

U.S. Building Military Presence Along China's Soft Underbelly

By [Boris Volkhonsky](#)

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[Voice of Russia and Stop NATO](#)

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This weekend and the beginning of the next week will witness an unprecedented rise in US diplomatic activity in a region which until lately was a “black hole” in Washington’s foreign policy but has acquired new importance after the administration announced its “strategic pivot” towards Asia.

The diplomatic offensive begins with the American triumvirate – President Barack Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Defense Secretary Leon Panetta – visiting Cambodia. The agenda includes both bilateral talks with respective counterparts and the participation in the East Asia summit in Cambodia’s capital Phnom Penh.

Later, the US President and his men (as well as the woman) will also visit Thailand and Myanmar.

What makes the tour historic is not just the fact that never before had any US President visited Cambodia or Myanmar (formerly, Burma), but the attempt to establish substantial presence in what has for a long time been regarded as China’s domain. Both Myanmar and Cambodia are looked upon as China’s allies in the region, and both countries have been in a kind of international isolation for decades which allowed China to dominate their economies as well as politics.

But times are changing, and the “strategic pivot” announced late last year presupposes that the US is going to exert efforts in order to not only limit China’s expansion in the fields it is aiming to conquer, but also to press China out of areas which it has long regarded as its backyard.

On Thursday, The Washington Post published a lengthy article by a staff writer, Craig Whitlock, on national security and the Pentagon dealing with the issues of the US cooperation with Cambodia in the field of counterterrorism.

The story says that, “The Pentagon is expanding counterterrorism assistance to unlikely corners of the globe as part of a strategy to deploy elite Special Operations forces as advisers to countries far from al-Qaeda’s strongholds in the Middle East and North Africa.”

These countries include the Philippines, Bangladesh, Indonesia and Cambodia, and Pentagon officials seem little concerned that all those countries are not on the list of those which respect human rights.

More so, not all of them seem to be facing a terrorist threat. “In Cambodia, for example,”

writes Craig Whitlock, “the Defense Department is training a counterterrorism battalion even though the nation has not faced a serious militant threat in nearly a decade.”

[I]n the past, while Washington apparently distanced itself from Cambodian leadership, it did not prevent Hun Sen’s three sons from receiving an education in US universities. His eldest son and heir apparent Hun Manet, for example, received a degree from the US Military Academy at West Point, and presently serves as deputy commander of Cambodian Army.

Various human right bodies have expressed concerns about President Obama’s visit to Cambodia citing gross human rights violations in that country. One of the latest incidents in the row occurred just a couple of days before Obama’s arrival in Phnom Penh. Eight villagers living close to the international airport were arrested for placing Obama’s portraits and SOS signs on the roofs of their houses trying to attract the US President’s attention to their problems.

Despite criticism from human rights activists, the administration’s top brass have not altered their plans and the visit is going ahead.

Too much is at stake both for Washington and Phnom Penh. Washington’s aims have been outlined above and are too clear.

“This is a hook,” said Carlyle A. Thayer, an expert on Southeast Asian militaries and a professor at the Australian Defense Force Academy. “It’s something you don’t want to give up. It gives you access, it gives you influence.”

As for Hun Sen, American assistance in training a counterterrorist unit is also of grave importance – it allows him to have at hand a loyal tool to suppress an attempted coup or any other challenge to his supremacy.

When the two are combined together, forget about human rights!

Stop NATO e-mail list home page with archives and search engine:

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/stopnato/messages>

Stop NATO website and articles:

<http://rickrozoff.wordpress.com>

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Articles by: **[Boris Volkhonsky](#)**

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