

Race for the Base: What Can Cambodia Offer to China

The [Collins English Dictionary](#) defines a military base as a, “Facility for the storage of military equipment and the training of soldiers”. A military base is any location owned, run, or utilised by the armed forces that serves as a refuge for soldiers and their equipment as well as a hub for operations and training. An overseas military base is geographically located outside of the territory of the state whose armed forces are the primary inhabitants of the base. Such bases are typically established through treaties between the host country and the country that requires the military post for a variety of reasons, including strategic and logistical considerations.

The [2019 Chinese Defense White Paper](#) mentions: To address deficiencies in overseas operations and support, it [People’s Liberation Army (PLA)] builds far seas forces, develops overseas logistical facilities, and enhances capabilities in accomplishing diversified military tasks. This synchronises with Hu Jintao’s bid to make China a ‘[maritime great power](#)’ and Xi Jinping’s aspiration to turn the Chinese military into a ‘[world-class](#)’ force by 2049. Foreign military bases and logistics support are desiderata for a navy to become a ‘blue-water navy’. For China, seeking multiple military outposts and logistical support from the Western Indian Ocean to the Pacific is mandatory as it needs to secure ‘[overseas interests](#)’—securing sea lanes on which Chinese economic growth and prosperity depend, safeguarding Chinese overseas citizens, ensuring food security, defending against an attack from the sea, and [recovering ‘lost’ maritime territories](#).

In 2019, it was alleged that, [under a secret agreement](#) between China and Cambodia, a Cambodian Naval base would be used by Chinese armed forces, which would assist the latter in projecting its military power. The pact provides for China to have exclusive rights to a part of the Ream Naval Base on the Gulf of Thailand. However, both Cambodia and China outrightly rejected the possibility of having a ‘military base’. Cambodian Prime Minister, [Hun Sen](#), [commented](#), “No such thing could happen because hosting foreign military bases is against the Cambodian constitution”. Both Chinese officials and Cambodian Defence Minister, Tea Banh, emphasised that upgrading the naval base was only for protecting the territory and sovereignty of Cambodia and was [not aimed at any third party](#). Later, in 2022, however, a Chinese official in Beijing confirmed that a portion of the base would be used by the Chinese military. To exculpate and lessen the seriousness of the charges, [the official added](#) that the Chinese would not be involved in any activities on the Cambodian portion of the base.

Even if there is little truth in accusations, the base is certainly going to boost China's ability to project naval power in the region. The [pier at the base is similar in size and design](#) to the one at the Chinese military base in Djibouti. It will provide the PLA Navy with a base at the southern end of the South China Sea (SCS), where China has claimed jurisdictions inside the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of other states. Strategically, it is also located east of the Malacca Strait, through which 80 per cent of China’s energy demands are met. In case of any major conflict over Taiwan, China would need to secure its sea lanes in the SCS and make sure that the strait is not blocked by any power, especially the U.S. In case of any conflict in the SCS or around Malacca, the presence of a naval base with its supplies of fuel and ammunition and the presence of medical facilities offer strategic advantages to China.

Albeit Cambodia has claimed that the dry dock facility at Ream is for the Royal Cambodian Navy, its size and construction make this claim implausible as the Cambodian Navy barely has any vessels over 50 metres in length. The main pier at Ream [is large enough to berth a Chinese aircraft carrier](#). Moreover, a new airport built at Dara Sakor, about 40 miles northwest of Ream, is a force multiplier. This features a 2-mile-long runway, [big enough for Boeing 747s](#) and China's long-range bombers. Military operations from the naval base, airport, or both would significantly add to China's capacity to enforce its claims in the SCS and pressurise states, such as Vietnam, Singapore, and Malaysia. It is also reported that the ground station technology for a [BeiDou navigation satellite system](#)— whose high-accuracy positioning and navigation service facilitates Chinese force movements and precision-guided missile attacks— was established at the Chinese portion of the base. It was disclosed that Cambodia had allocated 157 and 30 hectares to the Ministry of National Defense on September 15, 2022, [to develop an 'air defense command and general headquarters' and a 'naval radar system'](#), respectively. This air defence system would likely comprise surface-to-air missiles and hardened shelters. Thus, basing is also about ['global tracking and space assets'](#).

[Cheng Heang suggests](#) that the Naval base does not provide much strategic advantage let alone provide any benefit in the event of a military conflict. The shallow depth (10 metres) of the Bay of Kampong Som, which hosts the base, would not permit China to undertake major naval actions in the Gulf and the use of submarines would be rendered impractical. However, recent [satellite images showed](#) how several Chinese warships; including a submarine, a Type-52D destroyer, and two Type-54 frigates; were berthed even at the Karachi port, which is around [13 metres deep](#).

Though China has access to military outposts in the Spratly Islands too, they are highly vulnerable to attacks during wartime. Cambodian Naval Base provides a diplomatic dilemma for attackers. It [would complicate any military response](#) during a military conflict, as it would be Cambodian territory which would be bombed. Nevertheless, the base provides the ability for maintenance and repairs of warships, which is critical to sustaining any combat operations. [Ci Le Yi](#), a Taiwan-based military expert, argues that the Cambodian base would allow the PLA to berth its aircraft carriers and submarines for resupply. It would also increase the endurance of the Chinese distant naval patrols and enhance the flytime of Chinese fighter aircraft and bombers, by providing logistics, refuelling, repair, and other services. Likewise, it could be a valuable outpost from the vantage point of intelligence collection.

The Cambodian naval facility is going to aid Beijing's expansive maritime territorial claims in the SCS and help realise Xi Jinping's ambition to turn China into a first-class military power capable of projecting force over greater distances.

Anshu Kumar is a Master's student at the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India. Previously, he has worked at the Centre for Land Warfare Studies, New Delhi, India.

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