

Chinese Activities in Ream Naval Base and Associated Concerns

Introduction

As per a latest report from Chatham House, a British think tank, increased construction activities in Ream Naval base in coastal city of Sihanoukville in Cambodia suggests that it is nearing to its completion, which many fear is China's next overseas military base. Satellite images show land clearance operations, land reclamation efforts, the construction of several new buildings, roads, and importantly a large pier much bigger than the base's original jetty. New fencing is visible around the base's perimeter, and buildings funded by the US have been demolished and replaced. State media have reported that new storage facilities, a hospital, drydocks and slipways are planned at Ream.^[i] All these developments suggest that slowly the American influence is decreasing in Cambodia, which has huge security implications for the Indo-Pacific. But apart from security implications to neighbouring countries, the various economic initiatives planned by the US and its allies also get affected.

Chinese interests in Cambodia

It is to be kept in mind that China has always tried to forge only one-sided win-win ties with ASEAN nations because it has a twin approach of having large trade for its benefit as well as indulging in maritime dispute over the South China Sea (SCS) region. US President Biden announced the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) in 2022. Since, Cambodia has been left out in this grouping, as compared to its fellow ASEAN nations, it's natural for China to increase its activities in Cambodia.

Apart from that, just like any other authoritarian system, the Cambodian government, led by autocratic PM Hun Sen had faced many sanctions from the US and its allies. This stems from the fact that his party claimed landslide victory in the general election where the main opposition party was barred from participating.^[ii] Also, the local citizens regularly flag the corruption issues in the government. This has also led to the grant of Chinese projects where the pockets of the officials are being lined by China to gain bids of projects of infrastructure development projects.

But, the main goal of Beijing is strategic in nature. Here China will get diplomatic support in matters of its aggression in the SCS. In the past, at ASEAN summits presided over by states such as Vietnam or the Philippines, Cambodia led the way in watering down ASEAN joint statements critical of China's conduct in the SCS and, as in 2016, blocked them entirely. This year, Cambodia vetoed a proposal from Indonesia for joint military exercises by ASEAN members in the SCS.^[iii] Apart from that, militarily the Chinese can install their Air-defence systems as Cambodia has similar plans. The surveillance gathering abilities of China will increase. If surface to air missiles is included for protection of the base, then the construction of hardened shelters can also happen, which can protect Chinese aerial assets like surveillance aircrafts.^[iv]

US Concerns in the region

The upcoming Chinese naval base at Ream has implications for the balance of power across Southeast Asia. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is the world's largest navy, but in contrast to its principal competitor, the US Navy, it has no overseas bases in the Indo-Pacific. Even a modest logistics hub at Ream would give Chinese warships greater range and a permanent presence in the Gulf of Thailand and the waters of Southeast Asia.^[v] Observers are concerned at the similarity between an angled deep-water pier located on the western shore of the Ream base and another military pier at the PLA Support Base in Djibouti. Both main piers are 363 meters long and large enough to support any ship in PLAN, including the new 300-meter-long Type 003 Fujian Aircraft Carrier.^[vi] Meanwhile China has repeatedly denied all these speculations.

The US and its NATO partner the UK will also be concerned as this upcoming base will be in close proximity to its allies like Thailand and Vietnam, and also not far from Singapore and Malaysia which are both security partners of the UK. Hence, both these NATO countries will be keenly watching this development to assure their partners in the region. Out of these, Vietnam and Malaysia also have disputes with China in the SCS region. So, after the completion of this base, we can expect increased tensions in the region as this base can give Chinese PLAN enough reasons to increase its patrol in the SCS and Vietnams EEZ regions.^[vii]

India's Security Concerns

The Ream Naval base can also create maritime security issues for India, which is a QUAD member. It is located close to the Strait of Malacca, a crucial choke point that links the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) with the SCS. This choke point has been India's leverage in the last many decades. If in future any PLAN aircraft carrier is docked there in times of crisis, air power may be used which can pose challenges. If any future conflict happens in the SCS, it can have the potential to spill over to the IOR, since QUAD spans from the IOR to the Pacific. The construction of this base amounts to strategic encirclement of India, which has long been China's game plan.^[viii]

This development can boost China's quest for alternative trade routes. Already the Gwadar port is being built in the Arabian Sea in Pakistan. It will provide solution to China's Malacca dilemma and undermine Indian advantage in the Bay of Bengal and can also threaten the Andaman and Nicobar Tri-Service base in times of conflict as it will bring China strategically close to it. Also, the PLAN logistic support can be extended from the Chinese mainland to this base during conflict times.^[ix] This base can be used for any kind of replenishment vessel like the Type 901 Ship. It will also widely provide PLAN convenient staging area to project its aggression in the IOR.

Cambodia's National Interests

One cannot ignore the fact that this development is not seen by many from Cambodia's perspective. In the year 2022, the Cambodian government released the 'National Defence Policy', where the border defence was made the key priority. Despite this policy, the demarcation of Cambodia's land and maritime borders with all of its neighbors is still incomplete. Last year, Cambodia was negotiating over the remaining boundary areas to be

demarcated with Vietnam and Thailand. In the past, Cambodia had disputes with Thailand and which led to the Preah Vihear Conflict in 2009.

Hence, it's obvious that Cambodia will aspire to develop its infrastructure to feel secure in the region. Another point to note is that Cambodia also wants to develop this port for promotion of its international trade, as envisaged in the 2021-2023 'Economic Diplomacy Strategy'. Also, since there are natural resources in the Gulf of Thailand, Cambodia would like to explore that too. In 2022, Japan was also invited for putting investment in this base. All these showcase the just reason of Cambodia for this base's development. [x] Cambodia is trying hard to explain its position that its constitution doesn't permit the setting up of foreign military base, which can't be ignored. This situation looks similar to Sri Lanka.

Conclusion

As India has good bilateral relations with Cambodia, it's necessary for India to understand this issue holistically and chalk out a strategy explaining to Cambodian leadership its concerns just like it has done in the case of Sri Lanka.

Endnotes:

[i] John Pollock, Damien Symon, "Is China Building a military base in Cambodia?", *Chatham House*, 28 July 2023, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2023-08/china-building-military-base-cambodia>

[ii] AFP, "China-funded Cambodia naval base nearly finished", *Bangkok Post*, 25 July 2023, https://www.bangkokpost.com/world/2617510/china-funded-cambodia-naval-base-nearly-finished?view_comment=1

[iii] John Pollock, Ibid.

[iv] Jack Brook, Phil Rathana, "Cambodia reveals air defence plans near China-funded naval base", *Nikkei Asia*, 1 April 2023, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Defense/Cambodia-reveals-air-defense-plans-near-China-funded-naval-base>

[v] John Pollock, Ibid.

[vi] Sun Narin, Han Noy, "Ream Naval Base Modernized By China Nears Completion", *VOA News*, 26 July 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/cambodian-ream-naval-base-modernized-by-china-nears-completion-defense-ministry/7198994.html>

[vii] John Pollock, Ibid.

[viii] Devesh Kumar, "China's new military base in Cambodia threatens India's Maritime Security- Here's Why", *Live Mint*, 5 August 2023, <https://www.livemint.com/news/world/chinas-new-military-base-in-cambodia-threatens-indias-maritime-security-heres-why-11691234289762.html>

[ix] "New Chinese Naval Base in Cambodia: Here is why it is a cause of concern for India", *ETV Bharat*, 5 August 2023, <https://www.etvbharat.com/english/international/top-news/new->

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[x] Kathreen Reed, “Re-centering Cambodian Interests in the Ream Naval Base Debate”, *The Diplomat*, 2 August 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/08/re-centering-cambodian-interests-in-the-ream-naval-base-debate/>

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