



## Cambodia: Background and U.S. Relations

Cambodia, with a population of 17 million, is one of the younger and poorer countries in Southeast Asia. U.S.-Cambodia relations have been complicated since the Vietnam War, during which the United States extensively bombed the country. Following a civil war and the signing of a peace accord in 1991, Cambodia conducted several nationwide elections beginning in 1993. Since then, the United States government has delivered a range of assistance to Cambodia, including for programs related to development, food security, health, environmental protection, election observation services, and unexploded ordnance (UXO) removal. U.S. policymakers, including Members of Congress, as well as 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.

Over the past 15 years, Cambodia’s worsening record on human rights—including flawed electoral processes, expanding constraints on freedom of expression, the media, and nongovernmental organizations, and a 2017 ban on the main opposition party—has drawn criticism from the U.S. government and led to strains in the bilateral relationship. 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.

The second Trump Administration has sought to expand the U.S.-Cambodia relationship. This has included discussions to strengthen bilateral defense relations (including through the potential resumption of military exchanges, terminated in 2017), the removal of a U.S. arms embargo, and new foreign assistance programs.

Cambodia’s prime minister, Hun Manet, is the son of longtime leader Hun Sen and a graduate of West Point and New York University. While some observers expressed hope that the younger, Western-educated leader would usher in change when he took power in 2023, the Cambodian government has maintained many of its repressive policies and has not instituted meaningful governance reforms. Endemic corruption and human rights issues, including human trafficking related to the country’s cyberscam industry, hinder economic development and have limited investment opportunities. Managing tensions with Thailand, with which Cambodia clashed over their disputed border in June and December 2025, also has been a challenge for Hun Manet’s government.

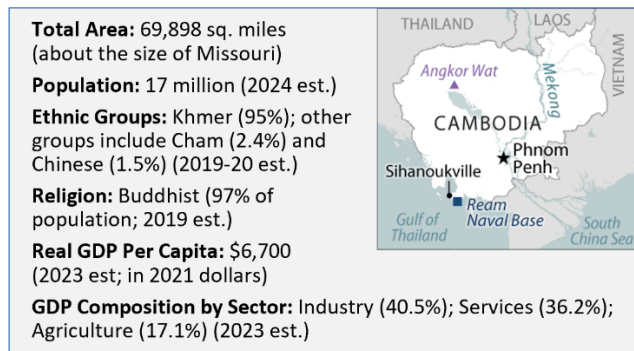
### Politics and Human Rights

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 and remains an influential figure. The King of Cambodia, Norodom Sihamoni, is head of state and a largely symbolic figure.

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 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. In response, Hun Sen employed a variety of means to stay in power, including 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 parliamentary elections, the CPP won 125 and 120 seats (out of 125 total), respectively. In the past decade, Cambodian courts have tried and convicted dozens of former members of the CNRP and other political activists, including opposition leader Sam Rainsy, who lives in self-imposed exile in France and was sentenced in absentia to life in prison. Cambodian-American lawyer and democratic activist Theary Seng, a dual citizen, is serving a six-year sentence for treason.

## Cambodia-Thailand Border Dispute

In July and December 2025, Thai and Cambodian armed forces engaged in bouts of fighting, stemming from unsettled border demarcations. President Trump played a role in mediating a ceasefire during the July hostilities, in part by pausing tariff negotiations with both countries as long as the fighting continued. The ensuing ceasefire resulted in reduced U.S. tariff rates for both countries. In October 2025, President Trump traveled to Malaysia, where he signed the Kuala Lumpur Peace Accords, a U.S. and Malaysia-mediated agreement between Thailand and Cambodia. Following renewed hostilities and another ceasefire in December 2025, the two sides have come to an uneasy yet sustained pause in fighting.

## Economy

The Cambodian economy—which was largely destroyed under the Khmer Rouge and in subsequent conflicts—achieved an average annual growth rate of around 8% between 1998 and 2019. Though growth slowed during the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Bank estimated GDP growth at 5.3% in 2025, a slowdown from 6% in 2024 due in part to the Trump Administration’s tariffs and the Thailand-Cambodia conflict.

The United States is Cambodia’s largest export market and second-largest trading partner after China. Cambodian exports to the United States totaled \$15.3 billion in 2025 (compared to \$12.7 billion in 2024), while imports from the United States amounted to \$370 million. The garment sector—which is largely run by companies from the PRC 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.

## PRC Influence

China is Cambodia’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, and a deep-water seaport in Kampot Province. In 2024, China and Cambodia broke ground on a \$1.1 billion public-private partnership to fund the construction of the 111-mile Funan Techo Canal connecting the capital, 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. Intermittent crackdowns on cyberscam compounds in Sihanoukville run by PRC-based criminal organizations have shifted some operations to border areas with Thailand and Laos. Following sanctions and other actions by the United States, in 2026 the Cambodian government announced its intention

to eradicate scam centers. While Cambodian authorities have highlighted some successes in fighting such centers, some argue these efforts appear performative, do not affect high-level beneficiaries of the scam economy, and potentially allow scam centers to reconstitute in other areas.

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 access for PRC military supply vessels and warships. Cambodian officials emphasize that they have welcomed other countries’ militaries to use the facility—including naval visits by U.S. ships—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.

## U.S. Foreign Assistance and Sanctions

Past U.S. foreign assistance to Cambodia focused on support for programs related to food security, climate change adaptation, human rights and civil society, education, and health. As part of its 2025 foreign aid review, the Trump Administration reportedly terminated as many as 30 U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) projects in Cambodia. The Administration has provided some new foreign assistance to Cambodia, including some portion of the announced \$45 million in support of the Kuala Lumpur Peace Accords and \$36 million for a five-year bilateral health partnership.

The U.S. government provided \$208 million for 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 Trump Administration’s foreign aid review in 2025, though some of these programs appear to have been restarted or received additional funding, including a reported \$5 million through the Kuala Lumpur Peace Accords.

Since FY2017, appropriations legislation for the Department of State has placed conditions on some U.S. assistance to Cambodia related to human rights, PRC influence in Cambodia (including at Ream Naval Base), and other concerns. These restrictions were not included in FY2026 appropriations (Division F of P.L. 119-75), though the House report (H.Rept. 119-217) “notes the need for a new United States integrated country strategy for Cambodia,” including on issues related to cybercrime, Cambodia’s “strategic autonomy,” and the rule of law, democratic values, sovereignty, and territorial integrity.

Since 2018, various U.S. agencies have sanctioned as many as six Cambodian officials for corruption and human rights abuses. 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 concerns about human rights, corruption, and the influence of the PRC military in Cambodia. The Trump Administration lifted these restrictions in November 2025.

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