

# CAMBODIAN PERSPECTIVE ON CHINA

## Chheang Vannarith

Cambodia and China commemorate their 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of diplomatic ties in 2018. During their meeting in the occasion of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in May 2017, President Xi Jinping said, “both sides should take the commemoration of the 60th anniversary as an opportunity to promote bilateral relations for steady, forward-looking and better development” . Prime Minister Hun Sen responded that “the Cambodian side is willing to, together with the Chinese side, consolidate traditional friendship, so as to promote bilateral comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership for greater development.”

From Cambodia’s perspective the world will become multipolar and China is one of the key actors. Therefore, Cambodia regards China as the most important strategic and economic partner, while China looks at Cambodia as one of the most reliable friend. Both countries share a colonial past and a historical memory of being humiliated by Western powers. Special personal friendship cultivated by Prince Norodom Sihanouk and Premier Zhou Enlai in late 1950s is the bedrock of the bilateral ties. The personal relationship between the leaders of the two countries has been nurtured from generation to generation.

China’s support is critical to realizing Cambodia’s development vision of becoming a middle-income country by 2030 and high-income country by 2050. Infrastructure development and national and regional connectivity projects are key areas of bilateral cooperation. The flow of Chinese investment capital and tourists has contributed to socio-economic development and poverty reduction in Cambodia.

After joining ASEAN in 1999, Cambodia has become more confident in regional integration and community building. The non-interference principle and consensus-based decision-making mode of ASEAN are the key international relations norms that Cambodia can rely on to protect itself from its neighbors. Although threat perception has gradually diminished, Cambodia still views its immediate neighbors as potential threats. Most notably, territorial disputes between Cambodia and its neighbors remain key security concerns with Cambodia-Vietnam territorial tension and the flow of Vietnamese migrants to Cambodia as one of the most complex issue, due to anti-Vietnam nationalism in Cambodia. The majority of Cambodians still perceive Vietnam as the core threat.

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A Chinese military adviser puts rank on Cambodian Army graduates during a graduation ceremony in March 2015.  
Source: REUTERS/Samrang Pring.



Cambodian political leaders, from both the ruling and the opposition parties, regard China as the global power that can be relied on most to assist Cambodia to achieve a better balance with Thailand and Vietnam, through both economic and security means. Hun Sen has shifted his political alliance with Hanoi to Beijing, particularly since 2010, when Cambodia signed a comprehensive strategic partnership with China. The strategic and political trust that Cambodia has earned from China has laid the foundation of closer ties between the two countries. China is now Cambodia's core backup.

The Cambodian government, under the leadership of the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), views China as its main source of regime legitimization. From 1994 to 2016, its total investment capital from China was about US\$14.7 billion, concentrated on four sectors – agriculture and agro-industry, the industrial sector, physical infrastructure, services, and tourism. Chinese investment in Cambodia is mainly driven by deep political trust, cheap labour, abundant natural resources, and market access to the United States, the European Union and ASEAN.

The Cambodian government prioritizes output-based legitimacy (democratic participation in development and choosing political leadership). Cambodia perceives that China's 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI) will enhance its own infrastructure construction and economic development, while enhancing its capacity to play a more relevant role in regional integration and community. To maintain high economic growth, Cambodia needs about US\$700 millions per year to develop infrastructures such as roads, bridges, power grid, and irrigation system.

To sustain its development, Cambodia needs to quickly and effectively grasp emerging opportunities deriving from ASEAN economic integration, the New Development Bank (NDB), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the BRI initiative, and other projects and funds including Silk Road Fund and China-ASEAN Maritime Cooperation Fund. Cambodia is capitalizing on these opportunities to concretize its development priorities. It hopes that it will be able to channel part of these loans towards its new infrastructure projects. There is a strong belief that BRI will reinforce connectivity within the country and connect Cambodia with other countries.

On the South China Sea issue, both China and Cambodia agree that bilateral mechanism is the most effective way in resolving differences and disputes, and that ASEAN-China dialogue mechanism is a tool to build mutual understanding and trust. The Code of Conduct (CoC) is not an instru-

ment to resolve conflicts or disputes, but a way to build confidence and promote preventive diplomacy. Cambodia is not interested in internationalizing the South China Sea issue, and is cautiously constraining other claimants such as Vietnam and the Philippines from using ASEAN to directly counter or challenge China. Cambodia's views and position on the South China Sea have earned significant political and strategic capital from China.

Opportunities, however, do not come without challenges. The structural challenge that Cambodia may need to overcome is power asymmetry. Economic overdependence on China poses certain constraints on Cambodia's foreign policy options. Cambodia's image and role in ASEAN have been affected due to its position on the South China Sea: both Japan and the United States have expressed their dissatisfaction with Cambodia over the South China Sea issue and the latter is planning to add a new condition to its development assistance by requesting Cambodia to take "effective steps to strengthen regional security and stability, particularly regarding territorial disputes in the South China Sea".

Chinese economic presence may cause public discontent if investments and infrastructure development projects are not inclusive and adversely affect local livelihoods and the environment. Some civil society and grassroots organizations have raised concerns over Chinese investment projects, particularly with regard to resettlement and compensation, environmental degradation, and land grabbing.

To conclude, Cambodia's view of China has been determined by historical memory, personal friendship, economic interests, output legitimacy and regime stability, and the perceived threats caused by immediate neighbors. Close ties with China present more opportunities and benefits than costs and risks. In Phnom Penh, China is regarded as the core economic and strategic partner, as Cambodia is thriving to diversify its sources of economic growth, modernize, connect its infrastructure, and integrate its economy with the region and the world at large. Betting on China to be a dominant power in Asia has also shaped Cambodia's view and approach towards China.



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