

Rocking the boat: Chinese warships dock at Cambodian naval base

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Map of Asia; Cambodia in red

Hailey Brown — Cambodia's Defense Minister, Tea Seiha, posted photos of at least two Chinese warships docked at Ream Naval Base's new pier last weekend. The pier sits on the Gulf of Thailand, near the South China Sea, a waterway China has continued to seek control of via its navy and coast guard. Presence at the base benefits China's **material** and **relational** power, a move that has received pushback from the United States.

Power is essential in geopolitics, allowing states to manipulate relations and control geographic entities. Material power is quantifiable—the size of a country's military or economy. While relational power explains how a country can put its material power into action in connections with other countries. China has expanded its military in size and strength, boosting its material capabilities. Attempts to expand its military presence throughout the South China Sea is an effort to take this facet of its material power and use it to amplify its relational standing with other countries. The Ream Naval Base offers a strategic expansion point for Chinese sea power, as it broadens the territorial reach of its navy. Its proximity to the Malacca Strait is another benefit to China. Chinese officials have stated **concern over potential blockades** of the strait, as such an occurrence would have a devastating impact on China's ability to carry out most of its maritime transport.

States exercise sovereignty over the **territory** which they claim. Sovereignty extends to the **ocean**, where China has turned its focus in terms of power expression. Every coastal country has a designated exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of 200 nautical miles from their physical geographic territory. Controlling islands within an EEZ is one method to further control of the seas. But by establishing amicable relations with other coastal countries, like Cambodia, China can chart its military far beyond its own seas, a tactic that is not unusual in geopolitics. Sea-based power projection is just one manifestation of the continued struggle for geopolitical control.

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