

# What Next after U.S. Arms Embargo On Cambodia

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I once wrote on this opinion forum expressing the concern that the United States government might continue to use the allegation of Chinese military presence in Cambodia to pressure Cambodia and to warn other countries in Southeast Asia not to maintain close relations with China. Such action is part of the U.S. strategy of containing China—a rising power that has a strong governance model, and economic and military power and therefore the potential to reshape the international system that the United States has dominated since the end of the Cold War. My earlier concern became a reality last week when the United States decided to impose an arms embargo on Cambodia that includes “dual use items, as well as certain less sensitive military items.”

At its face value, this arms embargo on Cambodia is only symbolic as the United States is not an arms supplier to Cambodia. But it serves as yet another warning to Cambodia regarding its close relationship with China. In its statement on the arms embargo, the United States government claims that “The United States remains fully committed to Cambodia’s independence and the sovereignty of its people.” The actions by the United States government, ranging from allegations of secret agreement between Cambodia and China to allow the latter rights to station its troops in Cambodia, to recent arms

embargo is nothing but a violation of Cambodia’s independence and sovereignty. It is a textbook case of realpolitik in which “might is right.” The United States uses its hegemonic power to pressure a weak country to support its strategy of containing China. It is an action that clearly interferes with Cambodia’s right to conduct its own foreign affairs. As a sovereign nation, it is within its legitimate rights under international norms and laws that Cambodia should be able to develop close relations with China which is a full-fledged and responsible member of the international community.

Contrary to claims by many policy makers, analysts, and news reports, the evidence is clear that China’s trade, investment, and development assistance has promoted economic growth here in Cambodia and elsewhere in the Global South including on the African continent. Many African countries experienced many lost decades since their independence from European powers, despite these powers’ continuing engagement in aid, trade, and investment. In recent years, these countries’ engagement with China has brought economic growth and infrastructural development.<sup>1</sup> Economic growth and its resultant poverty reduction are the key ingredients of peace and social stability. Like they did in Cambodia, the United States and its allies are pressuring African

<sup>1</sup> Deborah Brautigam, *The Dragon's Gift: the Real Story of China in Africa* (Oxford University Press, 2011), and Dambisa Moyo, *Dead Aid: Why aid Is Not Working and How There Is a Better Way for Africa* (Macmillan, 2009).

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countries to reduce their engagement with China, citing false claims that China’s engagement is a one-way street with flows of resources and profits out of Africa to China.

For Cambodia, pressure by the United States will persist in one form or another due to continuing geopolitical competition between the United States and China. At this point, the United States’ arms embargo on Cambodia along with other sanctions is only symbolic; however, it contains a warning that more could be coming. The United States still has yet imposed heavier leverage on Cambodia, which would be the revocation of a trade preferences that it grants to Cambodia under the Generalized System of Preferences. We can only hope that the United States would not pursue that option for doing so will tantamount to the violation of fundamental human rights—the rights to a decent living of millions of Cambodians whose livelihood and education depends on the incomes of garment factory workers.

That said, Cambodia should prepare a contingency plan to cope with worsening United States

government’s action within the looming Sino-U.S. geostrategic competition. If history teaches us anything at all is that in the name of geopolitical competition, the United States often invoked the idea of “doing evil in order to do good.” The Western embargo on Cambodia in the 1980s led by the United States is testimony to “punishing the poor” to win its ideological war with the Soviet Empire.<sup>2</sup> The global context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is different from the 20<sup>th</sup> century. China is completely different from the former Soviet Union. The world is complex and interconnected wherein economic interdependence is strong. Therefore, Cambodia can withstand U.S pressure if it prepares itself to reap the benefits of global interdependence, including its close relations with China. This preparedness entails Cambodia continuing to carry out in earnest its governance reform, economic diversification, legal reform, human resource training and resource mobilization. It is only through self-strengthening that Cambodia can withstand external pressure!

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<sup>2</sup> Eva Mysliwicz, *Punishing the Poor: The International Isolation of Kampuchea* (Oxfam GB, 1988).