

Updated June 24, 2025

Cambodia

Overview: U.S.-Cambodia Relations

Cambodia, with a population of 17 million, is one of the youngest and poorest nations in Southeast Asia. U.S.-Cambodia relations have been complicated since the Vietnam War, during which the United States undertook extensive bombing campaigns over the country. Following a civil war and the signing of a peace accord in 1991, Members of Congress, alongside U.S. policymakers and other countries and multilateral organizations, have worked to promote democracy, human rights, accountability for leaders of the genocidal Khmer Rouge (1975–1979), and economic development in Cambodia.

Under the aegis of United Nations, Cambodia conducted several nationwide elections beginning in 1993. The United States provided election observation for several polls, and also provided a range of assistance to Cambodia, including support for programs related to economic development, food security, health, environmental protection, and demining operations.

U.S.-Cambodia relations have been strained over the past 15 years by U.S. concerns about human rights, including flawed electoral processes; expanding constraints on freedom of expression, the media and non-governmental organizations; and a 2017 ban on the main opposition party. During that timeframe, Cambodia's relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC, or China) has grown closer. Some Members of Congress, and past U.S. administrations, have sought to remain engaged with Cambodia while calling on the government to restore democratic rights and resist PRC influence. It is unclear how the Trump Administration will approach the U.S.-Cambodia relationship. In 2024 and 2025, the United States and Cambodia have discussed possible ways to strengthen bilateral defense relations, including through the resumption of military exchanges.

Cambodia's Prime Minister, Hun Manet, is the son of longtime leader Hun Sen. Hun Manet took power in 2023 and has made few reforms. Endemic corruption and human rights issues, including human trafficking related to the country's cyber scam industry, hinder economic development and investment opportunities. The United States is Cambodia's largest export market, and observers argue that Cambodia could be heavily impacted by the Trump Administration's proposed tariffs.

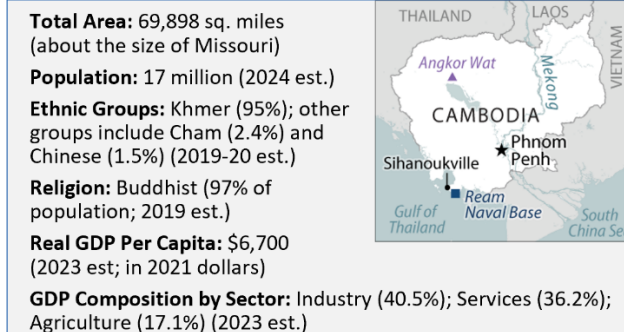
Politics and Human Rights

Hun Sen led Cambodia for 38 years (1985–2023), including as premier of the Vietnam-backed Republic of Kampuchea (1985–1993) and as Second Prime Minister in a coalition government (1993–1997). As the leading figure in the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), he orchestrated a coup d'état against Prince Norodom Ranariddh, his co-premier, in 1997 and was elected sole Prime Minister in 1998. In

2023, Hun Sen transferred power to Hun Manet, who had been elected to the National Assembly for the first time and was endorsed by the body as the new Prime Minister. Hun Sen was elected to the Senate and selected as its president. He retains his leadership of the CPP. The King of Cambodia, Norodom Sihamoni, is head of state and a largely symbolic figure. Hun Manet, a graduate of West Point and New York University, has given no indication he will usher in major policy changes in the near term.

Between 1993—when the United Nations administered Cambodia's first national election following the end of the country's civil war—and 2017, democratic institutions and practices had gradually evolved to allow widespread civic and political participation. The opposition Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP) made significant gains in the 2013 parliamentary election and 2017 local elections. Hun Sen employed a variety of means to stay in power, including electoral victories; legal and extralegal political maneuvers; limits on civil society; influence over the judiciary, broadcast media, and labor unions; and patronage, cronyism, violence, and intimidation.

Figure 1. Cambodia at a Glance



Sources: CIA World Factbook, 2025. Map, CRS.

In 2017, the Supreme Court of Cambodia issued a ruling that dissolved the CNRP for “conspiring with the United States to overthrow the government,” which the CNRP and U.S. officials denied. In the 2018 and 2023 National Assembly elections, the CPP won 125 seats and 120 seats (out of 125 total seats), respectively. In what some observers describe as politically motivated actions, Cambodian courts convicted opposition leader and former CNRP President Sam Rainsy, who lives in self-imposed exile in France, of numerous crimes. In 2022, he was sentenced in absentia to life in prison, on top of previous sentences. In the past decade, Cambodian courts have tried dozens of former members of the CNRP and other political activists. Cambodian-American lawyer and democratic activist Theary Seng is serving a six-year sentence for treason.

Economy

The Cambodian economy—which was largely destroyed under the Khmer Rouge (1975-1979), and subsequent conflicts—achieved an average annual growth rate around 8% between 1998 and 2019. The poverty rate dropped from 33.8% in 2009 to 17.8% in 2019, according to the World Bank, due in part to growth in the manufacturing and services sectors. GDP growth was 6% in 2024.

The United States is Cambodia's largest export market and second-largest trading partner after China. Cambodian exports to the United States totaled \$12.7 billion in 2024 (compared to \$11.6 billion in 2023), while imports from the United States amounted to \$322 million. Major Cambodian exports to the United States are electrical machinery, apparel, and leather goods, and the top U.S. export to Cambodia are vehicles. The garment sector—which is largely run by companies from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan—is a pillar of Cambodia's economy, employing over 750,000 workers, predominantly women. From 1997 to 2020, Cambodia was a participant in the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) program that provided tariff relief for imports from developing countries.

On April 2, 2025, the Trump Administration announced a 49% tariff rate on Cambodian exports to the United States, the highest in the world. Cambodia has sought to negotiate with the United States on tariffs. On April 9, President Trump suspended the higher tariffs for 90 days; as of June 23, Cambodia is subject to the baseline 10% tariff.

PRC Influence

China is the kingdom's largest foreign investor, a major source of financing—holding 41% of its foreign debt in 2023—and largest source of imports, including fabric for the country's garment industry. PRC-backed infrastructure, hydropower projects, and business ventures have delivered some developmental benefits to Cambodia, but also have created or contributed to environmental problems, corruption, and disruptions to some local communities. PRC investment has been particularly notable in the city of Sihanoukville and elsewhere along the Gulf of Thailand, with development projects including the construction of tourist and gambling resorts, industrial zones, an international airport at Dara Sakor, which hosts a special economic zone, and a deep-water seaport in Kampot Province. China and Cambodia recently agreed to a \$1.1 billion public-private partnership to fund the construction of the 111-mile Funan Techo Canal connecting Phnom Penh to the Gulf of Thailand.

Some PRC investments—particularly in Sihanoukville—have been linked to cyberscam operations, with the support of Cambodian politicians and business elites. The U.S. Embassy estimated that cyberscam operations in Cambodia had cost U.S. citizens at least \$100 million as of 2023. Intermittent crackdowns on compounds in Sihanoukville run by PRC-based gangs have shifted some operations to border areas with Thailand and Laos.

Ream Naval Base

U.S. concerns have grown regarding PRC construction activities at Cambodia's Ream Naval Base on the Gulf of

Thailand (**Figure 1**). Since 2022, China has expanded and upgraded facilities on a section of the base, enabling the accommodation of larger vessels. Some observers speculate that Cambodia may grant China at least semi-permanent access to Ream, allowing it to berth PRC military supply vessels and warships. Cambodian officials emphasize that they have welcomed other countries to use the facility and that hosting a permanent foreign military facility would be unconstitutional. PRC officials also have denied that Cambodia has given China exclusive rights to Ream.

Foreign Assistance and Sanctions

The United States provided \$98 million in assistance to Cambodia in FY2023. Of the U.S. foreign assistance provided to Cambodia through Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs (SFOPS) appropriations accounts between FY2021-FY2025, the majority has been through the Development Assistance account to support programs related to food security, climate change adaptation, human rights and civil society, and education. Other assistance supported global health goals such as those related to HIV/AIDS, maternal and child health, and nutrition. The Trump Administration's cancellation of foreign assistance programs reportedly included as many as 30 U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) projects in Cambodia.

The U.S. government provided \$208 million for unexploded ordnance (UXO) removal and related programs between FY1993 and FY2023. Cambodia is among the countries most heavily contaminated by UXO in the world. Funding for UXO removal was initially suspended as part of the foreign aid pause; the Trump Administration granted a waiver for these operations after a multi-week lapse. During the pause, China announced \$4.4 million in funding to Cambodia for landmine clearance operations.

Since FY2017, SFOPS legislation has placed conditions upon some U.S. assistance to Cambodia related to human rights and other concerns. The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023 (P.L. 117-328, Sec. 7043(b)) prohibited assistance to the Government of Cambodia unless the Secretary of State certified that it is taking effective steps to assert its sovereignty against PRC interference. Since 2018, various U.S. agencies have sanctioned as many as six Cambodian officials for corruption and human rights abuses pursuant to Executive Order 13818, which implements the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act (Title XII, Subtitle F of P.L. 114-328); several of these Cambodian officials were also sanctioned under the SFOPS Section 7031(c) visa restrictions authority. In 2021, the Commerce and State Departments imposed export restrictions on U.S. national security-controlled items and a ban on arms sales to Cambodia, citing human rights concerns, corruption, and concerns about the influence of the PRC military. SFOPS appropriations for FY2024 (P.L. 118-47, Section 7043(b)) requires the Secretary of State to submit to Congress an assessment of the extent of PRC influence in Cambodia, including at Ream Naval Base.

William Piekos, Analyst in Foreign Affairs

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.