

Time for America to Play Offense in China's Backyard

Ignoring Cambodia and Laos is a strategic mistake—but engagement requires a smarter balance of values and interests.

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As the Biden administration begins its second year in office, it is evident that its focus on the Indo-Pacific and geopolitical competition against China remains uneven. There are two small but strategically important countries that have been all but ignored by the administration so far: Cambodia and Laos. This could be a significant miscalculation.

If the United States were to make inroads in Cambodia and Laos—which observers have likened to vassals, satellite states, or virtual colonies of China—it would take strategic competition into China's own backyard. Perhaps more significantly, it would help undermine the persistent narrative that the United States is only reacting and playing defense in the Indo-Pacific in the face of China's all-but-inevitable rise. Even more than the facts on the ground, that narrative is a powerful headwind to U.S. strategy in the region. It sows doubts about U.S. engagement even among long-standing allies such as the Philippines and Thailand.

Stepping up U.S. engagement with Cambodia and Laos—for example, by countering China's multiple Belt and Road Initiative projects or enhancing U.S. access to Cambodia's Ream Naval Base—could also reverse what already seems like a fait accompli: that China will dominate, even subjugate, the Southeast Asian mainland. Cooperating with Cambodia and Laos could also strengthen ties with neighboring Thailand and U.S. strategic partner Vietnam, both of which share concerns about China, including its construction of dams along the Mekong River, an economic lifeline for all four countries.

But so far, the Biden administration's interactions with Cambodia have been poor and ineffective, while Laos has fallen off the radar screen entirely. Relations with both countries, neither of which is a democracy, have fallen victim to the administration's priority in its foreign policy on shared values over shared interests. President Joe Biden's team may also have concluded that Laos and Cambodia are so firmly entrenched in Beijing's orbit that time and resources would be better spent on countries in the region that are more receptive to and helpful in strategic competition.

These two countries, then, are test cases for whether one of the administration's priorities—democracy, freedom, and human rights—will undermine another priority: strategic competition with China. These do not have to be mutually exclusive, and there is already an active template for how the Biden administration can keep its eyes fixed on the national interest without entirely giving up on values. When U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin visited semi-authoritarian Singapore and Secretary of State Antony Blinken went to increasingly illiberal India last year, each toned down the administration's public language about democratic values, not least by admitting that the United States has struggled with some democracy issues of its own. Instead of delivering lectures, they made the interaction more of a two-way street. Alternatively, the Biden administration could emphasize the importance of good governance and limiting corruption in

Cambodia and Laos—certainly part of the values agenda—rather than tie bilateral interactions only to the state of democracy.

It is noteworthy that the democracy standard has been loosened for other countries—but not Cambodia and Laos. The Biden, Trump, and Obama administrations all consciously chose to downplay values in their relations with neighboring Vietnam, which has a poor and worsening human rights record but is an important piece on the strategic chessboard. Vietnam most persuasively demonstrates that the United States can—when it is willing—juggle values and practical cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

Admittedly, engaging Cambodia and Laos won't be easy. In 2019, then-U.S. President Donald Trump exchanged letters with Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen in a bid to reset ties. Trump requested that Hun Sen “put Cambodia back on the path of democratic governance” and, in a nod to the Cambodian strongman's concerns, noted “we do not seek regime change.” Hun Sen responded with a letter of his own. In it, he said, “I am of the view that we should not become hostage of a few dark chapters of our own history. There are so many other beautiful chapters that are worth nourishing for the greater good of both of our countries and people.” Understandably reluctant to undermine his own hold on power, he ignored Trump's call to return to democracy.

To its credit, the Biden administration has not totally ignored Cambodia, sending two senior State Department officials on separate trips last year. When Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman visited Phnom Penh in June 2021, she discussed the \$3 billion in economic development assistance the United States has given Cambodia since the end of its civil war in 1991. They also discussed health and education partnerships, Mekong River issues, and U.S. help clearing unexploded bombs from the Vietnam War. Sherman promised to work with Cambodia when it assumes the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' rotating presidency in 2022