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Beyond the Ban: A Comparative Study of U.S. and Chinese Humanitarian Mine Action in Cambodia

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Abstract. This paper explores why the United States and China have supported humanitarian mine action in Cambodia although both have stayed outside the Ottawa Treaty, and what their involvement shows about the influence and the limits of international legal regimes. Cambodia serves as the case study, and the materials come from government documents, treaty and Review Conference reports, publications of international and Cambodian mine-action organizations, as well as secondary scholarship. The comparison has two levels. At the treaty level, both countries accept that anti-personnel landmines have humanitarian consequences and support the humanitarian objectives of the treaty; however, they reject its comprehensive legal restrictions when they see these as conflicting with national security. The two policy paths are different: U.S. policy has changed from one presidential administration to the next and has kept its security exceptions, especially for the Korean Peninsula; China has held a more stable preference for phased restrictions under an alternative legal framework. In Cambodia, both countries have supported many of the same mine-action activities for humanitarian as well as strategic reasons, but the channels they use are not the same. U.S. support has been multilateral and has run through government agencies, NGOs, and technical partnerships; China has mainly used bilateral and state-centered cooperation with Cambodian institutions. The comparison shows that the humanitarian norms linked to the Ottawa Treaty reach further than its legal framework. Cambodia's large but still incomplete progress also shows that treaty obligations by themselves cannot guarantee timely clearance; this continues to depend on domestic capacity and on continued international assistance.

Keywords: humanitarian mine action, Ottawa Treaty, Cambodia, United States, China

1. Introduction

Used indiscriminately, anti-personnel landmines have caused deaths and injuries long after the wars in which they were laid have ended. In Cambodia the humanitarian consequences have been especially acute, since mine contamination there is among the heaviest anywhere. Global recognition of the crisis brought states together with non-governmental organizations, and their cooperation produced the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention (the Ottawa Treaty). In 1997 the treaty was adopted, and since 1999, when it entered into force, it has prohibited the production, stockpiling, transfer, and use of anti-personnel landmines (APMs) and has also imposed obligations

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for minefield clearance and victim assistance [1]. However, several major military powers, among them the United States, China, and Russia, have stayed outside the Convention [1]. This paper focuses on the United States and China, both of which have long supported mine action in Cambodia through funding, technical training, and victim assistance while remaining outside the treaty's legal framework [2, 3]. Why would states refuse a treaty's legal obligations while supporting the humanitarian goals behind it? That paradox is the central question examined here.

Cambodia has both unexploded ordnance (UXO) and anti-personnel mines, and the two are not the same. APMs are explosive devices emplaced on purpose and meant to be set off by a person; UXO consists of munitions that did not explode as intended after being dropped, launched, or fired [4, 5]. The Ottawa Treaty applies specifically to APMs, while mine-action programs in Cambodia typically address both; this paper therefore uses "mine action" for the broader practice that includes victim assistance and risk education as well as clearance.

Cambodia was subject to both international and domestic armed conflict in the twentieth century's second half, and landmines and UXO still contaminate large parts of the country, with particularly dense mine contamination along its border with Thailand [6]. Because of the contamination, rural infrastructure, for example schools, roads, and irrigation systems, has been difficult to rehabilitate [7]. Since the adoption of the Ottawa Treaty, Cambodia has received demining assistance from both China and the United States [2, 3]; thus it offers a useful case for examining how the two states approach the treaty and humanitarian mine action in practice.

This paper argues that the comparison operates on two levels. At the level of the treaty, both states endorse the humanitarian objectives of the Ottawa Treaty while refusing its full legal restrictions on grounds of national security. At the level of practice in Cambodia, both support mine clearance and victim assistance, but through different institutional channels and with different combinations of humanitarian, strategic, and political motivations. Together, these parallel positions and divergent approaches suggest that the Ottawa Treaty has shaped international norms well beyond the reach of its legal framework, even as domestic politics and security priorities continue to determine how non-party states put those norms into practice.

Existing studies deal with the Ottawa Treaty, with Cambodian demining, and with U.S. and Chinese landmine policy, but no study compares the two powers directly. Kenneth Anderson, a legal scholar who once directed the Arms Division of Human Rights Watch, has examined how NGOs, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) above all, drove the Ottawa Process [8]. Ved P. Nanda similarly presents the landmine ban as an example of how NGOs can strengthen and shape international human rights law [9]. This literature shows how cooperation between NGOs and like-minded middle powers such as Canada displaced the traditional negotiating procedures dominated by major powers. It concentrates, however, on the states and organizations that supported the treaty, and pays less attention to the major powers that stayed outside it.

A second body of literature concerns Cambodia's own experience of landmine contamination and mine action. The anthropologist Darcie DeAngelo examines mine clearance in Cambodia and the Greater Mekong Subregion beyond its humanitarian benefits [10]. She argues that although clearance reduces immediate physical risk and enables development, it can also generate new vulnerabilities, particularly where land-release processes expose marginalized communities to land grabbing and displacement. Nao Shimoyachi-Yuzawa connects demining in Cambodia more specifically to post-conflict peacebuilding, and she stresses local participation, post-clearance land use, and the need to link mine action to longer-term development [11]. Other studies examine what institutions have contributed, for example the Cambodian Mine Action Centre (CMAC), as well as international mine-action programs [12]. Valuable as this scholarship is, it treats Cambodia primarily

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as a recipient of assistance rather than examining the differing approaches of the external powers providing it.

A third body of research examines the landmine policies of the United States and China separately. Official statements of U.S. policy admit that there is a tension between humanitarian commitments and security concerns, especially on the Korean Peninsula [13]; for China, monitoring reports show that Beijing prefers alternative frameworks, for example the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) [14]. Bradley J. Murg has analyzed U.S.-Cambodia relations and points out that this bilateral relationship is complicated, with cooperation and mistrust existing side by side in the general context of Indo-Pacific competition [15]; Shihlun Allen Chen's work on Cambodia-China relations follows how China's engagement has deepened through economic and strategic partnership [16]. These studies examine the two states in isolation, however, rather than asking how two rival major powers outside the Ottawa Treaty respond to the same humanitarian problem.

To address this gap, the paper draws on official documents from U.S. government agencies, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, the United Nations, the Landmine Monitor, and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), together with reports from Cambodian mine-action institutions such as CMAC, press coverage, and scholarship. These sources allow the stated positions of the two governments to be compared with the ways their policies have been carried out in Cambodia.

2. Cambodia: landmines as a development and humanitarian challenge

2.1. Legacies of violence

Following its independence from France in 1953, Cambodia experienced decades of war and civil conflict, including U.S. bombing during the Vietnam War, most intensely between 1970 and 1975, and the Cambodian-Vietnamese War that followed [6, 17, 18]. By the end of the century, this violence had made Cambodia's mine contamination some of the worst in the world [18].

In 1979, Vietnamese forces overthrew the Khmer Rouge regime, and fighting continued between the Vietnamese-backed government and resistance forces, including the Khmer Rouge, with all sides laying mines in strategic and border areas [6, 17]. During this conflict the new Cambodian government, with Vietnamese support, implemented the K5 Belt from 1985, laying millions of mines along the Cambodia-Thailand border [6]. Cambodia's explosive contamination therefore has two principal historical sources: UXO from wartime bombing, and landmines laid during the conflicts that followed, particularly between 1979 and 1993 [6, 18]. Figure 1 reproduces a CMAC map of mine and UXO contamination together with the areas bombed by the United States between 1965 and 1975 [6].

The 1991 Paris Peace Accords formally opened Cambodia's peace process, followed by UN-organized elections in 1993. Mines continued to be laid even after those elections, according to CMAC [6]. As civilians returned to their villages and farmland, landmines ceased to be a military problem and became a humanitarian one.

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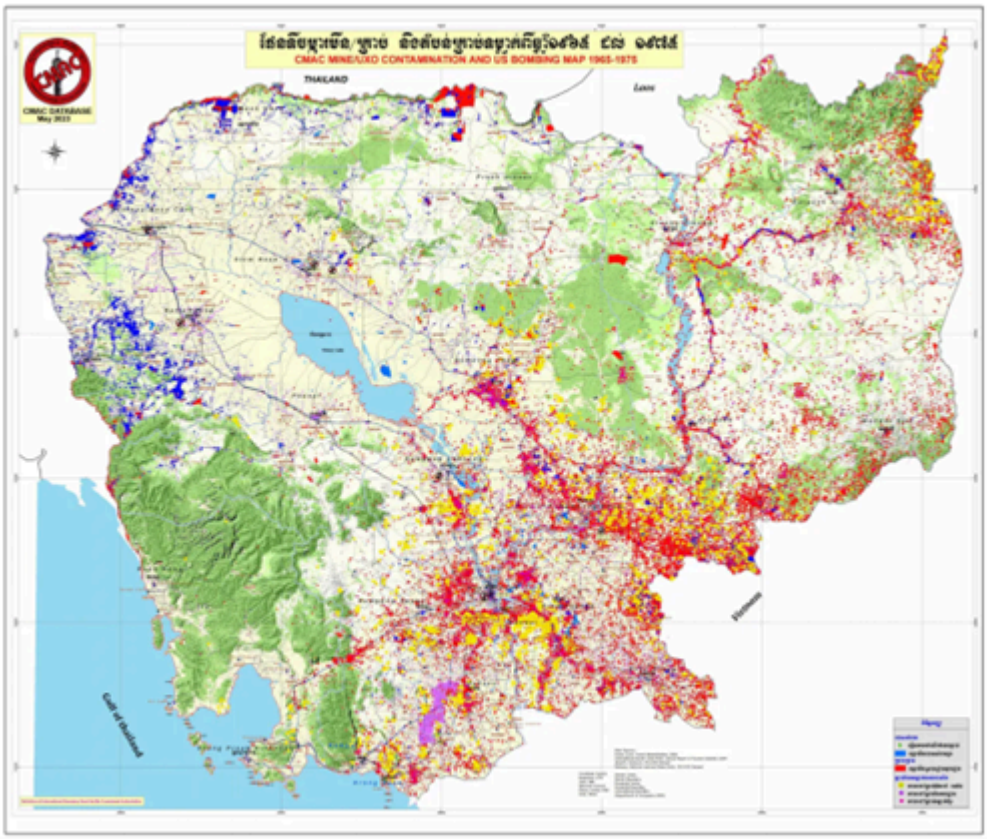


Figure 1. Mine and UXO contamination and U.S. bombing areas in Cambodia, 1965–1975 (source: CMAC database, May 2023)

2.2. Humanitarian consequences

The formal peace process did not end the dangers facing civilians in contaminated areas [19]. In CMAC's casualty series, the yearly number of people killed or injured by explosive remnants of war and mines fell from 1,153 in 1999 to 21 in 2023 (Figure 2) [6], and according to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), "Since 1979, there have been over 65,000 casualties, including nearly 20,000 deaths" [19].

A less visible consequence of contamination is its effect on livelihoods. Contaminated land has delayed agricultural production and infrastructure reconstruction and has restricted access to farmland and forest, so that civilians have often had to weigh mine risks against hunger [7]. Samnang Art was a former soldier and had already lost a hand in a mine blast; still, he went into a forest every day although he knew it was mined, and the reason, in his own words, was that "we were so poor, and we needed the money from collecting firewood"; later he lost a leg to a second mine [19]. Yuth Voung moved to Tuol Mtes with her family in 2000 and farmed mine-contaminated land there for nearly two decades; since the family needed food, she and her husband cleared that land by themselves, and they had no training and no professional assistance [20]. Mao Sopheap settled in Thvat village in Battambang province in 1992, and in May 1995, while she was clearing land for farming, she lost the right leg from the knee down; the injury increased the workload and the medical costs of her family [6]. For many civilians, there is no choice about taking such risks; survival requires it.

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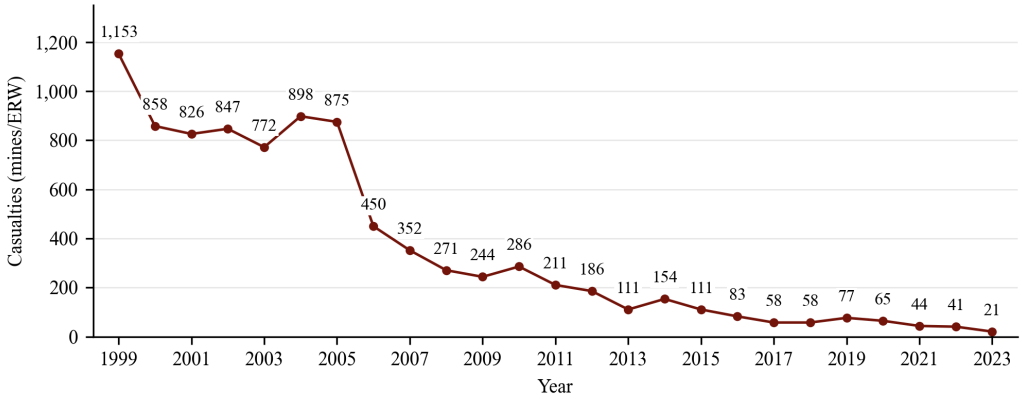


Figure 2. Casualties per year in Cambodia from explosive remnants of war and landmines, 1999–2023 (data source: CMAC)

2.3. National mine action

In 1992, the Supreme National Council of Cambodia established the Cambodian Mine Action Centre (CMAC); it has since become Cambodia's main demining body. CMAC's stated mission is "Saving lives and Supporting Development for Cambodia," and its work concentrates on mine risk education, information and survey, clearance, and training [12, 21]. It became the core institution of Cambodia's mine-action programme, and its work expanded over time from emergency clearance to land survey, risk education, technical training, and post-clearance development. Clearance has allowed communities to resume farming, rebuild roads and schools, and use areas that had long been unsafe. In 2023, for instance, CMAC destroyed 83,814 mines and items of UXO and released 281,975,328 m² (roughly 282 km²) of contaminated land [22]. Given the scale of the contamination, however, national capacity alone has never been sufficient, and continued international assistance has remained essential.

2.4. International assistance

Since organized mine action began in the early 1990s, assistance has come from state governments, including the United States, Japan, Australia, European countries, and China, as well as from UN agencies and international NGOs, and it has taken the form of direct funding, technical advice, equipment, training, risk education, victim assistance, and institutional support for bodies such as CMAC [3, 7]. Much of the clearance itself, however, has been carried out by Cambodian deminers, some of them former combatants, a fact that complicates any simple distinction between those responsible for contamination and those responsible for clearance.

Laying a landmine or leaving unexploded ordnance behind is far cheaper than removing it [23]. According to an estimate cited by the ICRC, a mine costing three dollars to buy and almost nothing to lay costs between two hundred and one thousand dollars to clear. The national mine-action programme has therefore received substantial financial support from multiple foreign governments, through bilateral channels and through a special UNDP trust fund named "Assistance to Demining Programs in Cambodia," and between December 1997 and December 1998 alone, the trust fund received US$9.14 million from donors including the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, Japan, Australia, Finland, and South Korea [7]. Table 1 lists the contributions of individual donors to CMAC between 1994 and 1998, as reported by the Landmine Monitor [7]. The UNDP-supported

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Clearing for Results (CfR) project started in 2006, and by 2026 it had helped to clear and release mine-contaminated land totalling 427 km² [24]. International demining assistance thus predates the Ottawa Treaty; after 1999 the treaty placed those efforts within a broader legal and humanitarian framework.

Table 1. Donor contributions to the Cambodia Mine Action Center, 1994–1998

Country/organization	Financial support in cash (US$)	Technical advisors	In-kind
Australia (1994–98)	10.21 million	Yes	
Belgium (1997)	0.82 million	Yes	
Canada (1994–98)	2.83 million	Yes	
Denmark (1993, 96–98)	4.15 million		
Finland (1998)	0.52 million		Flail
Pope John Paul II (94)	5,000		
King of Cambodia*	13,000		
Japan (1994/96/98)	6.3 million		
Norway (1994/95/96)	1.96 million	Yes, provided through Norwegian People's Aid	
New Zealand (93–97)	0.54 million	Yes	
Netherlands (93, 96–98)	7.76 million	Yes	
Switzerland (1997)	67,000		
South Korea (1998)	25,000		
Sweden (1995–98)	8.83 million	Yes	
United Kingdom (93–96)	4.119 million		Bilateral in context of Trust Fund (95–99)
USA (1994)	910,000		Leadership training and in-kind donations valued at US$10 million
Germany* (Dir. CMAC, 97)	1.6 million		
European Union*	5.3 million	Yes, provided through Handicap International	
UNDP/CARERE* (93–2000)	4 million	Capacity building	
USAID*	2 million		
UNICEF*	1 million	Yes	
UN Volunteers*		4 volunteers to CMAC (4 × US$35,000)	

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Note: * Donated outside the UNDP Trust Fund. Source: Landmine Monitor Report 1999.

3. The mine ban treaty: the Ottawa Treaty

3.1. The Ottawa Process and the Ottawa Treaty

The Ottawa Treaty established a comprehensive international prohibition of anti-personnel landmines; states could sign it from December 1997, and it has been in force since 1999 [4, 25]. Its origins were unusual: the treaty emerged from cooperation among pro-ban middle powers, international organizations, and NGOs rather than from great-power negotiation.

The International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) was launched in 1992 by six NGOs, namely Human Rights Watch, Physicians for Human Rights, the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation, Handicap International, the Mines Advisory Group, and medico international. Coordinated by Jody Williams, the ICBL linked organizations across many countries and worked directly with governments that supported a comprehensive ban [26, 27].

In 1992 the United States enacted a one-year export moratorium on anti-personnel landmines, and no other state had done so before; in 1994 it was President Bill Clinton who, ahead of every other world leader, urged their "eventual elimination" [28]. Washington nonetheless maintained that restrictions should be tightened step by step within existing multilateral forums, first the CCW and later the Conference on Disarmament, and should not come through a total ban adopted at once [28]. The CCW review conference that concluded in 1996 produced only limited changes to the original 1980 Convention, and fell well short of what pro-ban states had sought [29].

In 1996, the Canadian government convened representatives of some fifty states and of NGOs, including the ICBL, in Ottawa, and this meeting launched a fast-track negotiation that came to be called the Ottawa Process [30]. Unlike traditional negotiations conducted under United Nations auspices, the Ottawa Process allowed states committed to a total ban to proceed without waiting for universal consensus, which made it possible to complete the treaty within a single year. The text was adopted at Oslo in September 1997; the United States joined the Oslo negotiations but ultimately rejected the final treaty text; China stayed out of the Ottawa Process altogether, and neither country signed the treaty [14, 25, 31]. Cambodia itself took an active part, attending the 1996 Ottawa Conference and the preparatory meetings of 1997 and taking part in the Oslo negotiations [7].

3.2. Key provisions of the Ottawa Treaty

The treaty established two related sets of obligations: anti-personnel mines were banned outright, and states took on humanitarian duties to clear mines and assist victims. Without this distinction, U.S. and Chinese positions are hard to understand. In the preamble, the parties call themselves "determined to put an end to the suffering and casualties caused by anti-personnel mines." To fix the scope of that commitment, the treaty distinguishes anti-personnel mines, designed to be set off by a person, from mines meant to be set off by a vehicle. The prohibition itself is absolute, since each state party undertakes that it will "never under any circumstances" use, produce, stockpile, or transfer anti-personnel mines [4].

Under Article 5, a state party must clear the anti-personnel mines from all mined areas that it controls or has jurisdiction over, at the earliest possible date and within ten years of entry into force; until clearance is complete, it must mark, monitor, and protect mined areas to keep civilians out. Under Article 6(3), "Each State Party in a position to do so shall provide assistance for the care and rehabilitation, and social and economic reintegration, of mine victims and for mine awareness

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programmes," and Article 6(4) places a similar obligation on these states to support the clearance of mines and related efforts [4]. These provisions show that the treaty was concerned not only with banning a weapon but with reducing the humanitarian consequences that outlast the conflicts in which it was used. Reservations are also excluded, since the text says that "The Articles of this Convention shall not be subject to reservations" [4]. This prohibition was comprehensive and allowed no reservations; thus, states that wanted exceptions on military or security grounds had little room.

3.3. Successful implementation and humanitarian impact

The 1997 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded jointly to the ICBL and Jody Williams, in recognition of what they had done to ban and clear anti-personnel mines [27]. In her Nobel lecture, Williams said the Ottawa Process had shown how "small and middle powers can work together with civil society"; in this way a humanitarian problem was handled "with breathtaking speed" [32].

The clearest achievement in numbers is in stockpile destruction, which Article 4 requires for anti-personnel mines. By the Fourth Review Conference in 2019, states parties had destroyed over 52 million anti-personnel mines from their stockpiles, and thirty-one of them had finished their mine clearance obligations [33]. According to the ICBL, by the time of the Fifth Review Conference (2024), 94 states parties had fulfilled their stockpile-destruction obligations, and in total they had destroyed more than 55 million mines [34].

Cambodia shows how these obligations worked at the national level. It met Article 4 by destroying 203,671 stockpiled anti-personnel mines; its repeated Article 5 extensions, however, show that clearance is still far from complete [35].

4. U.S. and Chinese humanitarian demining approaches in Cambodia

4.1. U.S. and Chinese positions beyond the Ottawa framework

Neither the United States nor China signed the Ottawa Treaty, and their positions outside it are similar in pattern: each admits that anti-personnel landmines carry a humanitarian cost and supports the treaty's humanitarian objectives, and each puts forward an alternative framework as the better compromise between national security and humanitarian concern. However, the two paths are not the same: U.S. policy has changed with each successive presidential administration [36, 37], and China's position has moved less [14].

The United States sought from the outset to balance humanitarian concern against military necessity, above all on the Korean Peninsula. Under the Clinton Administration, anti-personnel mines remained "a key part of our defense line in Korea" [31]. Seoul lies only twenty-seven miles from the Demilitarized Zone, and the administration's argument was that APL in larger numbers "would be deployed to delay and to disrupt the attack long enough for us to bring in air power and other reinforcements" [38]. On 17 January 1997, with the Ottawa Process already underway, the administration announced that it would seek a negotiated ban in the Conference on Disarmament instead [28]. In September 1997, it was announced that U.S. forces would stop using anti-personnel landmines everywhere except the Korean Peninsula by 2003, and in 1998 Washington declared its intention to sign the mine ban treaty by 2006, provided that suitable alternatives had been developed by then [28, 38].

Under the Bush Administration, the United States dropped its aim of becoming a treaty party by 2006 [39]. U.S. officials disclosed in 2014 that one anti-personnel mine had been used by U.S.

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forces in Afghanistan in 2002 [40]. A 2004 State Department statement explained that "the United States will not join the Ottawa Convention because its terms would have required us to give up a needed military capability" [39]. In 2014, the Obama Administration brought U.S. policy closer to the Ottawa standard, and it called the change a matter of "aligning our APL policy outside the Korean Peninsula with the key requirements of the Ottawa Convention" [36]. In 2020 the first Trump Administration went back on this policy; in its view, "landmines, including APL, remain a vital tool in conventional warfare that the United States military cannot responsibly forgo" [37]. In 2022, the Obama-era restrictions were brought back by the Biden Administration, and it repeated the U.S. commitment that Washington "will not use anti-personnel landmines outside the Korean Peninsula" [13]; but then in 2024 anti-personnel mines were supplied to Ukraine, and the State Department admitted that "this is the first time we are providing them with anti-personnel landmines" [41]. In December 2025, the second Trump Administration reversed this policy once more; it lifted the geographic limits on where U.S. forces may use anti-personnel landmines and empowered combatant commanders to approve their use [40]. In short, if the circumstances are judged to require it, security concerns still come before humanitarian restraint.

Compared with this, China has followed a more consistent path. It has acknowledged that landmines have humanitarian consequences while arguing that a comprehensive ban should be reached gradually, with security concerns accommodated along the way and alternatives pursued under the CCW [42, 43]. China's 1998 national defense white paper said the country was fully aware of "the problem of threat to innocent people caused by the indiscriminate use of anti-personnel landmines," and it also said that "as a country with long land borders, China has to reserve the right to use APLs on its territory pending an alternative solution is found and its requirements in security and defense capability are catered for" [43]. In the same white paper, China advocated "proper and rational restrictions on the use and transfer of APLs"; it named an "ultimate objective of comprehensive prohibition," to be reached "through a phased approach," and it stressed that it had "actively participated in the revision of the Landmine Protocol (Protocol II)" [43].

China nonetheless engaged more closely with the treaty's humanitarian norms. In 1999 it sent an observer to the states parties' first meeting and hoped to prepare the ground "for the ultimate goal of a complete ban"; at a CCW meeting in 2000, it cited "security concerns and military technological development levels" but still acknowledged that "complete prohibition is undoubtedly the best solution" [44]. From 2005 onward, China has voted each year for the United Nations General Assembly resolution that calls for universal adoption and full implementation of the treaty [14, 44]. In 2014, it reported the destruction of "several hundred thousand old and dysfunctional" anti-personnel mines from its stockpiles "over the last two decades," and it said that the country had not used any new anti-personnel mines during the ten years before [14]. These steps brought Chinese practice closer to some of the treaty's humanitarian standards, but China maintained its position against accession. Neither state, then, accepts the total ban, yet both support clearance without joining the treaty, a shared position that is visible in Cambodia.

4.2. U.S. and Chinese demining assistance in Cambodia

Cambodia, itself a landmine-affected country, has become a major recipient of international demining assistance [45], and by supporting that work both China and the United States have gained standing as states that address the humanitarian harm caused by landmines without accepting the treaty's constraints. Their reasons for engaging combined humanitarian and strategic rationales.

Both justified their assistance in humanitarian terms. In a February 2004 briefing on the new U.S. landmine policy, a senior State Department official asserted that "our humanitarian and military

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goals are fully compatible" [46], presenting humanitarian mine action as evidence that retaining certain military capabilities did not require abandoning humanitarian commitments. The Department of State has also identified "explosive remnants of war from U.S. air strikes during the Vietnam War" as one source of Cambodia's contamination, so that U.S.-funded demining has helped clear the remnants of U.S. bombing campaigns [2]. The American humanitarian rationale thus carries an additional dimension of war legacy: assistance to Cambodia as a way of addressing the legacy of a past conflict in which the United States was directly involved. China framed its assistance instead in terms of Cambodia's present-day humanitarian needs: a report on "Pure Homeland-2023," a mine-clearing operation carried out jointly by several countries, stated that the operation aimed to "make positive contributions to the security and well-being of people in the region" [47], and in 2026 the Chinese ambassador called demining cooperation a practical step toward building a community with a shared future for mankind [48].

Yet humanitarian considerations alone do not explain the sustained involvement of either state. Demining also carried strategic value, strengthening both countries' relationships with Cambodia. A 2009 National Defense University policy brief described humanitarian mine action as "the flagship program of successful collaboration between the United States and Cambodia since 1993" [49], and during a 2015 training program with CMAC, a U.S. Marine Corps officer said that "this training provides the opportunity to further strengthen the bond between our nations" [50]. Chinese official language works in much the same way: in 2024 the Chinese ambassador to Cambodia said that cooperation on mine clearance is "an important part of the China-Cambodia comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership" [51]. Humanitarian and strategic considerations were therefore mutually reinforcing, but the two states translated them into markedly different institutional models.

4.3. Contrasting institutional and operational approaches

The United States has provided humanitarian mine-action assistance to Cambodia since fiscal year 1993, and USAID, the Department of Defense, and the Department of State have worked alongside international organizations and nongovernmental organizations [2]. Rather than working only government to government, it distributed the components of mine action among specialized organizations. The Department of State served as the principal coordinator, providing $94.388 million between 1993 and 2017 for work addressing UXO and other explosive hazards in Cambodia [52]. The Department of Defense contributed technical research: through the Humanitarian Demining Research and Development Program, it evaluated detection, area-preparation, and mechanical-clearance technologies under Cambodian field conditions [2]. USAID concentrated on survivor assistance and rehabilitation, and its channel was the Leahy War Victims Fund [52].

A 2015 Marine Corps program also trained CMAC personnel and planned a "train the trainer" phase in 2016 in which Cambodian trainees would teach new students under U.S. observation [50]. Together, these arrangements produced a decentralized model in which separate institutions performed specialized functions.

China pursued similar objectives through a more centralized bilateral model. It coordinates its work with the Cambodian Mine Action and Victim Assistance Authority (CMAA), which sets national mine-action policy, and implements most of its projects through CMAC by way of formal bilateral agreements and state-backed channels [53]. Its early mine-action assistance was international in scope and relatively sporadic: a 1998 donation of $100,000 to the UN Voluntary Trust Fund for Assistance in Mine Action; demining courses in 1999 and 2000 for personnel from mine-affected countries, Cambodia among them; and mine detection and clearance equipment worth $1.26 million for mine-affected countries, Cambodia among them, in 2001 [42]. Chinese engineer

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units in the UN peacekeeping mission had joined demining operations in Cambodia in 1992 and 1993 [3], but Cambodia-focused engagement became sustained after 2018; between 2018 and 2023, China contributed $14.4 million in total to CMAC, and this paid for three successive phases of its operations [53]. In 2023, China trained forty personnel from Cambodia and Laos in a humanitarian demining program [51]. China has delivered most of this assistance through state institutions, alongside multilateral channels such as the Lancang-Mekong Demining Cooperation project and the ADMM-Plus Experts' Working Group on Humanitarian Mine Action [48, 51].

The timing of this expansion is also worth attention. After 2018, China's assistance focused on Cambodia became continuous, and in 2020 U.S. national landmine policy moved away from the Ottawa standards under the Trump Administration [37, 53]. China did not take the place of U.S. assistance; instead, it enlarged its own humanitarian role at a time when U.S. policy on the Ottawa framework was becoming less consistent. The institutional structures were different, but the two approaches supported many of the same activities: both sides cooperated with CMAC, funded or took part in clearance operations, provided equipment and technical training, and supported capacity building. The difference is one of organization and delivery, not of substance; both carried out humanitarian objectives linked to the Ottawa Treaty, and neither accepted its comprehensive legal prohibition.

4.4. Results and limitations of assistance

In its 2024 report to the Fifth Review Conference, Cambodia stated that its mine-action sector had "cumulatively cleared and released 3,168 square kilometers of land contaminated by all forms of explosive ordnance, destroyed 1,185,589 anti-personnel mines, 26,440 anti-tank mines, and 3,126,412 explosive remnants of war, including cluster munitions" [54]. However, a large contaminated area remains: 1,658 square kilometers of land, and anti-personnel mines contaminate 393 square kilometers of this; the figure leaves out further minefields in the provinces bordering Thailand that a comprehensive survey has yet to identify [54]. Three extensions of the Article 5 clearance deadline have been requested by Cambodia, and the latest one runs until 2030 [35]. These extensions show that legal obligation by itself is not enough; meeting the treaty's humanitarian objectives still depends on assistance from international partners, and among them are non-parties, including the United States and China.

Both states have contributed substantially to demining in Cambodia. According to a 2006 U.S. government editorial, the United States had helped to clear over 250 million m² of land in Cambodia [55]. CMAC, for its part, records that a Chinese-assisted project cleared landmine and UXO contamination from approximately 19,000 hectares, and that operations under the project between 2018 and 28 February 2026 destroyed approximately 105,000 explosive remnants of war; risk education reached 4.6 million people, and more than 378,000 families benefited [56]. These figures cover different periods, activities, and forms of contamination, however, and cannot establish which approach was the more effective. Nor can Cambodia's national results be attributed only to China and the United States; the UNDP-supported Clearing for Results project by itself accounted for 13.5 per cent of Cambodia's sector-wide clearance achievements [24]. Cambodia's progress therefore reflects a combination of legal framework, humanitarian norms, and sustained cooperation between Cambodian institutions and international donors.

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5. Conclusion

This paper began with a paradox: the United States and China, strategic rivals that have both remained outside the Ottawa Treaty, have both supported humanitarian mine action in Cambodia. From the comparison it can be seen that a state can support a treaty's humanitarian objectives and at the same time reject its legal framework. At the level of treaty policy, the two states reached similar positions by different routes: U.S. policy changed whenever the administration changed, although its security reasoning for the Korean Peninsula stayed the same; China's position moved less, as it supported the humanitarian objectives and sought prohibition through a phased approach. In Cambodia, both supported mine action for humanitarian and also for strategic reasons; the United States, however, worked through a decentralized network of government agencies, NGOs, and technical partnerships, and China mainly delivered its assistance through state-centered cooperation with Cambodian institutions.

The Ottawa framework has its limits, and Cambodia shows them too. The treaty places legal obligations on its states parties, but on its own it cannot guarantee timely implementation; even with extensive international assistance, Cambodia has extended its Article 5 deadline again and again, and clearance is not yet finished. Non-parties, the United States and China among them, are outside the treaty's hold, and its membership can change as well; Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Finland, and Poland have all withdrawn, with effect between December 2025 and February 2026, due to the security threat that they link to Russia's war in Ukraine [25, 57]. These developments make the central paradox of this paper more pointed. China and the United States have both supported the humanitarian part of the Ottawa Treaty by dealing with the consequences of past conflicts, but they have not accepted its prohibitory goals, and these goals require that anti-personnel landmines be eliminated completely. In their policies, as a result, humanitarian assistance has been separated from military restraint. Therefore, humanitarian norms can go far beyond the legal reach of a treaty, but the legal framework that carries them is still exposed to the same security pressures that kept Washington and Beijing outside it from the beginning.

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