

RESPONDING TO AUTHORITARIAN CONSOLIDATION IN CAMBODIA: TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE?

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Over the past six months, Cambodian prime minister Hun Sen has begun to rapidly consolidate control over his country in the lead up to scheduled 2018 parliamentary elections. This was not unanticipated in that results from the previous national election as well as this year's commune elections depict a government that, while firmly in control, has lost considerable popular support.

The Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), the leading opposition voice in the country, has been outlawed with many of its lawmakers fleeing abroad to avoid arrest. Several non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including the US-backed National Democratic Institute, have either fled Cambodia or have been closed. And independent media, most notably the English-language *Cambodia Daily*, has been heavily pressured and in some instances ceased operations.

Following the work of Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, Cambodia has long been categorized by observers as competitive authoritarian, i.e. a state that, in contrast to a full-blown authoritarian regime, allows a degree of space for its citizens

to engage in political contestation in the electoral, legislative, judicial, and media arenas but in which continued control by the ruling party is generally assured. This era appears to be coming to an end as the government increasingly closes off those sites and gradually implements a hybrid personalist-single party authoritarian regime. The question on the minds of policymakers in Washington and Brussels these days is how they should respond.

This is no small issue in light of the billions of dollars Western donors have poured into the country since the 1991 Paris Peace Accords. Western governments would appear to have significant economic leverage in light of the fact that Cambodia's economy remains highly reliant on its export-focused garment sector. At the same time, it is unlikely that Phnom Penh would be able to find ready, alternative markets if sanctions were introduced. Moreover, the range of responses available to the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) regime in the event of mass protests appear to be limited. According to a senior government economic official interviewed by the author, a bloody Tiananmen-style crackdown on the opposition would severely harm the country's historically Western-focused tourism industry, a sector that contributes nearly one-fifth of the country's GDP.

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Photos of President Xi Jinping and His Majesty King Norodom Sihamoni on the occasion of the Chinese head of state's official visit to Phnom Penh.

(Source: Bradley J. Murg)



Grounded in these perceptions, the US Senate is currently considering targeted sanctions against ruling CPP leaders that would include the blocking of assets and visa bans. Concomitantly, the vice-chair of the EU Subcommittee on Human Rights has stated that Brussels should implement sanctioning measures in the near future with commentators pointing out three potential options: (i) blanket sanctions on all trade with Cambodia; (ii) the ending of Cambodia's tariff and tax-free trade with the EU; and (iii) personalized sanctions of the sort being considered in Washington.

However, the efficacy of sanctions is historically mixed. Overly broad sanctions can worsen the level of democracy as the regime utilizes the economic hardship caused to further weaken opposition and gain fresh popular support. It is unlikely that this form of sanctions will be applied to Cambodia. Conversely, targeted sanctions that do not cause severe economic damage could, theoretically, induce the desired set of political responses by the CPP regime – at the very least the release of certain imprisoned opposition leaders – provided that they are designed in a way that they impact key interest groups. This is the most likely option on the table at present.

All of these options, however, neglect the new political and economic realities of contemporary Cambodia. For years the country was deeply dependent on Western aid and investment, but this has shifted over the last decade. China – absent from the Cambodian scene since the end of the Cold War and the decimation of the Beijing-backed Khmer Rouge regime – has returned to the country bringing with it enormous amounts of aid and investment. China is now Cambodia's main source of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and while the official numbers from the Council for the Development of Cambodia still rank China significantly below Japan in the provision of Official Development Assistance (ODA), the actual situation on the ground depicts Beijing's dominance. Development interventions supported by China – at the central, provincial, and municipal levels – number in the hundreds. Hardly a week goes by without a visiting delegation from Cambodia's enormous neighbor to the north. From the construction of hydro-power dams to the expansion of the port of Sihanoukville to the tourism sector, China increasingly holds the strongest economic position in Cambodia, far outweighing that of Western governments.

For China, investment in this particular bilateral relationship has been more than worth its price. As a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Cambodia has consistently and actively supported Beijing's position on the South China Sea question and is increasingly regarded in Southeast Asian diplomatic circles as China's designated bag carrier on various issues. Similarly, Cambodia's central role in Chinese president Xi Jinping's ever-expanding "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) is regularly highlighted. With China having replaced Cambodia's traditional donors/investors, prime minister Hun Sen is no longer constrained by the need to placate Western concerns on questions of human rights and democratization – a fact that he has alluded to in public comments on several occasions over the last year. Beijing can easily step in to fill any aid or investment gap in order to protect its newest client state. Thus, while we are likely to see targeted sanctions implemented, their efficacy will likely be severely undermined by a resurgent China seeking to protect its interests in the region.

American and European policy towards Cambodia over the course of the last decade has been active in many areas, but Cambodia has never been regarded as a core interest. "Benign neglect" might be the best term for how Washington and Brussels have responded in recent years to China's steadily increasing influence in the country. Rather than now asking what should be done about Cambodia, perhaps today the better question after decades of aid, years of democratization programming, and billions of dollars spent is: "who lost Cambodia?"



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