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Relations between Cambodia and China: The Impact towards Cambodia's Sovereignty

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Cambodia – China relations and its impact towards Cambodia's sovereignty. Cambodia has been a loyal ally to China in the Southeast Asia regions with its support of “One China” policy, active involvement in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and denying ASEAN consensus to fight against China's claim in South China Sea. These facts links to a concern that China is trying to control Cambodia to establish a stronghold for its presence in the Southeast Asia region. Through qualitative research and data from secondary sources, this paper analyses deeper into these relations with an aim to dissect their connection and study the impact on Cambodia sovereignty. It is found through this paper that Cambodia, although practicing open foreign policy, is very much reliant on China for its economic development. However, Cambodia is wary of China's influence and strive to reduce dependency on China. China meanwhile deepens its influence on Cambodia's with its large investment and backing of current ruling regime's survival. This turned Cambodia into a strong ally of China in the regional and international arena. Though Cambodia – China relations have its pro and cons, this paper accessed that Cambodia would still rely on China strong economy for its development while also looking outwards to other foreign power to diversify its options. This paper concludes with several recommendations for future studies into Cambodia – China relations. It is noted throughout the paper that for a more comprehensive understanding of Cambodia's relationship with China, future research needs to investigate on Cambodia's relations with its regional neighbours i.e., ASEAN countries. It would also be significant if future research investigates China's interest in Southeast Asia region by analysing China's relations with ASEAN and the major power rivalries in the Southeast Asia region. This should provide different perspective that connects the need for Cambodia – China relationship and how both states are manipulating each other for their national interest.

INTRODUCTION

Cambodia's foreign relations have been a wave of back and forth between two major powers namely United States (US) and China. Since gaining independence from France in 1953, President Sihanouk has been favourable in relations to China as its main backer for its border issues with Thailand and Vietnam. However, when the Khmer Republic rose to power after a coup in 1970, the new government under Lon Nol was backed up by the US with intention to counter supply lines from Cambodia to Viet Kong forces during the Vietnam War (Porter, 1990). Subsequently in 1975, Democratic Kampuchea regime of Pol Pot rose to power, this time with backing from pro-Soviet Vietnam. When Vietnam withdrew its presence in Cambodia in 1989, Cambodia was again leaning towards the West, with the United Nations (UN) transitional force paving way for a democratic Cambodia. It was not until 1998, when current President Hun Sen manage to solidify his power, that Cambodia is once again amending its relations with China.

Looking back at Cambodia-China relations, it has been existing since 13th century (Phea, 2020). Cambodia has been dependent on the influence of China ever since gaining independence from France in 1953 to balance the conflict it has with Vietnam and Thailand over border disputes (Leng, 2019). It became apparent in 1978 where China bolstered Cambodian armed forces with anti-aircraft defence system, tanks, and long-range guns to counter Vietnamese troops (Chang, P. ,1985 as cited in Leng, 2019, p. 5).

When President Sihanouk was the head of state in Cambodia (1953-70), he tried to maintain a non-alignment approach in Cambodia's foreign relations. However, with the West constantly exerting its anti-communism influence and criticism of the ruling junta, Cambodia inched into closer ties with China. This brought discontent amongst the elites that are used to capitalizing on US aid (Bong, 2019). The discontent worsened when China tried to coerce President Sihanouk to allow Viet Cong to establish supply routes in Cambodia and asked for Cambodian Chinese community to accept Communism ideology. This eventually led to a coup in 1970 by Lon Nol, President Sihanouk closes ally, with the support of the US.

When the Vietnam war ended in 1975, the US forces had withdrawn completely from the Indo-China region. Without support, Lon Nol government was toppled by the Khmer Rouge regime under Pol Pot with the support of China. It was during this period that a mass genocide of pro-Sihanouk supporters had occurred.

In 1979, a group of liberators along with Hun Sen and Vietnam support, defeated Pol Pot regime in Cambodia. Cambodia's relation with China during this period (1979 – 1993) was not on good terms as the new government has the support of Soviet backed Vietnam (Po & Primiano, 2020). The turning point of this relation was in 1997 where President Hun Sen faced increased pressure from the West for his 'un-democratic' ways to uproot the stability that UNTAC had previously instilled in Cambodia. The European Union (EU) tried to persuade President Hun Sen to abide by the human rights and democracy principles by imposing trade sanctions and increasing tariffs in Cambodia. President Hun Sen however refused to submit to interference from former colonial powers focused more on building relationship with major Asian power – China.

Up to recent years, China is the largest contributor to Cambodia's economic development (Phea, 2020). China's investment in Cambodia's power plants alone is estimated at USD 7.5 billion (Hughes, 2020). China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) sees Cambodia, along with the latter's dependency towards the former, as an intermediary area that links Southwest China with Thailand and the rest of Southeast Asia (Hughes, 2020). By forging closer ties with China, Cambodia managed to revitalize its development that were otherwise stagnant from years of colonization.

Cambodia's tendency to rely on China was fuelled by the Western policy that lacks cognitive empathy to understand the political needs of a state (Strangio, 2020). The actions of EU and US Congress to impose trade restrictions and tariffs restorations on Cambodia's export due to the political crackdown by ruling Cambodian People's Party only pushed Cambodia closer to China (Strangio, 2020). This would eventually lead to an over-reliance of Cambodia on China's power to bolster its development thus portraying a band wagoning characteristic.

Cambodia's Foreign Policy

Cambodia's foreign policy has gone through several changes since its independence in 1953. Early on Cambodia's foreign policy sought for non-alignment and neutrality (Chheang, 2022). It was to balance the pressures from multipolar superpowers, ie US, Russia and China while juggling border conflicts between its neighbour i.e. Thailand and Vietnam (Gordon, 1965). At the end of Cold War and establishment of dual presidency after Cambodia's first democratic elections in 1993, its foreign policy changed to a pragmatic policy where it is not bound to any ideology and instead practiced an open foreign policy approach. According to Leng (2016) as cited in Chheang (2022) Cambodia implemented a hedging strategy involving economic pragmatism, limited band wagoning, binding engagement and soft balancing.

With time, Cambodian foreign policy shifted from an impartial state which does not choose side into a state that promotes cooperation between states to grow its economic power. According to Sarith (2014), Cambodia needs to revamp its foreign policy to have a more active role in the regional system. He outlined three pillars grand strategy that Cambodia’s foreign policy stems from. First pillar is the “Asian Century” which states that global power has shifted to Asia-Pacific region and amongst them ASEAN countries enjoyed a strong economic growth. Thus, Cambodia focused its foreign policy towards promoting diplomatic relations with ASEAN members and other ASEAN-led regional forums. Cambodia also enhanced its relations with China in 2010 allowing more bilateral trade to boost the economy. The second pillar states Cambodia needs diplomatic efforts to rebuild its prestige from pre 15th century. Cambodia needs global diplomatic relations and recognition to gain resources for its development especially in physical infrastructure and reducing the rate of poverty.

The third pillar, according to Sarith (2014), outlines the Six Point Principle as described in Article 53 of Cambodia’s constitution. It points out that Cambodia would remain neutral and sought for peaceful coexistence by not joining alliance or allowing foreign military presence in its country. However, the principle maintained the rights of Cambodia to receive foreign military assistance for self-defence purposes (Kingdom of Cambodia, 2008). Steaming from the three pillars grand strategy, Cambodia constrained its foreign policy into promoting economic diplomatic ties to foster greater development within country and promote regional peace.

Since achieving stability under President Hun Sen, Cambodia’s foreign policy anchors on the grand strategy to protect its national interest. It highlights five main tasks primarily to protect national independence, sovereignty and maintain social unity; foster external relationship based on spirit of national independence; promote economic diplomacy; support and strengthen multilateralism; enhance quality, efficiency and capacity of Cambodian diplomats (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, 2023). The outlined foreign policy tasks clearly show Cambodian national interest is to protect its sovereignty through diplomacy and social unity.

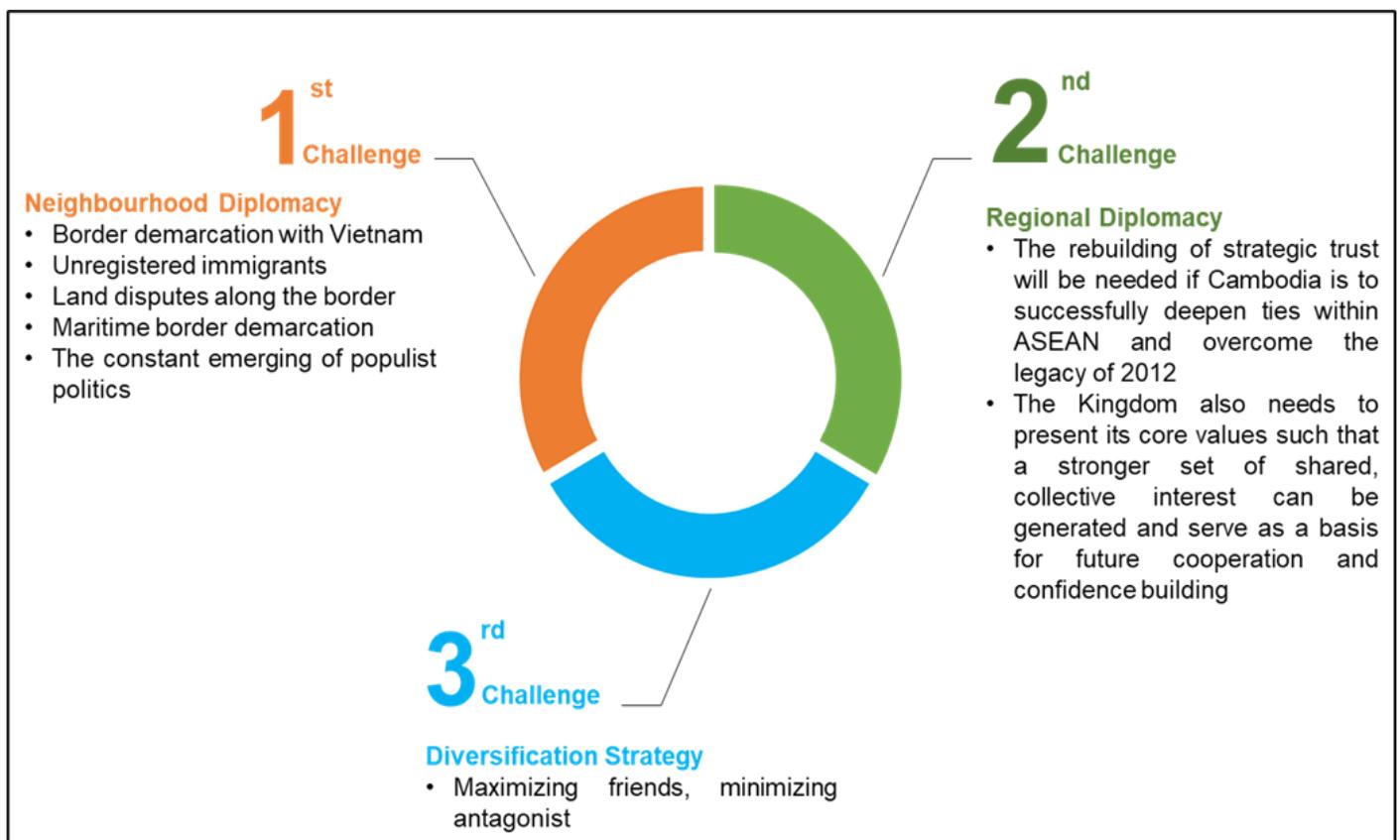


Figure 1: Challenges in Shaping Cambodia’s Foreign Policy (Charadine, 2020).

However, post 2018 elections in Cambodia which saw President Hun Sen gaining total control of the government, Cambodia’s foreign policy has seen a shift in favour towards China. Cambodia commemorated its 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations with China and in April 2019, Cambodia signed the Action Plan 2019-2023 on building China-Cambodia Community of Shared Future (Charadine, 2020). According to Charadine (2020), Cambodia foreign policy faces challenges in the form of neighbourhood diplomacy, regional diplomacy and its diversification strategy as shown in **Figure 1**.

Internally, Cambodia’s foreign policy is constrained with its limited resources to respond to global demands, contested domestic politics and bureaucratic capacity and foreign interventions that threatens its national stability (Chheang, 2022).

Amidst the challenges faced and global uncertainty, Cambodia has adopted a hedging strategy to protect its national interests. Up to 2017, Cambodia displayed limited band wagoning with both US and China whilst balancing relations with Japan, EU and ASEAN to avoid overdependence with the major powers (Doung et al., 2022). Cambodia’s hedging/limited band wagoning strategies shaped its foreign policy to optimize support for its political stability, economic development and national security.

All in, Cambodia’s national interest can be defined as to maintain its sovereignty and social unity. This is supported by its foreign policy objectives which emphasises on diplomatic measures that promote peace and cooperation to boost its economic development hence bring social stability to its otherwise choppy social backgrounds. Cambodia’s foreign policy is shaped by external factors namely its neighbourhood and regional diplomacy while maintaining peaceful diplomacy and internal factors such as limited resources, domestic political stability amidst foreign influences.

China’s Influence in Cambodia’s Economy

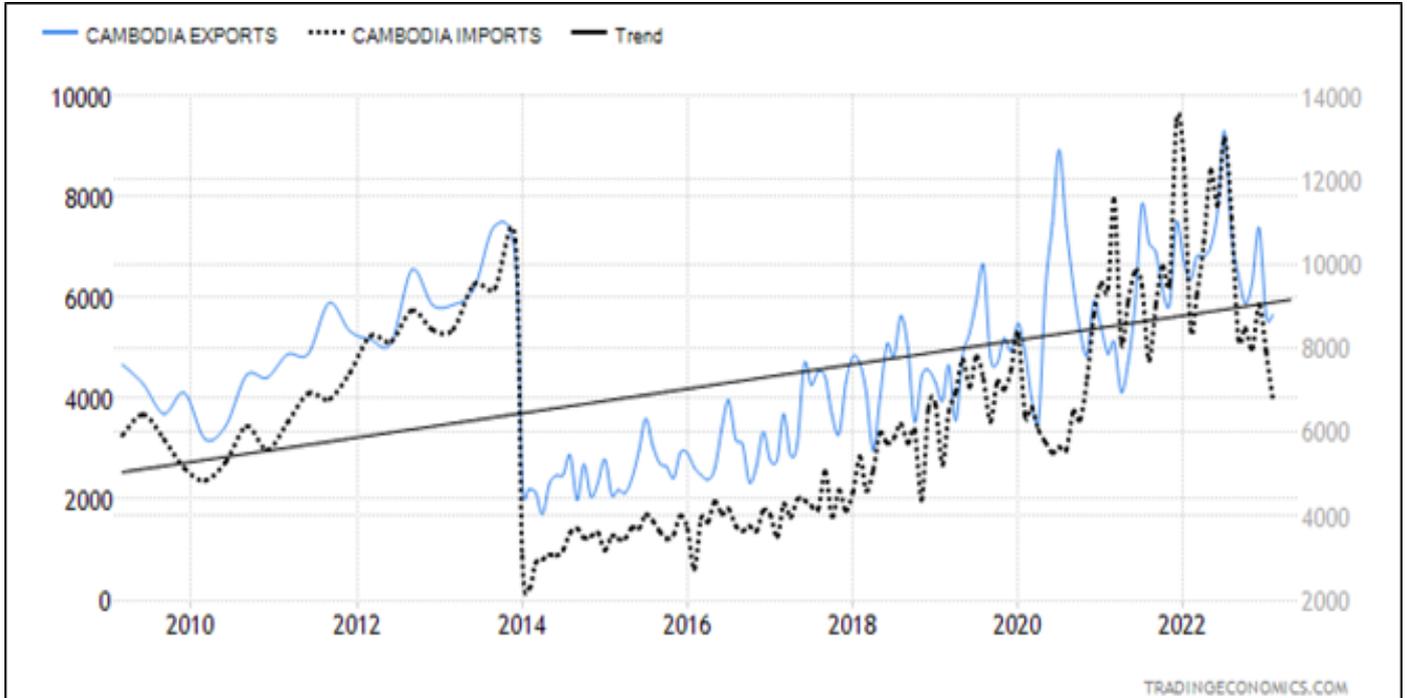


Figure 2: Cambodia’s Import (dotted) and Export (blue) from 2010 to 2022 (Cambodia Exports, 2023).

Under its revived economy and since achieving political hegemony in 1998 elections, Cambodia has seen a rise in its export and import as per shown in **Figure 2**. According to data from Figure 2, Cambodia export in 2022 was at 6.7 KHR Billion (USD 1.62 Billion) while imports stand at 12.5 KHR Billion (USD 3.02 Billion). The sharp drop in export and import values in 2014 stems from the government crackdown on protesters following the 2013 elections which saw Western allies sanctioning Cambodia for human rights violations.

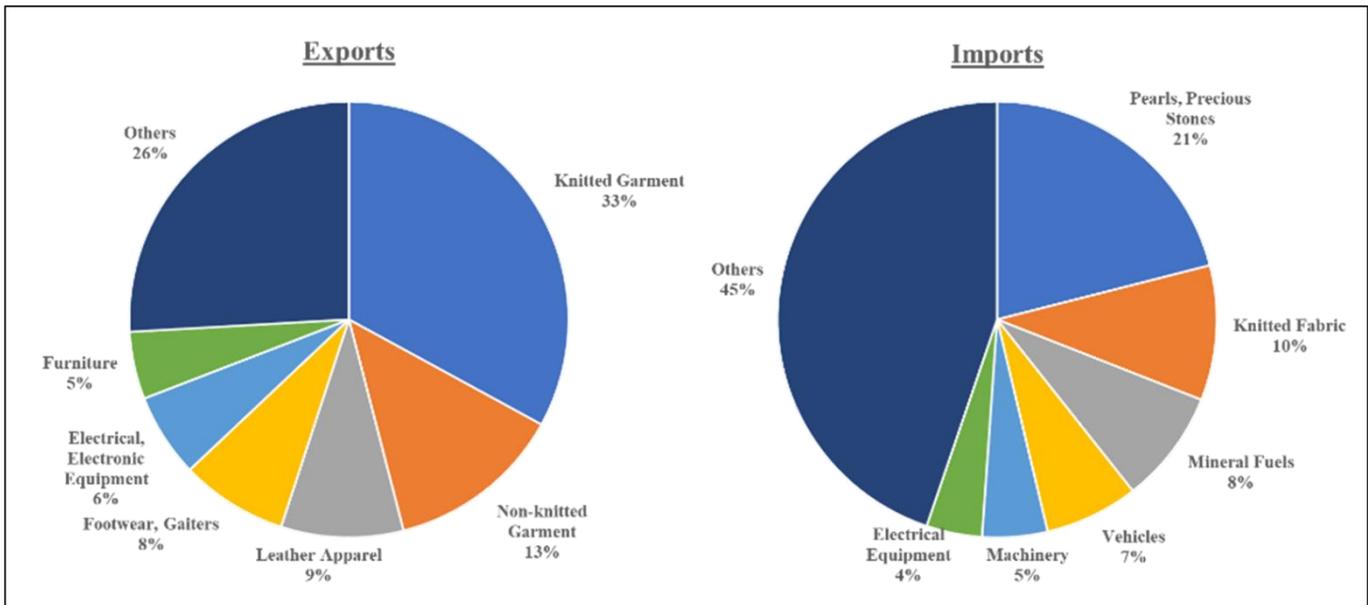


Figure 3: Cambodia main export and import by category in 2021 (Cambodia Exports, 2023).

The main source of export for Cambodia is from the garment industry whilst Cambodia mostly imports natural minerals such as pearls, metal and precious stones as shown in **Figure 3**. This shows that Cambodia’s economy is based on garment manufacturing industry where it emphasises on exports of apparel and garment products which is almost 55% of total export (including knitted garment, non-knitted garment and leather apparel exports).

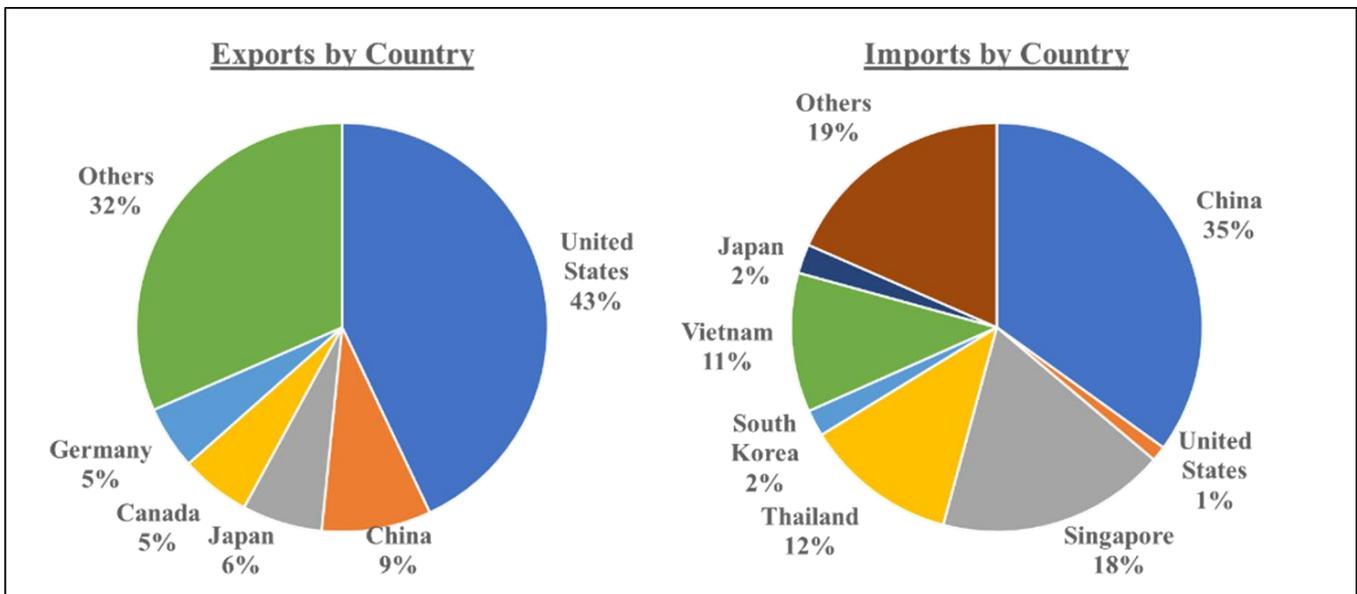


Figure 4: Cambodia main export and import by country in 2021 (Cambodia Exports, 2023).

According to Vannarith (2023), China is Cambodia’s most consistent trading partner, foreign investor and aid donor. Cambodia’s Senior Official, Vongsey Vissoth in 2023 said that “China is a major trading partner of Cambodia and one of the potential markets for Cambodian products. China is also the largest official development assistance (ODA) to Cambodia” (Huaxia, 2023). While Cambodia export market mainly stems from the US (43% of total export revenue), China has been a consistent trade partner for Cambodia standing at 35% of total import and 8.6% of total export in 2021 as per shown in **Figure 4**. This shows that Cambodia is highly reliant on China for its imports which is mainly fabrics or garments meant for its manufacturing industry (Cambodia Exports, 2023). The total trade volume for bilateral trade between Cambodia and China in 2019 were reported to be at USD 4.8 billion with a 26% increase annually (Chheang, 2023).

Development in Cambodia with China's Influence

According to Huaxia (2023), China's ODA and investment has played a crucial role in supporting Cambodia's economic development and poverty reduction. China's investment in Cambodia has increased to an estimate of USD 2.9 billion in 2016 or about 29.9% of total foreign investment value (Po & Primiano, 2020). These investments were mainly used to boost Cambodia's agriculture products through advancement in the product standard. China's investment in the agriculture sector has developed around 237,406 hectares of land (Chheang, 2023). The most significant agriculture project with China's investment is the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) at Kampong Speu province with a total investment of USD 2 billion. The construction of SEZ will bring benefits to Cambodians especially in the form of employment. SEZ will be an exclusive zone where special incentives such as lower tariffs and taxes, are implemented to attract FDI and trade to promote positive economic growth.

Besides agriculture, China has also been investing in Cambodia's energy sector. Chinese investment as surmounted to approximately USD 1.8 billion in form of five hydroelectric dams and USD 732 million for two coal power plants (Po & Primiano, 2020). This would be the catalyst for Cambodia to further develop its industries, which thirst for electricity, whilst improving the livelihood of the general population.

In the infrastructure sector development, China has been providing investments, loans and aid to Cambodia amounting to an approximate of USD 3 billion in 2016 (cited by Sum, 2016 in Po & Primiano, 2020). These involved the repair and upgrade work on more than 2,000 km of roads, twenty major bridges, Phnom Penh Autonomous Port and Siem Reap International Airport (Po & Primiano, 2020). The infrastructure improvement will further improve the mobility of goods in Cambodia thus also increasing production and trade for Cambodia's economy. Having good infrastructure will also attract more investors in building manufacturing plants in Cambodia.

China's Influence in Cambodia's Politics

Being a hegemony power in Cambodia for over 30 years, President Hun Sen had employed various strategies to maintain its legitimacy (Chheang, 2021; Horton, 2020; Loughlin, 2021; Po & Primiano, 2020). According to Po & Primiano (2020), President Hun Sen used China's support to boost its economy and wellbeing of its population, assuming that with economic boost the population will further support his regime. President Hun Sen also used China as its backing from the international pressure for him to respect human rights following the violent crackdown during 2013 and 2017 elections (Po & Primiano, 2020). This shows that Cambodia's ruler is highly dependent on China on the global front to ease out the pressure it gained for its one-sided democracy.

According to Loughlin (2021), it was China's helping hand that kept Cambodia afloat during its political crisis from the period of 2012 to 2018, where violent crackdown on opposition party were rampant. China's economic stimulus had kept Cambodia's economy running while its diplomatic backing and military exchanges had further strengthened CPP's standing on its path to total authoritarianism. China's aid came in timely as Cambodia faced a sanction from the EU and US for its human rights violations.

Loughlin (2021) also argues that Cambodia's transition from democracy to authoritarianism is evidence that CPP is using China's power for the survival of its legitimacy. An example of the 2017 pre-election, weary of opposition party CNRP popularity amongst Cambodians, President Hun Sen launched a crackdown on basic civil liberty, monopolization of media and law. This was done through expelling a pro-democracy US non-profit organisation, closing radio stations and newspaper publications that does not support the government while also charging opposition leader, Kem Sokha, with treason (Po & Primiano, 2020). All this was done amidst criticism and sanctions from the West which was mitigated by President Hun Sen through the support from China.

CPP also relied on China's aid to boost its infrastructure development and using it as a tool for gaining support amongst the population. According to Loughlin (2021), CPP provided development in construction and industrial sectors that benefits the population to secure its support and legitimacy amongst the broader population. However, corruption was rampant and most high-ranking development projects are being awarded to those that support the government. By doing this, wealth is channelled back to the party in legitimate terms, where an awarded contractor builds or provide resources for the government by justifying it as a donation. According to Horton (2020), Cambodia elites who supported President Hun Sen have a high level of wealth. This further pushed the Cambodian government to be reliant on foreign aids, especially China, as a source of monetary power to buy support from the elites.

The CPP also manipulated the security force in the same manner. CPP close relations with China has earned Cambodia direct financial aid from China which was distributed among the military officials and solders (Loughlin, 2021). CPP also retained high-ranking military officials in its party as CPP committee members to consolidate its power. This bought loyalty from high-ranking military officials and lower ranking soldiers as well, thus reducing the risks of a coup by other opposition leaders. It also provided the CPP with the power to dictate and control its people.

China's influence has also seeped into Cambodia's media sector. China has provided financial backing to Cambodian's think tanks that reproduced CPP ideologies and China's image as a friend through state-controlled media outlets (Loughlin, 2021). This assisted manifestations of the government and China's official to ease discontent among general population steaming from the rise of crime related to Chinese workers in Cambodia.

China's Influence on Cambodia International Relations

Faced with individual sanctions for its political crisis by the US under Magnitsky Act in 2019 which punished local businessman with direct link to the government, Cambodia turned to China for assistance. China and Cambodia signed on a free trade agreement (FTA) in 2020 to mitigate the impacts on sanction placed upon Cambodia for its authoritarian ruling (Loughlin, 2021). Without China's helping hand, Cambodia economy would suffer as the US is Cambodia's largest market for export (refer Figure 3.4). Having the FTA with China provided an option for Cambodia to not be reliant on the West which uses economy as a leverage to coerce Cambodia to follow human rights principle and practice democracy (Loughlin, 2021). This shows that Cambodia is dependent on China in its international relations. Cambodia looked to China helping hands when the rest of the world, Western region especially, was condemning them for human rights violations and tried to control Cambodia through aids provided. This is because China did not place any conditions to aids it gave to Cambodia and did not interfere in Cambodia's internal affairs as compared to US aids (Horton, 2020). This opened the room for willing receptions from the CPP and President Hun Sen especially as they were fighting to maintain its hegemonic power within Cambodia.

Cambodia – China relations were further amplified by frequent Chinese officials visits to Cambodia and vice versa. Trade and aids agreement were often signed during these visits, providing Cambodia with the financial aids it needs to develop the economy and strengthen the government support.

According to Horton (2020), Cambodia's close relationship with China gave Cambodia a more substantial international profile. Cambodia has been a tool for China to stamp its presence within the ASEAN communities. Cambodia backed China in 2012 maritime territorial disputes when it disagreed to an ASEAN communal against China's claims in South China Sea. Cambodia also banned public display of Taiwanese flag and supported the One China policy. Even during the Corona virus outbreak, President Hun Sen was the first foreign leader to visit China, while other nations globally blamed China for concealing facts of the virus and implicated the outbreak, thus sealing its place as an important friend to China (Horton, 2020). Through these actions, it can be determined that Cambodia is an ally of China that readily supports China in any possible means it can. Cambodia was willing to face criticism when it supported China instead of ASEAN in the territorial dispute.

Impact and Challenges of Cambodia – China Relations

Despite being dependent on China’s backing, Cambodia is also wary of China’s hidden agenda and its looming influences in its ruling autonomy. Cambodia’s strategy to balance out the influences of China was in applying a hedging strategy in playing out China’s role as a main investor by also economically dealing with US and Japan for its source of income. However, with the ever-pressing pressure from the US and EU for Cambodia to practice human rights and lean towards a democratic ruling, Cambodia is seen leaning towards a limited band wagoning stance in its relationship with China.

Cambodia’s stance with China might reap benefits in terms of development growth in Cambodia as well as securing legitimacy of current ruling government. However, China’s presence in Cambodia could also have several negative impacts and would be a future challenge to Cambodian government. To further dissect the impacts and challenges of China’s influence in Cambodia, the writer will categorize into Barry Buzan five sectors of security namely military, political, economic, societal and environmental security.

Militarily, although Cambodia’s foreign policy remained as non-aligned, Cambodia’s actions said otherwise (Cambodia International Relations, 2019). The allowance of China’s military presence in the port of Sihanoukville suggested that China is beginning to place its military there to increase their presence in the South China Seas (Phea, 2020). This is a step away from Cambodia’s non-alignment foreign policy. Having a foreign state setting up military installations in country would send out messages to other states saying that Cambodia is a puppet of China. Cambodian government will then have a difficult time in mustering up its positive international image to counter better regional diplomacy and diversification strategy challenges in its foreign policy.

Politically, Cambodia has also in several instances supported China’s foreign dealings with other nations. Namely China – Taiwan issue where Cambodia removed Taiwanese consulate from its capital and banned any public display of Taiwan’s flag (Bong, 2020). In 2012, Cambodia it refused to approve a referendum of ASEAN community against China’s territorial claim in South China Seas waters coincidentally not long after China promised millions of dollars of aid to Cambodia (Bong, 2020; Charadine, 2020; Pheakdey, 2012). Both this action painted Cambodia negatively in the regional and international arena which placed Cambodia as a part of a Communist state and one that does not support mutual development. Internally, Cambodia’s government close ties to China have made the former difficult in handling Chinese related infringement of law. A particular example in Sihanoukville, Chinese investors are reported in dealing with corrupt Cambodian officials to illegally use official government license plate for their personal interest (Po & Heng, 2019). Corruption has also led to land grabbing issues following the rapid development in real estate induced by China’s investment. Lacking government backing in land reform and the right of ownership by the general population compared to the Chinese will cause the instability and wide protest. It would also bring down popularity of the CPP and might be the cause factor of downfall of CPP once it has no external backings.

Economically, Cambodia has also a fair share of challenges faced from the influx of China’s aid and investment into the state. According to Pheakdey (2012), most of China’s ODA in Cambodia are in the form of loans used primarily in infrastructure development. Pheakdey (2012) noted that China’s debt comprises of around 66% of Cambodia’s total debt by the end of 2010. It is least favourable for the future development of Cambodia as China’s loan have higher interest rates compared to other state as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Terms of Loans from China Compared to other Donors. (Pheakdey, 2012)

Country	Interest rate (%)	Repayment Period (years)	Grace Period (years)
China	2 – 3	15 - 20	5 - 7
ADB	1.2	30	8
World Bank	1.2	40	10
Japan	0.01	40	10

Table 1 showed that interest rate from China amounts to 2-3% per annum of its total loan with a shorter repayment period of 15 to 20 years. This is around 1-2% difference in interest rate compared to other donor such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB) which is co-owned by US and Japan and the World Bank. Japan ever offered an extremely lower interest rate of 0.01% per annum the lowest possible interest rate offered. This proves that the loans provided from China costs more where total interest paid for 20 years of loan amounts to almost 60% compared to around 30-50% interest charged by other creditors. In long term, Cambodia could be losing more in interest paid compared to benefits gained from the loan. This is however justified with the loan conditions set by the creditors. The main reason for Cambodia to accept China's ODA is because China's loan came with a no-strings attached policy (Pheakdey, 2012). This is an opposite compared to other donors that provides aids with conditions that Cambodia reforms its policy in terms of governance, democracy and human rights. However, according to research by Pheakdey (2012), China's ODA, although might not seem to have come with any preconditions, is alleged to request favours in form of political and investment interests. Quoting from Dr Chheang Vannarith on China's aid, he said "There is no aid without any strings attached. But how they (China) put the strings on the politicians is different from putting the strings on civilians" (Pheakdey, 2012). This shows that China's ODA does have its precondition and presumably used to exert control of Cambodia's politics. In long run, this would be a huge challenge for Cambodia as its action is overtly controlled by China especially if it involves China's interest in the Southeast Asia regions. It would also impact Cambodia's sovereignty as a state with freedom to act.

Socially, China has been trying to spread its culture in Cambodia. According to Pheakdey (2012), Chinese is the largest minority group in Cambodia. The influx of Chinese migrants into Cambodia along with its investment arm diversify cultures in traditional Cambodia. An example Chinese culture seeping in predominantly Cambodian culture is the celebration of Chinese New Year. The celebration is one of the biggest annual celebrations in Cambodia although it is not recognized as a public holiday (Pheakdey, 2012). Chinese food has also become common dish while Chinese language is the second most popular foreign language in Cambodia after English.

Cambodia's aid dependency has also created a challenge in maintaining its workforce in terms of public employment. Aid dependency has caused Cambodia to face structural problems in excessive personnel and administration expenditure (Chen, 2018). This is because Cambodia's government revenue only amounts to a small portion of its GDP where most of Cambodia's GDP comes from FDI (Pheakdey, 2012). Over-reliance on foreign aids especially in Cambodia's operational expenditure will cause Cambodia to face serious backlash in maintaining its workforce should the said donor retract its aid to Cambodia.

China's aid and investment in Cambodia's infrastructure development are being managed by Chinese contractors which will limit local jobs opportunity and development of local technical skills (Chen, 2018). Energy and infrastructure investments only benefits the local physically in terms of hard labour supply but does not translate into development of human resources in terms of maintenance, operation, management or skilled technicians (Chen, 2018; Ny, 2022). In long term reliance on foreign aids will limit local creativity and opportunity to venture into local business as most industry is being dominated by foreigners.

The influx of China's investment also brought along migrant workers from China. This has caused a surge of criminal activities involving Chinese gangsters particularly in Sihanoukville, the main capital for China's investment (Ny, 2022). Criminal activities dealing from guns, drugs, money laundering, human trafficking, prostitution and violence have thrived under the lack of control from the Cambodian government. According to Ny (2022), in 2018, 68% of those caught with illegal drugs in pubs are Chinese national. Additionally, online gambling has also been an increasing concern for Cambodia's society. It is a challenge for the Cambodian government to step up and impose stricter rules to control these criminal activities especially those involving Chinese national without offending its largest donor and trading partner.

Environmentally, Chinese investment in massive agricultural and land development for energy generating industry has sparked various environment degrading issues (Pheakdey, 2012). Land development is alleged to have displaced indigenous people without any compensation from the government. In the energy sector, the

building of hydroelectric dams along the Mekong River is alleged to have destroyed the biodiversity and wildlife habitats in its vicinity (Pheakdey, 2012). With rampant corruption, the Cambodian government face serious challenge in monitoring and controlling the development activities so that it does not encroach into reserved forest. Failing to do so will impact Cambodia biodiversity in the future and may cause more frequent natural disasters in the form of flash floods and landslides.

In addition, Chinese operated power plants and offshore oil platforms are alleged to contribute to pollution by discarding waste directly into the sea (Po & Heng, 2019). This will further impact the fishing industry particularly in Sihanoukville and cause the loss of income for local fisherman. It will also cause a decline of nature loving tourist into Cambodia as most of the nature spot are tarnished with pollution. This is again a challenge for Cambodian government as it will impact on its income from the tourism industry as well as fisheries.

Way Forward for Cambodia in Maintaining Relations with China

Based on an analysis through Barry Buzan five sectors of security, it has been identified that China's investment in Cambodia also bring about many negative impact and challenges categorized into five main sectors. All these challenges could ultimately be the root cause of internal disorder of Cambodia. The already discontent general population towards the government ruling and bias towards Chinese could be sparked into an internal conflict should the government continue to place the people rights in the back burner. There are several ways to mitigate these challenges although it needs the government to reform and shift into a more independent economy instead of over reliance on China for assistance.

Militarily, Cambodia could suggest and promote multilateral military exercise in its home territory. Multilateral exercise especially between regional states could enhance state diplomacy and understanding. It will also prove that Cambodia is not aligning itself militarily to China by allowing China's Navy to dock in Sihanoukville. It will also benefit Cambodia's military by having the chance to learn and experience foreign military operational knowledge.

Politically, the Cambodian government needs to form a diversification strategy in its diplomacy through maximizing friends and minimizing foes (Charadine, 2020). Having more diversification and a neutral diplomacy will shift Cambodia hedging strategy between China and the rest of the world into a more balanced stance. This will provide Cambodia more option and manoeuvrability in its dealing with other nations. More importantly it will also improve Cambodia's standing among the ASEAN community through a transparent and non-aligned diplomacy.

Cambodia's government should also reform and reinforce its institutions especially in judicial, legislation and governance sector (Phea, 2020b). Reforming this sector will allow room for Cambodia to improve on its legal frameworks and policies to curb on the rampant corruption and misuse of power amongst the government official and influential investors from China. Likewise, the level of enforcement should also be reform as the legal framework is strengthen. This is so that the efforts do not go to waste on paper and implementation should be done regardless of rank or class. By having an improved legal system, the support from the population will increase as there is a sense of security being imposed on by the government and by enforcing it without bias will reinforce the trust of the people towards the government.

Economically, Cambodia also needs to peel away from its dependence on ODA and foreign aids for its economic development. Being a country that has achieved independence for almost 70 years, Cambodia needs to develop strategies to head towards self-sustainment. According to Anderson & Raksmeay (2020), Cambodia has shown a decline in ODA from 58% of government expenses to 20% in 2018. However, it is also noted that non-ODA aid is also flowing into Cambodia with its source from China. A strategy that Cambodia can adopt is to diversify its trade source and not be overly reliant on foreign aids. Cambodia could tone down on its human rights suppression to open its trade options to other economic power such as the US and EU. Cambodia could also be more involved in regional community such as ASEAN to promote regional friendship and enhance its trade.

Socially, Cambodia will also benefit from the reformation of its governance and institutions. The awarding of contracts would be more transparent and dealing made with China could weed out the imbalance opposed on it. As of now, most of the awarded contract on ODA dealing with infrastructure development are benefitting the local elites or Chinese businessman. The locals aspiring to join and taste the benefits of ODA are being disheartened by the lack of transparency in contract awarding due to the weakness in institution and governance. Increasing transparency would allow local Cambodian to be more competitive in contributing to the economy instead of just be content with ancestry jobs in the agriculture industry.

Cambodian government needs to increase its presence in diplomacy with China to stand for its own people. The government should also discuss an initiative with China to control the crime level associated with Chinese migrants in Cambodia. This is to curb the crime rate and to control the criminal activities associated to Chinese gangsters. The Cambodian government need to place strict emphasis on curbing crime as it will affect Cambodia's internal security.

Environmentally, Cambodian government also need to introduce policies that will protect the natural environment of Cambodia. Development that involves opening mass land for real estates or agriculture needs to be controlled. This is to avoid excessive land clearing and avoid illegal smuggling of timber out of the country. Apart from having a policy, a stricter enforcement and consistent monitoring on construction projects need to be placed to ensure contractors especially foreign contractors adhere to the given policies. This would protect Cambodia's natural resources and allow the indigenous to coexist along with development of the state.

The Cambodian government could also enforce populace control on the Chinese migrant or contractors into the state. This is to allow the government a better control of the crimes that might stem from the lack of enforcement and to control waste pollution amongst the Chinese. Implementing populace control would also help protect the locals from the fluctuation of real estates prices as rich Chinese investors are restricted to buy property in Cambodia. This will in turn generate better livelihood for the Cambodians.

FINDINGS

Through this research, findings shows that Cambodia would not be dominated by China in the near future. This is because Cambodia's foreign policy and constitution itself that does not allow any interference in its ruling. The writer also believes that Cambodia is maximising its relationship with China by utilising China's huge economy to boost Cambodia's own economy, a true art of hedging strategy for the sake of Cambodia's future development. Should the relationship become strained in the future, Cambodia would turn to other states for its survival, in this case Japan or US, the closest ODA donor to Cambodia besides China. Thus, the impact of China – Cambodia relationship on Cambodia's sovereignty might be insignificant as Cambodia practices a non-interference policy and a hedging strategy in its foreign relations, given that the current regime ideals is carried over through future rulers of the Kingdom.

However, it should be noted that Cambodia hedging strategy might not always work. Cambodia ruling government, present and future, should muster a plan to move away from its dependency on foreign ODA for its economy development. This is so that Cambodia can truly achieve its independence and to avoid being colonised again by foreign powers under the guise of economy.

To better understand the complexity of Cambodia – China relations, it is recommended that Cambodia's action in preserving its relations with China is studied with contrast to Cambodia's relation in its neighbouring regions. This would better provide an insight to the factors contributing to Cambodia's foreign relations with other state actors. It would also be significant for the research to investigate further into China's interest in the Southeast Asia region and ASEAN role in it. It would also facilitate to understand the intentions of major power rivalries in the Southeast Asia region and determining future potential of Cambodia as a nodus of future conflict between China and US in the region.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the research and readings, it is revealed that Cambodia – China relationship is complex and shaped through various factors bringing these two states closer compared to Cambodia's regional neighbours. This is solidified with the fact that China is Cambodia's refuge when international governing agencies and superpower are looking to control Cambodia's way of governing through obligations of human rights. Through these factors, although it is apparent of China's intention, Cambodia could not fully deny its relationship with China. This is because Cambodia is too heavily reliant on China's huge economy to boost its own development and to ensure its survival. However, it was noted that Cambodia's foreign policy strategy was to always hedge towards state that are beneficial to Cambodia's development and especially one that guarantees the survivability of the current regime. Cambodia's hedging or limited band wagoning towards China could be a temporary fix to mitigate the sanctions placed upon Cambodia for its human rights violation and non-democratic governance. China has much to gain from this relation as Cambodia is an important gateway for China to stamp its presence in the South China Sea and to balance the influence of US in Southeast Asia region.

Cambodia – China relations has evidently brought various benefits to Cambodia's development. Cambodia has benefited in all sectors of Barry Buzan securitization perspective. However, the backlash from it is that China's influence in Cambodia is slowly brewing up discontent amongst Cambodians and other global major powers. What seemed sweet could turn bitter if Cambodia could not steer out from China's overbearing shadow. To mitigate this, Cambodia should diversify its international relation and adopt a more balanced hedging strategy. Cambodia could also adopt a more subtle authoritarian style of ruling to avoid international critics on his style. All in, what is important to oversee for Cambodia's ruling government is the hearts and minds of his people instead of relying on foreign powers and the elites to secure their survivability. A government without the support of its people would not strive in long term and external threats could use the discontent to spark a revolution at any time.

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