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# SMALL STATE DILEMMA: CAMBODIA BETWEEN THE ASEAN AND CHINA IN THE INDO-PACIFIC CONTEXT

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*Abstract: As a small state, Cambodia viewed the ASEAN and China as almost equally important pillars of its foreign policy. Amid the intense strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific, Cambodia faced the dilemma of how to maintain the ASEAN centrality without diplomatic cost to its key ally China, and how to balance its national interest with regional interest. In this context, the article aimed to explain the importance of the ASEAN as a cornerstone of Cambodia's foreign policy, examine the motivations of Cambodia's deep political embrace of the Asian giant, and underline its implications for the Indo-Pacific from the lens of small state foreign policy. The article was based on qualitative, empirical analysis that comprises primary and secondary data pertinent to the current topic. The article concluded that Cambodia leaned more towards China than it did towards the ASEAN, thus weakening its centrality in driving the broader regional architecture and that domestic politics was the primary driving force of Cambodia's foreign policy towards that direction. At this juncture, Cambodia should step back from the present degree of its strategic engagement with China and look for ways to diversify its relations with other major powers while getting back on the democratic path and upholding human rights.*

*Keywords: ASEAN; Cambodia's Foreign Policy; China's Influence; Indo-Pacific; Small States*

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## INTRODUCTION

The powershift and increasing strategic contestation and rivalry between great powers have led to regional uncertainty and volatility. The relative decline of US supremacy and the rise of China and India in Asia have led to rapid change in the global power structure that directly impacts Southeast Asian states. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) faces a formidable challenge in preserving internal coherence and unity in the highly contested era of great power politics. The Sino-American geostrategic competition forces its Member States to pick sides, especially in critical regional issues such as the maritime disputes in the South China Sea (SCS) in which China played 'divide and rule' tactics. As one of the region's small and least developed countries heavily dependent on China for political backing and economic opportunities, Cambodia finds itself in a dilemma of upholding the ASEAN centrality

without diplomatic cost to its key ally Beijing. The ASEAN and China are almost equally important in Cambodia's foreign policy. Anyhow, Cambodia's deep political embrace of China has caused regional concerns that the former has to beholden to Beijing's strategic interests at the expense of regional interests. The internal discord also poses a significant concern for the grouping's future to maintain its centrality in shaping the wider regional architecture in the Indo-Pacific.

Against this backdrop, the article sheds light on Cambodia's foreign policy amid geopolitical rivalry in the evolving Indo-Pacific regional order and its domestic political challenges compounded with Western pressure to enhance human rights and democracy. It explains that the ASEAN is a cornerstone of Cambodia's foreign policy. The regional bloc provides Cambodia with a diplomatic platform to the outside world, a security shelter, an equal status with other larger players, and a driver of economic development and diversification. The article highlights four principal motivations for Phnom Penh's deep political embrace of Beijing, including balancing its neighbors, ASEAN's limited role as a security shelter, economic dependence, and, most importantly, regime survival in the environment of neopatrimonialism and dynastic politics. Moreover, it explains the dilemma Phnom Penh has faced in managing its relations with Beijing without undermining the interests of the ASEAN fellow members.

Based on empirical analysis, the article aims to examine the implications of China's growing influence on Cambodia's foreign policy on the ASEAN centrality in the changing regional order where great power competition significantly impacts small states' strategic options and how Cambodian domestic politics impacts its foreign policy choices. In this way, it contributes to further understanding of the foreign policy of small states and its connection with domestic politics. The article concludes that since small states strategically rely on multilateral institutions such as the ASEAN and/or align with great power for their security and prosperity, at the time being, Cambodia leans more towards China than it does towards the ASEAN, thus weakening the ASEAN centrality amid Chinese efforts to create divisions within the regional bloc, and that domestic politics is the primary driving force of Cambodia's foreign policy directions.

## CAMBODIA AS A SMALL STATE

The concept of small states has its significance in international relations in the heyday of the non-alignment movement. However, the literature on small states does not show consensus among scholars on the definition and position of small states in international relations dependent on scholars' criteria for their research purpose. Definitions of small states are based on two broad approaches - quantitative parameters and relational characteristics. The two groups of definitions reviewed below show how Cambodia fits in the literature of small states and how smallness impacts their foreign policy behaviors in international politics.

Quantitative characteristics of a small state include Gross National Product (GNP), population and geographical size, and military capability. The proponents of the quantifiable approach defined small states differently based on their subject of research. For instance, Barston (1973) defined small states in the combination of both population size and GNP factors, suggesting that they should have a population ranging between 10-15 million and GNP equivalent to US \$1 billion. There are some problems with the quantitative definition of a small state. One problem is that it does not cover the complexity of the size of small states in international relations because some countries may be small in size but very rich, or very big but somewhat underdeveloped (Handel 1981). The generalization of small state characteristics based on GNP is problematic when it comes to the small but rich countries such as Luxembourg in Europe, Qatar in the Middle East, and Singapore in Southeast Asia.

The relational characteristics of a small state are more comprehensive than the quantitative one. They include 'smallness' relative to weak power *vis-à-vis* great powers and self-perceptions. Bjol (1971) argues that small states should be defined through their relative disparity in capability *vis-à-vis* the middle and great power, the limited range of their national interests, and the strategically-important position of their geographical factors. Keohane (1969) argues that "a small state is a state whose leaders consider that it can never, acting alone or in a small group, make a significant impact on the system." The perception approach has gained attention from scholars in defining and analyzing small states. One scholar argues that "the concept of a small state is based on the idea of perceptions" and "if a state's people and institutions generally perceive themselves to be small or if other states' people and institutions perceive that a state is small, it shall be so considered" (Hey 2003, 3). Nonetheless, the perception approach has flaws. When different perspectives clash, the question is whose perspective should be taken into account. However, when studying the foreign policy of small states, the perception approach has an advantage by utilizing the levels-of-analysis approach that considers different types of inputs into the policy process: individual, state, and system.

In terms of quantifiable criteria, Cambodia may not adequately be defined as one of the small states as its GNP reached US \$71 billion in 2019 (World Bank 2021), which is beyond any definition of GNP upper limit of US \$1 billion, though with a population of 15.5 million falling slightly outside the scope of definitions given by Barston (1973). However, according to the perception-based approach, in comparison to its stronger neighbors Thailand and Vietnam, Cambodia can be described as a small state. In the ASEAN, Cambodia's population is the smallest of the others (more than Laos, Singapore, and Brunei), and its territory is 181,035 km<sup>2</sup>, making it the third smallest country in the regional bloc. In terms of economic development, Cambodia is classified among CLMV countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam), new members of the ASEAN or the ASEAN-4, which are less developed than the old members of the ASEAN or the ASEAN-6

(Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines). Above all, Cambodian leaders consider their country small, weak, and least developed. This perception has fundamentally determined Cambodia's foreign policy and security strategy for several decades.

In general, the foreign policy of small states has been primarily dictated by their geographical location, small size in terms of land and population, and weakness in terms of economy and defense capability. Due to the lack of tangible elements of power, small states are vulnerable to external shocks. In the case of Cambodia; it had played the role of a pawn on a superpower chessboard in Cold War geopolitics. The international system greatly impacted Cambodia's foreign policy behaviors, and Cambodia became the victim of great power rivalry. Since independence from France in November 1953, Cambodian leaders adopted and pursued different foreign policies from non-alignment to engagement with the primary objective of safeguarding sovereignty, territorial integrity, and survival against internal subversion and external interference. Cambodia went through at least five regime changes that pursued different foreign policies for the last six decades. In the post-Cold War, Cambodia prepared to join the ASEAN together with Laos and Myanmar in 1997, but it had to overcome many internal and external challenges before being admitted to the regional body two years later. Accession to the ASEAN was a milestone in Cambodia's external relations. Since the turn of the XXI century, Cambodia has also sought a close relationship with China as its powerful external backer.

### **THE ASEAN AS A 'CORNERSTONE' OF CAMBODIA'S FOREIGN POLICY**

The end of the Cold War and the emergence of unipolar liberal world order under American supremacy created opportunities for small states to raise their international standing and provided them with larger room in their foreign policy maneuver. In the meantime, the ASEAN emerged as one of the most successful regional organizations that survived the great power rivalries. Over the past five decades, the ASEAN significantly transformed Southeast Asia from a zone of war to a zone of peace and neutrality, from trust deficit to strategic trust, from pawns and proxies of great power rivalry to driver's seat of regional architecture, and from elite-centric to people-centric regional bloc. The ASEAN's diplomatic role in bringing about a political solution to the Cambodian conflict has been widely recognized. Therefore, since joining the regional grouping in April 1999, Cambodia's foreign policy has been ASEAN-centric. From the outset, Cambodian leaders considered the ASEAN the gateway to the outside world, through which they expanded the small nation's external relations with all regional players and great powers. They also expected a wide range of interests in the ASEAN.

## *Cambodia's Interests in the ASEAN*

Cambodia has four primary reasons for joining the ASEAN in the first place: the ASEAN as a diplomatic channel to the outside world; the ASEAN principles of non-interference in one another's internal affairs; the ASEAN spirit of a community as the decision is made by consensus basis, benefits from economic cooperation and partnership with the ASEAN and the ASEAN external partners. This stimulation shows Cambodia's confidence in its continued engagement in the regional grouping.

First, the ASEAN was a diplomatic platform for the Hun Sen government saving ample diplomatic resources. In 2002, Cambodia became the ASEAN chair for the first time and hosted several summits in which regional and world leaders participated. It was a great honor and privilege for Cambodia to be ASEAN chair. During the 8<sup>th</sup> ASEAN summit in November that year, the leaders of the ASEAN and the heads of the ASEAN partner states paid the official visit to the country. Observers expressed that having hosted the ASEAN summit was pride for the Cambodian government, making Hun Sen very proud. They held that "hosting the summit became a point of pride for the Cambodian government", and that "nothing could have made Hun Sen more proud than to host not only the leaders of the ASEAN countries but also the heads of government" of the ASEAN Plus Three, China, Japan, and South Korea (Un and Ledgerwood 2003, 117-18). Importantly, being part of annual ASEAN summits, Cambodian diplomats have the opportunities to interact with leaders of major countries that are ASEAN's dialogue partners, and therefore, further extend the country's diplomatic activities.

Second, the ASEAN principles of non-interference in the internal affairs of Member States provide Cambodia with internal and external security safeguards. The ASEAN is highly viewed as a security shelter for Cambodia. With the policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of one another, the ASEAN provided Cambodia with internal security. Neighboring countries often hosted anti-regime dissidents, which posed threats to regime security. Since all neighboring countries are members of the regional bloc, no countries shall allow anti-government activities to operate on their soil. Such a security environment is conducive for Hun Sen and his Cambodian People's Party (CPP) to consolidate power in Cambodian politics and guarantee regime survivability. Indeed, Acharya (1999) points out that "ASEAN's primary concern has been with regime survival" (p. 428). Moreover, historically, Cambodia's external threat came from neighboring countries, Thailand to the west and Vietnam to the east. Such a traditional security threat has been relatively diminished since relations among all ASEAN Member States are governed by the principle of settlement of differences or disputes in a peaceful manner and renunciation of the threat or use of force. Therefore, the ASEAN principles of inter-state relations overcome Cambodia's structural constraints as a small and weak country.

Third, the ASEAN decision based on a consensus basis provides Cambodia with equal rights as other nations on political and economic fronts. With veto power in ASEAN's decision-making, Cambodia can exercise equal rights to its larger counterpart despite being small, weak, and least developed. Instead, the ASEAN increases Cambodia's bargaining power on the international stage and draws significant attention from major powers such as China and the US, seeking influence in the regional grouping.

Finally, being part of the ASEAN integration, Cambodia has benefited from development assistance from the bloc and its dialogue partners and diversified its economy to the global market. First and foremost is the Initiative for the ASEAN Integration (IAI). With the admission of the four new members into the ASEAN, some expressed concerns over the possible emergence of a 'two-tier ASEAN'. To tackle the development issue in the ASEAN and help new ASEAN Member States to catch up with the ASEAN-6, the IAI was adopted in Singapore in 2000. It is a mechanism to provide economic assistance to them in broad areas, including human resources, institutional capacity, infrastructure, connectivity, and competitiveness. Cambodia has notably benefited from this special scheme in narrowing the development gap.

As part of the ASEAN-EU partnership in reducing economic disparity, Cambodia with Least Developed Countries (LDCs) status has also enjoyed the 'Everything but Arms' (EBA) trade preference which offers duty-free and quota-free for Cambodia's exports to the EU member countries. Cambodia has also hugely benefited from the US Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) program with preferential duty-free. With the EBA and GSP trade privileges, Cambodia significantly increased foreign direct investment (FDI), especially in the manufacturing industry and services (finance and insurance). For the last two decades, Cambodia has witnessed an increase in FDI from the ASEAN and the ASEAN Plus Three to the highest ever level of US \$3.6 billion in 2019 from the modest US \$118 million in 2000 and US \$1.4 million in 2010 (World Bank 2019). Accordingly, the EU and the US have become the two largest markets for Cambodia's exports accounting for 65.25 percent and 22.36 percent in 2006, and 39.82 percent and 21.32 percent in 2016, respectively (Ministry of Commerce 2019). At some point in time, the EU and US markets combined made up 70 percent of Cambodia's total exports.

Conversely, the ASEAN makes relatively a small percent of Cambodia's exports accounted for 4.40 percent in 2006 and 8.62 percent in 2016, mainly exporting agricultural products to neighboring Thailand and Vietnam, approximately equal to only one-fifth of Cambodia's total exports (Ministry of Commerce 2019). Trade deficit within the ASEAN is an unsolved problem for Cambodia. Even though the ASEAN is the lower destination of Cambodia's exports, the ASEAN integration and the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), established in 2015, have accelerated Cambodia's internal reforms. It has made numerous commitments, including National Single Window (NSW), capacity building, and institutional strengthening, to meet the requirements of the AEC.

### ***The ASEAN as a 'Cornerstone' of Cambodia's Foreign Policy?***

All old Member States of the ASEAN have officially regarded the grouping as the cornerstone of their foreign policy, including Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, and the Philippines. It seems that new Member States have not officially considered the ASEAN as the cornerstone of their external policy. So far, no mention of the ASEAN as the cornerstone of Cambodia's foreign policy in the official documents of the Royal Government of Cambodia has been found. Whatsoever, the ASEAN is indeed the 'cornerstone' of Cambodia's foreign policy, given its active engagement with, and the yielded economic and political interests from, the regional grouping.

One of the strong arguments for ASEAN's importance in Cambodia's foreign policy can be reflected in views expressed by Chheang Vannarith, founder and president of Asian Vision Institute (AVI), a Phnom Penh-based think tank. On several occasions, he repeatedly uses the term 'cornerstone' to describe how the ASEAN is important in the foreign policy of Cambodia as a small state in Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region. For instance, he insists that "[The ASEAN] has been regarded as a cornerstone, if not the cornerstone, of Cambodia's foreign policy" (Chheang 2018). By contrast, Cheunboran (2018) of the same think tank argues that "It seems that ASEAN is no longer the cornerstone of Cambodia's foreign policy", while another suggests that "ASEAN should remain the cornerstone of Cambodia's foreign policy" (Heng 2014). No doubt, the ASEAN is crucial for Cambodia, and it may be correct to say that the ASEAN is one of the cornerstones of Cambodia's foreign policy. On the occasion of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Cambodia's ASEAN membership in April 2019, Prime Minister Hun Sen stated that "Cambodia will endeavor to play a proactive and responsible role to ensure that ASEAN remains the fulcrum of regional architecture by upholding the 'ASEAN Spirit' and a 'Rules-Based ASEAN'" with emphasis on "striking a reasonable balance amongst external partners" (cited in Chheang 2019). However, the statement may not necessarily be consistent with actual actions. Although the ASEAN is a springboard and lifeboat of its smaller Member States, Phnom Penh slides towards China at the expense of the ASEAN centrality.

### **CHINA AS CAMBODIA'S 'IRONCLAD FRIEND'**

China is the champion in many things in Cambodia. Beijing is Cambodia's top investor and trade partner, major aid provider and creditor, and staunch backer of Cambodia on the international stage. As China's influence in Cambodia has increased over the last two decades, observers often describe the bilateral ties between the two countries in terms of mutually beneficial interests or quid pro quo. While China provides economic assistance and international political backup to Cambodia, the latter, in turn, backs Beijing's regional interests within the ASEAN and strictly pursues the 'One China'

policy. In strategic terminology, 'bandwagoning' is compatible with the description of Cambodia's relationship with China.

Back in the 1980s, Prime Minister Hun Sen labeled China as 'the root of everything evil in Cambodia' given the former's background as the strong backer of the Khmer Rouge genocidal regime - the background that has been entirely omitted in the current narrative of historical relations between the two countries. In contrast, today, he said China is Cambodia's 'ironclad friend', an updated version of Beijing's status as 'most trustworthy friend' of Cambodia.

In return, the Chinese leaders emphasized, 'China and Cambodia are good neighbors and trusted friends. China laid out the foundation for solid relations with Cambodia roughly since the second-half of the 1990s, overcoming their past distrust and hostility in the Cold War, and constantly consolidating bilateral ties with the signing of the treaty of comprehensive partnership with Cambodia in 2006, which was elevated to the treaty of comprehensive strategic partnership in 2010. Furthermore, in April 2019, the two countries signed the 'Action Plan 2019-2023 on Building China-Cambodia Community of Shared Future'. Their current relationship has reached its highest point in history than any formal relations can be described. On the flip side, since 2012, when the ASEAN under Cambodian chairmanship failed to issue a joint communiqué for the first time in its history, Cambodia has been more or less seen as a 'proxy state' of China. Therefore, it is significant to explain the underlying reasons for Cambodia's pursuit of a bandwagoning strategy towards Beijing.

### *Balancing against its Neighbors*

The first reason for Cambodia's close relations with China is the strategic balancing towards its more powerful neighbors, Thailand and Vietnam. In history, threat perception often emanated from the neighboring countries that had reduced Cambodia from a great empire of mainland Southeast Asia to a small state in the region. Since the fall of the Angkor Empire in the fifteenth century, the existential threats to Cambodia's security, survival, and territorial integrity had emanated from the two neighbors. In the post-Cold War, such a security perception was significantly reduced after Cambodia joined the ASEAN.

There was no security threat from Thailand until the deadly border clashes occurred in 2008-2011 over the disputed areas around the ancient Hindu temple of Preah Vihear. From a Cambodian perspective, border conflict with Thailand posed a clear security threat to the small kingdom. Even though Chinese assistance has contributed to building the Cambodian army's capacity and national defense, the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF) are "far from a level that would enable Cambodia to rival its neighbors", but instead of attempting to arm Cambodia heavily, "China has used military aid as a sign of political support" (Ciorciari 2013).



Back then, China donated some uniforms to the Cambodian army. Some suggested that the donations created a soft gesture urging Bangkok to practice more restraint in the disputed border areas. On the other hand, Cambodia's allying with China can be a counterweight in reducing Vietnam's influence. As China's weight in Cambodia has increased, Vietnam's influence in Cambodia has waned comparatively. Nevertheless, Cambodia still maintains a special relationship with Vietnam, and the latter is also a major country that provides military assistance, especially in terms of military training. Vietnam is the second-largest military aid provider to Cambodia after China.

Even though Cambodia supports Beijing's position in the South China Sea (SCS) disputes, which undermines the Vietnamese interest, the traditional relationship between the two neighbors remains unchanged, especially in defense cooperation.

There is no clear evidence that Cambodia attempts to balance its neighbors for the time being. Despite that, Cambodia is in a good position to do so while keeping close relations with China. One analyst argues that Beijing's forging ties with the Hun Sen regime in Cambodia has had the effect of "pulling the country out of the Vietnamese and Thai orbit" (Chachavalpongpu 2012). To a higher degree, since the border clashes with Thailand, Cambodia's alignment with China can be viewed as a balancing act against its western neighbor. Meanwhile, Cambodia has maintained a lower degree in balancing Vietnam, as both countries have remained cozy in their relationship. Since the 2012 Phnom Penh fiasco, when Cambodia supported China's core interest in the SCS at the expense of the ASEAN fellow members, particularly the Philippines and Vietnam, the Phnom Penh-Hanoi relationship signaled some uneasiness. For this reason, Cambodia tried to accommodate Hanoi in many ways, especially by cracking down on the opposition Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP) activists who used the politics of anti-Vietnamese nationalism on border issues and illegal Vietnamese migrants. Strategically, it is argued that Cambodia is pursuing 'soft balancing', to use the term loosely, against Vietnam by sustaining close relations with Beijing, Hanoi's geostrategic adversary. Therefore, to a certain extent, Cambodia's close ties with China can serve as a balancing act against its immediate neighbors. For landlocked Laos, Cambodia does not perceive it as a security threat. In all criteria, Laos is a country as small and weak as Cambodia in Southeast Asia. Although both countries have unresolved border demarcation, it is manageable through bilateral negotiation in a friendly manner.

### *The ASEAN's Limited Role as a Security Shelter*

Observers and analysts argue that ASEAN's limited role as a security shelter has driven Cambodia to seek alignment with China to offset the Kingdom's structural constraints and weakness as a small state. On many occasions, some academics have criticized ASEAN's ineffective role in the Preah Vihear dispute between Cambodia and

Thailand, while others have taken the issue as a justification for Cambodia's seeking strategic alignment with Beijing.

Such a viewpoint on Cambodia's foreign policy maneuver is partially correct. In reality, China has consolidated its relations with Cambodia since the July 1997 coup by then Hun Sen against his co-Prime Minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh. As the international community, including the US, the EU, and Japan, challenged Hun Sen legitimacy, China came in for political and diplomatic support for the coup maker. Moreover, one should acknowledge that the ASEAN did what it could as a weak regional institution to prevent and defuse interstate conflicts between Cambodia and Thailand. Back then, the ASEAN, under Singapore's chairmanship, convened a special foreign ministers meeting when the armed clashes first broke out in 2008. Both conflicting parties agreed to resolve their differences and disputes on bilateral basics and restrained from further use of forces. Unfortunately, it could not stop the deadly clashes. In 2009 and 2010, Thailand and Vietnam chaired the ASEAN summits, respectively, and they kept the issue out of the bloc meetings due to the lack of consensus. As severe fighting erupted again in 2011, Indonesia had to swap Brunei for the ASEAN chair. Indeed, according to the alphabetical order of the Member States' English name, Brunei was to take the rotating ASEAN chair after Vietnam. In his capacity as the ASEAN chair, Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa undertook intensive efforts by launching shuttle diplomacy to facilitate bilateral dialogues between the two Southeast Asian kingdoms. Then, the ASEAN foreign ministers accepted Indonesian observers to monitor cease-fire agreements at the affected areas around Preah Vihear temple, which never happened due to Thai disagreement on terms of reference. Frustrated with the ASEAN's ineffective role, Phnom Penh unilaterally took the case to the international multilateral mechanisms such as the UNSC and International Court of Justice (ICJ). In such a situation, Cambodia's embrace of China could increase the former's security against external threats.

### *Economic Dependence on China*

Economic dependence or reward is another driving factor for Cambodia to align with China. For the last two decades, China has made milestone after milestone in Cambodia. One of the least developed countries in the region that emerged from decades of civil war and internal conflicts, Cambodia is still heavily dependent on foreign aid to promote economic development. Between 1992 and 2017, Cambodia has received US \$20.68 billion in foreign assistance from three major donor countries, including China accounted for US \$3.1 billion, followed by Japan's US \$2.8 billion and US \$1.3 billion from the US (Koyanagi 2018). Hence, China has become the top aid provider to Cambodia, surpassing Japan's status in the mid-2000s. China's foreign aid is known for 'no string attached' and 'no questions asked' hence susceptible to corruption and

lack of transparency. China is also the largest source of foreign direct investment in Cambodia, accounting for nearly half of the total FDI approved last year. Reportedly, Cambodia received a total FDI worth US \$3.5 billion in 2019, accounting for a 12 percent year-on-year increase, of which 43 percent came from mainland China with the majority of the inflows channeled to the construction sector (World Bank Group 2020). China is also the number one source of tourist arrivals in Cambodia that received over 2.03 million Chinese visitors and accounted for 32.6 percent of Cambodia's total visitors in 2019 (World Bank Group 2020).

In terms of bilateral trade, China is the biggest trading partner of Cambodia. Total bilateral trade between the two countries reached US \$9.43 billion in 2019 compared to US \$732 million in 2006, with a growth rate of approximately 27 percent annually (Fullbrook 2006; Lee 2020). Cambodia's imports from China are the highest amount to US \$7.5 billion, followed by Thailand US \$3.2 billion and Vietnam US \$2.7 billion in 2019 (World Integrated Trade Solution 2019).

The US and the EU as a regional bloc are the two biggest export markets for Cambodian goods, mainly garment and footwear, totaling US \$5.3 billion and US \$5.1 billion in 2019, respectively (United States Census Bureau n.d.; European Commission n.d.). Due to democracy backsliding in Cambodia since the arbitrary dissolution of the main opposition CNRP in November 2017, the EU has decided to suspend 20 percent of the EBA to the Hun Sen government, with effect from August 2020 (European Commission 2020). In October the same year, Cambodia entered into Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with China after less than a year of negotiation, which some media observers speculated that the agreement is somewhat symbolic rather than practical given few details released and it will not save Cambodian industrial impacted by the EBA removal (Hutt 2020). On the other hand, China has already had FTA with the ASEAN Member States. The Covid-19 pandemic and the partial withdrawal of the EBA posed the greatest challenge to Cambodian economic development in its modern history. By July 2020, over 400 garment factories have shut down due to the severe impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the partial revocation of the EBA (Xinhua 2020). The FTA with China will not mitigate the effects on the Cambodian garment industry since China is not Cambodia's garment export destination.

In the meantime, China is the largest creditor, worth US \$3.6 billion, accounting for almost half (47.5 percent) of Cambodia's total external debt of US \$7.6 billion by the end of 2019 (World Bank Group 2020). For that reason, some Cambodian observers share the concerns that Cambodia, just as the small island state of Sri Lanka, is in China's debt trap which constituted about 25 percent of the GDP of the current year, with the worrying trend and its "foreign policy seems to largely serve China's political and diplomatic interests in the region" to the detriment of its international reputation and soft power (Var and Po 2017; see also: Heng and Var 2019). Also, Cambodia is one of the staunchest supporters of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for the Kingdom's much-

needed infrastructure development. The BRI provides Cambodia with opportunities to fulfill the country's needs of road connectivity to boost the economy. At the same time, it also increases China's influence under ambitious Chinese-invested projects worth up to billions of US dollars, exacerbating the trend towards debt-trap diplomacy. In the long run, with the deficiencies of economic diversification, Cambodia may end up in China's debt trap, which poses much concern among many Cambodians, and anti-Chinese sentiments are on the rise in the Kingdom. Nevertheless, China's aid and investment have significantly contributed to Cambodia's economic growth averaging 7 percent over the past two decades, thus providing the Hun Sen government with political legitimacy and credibility to sustain people support. On the flip side, despite two decades of economic growth, Cambodia was recorded as one of the world's most corrupt nations and the worst in Southeast Asia, ranking 160<sup>th</sup> out of 180 countries in the Corruption Perceptions Index released by Transparency International (2020). Likewise, Cambodia was recorded almost the lowest score in the rule of law index. According to World Justice Project (2020), Cambodia ranked 127<sup>th</sup> across 128 countries in 2020.

### *Hun Sen's Regime Survival*

The most crucial driver of Cambodia's political embrace of China is regime survival. Cambodia's foreign policymakers have engaged with China for three binding reasons that have ensured their political survival: 1) balancing force against Western pressure for political reforms and leveraging the dissident of the Hun Sen's regime in the domestic political arena; 2) political legitimacy or respectability stemming from economic growth; 3) dynastic politics and political succession.

For decades, as Cambodia's extremely personalized and Asia's longest-serving leader since 1985, Hun Sen has determined to hold onto power in Cambodian politics indefinitely. His government's alignment with China is to ensure its political hegemony in the country rather than any foreign policy strategy designed to balance any country. Cambodia knows how to "plays China off of the Western donor groups and China's aid - even if not necessarily linked to any downgrading of human rights - could have the effect of a kind of race to bottom on human rights", Kurlantzick said as quoted in 'Asia Times' (Strangio 2009). Western pressure in any form has never been a pleasure for Hun Sen, and he views the US deep engagement in Cambodia as a threat to his regime's survival. His 'China card' has been useful in countervailing Western influence and pressure for political reforms. In the meantime, domestic power rivalry between the ruling party and the opposition party has driven Cambodia's foreign policy choices. The rise of the opposition CNRP, a unified democratic opposition party led by France-educated Sam Rainsy, posed an enormous challenge to Hun Sen over three-decade rule. In Hun Sen's perspective, Western demand for democratic reforms attached with their

development aids is likely interpreted as asking for a share of power with opposition rivals. Therefore, Western pressure has exacerbated Hun Sen's move towards closer ties with China for political breathing. On the other hand, China's policy towards Cambodia is determined by one consistency: Beijing cares a little about who runs Cambodia as long as the ruler is keen on helping China maintain its strategic position in the region.

Other than using China to countervail external actors' influence, its economic assistance has helped Cambodia's ruling elites sustain their wealth and power at the expense of the poor and has undermined democratization. China's economic assistance constitutes pecuniary benefits to the CPP elites and legitimacy to continue to run Cambodian affairs. Cambodian elites have considerably benefited from China's economic development assistance and investment in Cambodia. The profitable economic engagement with China can be both in financial and political terms since Cambodia's political and economic systems are very closely intertwined (Ciorciari 2013). In Cambodia, a modernized bureaucracy is combined with personalized patronage networks - blurring the line between the public and private spheres - that is what some scholars call a "neo-patrimonial state" (Un and So 2011, 294).

Neopatrimonialism and the provision of material aid and political legitimacy rendered by the international community have been central to the endurance of Cambodia's ruling elites. This kind of patron-client relationship is ideally suited to the Chinese way of doing business (*guanxi*) based on mutually beneficial partnerships developed outside the official work setting.

Adding to the Cambodian democratic political crisis is the dynastic politics that also drives Hun Sen to embrace China. His eldest son, four-star general Hun Manet, is a confirmed candidate for the successive premiership. Manet has yet to win the majority backing of senior members of his CPP. With China's support, Hun Sen has leverage over his son's rivals within his party (Interior Minister Sar Kheng is one of them), while the other faction of the party has Vietnam's backing. A few years ago, 'Asia Times' reported citing the Cambodian government insiders that Vietnamese Politburo officials "expressed their displeasure behind closed doors during a November [2017] meeting in Vietnam, even going as far as telling Hun Sen to step down after July's elections" (Parkhouse 2018). It is interesting to mention that during the early outbreak of Coronavirus in the Chinese city of Wuhan, Hun Sen and his eldest son Manet visited Beijing and met with Xi Jinping to show solidarity with the host country in a difficult time. Manet's China visit fueled speculation that his father introduced him to Chinese leaders and sought their backing as a future leader in addition to the intra-party elite's backing. Beijing, too, needs to make sure the next generation of Cambodian leaders follows Hun Sen's China policy. Therefore, the 69-year-old Cambodian strongman needs China's support to balance Vietnam's influence in the Kingdom's internal affairs as he determines to hold onto power much longer, likely until the process of his son's succession is complete.

## **CAMBODIA BETWEEN THE ASEAN AND CHINA: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE INDO-PACIFIC**

As a small, least developed state, Cambodia has few foreign policy options in regional politics - either supporting regional institutions or aligning with great power for patronage. Cambodia faces a dilemma when the two options are contrasted and equally important for its political, security, and economic interests. Considering the factors described above in Sino-Cambodian relations, Phnom Penh faces a hard choice between its closest ally China and the ASEAN colleagues in the era of power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region. Cambodia's deep embrace of China has far-reaching implications for regional security and stability.

Observers and analysts agree that balancing the relations with the ASEAN and China is one of the most challenging tasks for Cambodia's foreign policymakers. As it turned out, Cambodia has openly pursued a bandwagoning strategy with China with the four motivations mentioned above. If compared with small countries such as Laos, "Cambodia appears more comfortably ensconced in China's embrace and [has] little qualms about bandwagoning" (Pang 2017).

In 2013, Hun Sen explicitly told Xi Jinping that supporting China's core interests and major concerns was "Cambodia's political choice" (China Daily 2013). The economic reward that leads to political legitimacy will make Cambodia even more dependent on China. Cambodian foreign policy thinkers and political elites believe that since Cambodia does not have a border with China, there is nothing to fear about China's rise. Because China will not annex their land as neighboring Thailand and Vietnam did in the past. Although this may be true, the problem is that the excessive reliance on one great power is a serious concern for small states like Cambodia in the Indo-Pacific context as it reduces the bargaining power in their foreign policy maneuver to achieve national interests. No one should rule out the prospect of neocolonialism. With the increasing Chinese influence, some observers contend that Cambodia lost its strategic autonomy and cannot apply agency in regional matters, causing regional concerns. For instance, the SCS disputes between China and some ASEAN claimant states, including Vietnam and the Philippines, have created a split within the regional bloc due to Cambodia being seen as siding with Beijing. In consequence, Cambodia has been seen as the weakest link in the ASEAN chain. In this situation, Cambodia certainly faces a strategic dilemma.

More importantly, Vietnam is the traditional ally of the ruling CPP in Cambodia. It was Hanoi that put this party in power after overthrowing China's ally Pol Pot regime in late 1978. By default, aligning too closely with Beijing will affect Cambodia-Vietnam ties. Therefore, it is one of Cambodia's most challenging diplomatic tasks to maintain a balanced relationship with two friends who are adversaries to each other. Undoubtedly, Cambodia's position in the SCS dispute undermined Hanoi's interest, but both have maintained peaceful relations so far. To please Hanoi, the Hun Sen government

subsequently cracked down on the CNRP activists who used the politics of anti-Vietnamese nationalism on border issues and illegal Vietnamese migrants and restricted or limited activities directed against Vietnamese interests. After all, the ruling CPP and the Vietnamese could maintain their special relationship because they have common unfriendly and hostile forces, the CNRP that has the potential to come to power in Cambodia and may adopt a hostile policy towards Vietnam. Vietnamese leaders consider Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam as a single strategic unit, and thus, maintaining good relationships among them is even more vital than the SCS issues. Meanwhile, neighboring Thailand and Laos are not the claimant states in maritime disputes. Hence, the two countries do not view Cambodia's close relationship with China with suspicion.

Likewise, Sino-US competition for influence and domination in the broader Indo-Pacific region has recently been felt in Cambodia, placing the Phnom Penh government in another dilemma position as it has to balance ties with the two great powers.

Recently, the Greater Mekong Subregion has become another competing arena between Washington's Mekong-US Partnership (est. 2020) and Beijing's Mekong-Lancang Cooperation (est. 2016) with five riparian states of the Mekong River, including Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Thailand on each side. Cambodia has become a hotspot because of its increasing proximity to Beijing. The US wants Cambodia to maintain neutrality and not be too close to China. The Americans expressed concerns after 'The Wall Street Journal' reported about China's alleged naval base in Koh Kong province in July 2019, which Cambodia repeatedly rejected, citing that its Constitution prohibits any foreign military base on its soil (Radio Free Asia 2020a; 2020b). Adding to that is the US economic sanction imposed on a Chinese company linked to land seizure and displacement of Cambodian families in Koh Kong (Men, Hul, and Aun 2020), followed by Cambodia's demolishing two of the US funded-buildings in Ream Naval Base in Sihanoukville (Radio Free Asia 2020b). One month earlier, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo alleged there were 'credible reports' that the US \$3.8 billion luxury Dara Sakor Seashore Resort project developed by the Chinese company in Koh Kong "could be used to host (Chinese) military assets", adding that "If so, (this) (...) could threaten Indo-Pacific stability, possibly impacting Cambodia's sovereignty and the security of our allies" (Men, Hul, and Aun 2020). In effect, China's access to these coastal provinces serves its long-term 'String of Pearls' strategy. The tit for tat response and reaction in this latest episode showed the lowest point in the ups and downs of US-Cambodia bilateral relations as the two countries mark the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of diplomatic ties this year and also reflected the US discontent about Cambodia being too close to Beijing. It is essential to understand that the US and its alliance system remain the stabilizing factor in Southeast Asia, and countries in the region welcome its presence. So, playing the hostile game with the US will not be in Cambodia's national interest. Cambodia should avoid serving as the battleground of great power politics as happened in the Cold War, and the consequence was devastated.

## THE WAY FORWARDS

At this juncture, Cambodia's foreign policy has to walk a tight rope between bandwagoning with China and maintaining the ASEAN centrality in the Indo-Pacific context. As China has been deeply integrated with Southeast Asia politically and economically, no country in the region can downright reject China's influence. China's rise is a geopolitical reality, and Southeast Asian countries have to accommodate it for economic opportunities. As a rising power contiguous with Southeast Asia, China wants respect for its global status but should not dominate the region exclusively. Its aggressive behaviors, particularly the militarization of artificial islands in the SCS, pose security concerns and Sinophobe in the neighboring countries. Undeniably, Cambodia is in the depth of Beijing's regional sphere of influence, affecting its foreign policy maneuver in regional matters concerning China's core interests. However, there is a paradox for Cambodia and China to undermine the ASEAN centrality and unity. Leading scholars candidly point out that "it is not in Cambodia's interest to alienate its fellow ASEAN members too much", adding that "China should also understand this and demonstrate its good judgment by allowing Cambodia more political space to take independent positions" (Mahbubani and Sng 2017, 143).

Cambodia needs smart and soft diplomacy to realize national interests without hurting any countries in the geopolitical gambles and avoiding confrontational rhetoric in external communication. For that to work, it requires Cambodia to have skillful, competent diplomats, think tanks that recommend and support the country's policy, national unity, and consolidation of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, which are vital for durable peace and stability.

Undoubtedly, Cambodia strongly supports the greater regional integration and the ASEAN-led regional architecture but being labeled as a 'proxy state' or 'client state' of external power has not been an accident but an external perception. The 2012 ASEAN fallout and subsequent positions Cambodia has taken on the sensitive issue in the SCS have led to a deeper suspicion over its commitment to the grouping's centrality and consensus as well as damaging the country's soft power. However, reactionarily or emotionally denying this apparent pro-China policy helps nothing but increases distrust, creating disagreement among the ASEAN Member States even more explicit. To change such a negative perception, Cambodia needs to step back from the present degree of its strategic engagement with China and look for ways to diversify its relations with other major powers. Doing so will reduce the chance of forcefully taking a clear side in great power strategic competition. Tactically speaking, strategic ambiguity is relevant there. As history tells, pursuing a permanent neutrality policy in theory and practice plus flexibility remains the best option for a small state like Cambodia. Moreover, Cambodia's national interest should be aligned with regional interest so that it can restore the trust of its ASEAN fellows and demonstrate its responsibilities as a member of the bloc.



The ASEAN should officially be considered the cornerstone of Cambodia's foreign policy, and strengthening the bloc centrality must be Cambodia's top strategic priority, especially in this time of intense geopolitical contestation between great powers in the Indo-Pacific.


Getting back on the democratic path and upholding human rights are essential for the Kingdom to enhance its relations with the West and develop internal cohesiveness and national unity while operationalizing an external diversification strategy. Of course, the ASEAN should also strengthen its institutions by making institutional reform to become a rule-based regional organization or supranational body similar to the EU. Although the ASEAN is not resilient enough to mitigate the adverse impacts of the increasingly intense geopolitical rivalries between great powers, it still plays a critical role in promoting a habit of dialogue, trust-building, and preventive diplomacy among its members and dialogue partners. Supporting and promoting rule-based international order, international law, and multilateral institutions protect the best interests of small states. Moreover, the Quad, a quadrilateral security dialogue platform among like-minded democratic countries, including Australia, India, Japan, and the US, could play a constructive role in democratization in Cambodia while also filling the development gap in the small Southeast Asian country.

## CONCLUSION

In the Indo-Pacific context, where great power rivalry has increasingly intensified, small states with structural constraints and capability problems face significant challenges in their foreign policy maneuvers. Small states have few foreign policy options - either relying on a great power or strengthening regional institutions. Cambodian foreign policymakers face a dilemma of choosing between upholding the ASEAN interests and the interests of its closest ally China. Against all odds, China is Cambodia's first choice, and the ASEAN is second to that.

As can be seen, in undemocratic small states, individuals are the most important factor in determining their external behaviors, especially when regime security and survivability are at risk. International and regional pressures play only a secondary role. In Cambodia, domestic political struggles essentially explain Hun Sen's eager entry into China's orbit. Chinese patronage can protect his autocratic regime against the international community's pressures on democratic reform and political dissidents within and without his party. In this sense, the regime's sustainability is the most crucial factor in Phnom Penh's alignment with Beijing by pursuing soft balancing against its neighbors while frustrated with ASEAN's insufficient role in addressing the Kingdom's economic and security needs. Although the ASEAN is a cornerstone of Cambodia's foreign policy, Phnom Penh chooses to embrace China. In the long run, Cambodia's domestic politics will continue to impact its foreign policy options significantly.

Cambodia's full embrace of Beijing certainly has broad implications for the security and stability of the Indo-Pacific. It impacts the strategic interests of the US and its allies in the region. Finally, it is not in Cambodia's long-term interests to weaken the ASEAN unity and consensus over sensitive issues in the region. While the ASEAN makes Cambodia valuable and relevant to China, it also provides strategic space for the Kingdom. Pragmatically, Phnom Penh will have to learn to play the geopolitical game more flexibly to retain its strategic autonomy and independent foreign policy. It requires a smart and soft diplomacy by which Cambodia can protect its national interests without harming other countries' interests. Being a small regional player, Cambodia needs to avoid the behaviors or policies that alienate the more powerful countries. Moreover, to be a responsible member of the regional bloc, it needs to balance its national interests with the ASEAN and China and demonstrate solidarity with and strengthen the ASEAN and its central role in the regional architecture amid the geostrategic, geoeconomic competitions between major powers in the Indo-Pacific.

Some future scenarios potentially change Cambodia's strategic choices of bandwagoning with China: more economic benefits from the ASEAN and its dialogue partners would likely reduce Cambodia's excessive dependence on China; the leadership change in Cambodia in the due democratic process or otherwise would lead to the reset of Phnom Penh's 'ironclad' friendship with Beijing; eliminating the Western existential threat to Hun Sen's regime survival would provide Cambodia with more political space to diversify its strategic focus with other major powers and Cambodia would conceivably change its course if China made any misstep in the strategic move. 

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