2017 when PLA medical teams were dispatched to provide health services to Laotian citizens.⁴⁶ Press releases indicate that Peace Train was expanded in 2018 into a combined humanitarian and medical rescue exercise.⁴⁷ The participating PLA medical team also became involved in the international response to the massive flooding after the 2018 collapse of a hydroelectric dam. Chinese media highlighted the contributions of Chinese commercial and private entities in the response but did not mention the deployment of other PLA forces.⁴⁸ Peace Train 2019 was once again a combined humanitarian and medical rescue exercise, but the inclusion of a Chinese Z-8G rescue helicopter indicated that the event was becoming more complex.⁴⁹ The expected 2020 iteration was not covered in the media, possibly because the event may not have been held during the COVID-19 pandemic.

SINO-CAMBODIAN EXERCISES

Although Cambodia is considered the ASEAN member most under PRC influence, its military exercises with China began only after the PLA started training in Thailand.⁵⁰ PLAN visits to Cambodia began in 2008, first with a training vessel (the *Zhenghe*) and then a hospital ship (the *Ship 866*). Both events exemplified military diplomacy and are considered goodwill visits rather than military exercises. The same year, the United States and Cambodia embarked on a cooperative program under which US Navy construction battalion personnel (Seabees) worked with the Royal Cambodian Navy (RCN) to complete projects such as building schools and clinics.⁵¹

The Sino-Cambodian military exercise relationship began in February 2016. Three PLAN ships paired with the RCN for an exercise focused on rescue operations, the sort of activity navies often conduct when building mutual familiarity. Cambodia's deputy navy chief referred to the event as the first joint naval exercise with China. The ships also visited Sihanoukville, the deepwater commercial port near the RCN's Ream base. Ashore, the 737 sailors were involved in personnel exchanges and sporting events that are emblematic of a goodwill visit.⁵² In December 2016, Cambodia hosted PLA units for the first bilateral exercise ashore. Dubbed Golden Dragon, the event reportedly involved around four hundred personnel and focused on civil-military skills such as emergency road repairs and construction, medical response during natural disasters, dam building, flood relief, and demining.⁵³ After 2018, Golden Dragon became an annual event, expanding into five days and involving both helicopters firing live rockets and tank engagements.⁵⁴ Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, Golden Dragon 2020 lasted nineteen days; involved three thousand personnel; and showcased high-end equipment including tanks, artillery, and helicopters in combat scenarios. This is the largest Chinese exercise with a Southeast Asian partner to date, and its scale in the face of the pandemic is striking.⁵⁵ Although it was only the fourth Sino-Cambodian exercise, as Cambodia becomes more amenable to PRC preferences, the military exercise relationship is becoming more important to China.

Cambodia has a track record of being open to military relationships as long as they are relatively unburdened by political requirements and fit the current Phnom Penh foreign policy narrative. For example, in 2016, days before the exercise with the Chinese navy, Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force ships were welcomed for a goodwill visit.⁵⁶ In contrast, in 2017 Cambodia responded to increased US criticisms by suspending the Angkor Sentinel joint exercise and discontinuing the partnership projects with the Seabees.⁵⁷ The sixth iteration of navy-to-navy Cooperation and Readiness Afloat Training (known by its acronym, CARAT) was also suspended. The Cambodian denial that the cancellation was the result of Chinese pressure met skepticism, but the deteriorating relations with the United States would have been enough in and of themselves to warrant such a decision. Despite the cancellation, in May 2020, Hun Sen made a welcoming announcement to foreign military powers: “Anyone wants to hold exercises on Cambodian territory, please come. We open the door.”⁵⁸

In February 2021, however, the Cambodian government surprised many watchers by suspending Golden Dragon. Defense Minister Tea Banh explained that the decision was based on the need for Cambodia to prioritize responses to flooding, the COVID-19 pandemic, budget constraints, and “several other problems.” Some analysts, however, suggest that the Hun Sen government may be signaling to the new administration in Washington that it is not a Chinese satellite and therefore deserves greater positive engagement.⁵⁹

Mekong River Patrols

The development of the multilateral Mekong River patrols illustrates how geo-economic influence can develop into geopolitical power. In October 2011, a Royal Thai Army antidrug task force announced that they had intercepted \$6 million worth of methamphetamine on two Chinese vessels operating on the Mekong. The bodies of the vessels’ thirteen Chinese crew members were found on barges and in the river, their bindings and wounds indicating that most had been executed. Citing the need to satisfy an enraged domestic population, Beijing demanded swift justice, temporarily suspended river trade, and sent armed vessels to escort Chinese craft from the waters of downstream nations.⁶⁰

Thai officials moved quickly to blame Naw Kham, a Shan criminal who had lost control of drug production facilities to Myanmar’s armed forces after allegedly attacking a Chinese patrol boat in 2006. After shifting his base to an island between Myanmar and Laos, Naw Kham led river pirates to extort rapidly growing legitimate and illicit trade activity fueled by PRC-backed infrastructure projects.⁶¹ Naw Kham relied on easy movement across the Golden Triangle’s porous borders and, presumably, payouts to elements of multiple law enforcement bodies. After the killings, PRC leaders may have lost their tolerance for the chaotic activities thriving in an environment that had been created by pouring money and infrastructure into weakly governed space. Certainly, the crisis presented an opportunity to leverage geo-economic influence into political power.

In October 2011, the Chinese state minister of public security, Thai deputy prime minister, Laotian deputy prime minister and minister of defense, and Myanmar minister of home affairs met in Beijing, where they announced a joint security agreement to fight transnational crime around the Mekong. This package included law enforcement capacity-building projects, establishment



The Nam Ou 1 Dam on the Mekong River in Luang Prabang Province, in northern Laos, under construction on December 10, 2018. It was built by China's largest hydropower company. (Photo by Sergey Ponomarev/New York Times)

of a Combined Operation Center in China staffed by police from the four nations, and initiation of Mekong River patrols. The first patrol launched with great fanfare in December 2011. The arrangement also may have included extraterritorial rights for Chinese law enforcement agencies to capture Naw Kham.⁶² Reportedly with Chinese police on-site assistance, Laotian police did so in 2013. Naw Kham was then extradited to China, tried, and executed.⁶³

The regional posture of PRC law enforcement became enshrined with the continuation of the Mekong River patrols. Each is announced in Chinese government-sponsored media reports that enumerate the vessels, law enforcement officers, and days assigned to the event. Photos show the vessels parading in convoy and conducting routine traffic inspections. Although limited in terms of operational value, these carry high symbolic value and the representations help normalize PRC force presence in the region as welcome and routine. The specific roles and enforcement authorities involved are murky; but indications are that much more is happening behind the scenes, and the patrols amount to more than showboating. While Thailand appears to have held the line against Chinese desires for extraterritorial enforcement rights, even posting guards to ensure Chinese government vessels do not venture into Thai waters, Chinese reports mention sideline activities such as a follow-on week of China-Laos combat drills, joint

investigations ashore, and raids by bilateral combined teams, all of which suggest that armed Chinese units postured, at least intermittently, in foreign territory.⁶⁴ Chinese sources also refer to the patrols as “joint,” which implies a combined command structure, whereas Thai sources call them “coordinated.” As of February 2021, 102 patrols had been completed.⁶⁵

The Mekong River patrols and associated cross-border law enforcement operations reflect growing Chinese influence over Thailand and Laos. At the same time, they also demonstrate mutually beneficial cooperation on real transborder criminal issues. The lawlessness of the Golden Triangle has long posed both threats and opportunities to faraway national leaders, but growing transnational connectivity has reduced isolation of the area and created more wealth. National governments should therefore be expected to expand their law enforcement powers in this area. The transnational nature of the criminal activities requires multinational responses. Although these may set a precedent for expanded PRC presence in the Southeast Asian heartlands, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia—particularly Thailand—can be expected to resist infringement of their sovereignty. Furthermore, speculation that the patrols might spread downstream seems misplaced. After nearly a decade of operations, the patrols’ geographic scope has not yet grown. The barriers that inhibit such expansion are both the political backbone of Thailand’s firm stance and the geographic rapids and falls that prevent navigation along the river south of the Golden Triangle and between Laos and Cambodia.

Potential PLA Bases

China has reclaimed land around disputed features in the South China Sea, but no Southeast Asian nation hosts a PRC military base or a persistent presence of PLA forces. Indications are, however, that Chinese bases of some sort could be established in Cambodia soon. Cambodian leaders have taken a firm public position rejecting this possibility, but media reports have been persistent and the US government has officially stated its concern. Chinese statements have been vague, offering more flexibility than the outright denials they made while militarizing facilities in the South China Sea.

The precise function and utility of these potential bases remain unclear. Some might imagine Chinese-operated facilities hosting forward-deployed forces similar to those in Djibouti, Beijing’s only existing facility hosted by a foreign nation. Given the relatively small scale of the construction, the limited dredging observed thus far, the political implications of such a development, and the openly stated denials of the Hun Sen government, this seems less likely.⁶⁶ More likely would be a small PLA force package operating from dedicated infrastructure within Cambodian military bases. The nearest regional analogy is the US arrangement with Singapore, where a small permanent staff and maintenance element support the persistent presence of littoral combat ships. Another option, one that better comports with the public position of the Cambodian leadership, would be for China to be granted unfettered access to facilities functioning as persistent logistics hubs that support rotational or regularly visiting forces with a small forward support element.⁶⁷ Such an arrangement would be most akin to the access the United States has generally enjoyed at Thailand’s Utapao and the Philippines’ Clark and Subic Bay bases. Any of these arrangements would suggest a need for legal frameworks for the visiting forces to obtain



FIGURE 2. SELECT STRATEGIC LOCATIONS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Adapted from artwork by Rainer Lesniewski/Shutterstock

diplomatic entry and govern their rights when in Cambodia. Negotiations toward developing such frameworks have not been reported, but could be a part of secret agreements.

Most international concerns focus on the potential that port and airfield facilities are being built or enlarged in the vicinity of Sihanoukville. Once a sleepy seaside town, Sihanoukville is now home to many Chinese-owned casinos and a hub for Chinese tourism. It also boasts a deepwater port built primarily with Japanese financing that has also benefited from Chinese Belt and Road Initiative projects.⁶⁸ The RCN is homeported nearby at Ream Naval Base, and the massive Dara Sakor development includes a worrisome airfield.

Concerns about PLA posture in Cambodia broke into international headlines in November 2018 with reports that US Vice President Michael Pence, who was attending ASEAN and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summits, was expected to weigh in on the construction of a Chinese naval base.⁶⁹ After the meetings, Hun Sen said that Pence had done so. Hun Sen explained that the Cambodian constitution forbids the presence of any foreign troops and argued that such a deal would also be unnecessary given Cambodia’s ability to defend itself.⁷⁰ In May 2019, Cambodia declined an opportunity for the United States to repair and renovate boat maintenance facilities at the

US officials were reported to have seen an early draft of the agreement, which would allow China to post military personnel, store weapons, and berth warships at the base for thirty years.

Ream Naval Base, a move that furthered concerns that Ream might host Chinese military assets instead. Cambodian officials, however, insisted that the rebuff reflected only a lack of desire to deal with continued US derision.⁷¹

In July 2019, the *Wall Street Journal* cited anonymous US and allied government sources in a report about a secret China-Cambodia agreement that would grant the PLA exclusive rights to facilities within Ream. US officials were reported to have seen an early draft of the agreement, which would allow China to post military personnel, store weapons, and berth warships at the base for thirty years, and which would renew automatically every decade thereafter. China would construct two new piers, one for the PLA and one for the RCN. A two-acre Chinese-only section of the base would be off-limits to Cambodians.⁷² Senior Cambodian officials, including Hun Sen, flatly denied the existence of such an agreement.⁷³ The paper also reported on a diplomatic letter from the Cambodia Defense Ministry to the United States saying that the US-funded facilities at Ream would be relocated to allow for the development of the base. The 2020 demolition of a US-constructed boat ramp also raised questions, though it was consistent with standing Cambodian public statements about base redevelopment plans.

Without construction beyond the work now being reported, Ream’s capacity will remain small. Open-source intelligence estimates observe that the facility has only two helipads and can support vessels no larger than frigates and corvettes. Indeed, deeper draft foreign naval vessels have berthed at Sihanoukville rather than Ream when visiting Cambodia. Of course, construction of the new piers could be coupled with dredging to accommodate larger ships. Existing maintenance facilities would enable the repair and resupply of vessels that can enter the harbor.⁷⁴

Other suspicions relate to Chinese construction at the huge Dara Sakor resort area in Koh Kong Province. In 2008, China’s state-controlled Union Development Group (UDG) secured a ninety-nine-year lease on the area, which includes 20 percent of Cambodia’s coastline. From 2009 onward, commercial and industrial projects were slated for the area to develop in line with China’s Port-Park-City model used in concessions such as Gwadar, Pakistan. UDG’s construction work includes both a deepwater port and a large airport. The *Wall Street Journal* report about the secret agreement at Ream also cited US officials as stating that the Dara Sakor runway was being configured to support fighters. UDG representatives insist that the specifications are purely commercial.⁷⁵ In September 2019, UDG was placed under US sanctions for the illegal seizure of the land associated with Dara Sakor. The Treasury Department press release notes concerns relating to “media reports that the Cambodian government spokesperson, Phay Siphon, said that Dara Sakor could be converted to host military assets.”⁷⁶ Phay Siphon responded that he was being misquoted, but a 2019 Bloomberg article reported him as saying, “Dara Sakor is civilian—there is no base at all. . . . It could be converted, yes, but you could convert anything.”⁷⁷ China has declined to comment on its intent and deflects questions by pointing out that the United States maintains a global network of bases.⁷⁸

US government public statements have not confirmed Cambodian plans to host Chinese military bases but instead focus on US concerns related to the potential for such development. The Treasury Department press release sanctioning UDG states that “a permanent PRC military

presence in Cambodia could threaten regional stability and undermine the prospects for the peaceful settlement of disputes, the promotion of maritime safety and security, and the freedom of navigation and overflight.”⁷⁹ On a similar note, a Pentagon spokesman said, “We are concerned that the runway and port facilities at Dara Sakor are being constructed on a scale that would be useful for military purposes, and which greatly exceed current and projected infrastructure needs for commercial activity. . . . Any steps by the Cambodian government to invite a foreign military presence would disturb peace and stability in Southeast Asia.”⁸⁰ The US budget passed in December 2020 stipulated that provision of \$85 million in aid to Cambodia depends on Cambodia’s verification that Ream and “dual-use facilities such as the Dara Sakor development project” maintain their neutrality.⁸¹

Certainly, the development of bases such as these would have major new implications for regional security. Although other ASEAN states have been relatively muted in voicing their concerns publicly, they have noted the developments. The geopolitical tilt of Cambodia and Laos has been raised in high-profile track 2 discussions. The most noteworthy exchange followed Singaporean former senior diplomat Bilahari Kausikan’s suggestion that Cambodia should be removed from ASEAN if an external power controls its policies.⁸² An open letter from “a group of retired and active Cambodian diplomats” taking umbrage at these remarks called suggestions that Cambodia might host a Chinese base a “coordinated attack” orchestrated by the Singapore-based ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute. It also pointed out that Singapore has “provided military basing or leasing rights to external powers for far too long.”⁸³ This quarrel suggests that the hosting of PLA bases in Southeast Asia could provide a sort of litmus test distinguishing the ASEAN states that prioritize security relations with the United States from those that prefer China.

Implications for Maritime Southeast Asia

In its current form, China’s security force posture in Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia does not pose a meaningful direct security risk to maritime Southeast Asia. The military exercises that China conducts with the three states mostly focus on relationship building rather than the development of joint operational capability. The Mekong River patrols and associated transnational law enforcement activities reflect growing Chinese leverage but are also confined to an area where international cooperation is highly useful. Rather than being direct concerns, these arrangements indicate growing PRC influence, primarily of geopolitical and economic consequence. At the same time, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia have proven themselves adept at balancing between powers to retain strategic autonomy.

PLA bases in Cambodia would have greater implications. That Cambodia would be offering its territory to be potentially attacked by belligerent forces targeting China clearly illustrates the seriousness of such cooperation. This geopolitical alignment should not be overstated, however. Asian nations hosting US forces (rotational or visiting) and providing for their logistics support have done so while retaining autonomous foreign policies.



People sort fishing nets in Chamlang Kou, part of the Dara Sakor land concession, in Cambodia on August 8, 2019. (Photo by Adam Dean/New York Times)

PLA bases in Cambodia would also have implications for military operations. Most immediately, the bases would provide direct access to the Gulf of Thailand. Just as Beijing heralded the utility of its Djibouti and South China Sea bases in responding to disasters and conducting humanitarian missions, it would likely argue that bases located in the Gulf of Thailand would allow closer staging to some locations where those threats are likely.⁸⁴ Indeed, the PLA does not currently have ready logistics support options in this area and China is not a key player in regional disaster management despite its strong economic presence. However, scenarios in which states near the Gulf of Thailand would welcome Chinese forces to perform a humanitarian mission—such as after the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami or the 2018 Laotian hydroelectric dam collapse—but do not provide the necessary staging grounds or logistics facilities seem unlikely. Humanitarian mission readiness thus seems a poor rationale for establishing new facilities in Cambodia.

From a military power standpoint, the bases would place Chinese forces between Thailand's primary commercial and naval ports and the open sea. However, if Thailand has concerns regarding a threat to its ports or sea-lanes, it has not emerged in public discourse or track 2 conversations. The bases would also be along the sea-lanes that would feed the eastern terminus of a hypothetical Kra canal or land bridge sometimes discussed as a potential Chinese

investment to create an alternative to the Strait of Malacca. However, even if the significant engineering and cost challenges were overcome to build such a canal, adversaries would find it easier to close it by destroying its infrastructure than by establishing a naval blockade.

Military implications would also be noteworthy for Vietnam because the bases would open its southwestern flank to Chinese pressure. Vietnam, however, is already accustomed to managing its complex relationship with China despite the imbalance in military power favoring Beijing.⁸⁵ A noted Vietnam specialist recently observed that although the country would not be happy about such a development, none of the strategic leaders with whom he interacts have expressed alarm in related discussions.⁸⁶

The development of facilities in Cambodia could also have implications for military operations related to the ongoing South China Sea dispute, in which Ream and Dara Sakor would provide an additional axis for attack and resupply of operational forces. Bases on the Asian mainland would likely be more easily resupplied, more resilient, and more capable than those established on relatively remote reclaimed features. However, although military planners generally appreciate the increased operational flexibility that additional bases offer, facilities in Cambodia would not be a game changer in a South China Sea struggle. Chinese forces operating from Cambodia would need to fly over Vietnam or detour south to pass between Vietnam's southern tip at the Cà Mau Peninsula and the northeast corner of Peninsular Malaysia. Such a detour would extend the transit distance and could expose them to hostile forces operating from the South China Sea's western shores.

The proximity of Cambodian bases to the Strait of Malacca, one of the world's most important shipping channels (between the Pacific and Indian Oceans), should also be considered. The distance from Ream to the Strait of Malacca's southern terminus is about five hundred kilometers less than that between the Strait of Malacca and the Chinese bases at Subi and Fiery Cross reefs—approximately a half-day's steaming for a surface combatant. This would offer significant advantages in terms of on-station time for vessels seeking to operate at or within weapons range of the approaches to this choke point. A military airfield in Cambodia would reduce the flight distance to the northern Strait of Malacca and the Andaman Sea by nearly a thousand kilometers if aircraft were able to safely overfly Thailand's Isthmus of Kra. In short, military facilities in Cambodia would offer improved flexibility and new angles of approach for a variety of operations and would bring the most to Southeast Asian contingencies around the Strait of Malacca.

Implications for the United States

Growing Chinese economic leverage, coupled with China's accommodating stance toward domestic political developments, has tilted Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia toward Beijing. This shift has fertilized the bilateral security relationships and the conditions for an expansion of China's security force posture in the three states.⁸⁷ However, the fundamentals of their foreign policies remain unchanged. Political accommodation is scaled to avoid confrontation and preserve flexibility; meanwhile, counterbalances prevent dependency. As US-China competition escalates, these states will seek to maintain balance between the powers and prevent either from becoming a direct security threat.



A man holds a paper submarine at a protest against the Thai government's plan to buy two new submarines from China in Bangkok on August 27, 2020. (Photo by Soe Zeya Tun/Reuters)

As the smaller states react to their deepening enmeshment in China's economic ecosystem, they may seek to counterbalance it by strengthening their military ties with Washington. In this way, small-scale exercises with the PLA and hints of expanded posture may sometimes effectively be China cards played to seek US attention. Demonstrating willingness to work with one power has been one way Southeast Asian states have regularly gained leverage over another. As the Chinese security force posture in the three nations most likely to influence the balance of power, PLA bases in Cambodia could prompt Vietnam and Thailand to enhance their security relationships with the United States, but such developments should not be assumed given the relatively low threat profile Thailand associates with China, the perceived unreliability of US military support, and other factors currently inhibiting cooperation with Washington.

Thailand is the largest of the three states and has expansive relationships with both Washington and Beijing. Thus it should be the best equipped to balance between the two. Although China's force posture does not directly threaten US military access, it does correlate to the geo-economic and political pressures that are increasingly unfavorable to the United States and have already prompted Thai decisions favorable to China. As an example of the sort of events likely to become more frequent, in 2012 Chinese pressure led to the cancellation of a NASA environmental

monitoring flight mission out of Utapao, which should have been guaranteed under a 1983 bilateral agreement. Given that Utapao is a regular US-Thai military exercise location, a major US logistics hub, and home to a significant US prepositioned supply depot, this challenge to access exemplifies the danger.⁸⁸ In a regional crisis, Thailand may not make decisions that Washington would prefer; access to Utapao should not be assumed during potential Sino-US conflicts.

Cambodia has fewer options. Its smaller economy depends more heavily on China, and it lacks the deep military-to-military relations of the US-Thai alliance. Furthermore, Washington has not shown Hun Sen the same diplomatic patience that it has extended to the intermittent military leaders of its Thai ally.

Chinese support was an important factor enabling Cambodia to halt its US exercise schedule. Although Beijing may not have specifically requested it, Phnom Penh knew the move would please its leading economic partner and could be confident that China would fill any resultant capacity gaps. Still, Hun Sen's 2019 outreach to President Trump and the cancellation of Golden Dragon 2021 suggest that Cambodia does not want to simply settle into a Chinese orbit.⁸⁹ Laos depends more on China but maintains some opportunity to balance by maintaining its long-standing security relationship with Vietnam and growing economic integration with Thailand.

The posture of PRC security forces in the three Lower Mekong states has a long way to go before it can be considered a military threat to other ASEAN members, let alone the United States, without being used together with forces from the Chinese mainland. However, if Beijing were to establish a navy or air base in Cambodia, Washington would find it more difficult to support the defense of partners in maritime Southeast Asia or to conduct operations to ensure allied access to sea-lanes. Still, the strategic geography dictates that these facilities would be better characterized as concerns or operational complicators than as game changers.

In peacetime, bases in Cambodia would provide operational flexibility for PLAN surface ships and enable shorter periods off station when those ships have emergent maintenance requirements or require other logistics support that cannot be delivered at sea. This means that the US Navy, already often outnumbered in the South China Sea's international sea-lanes, would be further disadvantaged.

Were maritime combat to break out between the United States and China, these decreased ranges would be particularly helpful to sustaining military operations in the western and southwestern South China Sea and increasing threats to US forces to the west of the Southeast Asian landmass, precisely the waters in which belligerents would likely seek to interfere with others' free access to the Indian Ocean. The Dara Sakor air base would also be well positioned to enable intercepts of aircraft operating from Thailand's Utapao airfield. Although a base and airfield could be eliminated by US strike operations, such a move would add to the strike target list, consume ammunition supplies, and otherwise complicate planning. PLA operations from these facilities would also require the United States to make uncomfortable political decisions regarding expanding the conflict and related targets to include the territory of an ASEAN state.

The military dimensions are worrisome but should be relatively manageable. China's force posture is more concerning as evidence of the country's growing geo-economic and geopolitical power. Transnational law enforcement and military exercises are a sign of growing accommodation for a more active Chinese foreign policy that seeks to reshape the international

order. The normalized, regular nature of these events suggests they may become increasingly routine and that overseas PLA bases would make the events easier to execute. These factors all suggest a Chinese advance in major power competition, even though US military engagements remain far more frequent and complex in Southeast Asia.

Conclusion

Chinese geo-economic influence is empowering the expansion of PRC security force posture in Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. That Thailand and Cambodia are leading hosts for PLA international training exercises and that transnational law enforcement operations are in place, including those associated with the Mekong River patrols, reflect the three states' increasing reliance on cooperation with China. Although the geopolitical implications are worrisome to maritime Southeast Asia and extra-regional partners such as the United States, the scale of Chinese military and police units is not enough to pose a direct military threat. China's force posture in the region remains dwarfed by that of the United States. The three smaller states are also demonstrating the necessary resilience to balance dependence on China and other partnerships to sustain some strategic autonomy. Several trends, however, indicate that their options may be increasingly limited. The presence of PLA military bases in Cambodia would have significant implications for geopolitical outlooks and the regional military balance.

The United States has an opportunity to extend a steadying hand as Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia seek to rebalance, but to do so would risk undermining the US commitment to promoting human rights and democratic government. If Washington takes a hard-line approach by requiring domestic reforms as a condition for expanded partnership, it would be essentially asking regime leaders to choose between reducing their domestic power and taking their chances with Beijing. The largesse to be derived from investment in China will make it an easy decision. It seems more likely that the US government will take a more flexible position that couples engagement with incentivizing reform. However, such a mixed approach would only slow the shift, rather than changing the overall trajectory of the shifting allegiances of Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia.

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