

It's the first time the United States has deployed such a system in Asia since it withdrew in 2019 from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, which banned ground-launched missiles with ranges between 500 and 2,500 kilometers.

The Typhon was not fired during Balikatan, but "its presence in Northern Luzon demonstrates the reach of its missiles and its intended purpose to lock down key maritime terrain," Lariosa said.

US and Philippine military leaders have repeatedly harped on the need to shift Manila's military goals to external maritime defense, away from an internal focus such as counterinsurgency operations targeting Islamic State-backed extremists and armed rebels from the communist New People's Army. The Philippine government's campaign against the latter group, in particular, has been associated with ongoing accusations of human-rights violations; but some politicians and military members are wary of ignoring the domestic counterinsurgency.

Manila has an ongoing effort to modernize its military, which relies on outdated equipment that keeps it several steps behind China. But its modernization

program is "progressing at a slow rate," Lariosa said.

"The Philippine military won't reap the fruits of modernization until the later part of the decade to the mid-2030s," Lariosa said. "Until then, Manila has to rely on the [United States] for support in a conflict."

For now, the United States is making unprecedented commitments to the Philippines that stretch beyond military aid. During an April trilateral summit between Marcos Jr., US President Joe Biden, and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, the parties announced an economic corridor on the main Philippine island of Luzon, the first project in Washington's Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment — its counter to China's Belt and Road Initiative.

The corridor will serve Luzon by linking infrastructure projects such as ports, railways, clean energy, and semiconductor supply chains throughout the island, said Don McLain Gill, a geopolitical analyst and lecturer at the Department of International Studies at Manila's De La Salle University.

It will stretch from economic zones north of Manila at Subic Bay and Clark —



A US Army Mid-Range Capability (MRC) Launcher arrives as part of the capability's first deployment into theater on Northern Luzon, Philippines, on April 8, 2024.  
● JESSE JOHNS/US ARMY PACIFIC

both former US military bases — to major ports in Manila and Batangas, a city two hours south of the capital.

The project could alleviate the Philippines' reliance on Chinese imports and allow Manila to open its critical minerals market to Japan and the United States,

Gill said. At present, more than 90 percent of such mineral exports go to East Asian countries, and the bulk of the country's nickel is exported to China.

The corridor will also serve as a major test of Washington's ability to provide an alternative to Chinese promises of

loans and lavish infrastructure projects through the Belt and Road Initiative. Chinese companies pledged billions in railways, airports, renewable energy projects and smart cities throughout the Philippines during the Duterte presidency. However, very few of these projects came to fruition, and a majority of Filipinos polled last year expressed disapproval of China. Marcos has expressed optimism over the new economic initiative's potential, telling reporters that "within the year," the Philippines would start "to see the wisdom of having that trilateral agreement".

While the relationship between Manila and Washington appears strong now, it could be vulnerable to changing political winds. Duterte and his family remain popular — his daughter, Sara Duterte, is the Philippine vice president. The election of US presidential candidate Donald Trump could also see Washington pull back from or otherwise shift its defense commitments in the Asia-Pacific.

"While the current administration seeks to address China's expansionist ambitions," Gill said, "there is a possibility that this trend may change yet again."

The article first appeared on Foreign Policy.

## Chinese-funded port reawakens Thailand's colonial ghosts

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### OPINION

In 1907, the then-Siamese government signed over the provinces of Battambang, Siem-reap, and Sisophon to French Cambodia. The treaty outlined the new land and sea borders between French Cambodia and Siam — now Cambodia and Thailand, respectively — whose interpretation became a point of contention between the two countries in 1972. Since then, relations between the Thai and Cambodian governments over the disputed maritime territories have been amicable, but Thai nationalist group pressure has stymied recent attempts to resolve the issue.

With the establishment of the Chinese-funded Ream port in Cambodia, there is increasing concern that the port could be converted to military use to strengthen Chinese naval power projection or be a competitor to Thailand's Eastern Economic Corridor. The port and secrecy around its actual use are reigniting concerns first established in the 1907 treaty and inflaming Thai worries about what the port means for its maritime territories, the stability of the Gulf of Thailand, and relations with China and the United States.

### Sovereignty, anti-colonialism in Thailand

Thailand was the only Southeast Asian country to retain its independence in the face of Franco-English great power competition in the 19th and 20th centuries. Until the late 1800s, Siam had expanded its control over Laos, Cambodia, and the Malayan states as tributaries, with parts of those regions being under varying legal and administrative control of Siam.

Siamese territorial borders were unclear to the French and English, and the extent to which each tributary could exercise its own autonomy varied widely. When the French and English began colonizing areas over which Siam had suzerainty, this increased pressure on Siam to define its borders and adopt the Western concept of sovereignty, eventually conceding territories and enacting unfair trade policies to maintain independence.

A major sore point of colonization was the 1855 Bowring Treaty with Great Britain, which granted significant, and arguably inequitable, trade privileges to the British in Siam. This was followed by the 1856 Franco-Siamese trade agreement, which closely mirrored the terms of the Bowring Treaty. Such trade agreements and other conciliatory policies were seen as necessary by then King Mongkut to maintain Siamese in-

dependence from great powers.

These factors contributed to the 1893 Franco-Siam Crisis, which ended Siam's empire-building attempts and laid the groundwork for the loss of Laos, Cambodia, and the Malayan states. The last of these treaties was the Franco-Siamese Treaty of 1907, which established land and sea boundaries between Cambodia and Siam that have yet to be firmly determined by either country.

Once the absolute monarchy was abolished in 1932, a new national identity was formed on the basis of Thailand's ability to maintain sovereignty and adherence to anti-colonialist concepts. Great power competition led to nearly a century of national humiliation for Thailand and has entrenched deep mistrust against overbearing foreign powers. With the secrecy around the Ream port and the potential for Chinese interference, Thailand is becoming apprehensive about the project and its potential to bring great power competition back into the Gulf of Thailand.

### Implications of Ream naval base on Thai sovereignty

Cambodia interpreted the maritime borders between Thailand and Cambodia in 1972 to include a greater chunk of territory for the Cambodians,

creating an overlapping claims area of roughly 26,000 square kilometers that contains billions of dollars' worth of untapped natural resources. If extracted, they would provide greater energy independence to either nation. Many experts consider these claims unique, even radical, in the field of international law. The Thai government rebutted the claims a year later, citing the original 1907 treaty.

In 2001, following regime changes and political upheaval in both Thailand and Cambodia, the two nations signed a Memorandum of Understanding that created a commitment to resolving the maritime disputes while creating a Joint Development Area in some parts of the disputed territory. Yet, political roadblocks within both nations prevented a lasting agreement. In 2024, the governments of both nations continue to discuss the best path forward, although they have been recently affected by Thai nationalist backlash.

The historically friendly and compromising relationship between Thailand and Cambodia makes the Ream port a troublesome wedge between the two countries. China and Cambodia vehemently deny that the Chinese-funded port is operating covertly as an overseas base for the Chinese navy. Yet, satellite imagery shows the continued presence of Chinese warships while Cambodia continues to boost its military cooperation with China. Experts in the West and in Thailand have expressed concern over the potential for China to use this base to project its naval power in the crucial trade routes through Southeast Asia, possibly connecting it to the militarized Chinese ports scattered across the South China Sea.

For Thailand, the move is an unwelcome reminder of the country's history with Franco-British great power competition over a century ago. With Cambodia modernizing its navy and receiving the backing of China, the overlapping claims area in the Gulf of Thailand could become a flashpoint between the two historically friendly countries. The Thai government



Chinese naval vessels at the Ram Sea Port are preparing to train the Cambodian navy on December 3, 2023.  
● FACEBOOK

is further concerned about the port because the areas immediately surrounding Ream have historically been strategically important. The French first constructed the nearby Port of Kampong Saom in 1955, choosing the location for primarily strategic means, including the solidification of French control over strategic waters between Thailand and Vietnam. During the Vietnam War, the Vietnamese communists leveraged the port to stockpile and transport military supplies along the Ho Chi Minh trail. Furthermore, the region around the port does not lie on major traditional maritime trading routes, making Thailand even more dubious about its purpose given the secrecy around its construction. Thailand's economy has already been negatively affected by the US-China trade war, as approximately 25% of all Thai imports come from China, while around 15% of all Thai exports go to the US. Thailand has started to see China as a more reliable partner than the US, being geographically closer and more embroiled in the Thai economy, but still seeks to strengthen trade and military relations with the US as a counterbalance. This is despite skepticism that the US has an interest in Thailand beyond maintaining US hegemony in East Asia. The construction of the Ream

port, regardless if it were to serve as a military base or trading hub, may tip the scales further in favor of the Chinese regardless of Thailand's desire to remain neutral.

Thai government officials have expressed that the increasing influence of US-China competition in the Indo-Pacific could pose a serious security threat if ignored. Many Thais, feeling the growing pressure of the rivalry, believe the best chance of maintaining true independence is through stronger relations with the middle powers, including Japan, Australia, and India.

As in the past, countries with superior military and economic might, countries with which Thailand has long sought to maintain good relations, are putting pressure on the nation to make a choice. Unfortunately, the echoes of Thailand's past dealings with great power competition are becoming louder, originating with the 1907 Franco-Siam treaty and reverberating through to the Ream port. Thailand understands that it takes little time for great power competition to ignite greater conflicts, and the Ream port has the potential to be the spark that sets it off.

The article first appeared on Responsible Statecraft.



Tea Banh (2nd-R), former Cambodian Defense Minister, reviews Chinese naval officers on board a Chinese corvette at the Ream Naval Base.  
● CAMBODIA DEFENSE MINISTER