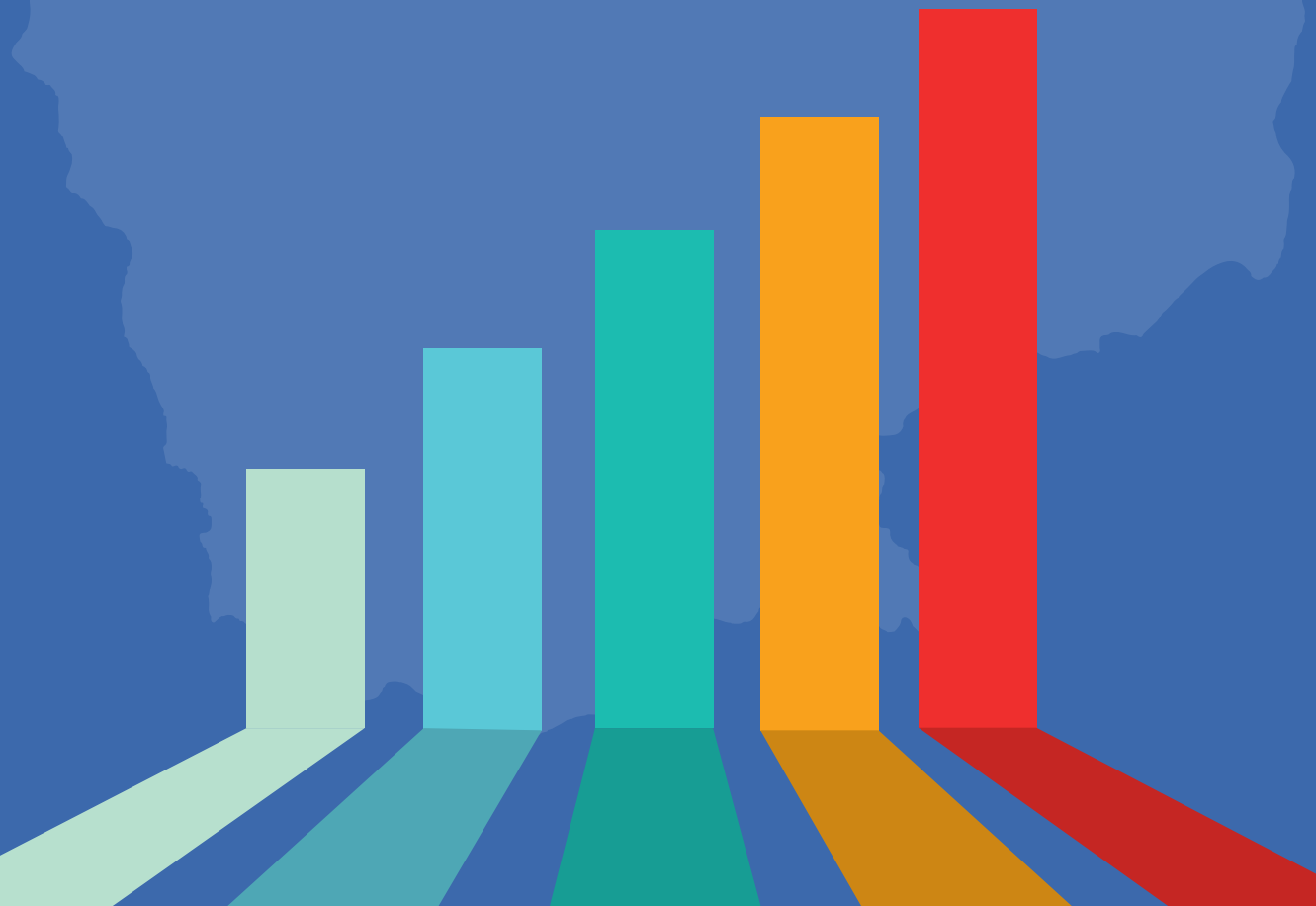


# Observation on the Evolution of Contemporary Cambodia

A Cambodian View

By Sim Vireak



# **Observation on the Evolution of Contemporary Cambodia**

**A Cambodian View**

Sim Vireak



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# INTRODUCTION

This book is a compilation of articles that I have written in the last 10 years. My motivation of writing derived from the thirst to read publications and receive fair assessment about contemporary Cambodia beyond the limited stock of topics such as the Khmer Rouge and genocide.

As a post-war generation, I have difficulty in finding identity of my own and finding stories that my generation should tell the next generations. This is because, practically, I cannot relate myself with the extreme experiences of my parents' or grandparents' generations nor could I totally relate myself with the external views about Cambodia. Those views do not fully correspond with what I have seen, felt and experienced inside the country.

Most stories about Cambodia are written by outsiders. The observation is often based on externally framed paradigms.

Most stories are about the past, about mistakes and shortcomings. Nothing much about Cambodia's future, dream, and pride as a nation.

I have lived through the post-genocide Cambodia. Observing Cambodia within the international community, my childhood informed myself of the sense of deprivation and solitude of Cambodia. This is the real feeling of deprivation of self-esteem and national pride.

We survived post-genocide period with limited means and state structure; yet no one want to know us, to save us, and to recognize us.

Some even looked at us like poor criminals; the crimes for being poor and underdeveloped; the crimes for being imperfect in the process of our nation-building and development.

External observers, using the paradigms from advanced countries, often deprive us of self-esteem and pride ignoring the fact that Cambodia is among the few post-conflict nations that did not fall back into civil war; a post-conflict nation that can turn itself into an active contributor of deminers and peacekeepers under the United Nations; a post-conflict

nation that can transform into one of the great achievers of sustainable development, poverty reduction, and peaceful democratization.

When post-conflict nations fall back into wars and chaos, no one would come to your rescue. The destiny of the country, its peace and development can only be protected by the people of that particular country.

Attā Hi Attanō Nāthō is a Buddhist teaching of self-reliance. To have self-reliance, nation and people must have self-esteem, self-confidence and pride.

How can you strengthen self-reliance if you don't have self-esteem and self-confidence?

For people of the developing countries, there are two types of attitudes towards your country's imperfections.

One attitude is that you are always angry; you blame the government; you blame the whole society; you try to find someone responsible. You accept everything that outsiders say about your own countries. At the end, you always want to migrate or move to a better country or the countries that you think are perfect, expecting to have a better life, to receive a better healthcare, cleanliness, good environment, good education, etc.

The more you go overseas to see different countries, the more you feel irritated about your own countries. You wake up every day to spot your countries' endless mistakes and shortcomings through comparison.

Another attitude is that you accept those imperfections. You acknowledge that some imperfections are man-made, and some are inevitably attributed by structural shortcomings of the development process. You don't find targets to blame but rather you try to do something within your sphere of influence or professions to better your family, society, work place and nation.

The more you go overseas, the more you love your country. You want to learn and explore more about your country, identity, history and to do something for your country no matter how small that contribution would be.



No matter where you go, you still want to “choal cha-erng” or to leave your bones here in your motherland.

You always find a sense of hope and find a way to create and see your dreams from the imperfections of your poor yet beloved nation.

Nonetheless, there is no right or wrong about the above two attitudes. It is a matter of choice of life.

The 10 years of my writing offer a glimpse of my exercise of self-questioning on Cambodian values and Cambodia’s journey as a post-conflict nation. I tried to arrange articles based on chronological order, reflecting the key social events Cambodia was facing at the time of writing.

I cannot say that I have no bias considering my experiences with the government, especially when it comes to the pride as a sovereign independent nation. This is the attitude and mentality that was shaped mainly by my profession as diplomat working at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

I have a strong wish that the world will one day acknowledge and recognize Cambodia by assessing and evaluating Cambodia from various perspectives and dig deeper on different aspects of Cambodia. I have a dream that one day the world will fairly assess us based on who we really are, and not from where the viewers are coming from. I hope that one day the original Cambodian values, thoughts, ways of life, historical and cultural identity will be fairly appreciated by external observers.

I hope that I could tell the next generations that my generation has our own unique identity, and that we have different stories to tell them. Those stories are about the gradual struggle of Cambodia as a post-conflict nation towards peace, harmony, democracy, and prosperity.

March 2023

Sim Vireak

# **PART 1: POLITICS**

# VIEWING CAMBODIA'S POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Opinion, Khmer Times, 4 March 2019

This is in response to the article written by Kimkong Heng and Veasna Var entitled "Reversing Cambodia's democratic drift" which appeared in East Asia Forum. The article raised three major points namely the alleged sham election, the decrease of legitimacy and the growing state autocracy.

I wish to reflect upon the nuances of the development of democracy in Cambodia through historical comparison and debate on the nature of autocracy.

Cambodia's democracy should be viewed as still in the elementary school level if compared to other advanced and established democracies as discussed by Soun Nimeth, which appeared in Myanmar Times. He argued that viewing it from the nation-building perspective, Cambodia is among the top scorers. Its political development comprises three elements in tandem namely peace, strong economic growth and a certain level of democratisation, which is currently a rare case in the region.

Calling the 2018 election a "sham election" is rather a misplaced argument. Out of the 8.3 million registered voters, 83 percent went to vote, which is relatively high if compared to other countries with a non-compulsory electoral system. For instance, the Philippines had 60.6 percent in 2013, India 58.19 percent in 2009, the US 41.59 percent in 2010 and 55.7 percent in 2016, and Japan 53.68 percent in 2017.

Nearly 1.5 million people voted in favour of another party than the Cambodian Peoples' Party (CPP). If we consider the exceptionally high number of invalid votes of over 500,000, we can consider that more than two million voters (out of some 7 million) expressed a preference different from that of the CPP. The number of invalid votes is also a good indication of freewill and secrecy of ballot.

Compared with previous elections, there are two major historical developments that should deserve attention.

Firstly, it is the first election that was held with zero incidence of violence. There was less tension as contending political parties did not instigate class division, racial hatred, xenophobia and ultra-nationalism.

Secondly, there was absence of post-electoral confusion. Previously, after every general election, Cambodia's government would be stalled by prolonged electoral deadlock, if not violence. Allegations on vote irregularities such as voters' list, name duplication, voter registration and management, etc. were common. Such confusion had been neutralised thanks to the digitalisation of voters' list, which was technically supported by Japan and the EU.

Arguing that the government's legitimacy is under threat and is drifting towards autocracy does not reflect reality on the ground.

The authors got mixed up between the concept of "approval rating" and "legitimacy." It is normal that the approval rating of President Trump, President Macron and Chancellor Merkel are decreasing but that does not mean that their legitimacy is under threat. Besides, legitimacy is not for outsiders to decide but for the Cambodian people.

Touching on arguments of autocracy, the high level of freedom of expression and freedom of association should be cited.

Media criticism is becoming a part of life for every Cambodian. Far from being autocratic, the government has been very sensitive towards public opinion.

The case in point is the violent incident involving land issues in Preah Sihanouk province. Four military police officers were disciplined after the probe and Preah Sihanouk provincial governor was publicly criticised by the Minister of Interior for the violent clashes with people. Recently, two deputy provincial governors were officially removed following the Supreme Consultative Council's meeting last week.

Another incident involved the sacking of Ratanakkiri Provincial Military Police Chief Kim Raksmeay after criticism on his handing out of \$500,000 to his children at a birthday party.

Online media freedom is reaching the level of frenzy. Social media users in Cambodia are free to say practically almost anything you want against the government's underperformance. Any foreigner who can read Khmer on Facebook would immediately understand that the language used in social media is clearly not an expression that can be used by people under suppression.

The two foreign affiliated radios, Radio Free Asia (RFA) and Voice of America (VOA) in Khmer, can be heard uninterrupted daily throughout the country along with their online webcast. The RFA and VOA are free to broadcast their daily tirades against the government, in the likes of animosity between President Trump and CNN. Their popular radio programme can be accessed anytime over the internet and also on Facebook. It is estimated that of the country's 29.2 million mobile phone connections, 52 per cent have 3G or 4G broadband coverage.

Cambodia continues to be an "NGO paradise" with more than 5,000 operating freely and their voices are impactful. If they are under pressure, they should have voiced support for the EU as it launched procedural action to withdraw Cambodia's trade preferences under the Everything But Arms scheme – an action the EU claims as necessary to save the opposition and civil society groups. The reality is that none of the civil society organisations operating in Cambodia have voiced their support for the EU's latest action. So is the EU barking up the wrong tree?

Labeling Cambodia as autocracy stems from the misperception of Cambodia's political development and the gross over-expectation of a performance beyond that of an elementary-level democracy. On top of that, geopolitical interests are also at play. These factors, indeed, exert pressure on the political, economic and strategic choices of Cambodia. However, it should be fair to say that such discussion should be separated from the context of the state's legitimacy.

# CAMBODIA: BETWEEN 'DEMOCRACY' AND 'DEVELOPMENT'

Opinion, Khmer Times, 28 March 2019

Cambodia has a vision to become an upper-middle-income country by 2030 and a high-income economy by 2050. Nonetheless, this vision has met many distractions both domestically and internationally. Many expectations and concerns have been expressed relating to Cambodia's future, as a vibrant democracy with a flourishing economy.

Despite being a fast-growing economy and great achiever of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Cambodia is still a young country in terms of demography and state building. These structural challenges cannot be taken for granted.

For instance, while health insurance is a matter of course for many countries, the public health insurance system in Cambodia is still in its nascent stage after its establishment in 2016 under the National Social Security Fund. This March, Cambodia just launched the construction of its first ever expressway linking Phnom Penh to Sihanoukville port. In Southeast Asia, Cambodia is probably the last country to have an expressway.

In terms of demography, almost half of the population had been wiped out due to wars, putting the country into an extreme shortage of capable middle management in the 40 to 50 age categories in both the private and public sector. This middle management is very critical for the current stage of Cambodia's development and lack of this is causing structural underperformance.

As Cambodia endeavours to realise its ambitious vision, the country is currently struggling between perceptions that either puts first "democracy" or "development". The perennial question is which should come first?

When the government keeps explaining the state of democracy and

human rights of the country, the opposition group keeps pushing foreign governments and parliaments for various forms of diplomatic and economic pressures and punishments.

When the country is fighting the war of perception on whether Cambodia is democratic enough, the country struggles physically to build its water treatment system in Preah Sihanouk province to prevent sewage flowing directly to the sea or to save Boeung Trabek sewage canal from overflowing with garbage right in the middle of the capital Phnom Penh.

When the EU is pressing Cambodia on the Everything-but-Arms (EBA) issue, the country is struggling to find alternatives to cope with drought that is causing shortages of water and electricity. When some countries assure Cambodia of non-interference, some are seeking reversal of the Supreme Court's decisions. Some people even made politicized comment to His Majesty the King, which is the country's symbol.

The dilemma and ironies that Cambodia is facing seems troubling.

As a matter of fact, Cambodia needs both democracy and development but striking a balance is extremely hard especially when external actors are involved. One argument suggests that in order to become a vibrant democracy, Cambodia needs to build a "safe democracy" with a "credible opposition". The definition of a "safe democracy" and "credible opposition" can vary but it needs to address both angles of the discussion.

"Safe democracy" should be a democracy that is safe for the opposition or groups of different persuasions and ideologies to express themselves without persecution. However, on the other hand it should also be a democracy that is safe from foreign interference and undemocratic regime change.

"Credible opposition" should mean an opposition that can provoke policy-based civilized dialogues in parliament instead of provoking street riots and vandalism. Real democracy is exercised in the National Assembly through policy consultation and debates, and not on the streets.

Extremist ideologies that incite class struggle, rebellion against state

authorities, anti-Chinese and anti-Vietnamese racism, a revision of private ownership, revisionist approaches on borders in contrary to the principles of *Uttis Possidetis* and international laws shall be strictly prohibited.

Amid such distraction, Cambodia needs to be focused more on its own vision of building a prosperous country that benefits all sectors of society. In the meantime, Cambodia also needs to continue improving social justice and inclusiveness, building a safe democracy with a credible opposition not because other countries say so but because its Constitution requires it.

Cambodia needs to be consistent in its principal positions and stay firm with regards to its independence and sovereignty on its democratic path. Building a mature democracy is a long-term process which requires participation from the people and all political parties.

International communities should continue to extend support to Cambodia's "longest peace in modern history", evolution towards peaceful and safe democracy and progress towards inclusive and sustainable development.

Regime change should not be an indicator of success or key performance index for any diplomatic missions. What Cambodia really needs now is to maintain high economic performance so that the middle class will become the key driving force in sustaining socio-economic development as well as strengthening democratic foundations. Social justice, the foundation of peace and stability, will need to be improved and judicial reform is a matter of urgency.



# A POPULIST 'TSUNAMI': IS IT DESTRUCTIVE OR CONSTRUCTIVE?

Opinion, Khmer Times, 12 February 2019

Populism is a form of politics where politicians garner their support by manipulating the public's nationalism and discontent over social weaknesses, social inequality and alleged exploitation by the establishments. Populist politicians label themselves as fighters against specific social ills, ones that often draw people's sympathy, ultra-nationalism and struggle against the existing establishments.

As the European Parliament election nears, the sweeping tide of populism is a matter of concern not only on its violent nature but also on its enduring policy-decision that has impact well beyond the EU.

The number of Europeans voting for populist parties in national votes has surged from 7 percent to more than 25 percent, according to the research by the Guardian.

The most symbolic faces of Europe's populism are probably Brexit in the UK and the Yellow Vest movement in France.

The ugly turn of the Brexit appeared when Jo Cox, the British Labour Party Member of Parliament, was killed as she was seen as a "passionate defender" of the European Union and immigration. The Brexit ordeal continues to haunt Europe in the undecided divorce since the referendum in 2016.

In France, for the past two months, the "yellow vests" or "gilets jaunes" movement has been protesting across the country and President Emmanuel Macron denounced "extreme violence" that came to "attack the Republic".

The impact of populism in Europe has even provoked barbed exchanges of comments among France and Italy when Di Maio, leader of Italy's Five Star Movement (M5S) sent his support to the Yellow Vests and accused

France as the main cause of Africa's impoverishment and that "European countries, France above all, have never stopped colonising dozens of African countries". France's Europe Minister Nathalie Loiseau responded, "Our intention is not to have a stupidity contest."

Populism is also attributed to Europe's deteriorating peace as argued by José Luengo-Cabrera based on the result from the 2018 Global Peace Index. He wrote that "although results from the 2018 GPI show that 20 of the 30 most peaceful countries in the world are European, they also show that the region's level of peace has been deteriorating for the last three years in a row.

"While many conflating factors are at play, the drivers behind Europe's deteriorating peace are those that populist parties have capitalized on (and stoked) for political ends. The recurrence of terrorist attacks across European cities and the unprecedented inflow of refugees have contributed to an accruing sense of social acrimony, one that has arguably bolstered the appeal of populist parties. Economic woes have also played a role, themselves exacerbated by growing insecurity."

The dangerous part of populism on the street is that no one can guarantee that the crowd of protesters do not include opportunists, anarchists and hard-core fascists.

The current trend in Europe is a form of agitated democracy where demand for pure social utopia, ultra-nationalism and racism are being expressed through a legitimate form of democratic expression. Populist democracy gives the impression that every individual can become the representative of the people. It demands pure socialist benefits within a capitalist system when society is losing balance between people's endless demands and state's resources.

The hierarchy of state institution is becoming flat when state governance is under scrutiny from any possible element of society. Non-elected NGOs or interest groups and lobbyists are acting like the legitimate representatives of specific constituency that is claimed to be either "the vulnerable" or "the majority". The meaning of being elected or "representative" is becoming obsolete with populism because anyone can just come to the street and

shout for their “legitimate demand”.

For the case of Japan, populism was a sort of social experiment that lasted from 2009 to 2012. It began when the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) ousted the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), who had ruled Japan almost uninterrupted for 54 years, from power in a massive landslide victory in 2009.

DPJ capitalized support from a populist manifesto that promised cash handouts, generous social schemes, free tollway, reduction of the US military presence and the fight against the alleged corrupt elite system built by the LDP that drove the economy to the bottom, building up more than 6 trillion yen (\$5.45 billion) in public debt and ruining the social security net. The LDP’s increased political scandals and corruption also contributed to their historical defeat.

The populist DPJ, whose members have little or no governance experience, later found themselves trapped in their own manifesto with promises – undeliverable as they could not manage resources from the already strained fiscal budget. Pressure mounted when the DPJ government had to deal with the powerful March 11, 2011 earthquake and tsunami which severely damaged the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, 150 miles northeast of Tokyo. This natural calamity posed further challenges to Japan on top of the battered economy, increased fiscal deficit and public debt, and increasingly difficult relations with the US.

From all the above, the commonality between Europe and Japan’s populism is that, although populism is the desirable form and means of election victory, it is not a form of politics that promotes social harmony, cohesiveness and sustainability.

Learning from the case of Japan, it is clear that social interruption or destruction of the establishments does not necessarily provide a direct answer to social problems especially when those who are holding the reins of power in state governance have no policy or political experience.

Another important difference from Europe is that Japanese political scenes do not involve street violence but rather tense parliamentary debates and

a consensus-building process.

No one knows when the social experiment of populism in Europe is going to end but clearly politicians need to find middle ground between the desire for electoral victory, the structural destruction of the establishments, and deteriorating peace and social harmony.

# CAMBODIA'S THREE WISHES FOR 2020

Opinion, Asia Times, 2 January 2020

As Cambodia faces domestic and international challenges, the country is pinning its hopes on three key issues for 2020, namely its position amid geopolitical competition, a new domestic political culture, and economic resilience.

## Geopolitical melting pot

For good or for bad, Cambodia has always been the darling, if not the trash bin, of geopolitical competition. Despite the fact that the last geopolitical proxy war was tragic, the temptation to use Cambodia as a geopolitical platform is re-emerging between the US and China as well as between China and Vietnam.

Cambodia should learn from Thailand in terms of how the latter has never been colonized but instead has always served as a platform for healthy competition that is beneficial for Thailand both economically and politically.

Historically, Cambodia can also take aspiration from its 16th- and 17th-century position when it was the center of commercial connectivity in the region that could balance harmonious co-existence among Chinese, Japanese and European traders. It was known that Phnom Penh in those days was the international and regional Mekong upstream port-of-trade and marketing emporium and a major supplier of deerskins that were shipped to Tokugawa Japan, in return for a variety of silver and international products.

Key to this point is how Cambodia can identify its contemporary “deerskins” that could help appease American, Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese and European partners altogether. How can Cambodia position itself as a geopolitical melting pot without another disaster to its own people like that in the period from the 1970s to the 1990s? How can Cambodia appease different players while firmly protecting its sovereignty, independence and

national interests?

Let's cite concrete examples. If the US perceives that Cambodia is hosting a Chinese military port in Ream Naval Base, Cambodia can possibly address such distrust by resuming military exercise with the US at that base at mutually agreeable terms. If the US perceives that Cambodia is hosting a Chinese airbase in Koh Kong province, Cambodia can probably outsource airport management to joint-venture companies that may dilute the Chinese monopoly while maintaining mutual economic benefits among all parties concerned.

If Vietnam perceives that Cambodia is supporting China on South China Sea issues, Cambodia can possibly encourage Vietnam to create a bilateral border mechanism with China to institutionalize constructive dialogues like that between Cambodia and Thailand.

Regarding the South China Sea, there is a growing trend to accept the oversimplification that any failure to reach a consensus over a joint communiqué or any other ASEAN statements in which SCS issues are involved are caused by Cambodia, which is perceived as a vassal state of China, despite the fact that negotiations among 10 actors with different interests and positions are highly complex.

Vietnam and the US should be able to understand by now that it can just never happen that Cambodia would support either China or Vietnam, which have overlapping claims with other member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Because it was an indisputable fact that when Cambodia had territorial issues with Thailand over the ownership of land surrounding the Preah Vihear Temple, neither China, the US, Vietnam, the Philippines or Japan could take any position to the contrary.

It is quite obvious that Cambodia's position remains the same, taking no side on territorial issues in the South China Sea, and urging states directly involved to deal with the issues among themselves peacefully without provocation, threat or coercion, demonization or victimization.

New domestic political culture

There exists an exceptional opportunity for Cambodia to reset its domestic political culture after the dissolution of an opposition that aligned itself with constant foreign interventions, extremism, racism and non-democratic regime change.

Cambodia should reinvent national consensus and national reconciliation among domestic political actors by building a new political culture that is based on dialogue, policy-based debate, and parliamentary participation. There is a strong hope for future politicians to learn to open their hearts and agree to disagree based on national interest and national consensus.

To that end, Cambodia can learn from Japan's mature democracy that is less antagonistic and agitating than some Western versions of democracy, which are now being undermined by populism, extreme nationalism and ideological polarization.

#### Economic resilience and diversified economy

Despite the threat from the European Union to withdraw preferential trade treatment under the Everything But Arms (EBA) scheme, Cambodia should be able to assert clearly, "No EBA, no problem."

Looking back to the past, one should not underestimate Cambodia's resilience. Cambodia was able to withstand the 12-year economic embargo by many nations starting from 1979 when the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime was toppled with support from Vietnamese forces. It also withstood the economic crisis in 2008 following the sudden massive withdrawal of Korean investors due to the global financial crisis. Cambodia also manifested its resilience when Thailand decided to crack down on illegal laborers in 2014, and eventually ousted nearly 200,000 jobless Cambodians.

The current macro-economic stability even provides sober ground to believe in Cambodia's resilience as compared with the previous economic shocks. For instance, the government collected more than US\$4.5 billion in revenue from customs and taxation during the first nine months of 2019, with tax collection exceeding the target by \$800 million. Moreover, the government has also reserved around \$3 billion to cope with any

possible shock.

Apart from preventive measures against external economic shocks, domestically, there is hope that Cambodia will be able to encourage healthy and diversified economic competition among domestic actors. For instance, the government can encourage tycoons to invest in new industries or factories that create jobs instead of heavily investing in sectors that do not diversify the economic base or create sufficient jobs for the young workforce.



# CAMBODIA'S STATE OF EMERGENCY LAW IN CONTEXT

Opinion, Asia Times, 23 April 2020

Should the government deem it necessary to impose emergency measures to fight Covid-19, they will adhere to international standards

The World Health Organization has officially declared the Covid-19 outbreak a pandemic and has called on all countries to continue efforts that have been effective in limiting the number of infections and slowing the spread of the virus. Countries around the world have proclaimed national emergencies, and many have imposed quarantines, lockdowns and school and business closures. More than a third of the planet's population is under some form of restriction.

In the US, a national emergency was declared on March 13 and the National Guard was deployed to aid California, Washington state and New York. Almost all US states have declared states of emergency to fight the coronavirus.

Countries across Europe have significantly curbed public life in order to halt the spread of Covid-19. In Spain, police have been using violence to enforce strict restrictions on movement, and hundreds have been arrested or fined for defying the measures.

As British lawyer Nicholas Clapham pointed out when explaining the UK's emergency legislation, "The new legislation provides parliamentary authority for the government to act in ways that might otherwise be considered unlawful or draconian. Like much emergency legislation, it is an attempt to balance liberty and necessity."

Cambodia is a newcomer in terms of utilizing emergency law. While such proclamations are permissible under a 1999 constitutional amendment, Article 22, a new law to govern such an implementation was deemed necessary. A draft law to that effect now has passed through the National

Assembly and the Senate.

Cambodia's draft Law on the Management of the Nation in State of Emergency (LMNSE) has 12 articles under five chapters.

Article 1 provides for the purpose of the law, which aims to govern the nation under a state of emergency in order to safeguard national security and public order, to protect citizens' lives and public health, and to protect properties and environment.

According to Article 3, such a state of emergency shall be proclaimed by the king after requests from the prime minister, president of the National Assembly and president of the Senate. The duration shall not exceed three months. While it can be extended, it can also be terminated earlier.

Article 4 provides that conditions for proclamation of a state of emergency shall involve dangers caused by war or foreign invasion, public health emergencies caused by pandemics, tumultuous chaos in national security and public order, and severe disasters that threaten the nation as a whole.

Article 5 stipulates specifically restrictive measures that can be taken by the government. These include prohibition of or restrictions on traveling, freedom of assembly and work; quarantine; mobilization and evacuation; governing of properties and services; price management; closures of facilities; information monitoring; and other measures deemed necessary to respond to emergencies. These measures can be applied nationwide or over a specific geographical scope.

It is mandatory that the government shall regularly report to the National Assembly and the Senate about the imposed measures (Article 6).

Obstruction to the execution of emergency measures can result in fines from 2 million to 10 million riels (about US\$500 to \$2,500) and/or carry a jail term from one to 10 years according to the severity of the crimes (Article 7). Non-compliances carry lighter punishment (Article 8) while heavier punishment is reserved for crimes committed by legal persons (Article 9).

The conduct of state authorities is also governed by this law. Officials who conduct arbitrary abuse of power in contravention to the purpose of this law shall be punished under the laws of Cambodia (Article 10).

Measures derogating public liberty are permissible under international human-rights instruments. Article 4 (1) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) provides that: “In time of public emergency which threatens the life of the nation and the existence of which is officially proclaimed, the States Parties to the present Covenant may take measures derogating from their obligations under the present Covenant....”

However, the freedom of action of states is not without limitation. According to a document titled “The Administration of Justice During States of Emergency” published by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, states are limited by the principles of exceptional threat, official proclamation, non-derogability of certain rights, strict necessity, compatibility with other international legal obligations, non-discrimination, and international notification. Relevant measures must be tailored to the “exigencies of the situation” in terms of their territorial application, their material content and their duration.

All rights that can be derogated from are listed in the ICCPR. Non-derogable rights must be fully protected in such emergency situations. Non-derogable rights include the right to life; the right to freedom from torture, cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment; the right to freedom from slavery; the right not to be imprisoned on the ground of inability to fulfill a contractual obligation; the right not to be subjected to retroactive legislation (ex post facto laws); the right to recognition as a person before the law; the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; and the right not to be subjected to the death penalty.

Through the above-mentioned criteria, it is observed that Cambodia’s draft law has adhered to the principles set forth by international human-rights standards. As well, compared with the existing emergency actions by some countries, it is fair to say that Cambodia’s draft law is still nascent, rudimentary and soft.

The government has also explicitly declared that considering the current Covid-19 situation, there is a slim chance that Cambodia will invoke a state of emergency. So far, Cambodia has yet to implement any lockdown. As such, concerns over the possibility of serious derogations by Cambodia against international norms and practices seem far-fetched.

# HUN SEN: PEACE IN HIS OWN WORDS

Opinion, Khmer Times, 1 February 2022

A man that is known far too much for his harsh words but very less on his dedication to peace. His harshness is otherwise a reflection of his unyielding dedication to peace that he did not enjoy during his youth. It was the lost three decades for Cambodian nation as a whole, not just for himself.

He has lived in a country that had never known a united rule and government, more often than not a country that was marred with civil strife with a very few occasion of known uninterrupted peace for less than ten or twenty years.

“Cham Srok San Tran”, or “to wait for a peaceful homeland” was the word that Cambodian seniors like to say so much but most of them already lost their lives before they saw this unachievable dream of Cambodian people realised.

“A small country like Cambodia which was broken into more than two ruling factions was a bitter experience. We had from the French colonial era many Cambodian factions colouring themselves blue, red, pink, white, etc. In between 1970 to 1975, Cambodia was under two factions and there was genocide between 1975 and 1979. From 1979 to 1993, Cambodia was under four ruling factions and again under two factions between 1993 and 1998.” (27 December 2006)

“As we now have peace that enables in infrastructural developments, we should not let it slip off our hands. Take for instance, these areas along the mountains of Kravanh and Aoral, previous administrations – including those of the French, the Japanese and then the French again – had so much difficulties to impose their administrative control upon. This area was also former Khmer Rouge commanding headquarters where former Khmer Rouge leaders like Khieu Samphan, Nuon Chea hid themselves. If you read the personal history of Khieu Samphan, you will learn that he fled to the forest that links Kompong Speu, Pursath and Koh Kong

altogether....That is why I always remind everyone that in the Cambodian history, it was rare that Cambodia was one united country under one rule, one King, one Constitution, Royal Government and army. It has been one of the most difficult tasks to formulate and put into realistic practice of the win-win policy. Though we now have more than one political party, we have only one King, Constitution, National Assembly, Royal Government, army and one united country." (28 January 2013)

Peace is like oxygen that we tend to take for granted. You never know that it is important unless you fall in the situation that requires assistance from oxygen machine.

But that can be too late already. And we have seen a lot of countries in the world that are choked with bloodshed because their political parties are breathing the air of antagonism, mutual elimination and power struggles, at the expense national peace.

For Hun Sen, war cannot end war.

"It has been my philosophy always that peace can never be achieved by making war. All conflicts, whether they are international or internal, must be resolved by peaceful means. I started military service since I was 18 years old. I have so much experiences and beliefs that gunpoint is not a way to make peace. This brought me in fact to overcome all sorts of hindrances and difficulties to conduct peace negotiation that in the end led to national reconciliation and peace throughout the country." (15 February 2011)

Standing on this firm belief, he had risked his life to go to the Khmer Rouge's stronghold to win trust from the rebel's ranks and files as he tried to convince them to integrate into Cambodian society. Trust is the most important factor in executing the high-risk policy among factions that had fought each other for decades.

"My mother and my aunt, both of whom have passed away already, asked me in closed door why I decided to go to the enemy region. I told them that if the worst happened, only I and perhaps a hundred other people going with me would die but if the worse did not happen, I would have

the whole country back in peace. Let's imagine if I did not go to Malai, Phnom Proeuk, Kamrieng and Samlot, would those people have trust in the win-win policy." (21 January 2008)

Armed groups' affiliation with political groups is one of the core elements of structural violence in Cambodia because each political group can become rebel anytime or a force for coup d'état whenever their political group deems that the conditions or power sharing status are less beneficial.

Looking at long history of fighting within Cambodian modern history, Hun Sen wanted to eliminate the structure of violence by avoiding revenge and pushing for "culture of dialogue" that he has been practicing all along from peace negotiation with the then Prince Norodom Sihanouk in the late 1980s, to the Win-Win Policy with the Khmer Rouge and up to the present when he tries to conduct dialogue with different political parties or groups.

The culture of revenge is known in a Khmer saying that goes, "teuk leung trey si sromoach, teuk hoach sromoach si trey" meaning that when the water floods, the fish will eat the ants and when the water runs dry the ants will eat the fish.

"By late 1998 we have been reduced to two armed groups – the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces and the Khmer Rouge, whose control had been the areas along the Thai-Cambodian borders and certain spots. The win-win policy has brought about an end to secessionism and division of controls while eradicating all internal boundaries... Full integration has been achieved and also the game of "the fish eat the ants when water rises and the ants do vice versa when the water recedes" has ended. We have brought our country to a state of peace and peaceful culture in the last four years. What is "the fish eat the ants when water rises and the ants do vice versa when the water recedes?" This is a policy of taking revenge without end that had happened in the past. When we won, we kill our opponents and when our opponent won, we stood to be killed. It was a true story in the past. Take for instance in 1970 the Lon Nol group eradicated those followers and supporters of Samdech Preah Sihanouk and when Pol Pot came to power, both supporters of Samdech Preah Sihanouk and Lon Nol had been killed... The war saw no ends. We have

put an end to this policy and that is why we dare have our armed forces demobilised and tens of thousands firearms destroyed. Not only that we destroyed old weapons, but we also do not buy new ones as well.” (2 September 2002)

After the success in implementing the Win-Win Policy, Hun Sen clearly understands the importance of development to support durability of peace. On the military aspect, the Cambodian government has embarked on military demobilisation, destroying of weapons, and demining. On the infrastructure aspect, roads, bridges, water canals, schools and hospitals have been built in the former Khmer Rouge area to ensure connectivity, enhance poverty reduction and equal access to fundamental needs and economic opportunity for all Khmer citizens without discrimination.

By 2010, Cambodian government has demobilised some 17,000 soldiers.

He ironically said that “...in time of war asking someone for money for war purpose is easier than seeking someone’s help in time of peace in order to demobilise soldiers.” (21 June 2010)

By 2006, the government had demolished about 200,000 rifles. From 1993 to 2002, the engineering forces has liberated 4,288,913 ha from mines. Among those uncovered, 129,657 were anti-human landmines, 7,894 were anti-tanks, and 23,476 UXO.

Strong emphasis on the building of schools nationwide also signified Hun Sen’s long-term vision for Cambodia’s future as his generation was deprived of education opportunity because of the civil wars. Massive road construction filled up his political calendar as he has been presiding over the inaugurations and to revisit the regions that once were the bloody battlefields between Khmer and Khmer.

“Implementing the win-win policy is making no one a winner or a loser. After each victory in the battlefield, what to gain from fighting were all sort of rifles but in this moment the gain that we all are collecting is the Peace Bridge and other bailey bridges, school buildings, hospitals, canals and roads.” (20 May 2003)



“To achieve peace is not yet complete. Peace and development must go hand in hand. We would not be able to maintain peace if we do not develop. It is with that perception that I have declared on behalf of the Cambodian People’s Party that I will transform former battlefields into development zones and markets. In reality, starting in Banteay Meanchey province all the way to Kamrieng, Phnom Proek, Sampeo Loun and Pailin, cassavas have been planted in large area and we had to negotiate with the Thai authority recently to allow trade to proceed in a timely manner. So you see, our people no longer are displaced on their own soil but station and settle down with production and trade activities, though road access and school for children are still issues to be resolved.” (9 April 2012).

# CAMBODIA'S WIN-WIN POLICY AND INTERNATIONAL PEACE THEORIES

Opinion, Khmer Times, 9 February 2022

## ***1. Dichotomy of debate: international intervention or endogenous initiative?***

It takes only a short time to start a war but ending it and building peace requires generations. Cambodia's three decades of civil war had sowed distrust and a vicious cycle of structural violence on top of the mutually annihilating behaviour and social destruction. As a result, the whole society had lost every chance of development, as poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition, and the deprivation of basic human rights became the norms.

The Win-Win Policy refers to the national reconciliation policy crafted and implemented by Prime Minister Hun Sen from 1996 to 1998 to end the more than three decades of civil war through dismantling the Khmer Rouge's political organisation and integrating them into the social, economic, and political life of the Cambodian state.

Not much research has been done on this specific topic due to international perception that peace was fully restored after the 1993 United Nations-brokered elections. However, this perception has gradually changed. More scholars and media communities have started to acknowledge that the 1993 election was merely one building block of the long process of peace-building and was not a definitive point of peace attainment.

When discussing Cambodia's peace, one should not adopt a mutually-denial manner and focus only on who should take the monopoly of credits for Cambodia's peace, the international community or the Cambodian government. Discussion on Cambodia's peace-building tends to adopt two opposite extremes, the "overemphasis on external intervention" and the "nationalistic monopoly of peace." The former group thinks that the international community should be more assertive in Cambodia's peace process and should not heed to political compromise with the Hun Sen

government. They believe that the international community has an obligation to bring peace to Cambodian people. However, they tend to ignore the limited time and resources that the international community could commit.

The overemphasis on foreign intervention draws criticisms of an imperialist or colonial mindset in which the roles of local actors are not fully appreciated. Consequently, the “nationalistic monopoly of peace” paradigm has emerged to counterbalance the “overemphasis on external intervention” paradigm to give credits to local actors and initiatives. Indeed, there were historical facts showing achievements by the local actors. Unfortunately, they were not fully appreciated by some circles of the international community. The Cambodian government’s narrative on the Khmer-initiated Win-Win Policy is thus viewed as a propaganda attempting to promote local monopolisation of Cambodia’s attainment of peace. However, the “nationalistic monopoly of peace” paradigm has its firm ground. As war lingered on, monopolisation of the peace process by local stakeholders increased because international intervention could not endure the lengthy peace-building process that could take decades. Aid fatigue and human resource exhaustion are the limit of international intervention.

Nevertheless, it is not right to suggest that total peace can be achieved without external involvement because if international actors still provide military, diplomatic, and political support or even media support to rebel groups, secessionist groups, or groups that seek the violent overthrow of the government, peace created by local stakeholders cannot withstand. Thus, on top of the domestic stakeholders’ commitment to peacebuilding, durable peace requires direct and indirect support from the international community for state legitimacy.

## **2. Peace Theories**

There are a lot of peace theories. Among other, one of the most prominent ones was proposed by Johan Galtung, the so-called “positive” and “negative” peace. Peace does not merely mean the total absence of any conflict. It means the absence of violence in all forms and a conflict unfolding constructively. This is called “positive peace” that also indicates

the simultaneous presence of many desirable dimensions of mind and society, such as harmony, justice, equity, sustainable development, etc.

Another important theory was on “reconciliation” proposed by Louis Kriesberg. He identifies four dimensions of reconciliation essential for conflict transformation and peacebuilding in post-war societies, which are shared truth, justice, regard, and security.

“Truth” is important as societies divided after mass crime, tend to deny what members of the other side have experienced and thus need to openly recognise that they have different views of reality. They might develop a shared truth at a higher level, supported by official investigations, judicial proceedings, and literary and mass media reporting to acknowledge the abuses that had occurred.

“Justice” is needed, as those who have suffered oppression or atrocities seek redress, which may take the form of restitution or compensation, but also the punishment of those who committed injustices. Justice may furthermore be exhibited in politics offering protection against future harm and discrimination.

“Expression of regard” by members of each community towards one another entails recognising the humanity of the others and their human rights.

“Security”, in the sense of personal or collective safety and well-being, is a constitutive part of reconciliation. Security exists as the adversaries feel a minimum of trust and have reason to believe they can look forward to living together without one side threatening the other.

### ***3. Lessons from Cambodia’s Peacebuilding Experiences***

*“War cannot end war”*

Based on Hun Sen’s Win-Win Policy, the most important lesson that can be drawn from Cambodia’s experience is that war cannot end war. Only peaceful negotiation, mutual understanding, and at times, mutual compromise, and concession can lead to peace because no single party can

afford to be seen as losing. Because sometimes losing can be synonymous to death in warring societies.

### *The Importance of "Security" and "Regard"*

Peace negotiators need to identify the "security" dimension within the "reconciliation" process, which can help address the concerns of interlocuters.

Integrating an armed faction into a government's armed forces to end a civil war is not easy, as the risk is too high for both sides. The guarantee of survival and trust towards such a guarantee is a must. After gaining experience from the protracted wars, Hun Sen understood clearly that "security" was vitally important for each warring faction before any peace agreement could be achieved.

As such, he devised basic conditions of the Win-Win Policy based on three core elements, namely the guarantee of life, the guarantee of employment and status, and the guarantee of personal properties. Such conditions bode well with some elements of the Khmer Rouge although trust was a key factor in implementing each step of the Win-Win Policy.

Restoring peace is important but making it durable is also equally important. One of the four dimensions of reconciliation, according to Kriesberg, is the "expression of regard" by members of one community towards another that entails recognising the humanity of the other and their human rights, including political rights and freedom.

Liberal multi-party democracy is considered the cornerstone for such "regard" that supports the "positive peace" based on ballots, not bullets. This dimension was included in the long-term development and the post-Win-Win Policy peacebuilding process. Citizens in Anlong Veng, the Khmer Rouge's last stronghold, also exercised their rights in the national elections in July 1998. Prime Minister Hun Sen clearly understands multi-party electoral democracy and has a firm commitment towards upholding it, along with the respect for human rights and freedom because, from his own experience, the suppression would lead to armed struggles and wars.

Violence during elections has gradually disappeared from the Cambodian political scene. This is a fact in Cambodian political history showing the maturity of its political culture, as it is moving toward “positive peace”. The elections in 1998 did not have the picture of automatic rifles wielded in the streets like when UNTAC organised it in 1993. Those who looked after security stayed outside the stations and carried no weapons. All votes were counted right at the stations, different from the UNTAC administered elections in 1993 when ballots were brought to where they called “safe havens” to be counted.

### *Elimination of Structural Violence*

The possession of armed forces by various political groups and factions is one critical factor for prolonged civil war or structural violence in Cambodia. With armed organizations, political groups can become rebel anytime or a force for coup d’etat whenever their political group deems that the conditions or power sharing status are less beneficial. After the completion of the 1998 integration through the Win-Win Policy, Cambodia finally achieved in eliminating this major cause of structural violence and the whole armed factions fall under the command of a single national army. This is unprecedented in Cambodian modern history.

Hun Sen wanted to eliminate the structure of violence by avoiding revenge and pushing for “culture of dialogue” that he has been practicing all along from peace negotiation with the then Prince Norodom Sihanouk in the late 1980s, to the Win-Win Policy with the Khmer Rouge and up to the present when he tries to conduct dialogue with different political parties or groups.

### *Identifying key negotiators is key for peace talks*

Having competent and influential negotiators is also crucial. The less the number, the less likelihood of division. Cambodia is fortunate in this account, as it is relatively homogenous, and the key negotiators were easy to be identified, such as the former King Norodom Sihanouk and Prime Minister Hun Sen.

Nevertheless, in reality, the domination of a few actors, like the case

of Hun Sen, is rare because all warring factions often try to achieve a balance of power for their safety. The power balance perpetuate wars through “structural violence”, as each side does not want to lose. Even Hun Sen himself had faced differing opinions and dissenting actors within the government. While peaceful negotiation is the preferable way to proceed, it cannot neglect the bargaining power resulting from military campaigns and military strength, administrative and territorial occupation rate, and public support.

*“There can be no sustainable development without peace and no peace without sustainable development”*

Finally, conducive environment that can support the sustainability of peace is paramount. Peace and sustainable development are mutually reinforcing. Peace cannot be sustained if there are poverty, hunger, inequality, unemployment, injustice, poor public services, and weak governance.

Peace cannot be sustained without quality education, healthcare, proper and equal access to social security, decent work, and economic growth.

Such a long list of requirements means that peace is extremely difficult to build and sustain. Therefore, maintaining the existing peace should be the top priority of every government, if not the whole world.

# TRAVELING STYLE OF SENIOR KHMER STATESMAN HUN SEN

Opinion, Khmer Times, 19 December 2022

As a prime minister, Hun Sen has travelled a lot both domestically and internationally.

Wherever he goes, he has a popularity like a “Rockstar” that triggers love, support and envy, the charismatic leader who gathers crowd and attention. The frequency and intensity of his travelling is beyond compare and it is very hard to find any international leaders, young or senior, that can travel as much as he does.

This is not leisure traveling. These are travels that are full of agenda and energy to create an impact, some even creates history. The traveling that requires heavy physical and mental stamina. The word “healthy” alone may not be sufficient to describe the capability to carry out these heavy duties, the like of Hun Sen’s style of work and travel.

There are many examples of his intensive travel and working style.

Just before the 40th and 41st ASEAN Summits and Related Summits, Hun Sen made a tour to northwestern provinces of Cambodia in late October to meet with Cambodian flood victims.

On 21 and 22 October, he met with 1,853 families and 3,200 families in two separate occasions in Siem Reap province. On 23 October, he met with more than 5,000 families in Banteay Meanchey province.

On 24 October, he met with 11,528 families in Battambang province. On 25 October, he met with 5,145 families in Pursat province. On 26 October, he met with 3,460 families in Kampong Chhnang province. On 29 October, he visited Kampong Thom province and met with 6,844 families. On 30 October, he met with 6,112 families in Prey Veng province.



This is an example of his extremely hectic schedule. And that did not include the schedule that he set for meetings with local authorities and armed forces after meetings with the flood victims.

At the meetings, he used sacks of rice as a table to put his microphone as he delivered his trademark long speeches to the people, followed by the distribution of rice seeds, medicines and emergency food supply to those victims.

He recalled the time back on 14 January 1985 when the Kampuchea People's Representative Assembly under the People's Republic of Kampuchea voted for him as prime minister, after drought and flood in 1984.

"God is testing my capability as prime minister", he said as he was elected to lead the country that was emerging from war and genocide, and were facing natural disaster and calamity.

From that moment onward, he has set an important principle that he holds dearly until today that he will not allow people to die of hunger without the knowledge of and solution from the government.

He remembered the time when he saw his father who dived under the boat to view his own paddy field that was totally destroyed by the flood at Toul Sambour, Kampong Cham province. He remembered his father's tears and how his family fell into debt as they needed money to buy rice seed to renew the plantation.

To describe that hardship, he even used to compose a song called "chivit neak chamkar, veasnar neak srea" meaning "life of the peasants and destiny of rice farmers". He feels the pain of the people as he relates them with that of his own.

After that intensive travel, he chaired the 40th and 41st ASEAN Summits and Related Summits. He had to chair/co-chair 12 Summits in the course of 4 days and conducted many other bilateral meetings.

He said he had to work for 15 hours a day during the Summit that he needed to stay at Sokha Hotel, the venue of the summits to reduce time

of traveling. After the ASEAN Summit and the receiving of the State Visit of the Sultan of Brunei, he flew directly to Bali for the G-20 Summit although he had to return the next day as he was infected with Covid-19 probably due to his lowering of immunity following the heavy working schedule he had a week before.

In his recent visit to Europe for the ASEAN-EU Commemorative Summit on 14 December, he had his three days stay full of programs, in which he had to fly back and forth between Brussels and Paris.

He arrived in Brussels on 12 December morning; he met with more than 1,000 Cambodian fans and supporters, and then flew to Paris arriving at 1:00AM. He conducted one full day, or even full night working visit in France and flew back to Brussels on 13 December, again at 1:00AM to prepare for the ASEAN-EU Summit on 14 December in which he had to co-chair with his European counterpart.

In Europe, he carried the agenda of peace, cooperation and multilateralism. The peacemaker in his own country, now he is trying to spread the message of peace beyond the continent. His work is a conviction that is much stronger than the simple desire to win popularity or election.

His conviction is much stronger than the desire to win people's hearts, because once you are dependent on others' encouragement, there is a limit that may stuck you from moving forward. That desire and conviction must be internally generated.

The desire for humanity, and the great attachment to the people. The desire that is based on principles and compassion. This is akin to Khmer ancient leadership's philosophy, "the pain of the people is the pain of the leader".

It is hard to find Cambodian leaders who can spread political message of peace across the globe like he does. His horizon of diplomacy is large, from English speaking to French speaking world, the larger world that seems to be in far distance from Cambodia.

But with Hun Sen, Cambodia was put on the spot light for global peace

diplomacy. French President Macron held his hand like husband and wife, and they hugged each other like a long-lost friend after the official dinner prepared in his honor at the Élysée Palace.

Both leaders issued a common statement entitled “Ukraine: Appeal from France and Cambodia” after the Paris Conference for Solidarity with Ukrainian People held on 13 December. The Khmer message appeared on French president’s official Facebook page calling for peace and end of suffering from war waged by Russia in Ukraine.

Hun Sen walked through the icy cold winter on the half-frozen red carpet, and the midnight moon can be seen from the airplane window above European sky as he flew from Paris to Brussels.

His passion and dedication are well received by the people, not just of his own but also by European leaders, and they responded to him back with similar tone of peace and affection.

His traveling style leaves many footprints. The traveling style that leaves legacies for the next generation to carry forward, and to hold to their hearts the pride of Cambodia, a small nation with a big heart. The footprints that mark many significant moments of history that contribute to peace, stability and prosperity; domestic, regional and global.

# TIME TO ACCEPT CAMBODIA AS IT IS

Opinion, Khmer Times, 23 January 2023

In his memoir, Lee Kuan Yew remarked that Cambodia's "present leaders," meaning Hun Sen, "are the product of bitter, relentless struggles in which opponents were either eliminated or neutralized. They are utterly merciless and ruthless, without humane feelings."

This is the general view of foreign observers over Cambodian leaders. But was it a correct view about Cambodia and Cambodian leaders?

Back then, Singapore was not alone in despising Cambodian leaders whom they treated as Vietnam's puppet. Many countries put sanction on Cambodia and the remaining few million Cambodian survivors. Many countries provided legitimacy and weapons to, and conducted trade with the Khmer Rouge. The anti-Vietnam and anti-communism sentiment had justified those countries' being as Khmer Rouge sympathizers.

For now, we have the benefit of re-evaluating history in hindsight.

For now, we could understand that being a Khmer Rouge sympathizer was a mistake against the surviving Cambodian people.

This was the past mistake of foreign observers, and they should learn from that mistake by trying to understand what Cambodian leaders think. They have to remove their own stubborn and rigid ideological and geopolitical frames if they want to understand better about Cambodian leaders.

Was Hun Sen really Vietnam's puppet? Was Hun Sen a communist dictator?

By reviewing Prime Minister Hun Sen's five-hour testimony in the National Assembly on the border issues between Cambodia and Vietnam on 9 August 2012, and his 64-page written statement dated 8 September 2015, one would have wondered why would Vietnam spend more than 40 years to negotiate border issues with its puppet?

If one can read Prime Minister Hun Sen's book entitled, "10 Years of Cambodia's March: 1979-1989", one can re-evaluate what was the situation and challenges that Cambodian leaders were facing, and evaluate their leadership's approaches and perspectives.

From the book, one can observe that Hun Sen is not an ideologue. He is a pragmatist that cares the most for the nation's survival and people's livelihood. He adopted market economy and partial privatization well before Vietnam did. He initiated peace negotiation with the then-Prince Norodom Sihanouk despite internal opposition within his party. He invited the United Nations to broker Cambodian peace and to station in Cambodia despite the fear of losing sovereignty and foreign domination. He was not a dictator as he was trying to mobilize consensus and support from within his party since the beginning. His approach is still the same. He never made a decision in silo, with a complete lack of information or consultation.

All of these historical decisions defined the quality and capability of Cambodian leaders, and those surrounding them.

These historical books and events proved that many foreign leaders made a mistake towards Cambodia because they misunderstood and underestimated Hun Sen and his government.

Foreign observers should treat Cambodia as a nation, and they should not approach Cambodia through the perspective as parental advice.

"I am from advanced, wealthy and developed countries and therefore Cambodia should listen to me."

This type of attitude is equivalent to the unconscious assumption that Cambodian leaders are illogical, irrational, selfish, unknowledgeable, savage, and don't know how to run the country.

The fact that Cambodia has changed from war to peace, and from peace to prosperity is mostly stemmed from endogenous Cambodian wisdom that should be fairly re-evaluated. It was a wisdom crystalized from 40 years of struggles, survivals and thirst for development and catch-up.

Prime Minister Hun Sen is not a lonely man, nor a totalitarian who controls everything all by himself. The ruling elites are united by his leadership, that is the fact.

There are many brains and brawn to support peace and development over the course of 40 years. Looking at a single man, putting all the blames in him for all social ills, that kind of evaluation is unfair, unjust, inconsiderate and unreasonable.

Inconsiderate towards a man, inconsiderate towards a nation.

To look at Cambodian government is to evaluate the collective wisdom and knowledge of Cambodian leadership in sustaining the fragile society for over 40 years. Cambodia does not walk back; it only moves forward.

To understand Hun Sen and Cambodia, observers should put themselves in the shoes of Cambodian leaders. How would they run the country when it was just emerging from war, violence was rampant, infrastructure collapsed, human capital eliminated, country's economy suffocated by sanctions? Why is there necessity to bear criticism, sanction or condemnation if you would have other better choices? What are the reasons and challenges that Cambodian leaders have been facing in making difficult decisions in terms of national security, nation building and national development?

Cambodian leadership, not only Prime Minister Hun Sen, had to adopt a tough approach to sustain the country, to protect peace and to keep the country in one piece.

If one reads Lee Kuan Yew's memoirs, one can understand that Lee Kuan Yew too had to take harsh approach to suppress the spread of communism in his country. In those times, no one talks about human rights yet; people only talked about anti-communism.

The commonality between Hun Sen and Lee Kuan Yew is the intolerance against social instabilities and unrest. They both shared an extremely strong instinct for nation survival. The instinct that was developed from the feeling of an abandoned and forgotten nation.

Different from Lee Kuan Yew, as he was coming out from war, Hun Sen even has an absolute intolerance against those who may destabilize the hard-earned peace for his fragile nation.

Surely, Lee Kuan Yew does not want to be compared with Hun Sen and nor does Hun Sen want to be compared with Lee Kuan Yew.

But observation on development and evolution of a country should look beyond a single man, single word, and single deed.

Ones should look at the results in the long-term perspectives to make proper evaluation and judgment.

Does Cambodia have more violence and bloodshed or less? Does Cambodia have less instability or reverse? Does Cambodia have more development or less? Does Cambodia stop moving towards democracy and give up its course? Is the abuse of power by powerful individuals increasing or decreasing?

In answering the above questions, no one can say that Cambodia is going backward, or giving up its course in developing toward a modern democracy with strong development.

Even for the next generations of Cambodians, they should learn to appreciate the courage and sacrifice of senior leaders in maintaining peace and security for the country.

To keep the country safe, to protect the society of the whole, they have sacrificed their reputation, becoming mean and harsh sometimes. They don't care how much would the international society condemn or sanction them. They only care that Cambodia be in peace, and Cambodian people and the next generations live a better life than their generation.

They don't need foreign approval, or recognition. They don't fear foreign sanctions because they used to eat rice-less porridge already under the Khmer Rouge.

This is the level of courage and determination that Cambodian senior

leaders have in firmly protecting Cambodian peace at all cost.

This is the pure sense of sovereignty and independence.

They are the good leaders by results. Not by rhetoric, not by looking good towards foreign observers, not by speaking the language that is music to the ears of foreign observers, not by making blank and destructive promises for electoral campaign.

Leadership needs to prove results for the people, and they should have the courage to brave all criticism against their decisions even if sometimes the results cannot be evaluated in tangible forms in the immediate term.

Peace is intangible and people tend to appreciate its priceless value only when it is already lost.

What Cambodia wants and needs is peace at all cost.

And it is time to engage and accept Cambodia as it is.



# HOW TO BETTER UNDERSTAND CAMBODIA

Opinion, Khmer Times, 25 January 2023

There are two ways to better understand a country and its people.

One way is to give up all prejudice and try to approach local people with naked eyes.

Another is to seek to understand the original thoughts, cultures and identities of local people.

Now let us discuss about the first way, the importance of seeing local people with naked eyes without predetermined frames of prejudice.

The approach towards Cambodia and Cambodian people should be in a learning attitude, trying to understand without prejudice and predetermined judgment.

For example, for Cambodian people, when asked what they think about Japanese, they often can accept Japanese as they are, not as the imperialist invaders based on historical and cultural prejudice even if Cambodian people like to watch Khmer-dubbed Chinese movies, Korean movies and American movies that portray Japanese as devil imperialists.

They just accept Japanese people as Japanese, as friends, as guests, as pure human being without any prejudgment.

Cambodian people know that there are also some rude and arrogant American, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. But they still approach those foreigners without discrimination.

Cambodian people rarely view Westerners in the historical frames, such as the past colonists, the past bombers over our grandparents, the past “sanctioners” over our parents, or as the past Khmer Rouge sympathizers.

Generally, we don’t have vengeful feeling against foreigners.

Such kind of approach by Cambodian people should be reciprocated by foreigners.

Now let us discuss about the second way, the importance of digging deeper by getting to know the original thoughts and ways of life of local people.

Let us compare two versions of a movie entitled "47 Ronin", one originally made by Japanese Director Kenji Mizoguchi in 1941 and another one was a Hollywood movie starred Keanu Reeves in 2013.

The story tells of a group of samurai who were left without a leader after their Lord Asano Naganori was compelled to perform seppuku (ritual suicide) for assaulting a powerful court official named Kira Yoshinaka. After waiting and planning for a year, the Ronin (masterless Samurai) avenged their master's honor by killing Kira, knowing full well that the authorities would not tolerate their revenge and would put them to death.

Hollywood version was a twisted version, more like a fantasy.

Watching Hollywood version, you would have the "wow" effects and cinematographic visual excitement but you fail to appreciate the depth of words, Samurai's philosophy, culture, and ethic.

In Japanese version, there was no fantasy, no real protagonist, but in Hollywood version, there is a protagonist, and he is an outsider, a foreigner, a non-Samurai Keanu Reeves.

This is the Hollywood's approach in appreciating Japanese culture, but whether you understand the real context of Japanese thinking, that is another story.

To really understand Japanese values from the movie, you have to try to watch the non-fantasy version that is based on the viewpoints of local people.

Some foreigners may be only interested in Geisha and Ninja, and many people still bear the prejudice that Japanese women are the best wives

in the world.

But that is not the beauty and reality of Japan.

It might be just a fraction of external appearance that outsiders have consolidated prejudice towards Japan.

If you pursue that prejudice, you would fail to appreciate the real values of Japanese culture, philosophy and ways of life.

Many people would not be able to really appreciate Japanese cultural icons and philosophers the like of Fukuzawa Yukichi, Saigo Takamori, Shiba Ryotaro, or Kenji Mizoguchi.

Likewise, to understand Cambodian people, politics and leadership, foreign observers should try to dig deep into local thoughts, writings, culture, history, identities and values.

For example, before accusing Prime Minister Hun Sen as a communist dictator, one should read his book entitled “10 Years of Cambodia’s March: 1979-1989”, and see how he evaluated the situation and ran the country during the most difficult time to really understand whether he is a pragmatist or an ideologue.

Before accusing Prime Minister Hun Sen as a Vietnam’s puppet or that he had ceded land to Vietnam—an accusation constantly and endlessly made by Cambodian opposition to stir anti-Vietnamese sentiment and ultra-nationalism for electoral purpose—one should first review Prime Minister Hun Sen’s five-hour testimony in the National Assembly on the border issues between Cambodia and Vietnam on 9 August 2012, and his 64-page written statement dated 8 September 2015.

Without a proper understanding or at least trying to listen to the voices of senior Cambodian leaders during Cambodia’s most difficult time of survival, ones should not make haste to judge the level of statesmanship of Cambodian senior leaders.

Otherwise, it sounds like an unmarried first year university student

criticizing or lecturing their own parents on how to raise a family.

Cambodia and Cambodian leaders are often misunderstood, underappreciated and misperceived.

It is time to engage with Cambodia and evaluate Cambodian leaders with naked eyes. It is time to abandon foreign-shaped prejudice and try to understand local people, ways of thinking, and ways of life, and values.

Foreign observers should try to read books about Cambodia beyond Pol Pot and Khmer Rouge. They should try to find books and media written and produced by Khmers who have survived, lived and breathed in Cambodia to really grasp the real-life experiences, perspectives and understand what Cambodian people really think.

They should try to read books about Khmer Buddhist culture and mentality, humbleness, the sense of benevolence and gratitude, respect for parents and seniors, respect for the monarchy, cultures and traditions. These cultural traits are so deep-rooted in Khmer society and mentality.

Probably, foreign observers should try to appreciate movies made by internationally-acclaimed Cambodian directors like Rithy Panh, for example the movies called "Rice People" (1994) or "One Evening After the War" (1998).

Or probably they can enjoy a much more modern taste like "The Last Reel" (2014), "Kroab Pich or Gems on the Run" (2013), or action comedy movie, which featured Cambodian martial art Bokator that was inscribed in UNESCO World Heritage List in November 2022, called "Jailbreak" (2017).

Apart from Hun Sen's books, the book of Keat Chhon, the former minister of economy and finance, who has survived several regimes and is the eyewitness to many Cambodian historical evolutions, can also provide a glimpse on historical context and situation that Cambodian bureaucrats were put in.

Readers should be able to distinguish and judge by themselves what is or what is not a propaganda.

After all, Cambodian people and Cambodian leaders who have survived the Khmer Rouge regime are not “domlong mou” —a Khmer slang literally translated as “round potatoes” to refer to total dumbs—when they have been able to transform Cambodia into what it is today – peaceful, safe, modernized, gradually prospered and free.

But Cambodia is not that free to the level that people has freedom to throw shoes on leaders. In Khmer and Buddhist culture, head is the most sacred part of human body.

Cambodia is not that free to have people utilizing the freedom of expression to accuse others as “killers”.

Cambodia is not that free to have democratic space that allows politicians to make extreme electoral promises such as arresting other politicians and confiscating all their properties, and promising to redistribute wealth. Such kind of extremist Cambodian politicians are no difference from Pol Pot.

In terms of freedom, Cambodia is not there yet, and we don’t plan to develop our society into that extreme either. That is not Cambodia now and will never be Cambodia in the future.

Extremism has no place in Cambodia.

Collective peace, security and harmony is what Khmer people values the most.

In Cambodia, you cannot say it is your freedom and rights when you destroy common stability, peace, and other people’s rights to live in peace.

Cambodian people have seen enough, and we still can see a lot of countries and millions of people that cannot enjoy the right to live in peace, or even enjoy the rights to life itself.

One would know the value of peace only when you start wanting to lock yourself and your family in the house for fear of going outside to witness social unrest, insecurity and violence. One would only value peace when

your mind unconsciously starts to think about where to evacuate your children tomorrow to escape from violence and war, and how to get your loved ones to the border or any accessible exits to get out of the country as fast as possible.

What Cambodia wants and needs is peace at all cost.

And it is time to engage and accept Cambodia as it is.

# CAMBODIAN DIASPORA'S OPPOSITION 'CONSENSUS' MISREPRESENTED

Opinion, Asia Times, 1 March 2023

Hun Sen's expatriate supporters have as much right to be heard as his opponents

On February 23, The Diplomat published an article written by David Whitehouse titled "Australia Gets Tough on Foreign Government Intimidation of Cambodian, Rwandan Diasporas."

The article accused the Cambodian government of intimidating members of the Cambodian diaspora to stifle dissenting voices and fundraising.

However, the argument lacks a fair and objective assessment of Cambodian politics.

The author identified himself as co-author of the autobiography of Cambodian opposition leader Sam Rainsy, who is a very controversial political figure.

Sam Rainsy exploits the borderline of freedom and democracy as means for his political style and self-expression. Just recently, he added up his multiple accounts of verbal assaults against the Cambodian king, who is an inviolable public figure under the constitution. This is akin to an Australian politician making a public attack against the dignity of the late Queen Elizabeth II.

He made several accusations that Prime Minister Hun Sen is behind various assassination cases. This is again like an Australian politician accusing Queen Elizabeth of masterminding an assassination of Diana, Princess of Wales.

This is how problematic his political style is under the guise of freedom of expression.

Therefore, Whitehouse's association with such a controversial and extremist political figure should be enough to arouse caution when evaluating the objectivity of his article.

Second, the article encourages an extremist political culture that could be harmful to democratic principles and inter-state relations.

According to democratic principles, if it is a recognizable right of the Cambodian diaspora to support an opposition group, it is also right and fair for anyone to support the elected government of Cambodia.

Accusing the government of intimidating and harassing diaspora communities is erroneous.

In fact, it is members of the diaspora who support the Cambodian government and the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) who have been suppressed, humiliated and discriminated.

The latest threats made in the United States are that those who support the CPP could have their American citizenship and resident rights revoked, and may be repatriated back to Cambodia.

The landscape has changed. Recently, members of the diaspora gained enough confidence to join public events and express their support for Cambodian government, and it has become commonplace for Hun Sen to conduct meetings with thousands of Cambodians overseas, such as in Geneva in July 2019, Washington and Zurich in May 2022, and the latest one in Brussels in December.

The increase of public expression of support from the Cambodian diaspora toward the government speaks to the practice of democracy in which people can exercise political freedom.

Claiming that the whole Cambodian diaspora supports the opposition is far-fetched and lacks objectivity.

On inter-state relations, encouraging anti-government political movements against another state is politically sensitive. This allows intrusion and



meddling in the internal affairs of another state under the guise of democracy, human rights and political freedom.

Stories abound that the US has suspected Russian influence in its highest form of politics, the presidential election. Australia also took actions to prevent Chinese influence within its domestic politics.

According to the Westphalia Treaty, which is the cornerstone for customary practice and norms of international relations, states shall abide by four important principles, namely national self-determination, the resort to diplomacy in resolving conflicts, peaceful coexistence among sovereign states, and non-interference in the internal affairs of other sovereign states.

But the real practice is rather different. To borrow George Orwell's quote, it seems that "all animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others."

There are multiple occurrences of extrajudicial and extraterritorial practice of some states that intrude the internal affairs of other states. Some states use their parliamentary and executive powers to impose economic and diplomatic sanctions to meddle in domestic politics of other states, mostly weaker ones.

All states should be cautious in differentiating between the encouragement of political freedom and democracy, and the encouragement of extreme political culture.

No politicians of any country, no matter how good they perceive themselves to be, can totally exempt themselves from hatred by people who have different political opinions. Nonetheless, all expression of political freedom should be made in accordance with the law and with respect for the dignity of the person.

No one can stop the opposition diaspora from having unfavorable views against Cambodian leaders. Likewise, no Cambodian diaspora should be prevented from expressing different political opinions from the opposition groups.

This is the core principle of democracy, which should be observed and applied fairly and equally without discrimination.

# CAMBODIA MAKES ITS OWN WAY IN KEM SOKHA CASE

Opinion, Asia Times, 7 March 2023

The sentencing of an opposition figure for treason sends a message that foreign interference will be rejected.

Cambodia made two important choices on its national trajectory considering the recent sentencing of Kem Sokha to 27 years of house arrest on charges of treason and conspiracy with a foreign power.

First, it made clear that Cambodia chose peaceful democratization in its consistent endeavor to build a multiparty liberal democracy as enshrined in its constitution.

Some may observe the sentence as the end of democracy. But looking at Cambodia's history of nation-building, the event was just a point of time in which Cambodia confirmed its self-determination on what kind of democracy it intends to build.

Surely, Cambodia does not opt for agitating, abrupt, violent and selfish democracy in which individual freedom is cherished and sanctified more than peace, stability, and social harmony.

The context is strange when the individual right to possess a gun is so much more important than the protection of children's lives. The context is beyond comprehensible when individual freedom and democracy is being prioritized so much more than peace even at the sacrifice of the people's right to life.

What does democracy mean for countries fallen into wars that see no end? The right to life is the most sacred human right of all.

Attempted coups, sabotage of government and public security are responded to firmly in every country. For instance, in December 2022, Germany suppressed a coup plot by launching one of its biggest ever raids, nationwide and beyond

(in Austria and Italy), involving 3,000 officers, searching 150 properties and arresting 25 people in total.

In July 2016, scores of people were killed in Turkey and more than 1,400 wounded as a result of an attempted coup. Meanwhile, the government arrested some 6,000 people, including high-ranking soldiers and judges.

Compared with the above cases, Cambodian authorities' actions in containing a planned color revolution have been rather calm. No violence, no torture, no bloodshed.

All human-rights aspects have been observed strictly. For instance, the rights of criminal defendants were fully guaranteed, including the right to a lawyer, permission for observation of the trials, and health-care consideration. In Cambodia, foreign diplomats were even allowed to observe the 66 hearings held from January 15, 2020, until December 21, 2022.

In contrast, in April 2019, Thailand's Foreign Ministry protested against Western embassies accusing it of breaching protocol when the latter witnessed court proceedings of a Thai politician charged with sedition.

The crime of treason, conspiracy with foreign powers, sabotage of government and public security are among the most severe types of crimes.

Cambodia firmly implemented its law in protecting constitutional order, and in the process has strictly observed human-rights obligations and protocols.

These actions clearly show that Cambodia has chosen democracy based on the rule of law. All political parties and actors must remind themselves of obligations to protect peace, stability and social harmony in their promotion of multi-party liberal democracy under the constitution.

This is Cambodia's choice.

The second choice Cambodia made in the Kem Sokha case was to make clear that it strongly rejects foreign intervention and interference in domestic affairs.

In 1994, Singapore sentenced Michael Fay, an American teenager, to jail and caning for vandalism and theft. Then-US president Bill Clinton requested clemency, putting Singapore in a dilemma.

Recalling how the event strained US-Singapore relations, former prime minister Goh Chok Tong noted, "On the one hand, we need to stand firm on the rule of law..... On the other hand, had we granted clemency, we would not have done our relationship with the US a favor, because we would be seen to be a client state of the US."

The late prime minister Lee Kuan Yew put it more bluntly: "The American society is the richest and most prosperous in the world, but it is hardly safe and peaceful. If you like it that way, that is your problem. But that is not the path we choose. They always talk about human rights. I think it is just a convenient slogan."

According to Goh, in 2002 Clinton said to him, "You should have caned him more," and added that Fay's father should also have caned him earlier.

This was a tough decision for Singapore when the country needed to reject foreign interference in executing its rule of law.

But Kem Sokha's case was much tougher. This is not a case where an American kid messed up a Singapore park, but it was a case where a Cambodian politician stirred up domestic politics with support from foreign powers. Kem Sokha said so himself proudly, that his activities were meant to gain more political confidence from his supporters.

No one tortured him to make him confess; and no one forced him to speak about his long-term plots to overthrow the Hun Sen government through a color revolution with support from foreign powers.

This is like having a Russian-American politician trying to run for president in the US, claiming that he has a good formula to fix America's democracy. How would the Americans handle a foreign-controlled politician in their homeland?

Rejecting foreign interference is no easy feat for small states. Threats, coercion, intimidation and unilateral sanctions are foreseeable consequences.

But Cambodia still says no to foreign interference in its domestic affairs, and has chosen to implement its laws firmly.

If foreign sanction results from maintaining domestic peace, and the foreign trophy of human rights is given only at the expense of domestic peace and stability, Cambodia would choose domestic peace and sovereignty.

Senior Cambodian leaders are rather tone-deaf about sanctions from Western nations because they experienced unjust economic sanctions for 12 years, from 1979 until 1993, after survivors emerged from the genocidal Pol Pot regime. They are resilient and proud people who have contributed to turning the country from war to peace, and from peace to prosperity.

They are the generation who believed that foreign intervention had been one of the major causes of Cambodia's tragedy that had left scars that can be seen even until today, like landmines and unexploded remnants of wars (UXO) as well as the toxic Agent Orange legacy.

Their experiences tell them not to let go of peace, independence and sovereignty. Cambodia will hold on tight of its own destiny with its own hands.

Cambodia chose a peaceful democratization process based on the rule of law and with full respect to peace and stability. Its self-determination shall be respected.

# **PART 2: ECONOMY**

# CONFIDENCE NEEDED TO KEEP JOBS

Letter to Editor, Phnom Penh Post, 14 January 2014

Dear Editor,

When workers took to the streets and protested for an immediate 100 per cent wage increase of up to \$160 within a year, in hindsight I keep asking myself what should be the options for civil servants and university graduates who earn less than \$100?

With 300,000 youth entering the job market each year, work is increasingly difficult to find, even for many university graduates, prompting some of them to take jobs with meager salaries in order to gain experience and to build skills to compete in the increasingly fierce job market.

For these people, should they also take to the streets or should they change their jobs to work at factories?

If we make such a comparison, then is the workers' demand for \$160 a luxury? Absolutely not.

However, in terms of income, factory workers are better off compared to being traditional farmers or seasonal construction workers.

Looking back at 10 or 20 years ago, it was widely accepted that the more than 400 garment factories, which employ about 600,000 workers and account for 35 per cent of the country's GDP, have contributed significantly to the country's economy as well as poverty reduction.

The fact is those 600,000 workers rely on their jobs to support not only themselves, but also their families in their hometowns. Generally, garment workers can earn more than \$100 each month and many of them go home during festivities and the holiday season. It is generally observed that people would not go for holidays if they don't have extra money to bring home or cannot afford the transport fees.

On the other hand, from an employer's point of view, if one is to run a



company, doubling the wages in a single year is an unrealistic option, and it is especially true for a labour-intensive industry.

Compared to the region, it is understandable that workers demand a wage increase of 10-20 per cent each time, but 100 per cent is out of the question. This raises the level of unpredictability of Cambodia's investment climate, posing a serious blow to the management of the current investors and prompting potential investors to re-consider even harder before making their investment decision in Cambodia.

Being in a profession whose role is to promote investment, experience tells us that building investment confidence is something that is time-consuming and hard to earn, but it can fade away in the blink of an eye. It is an inherent duty of every government to make their best efforts to attract foreign investment so as to boost the economy, create jobs and reduce poverty.

When Cambodia's physical infrastructure and logistics are handicapped and the energy costs are high, foreign companies tend to look for low cost labour, which is Cambodia's competitive advantage compared to the rest of the region, to off-set their total investment cost.

However, the demonstrations did show that the times are changing and that Cambodia is no longer a sanctuary for low-cost labour. This should be clearly understood by every stakeholder. To balance the increasing labour cost, Cambodia has two major options, which is to improve its hard and soft infrastructure, so that companies can reduce their investment costs, and to build higher skilled labour, so that companies find it comfortable to pay higher wages.

These two options have to go hand-in-hand, but we have to be mindful that both options are not something that can be achieved in a single night.

An economy develops from non-skilled low wages to higher-skilled higher wages and Cambodia is in this transition period, so we need to be cautious and not to jump too fast before we are sure that we have better skilled labour and better infrastructure at a level of competitiveness on par with the region.

It is thus better for us to go step by step to maintain investment confidence, to ensure that this transition period goes smoothly and is acceptable to every

stakeholder for the sake of, above all else, the wellbeing of the nation-wide economy.

# CAMBODIA'S HYDROELECTRIC QUESTION: CHINA POWER AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Opinion, *The Diplomat*, 30 July 2014

Discussion about hydroelectric power plants in Cambodia tends to focus on two aspects, both negative. One is an overdependence on Chinese investment, and the other is a relatively disproportionate focus on the environmental impacts of hydroelectric power.

## Chinese Influence

Most hydroelectric power plants in Cambodia are associated in some way with China. According to the Ministry of Mines and Energy, Chinese companies have invested more than \$1.6 billion in the construction of six dams with a total supply of 928 megawatts. Although the data might suggest the theory that Cambodia is giving preference to China in this particular field, one should also consider why other countries don't, or don't want to, invest.

Japan, which is Cambodia's biggest donor, has not been involved in large scale hydroelectric power plants since it resumed Official Development Assistance (ODA) to Cambodia in 1992. Why?

The Narmada Dam project in India and the Koto Panjang Dam project in Indonesia are instructive. These were bitter experiences for the Japanese government, prompting it to avoid projects that tend to spark conflict among environmental groups and authorities, and that eventually may damage Japan's ODA brand.

The developed countries of the OECD provided approximately \$200 million from 2000 to 2012 to Cambodia's energy sector. Indeed, they have the option to get involved in large-scale hydroelectric power plant projects through loan provisions, but records show that countries like Japan, Germany, Australia, and France chose to handle less sensitive projects such as electricity transmission and distribution systems. For instance, the latest loan from Japan signed in June this year was for approximately \$65 million to help expand Phnom

Penh's transmission and distribution system.

This argument suggests that no matter how environmentally conscious and technologically advanced the country is, you still cannot build a hydroelectric power plant without an environmental impact. In this light, the right question should be: if China does not do it, then who will do it for Cambodia?

### Focus on Environmental Impacts

The total electricity supply in 2013 was 4,297 million kilowatts-hours (kWh), with imports from Vietnam and Thailand accounting for more than 60 percent. Electricity prices in Cambodia are among the most expensive in the region due to a shortage of integrated high-voltage transmission systems and the high cost of imported diesel fuel, which accounts for more than 90 percent of domestic power generation.

According to an investment cost comparison conducted by the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO), the cost of electricity in Phnom Penh is approximately 18 cents, exceptionally high compared to 10 cents in Bangkok, 9 cents in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh, 12 cents in Yangon and 5 cents in Vientiane.

Many Japanese companies locate their factories in Special Economic Zones (SEZ). According to a survey conducted by a large Japanese bank, the cost of electricity in Phnom Penh's SEZ is around 20 cents per kilowatt hour. Electricity in the SEZ of Bavet City, Svay Rieng Province bordering with Vietnam is cheaper – around 15 cents – but the supply is unstable with more than 20 blackouts a day. At Sihanoukville's SEZ, the price is 24 cents.

To many investors, electricity costs and a stable supply are among the major bottlenecks hindering investment in Cambodia, especially in electricity-hungry manufacturing companies, which can offer jobs and skills.

Mindful that the private sector is playing a vital role in economic development and job creation, the Cambodian government is naturally endeavoring to increase domestic power supply capacity and to secure self-sufficiency. This is important not only for attracting investment, but also for national security. Simply put, relying on neighboring countries for more than 60 percent of its supply of energy is not a secure energy strategy.

So among its various options, and considering the current status of Cambodia's economy, hydroelectricity is seen as a favorable option for its cost effectiveness and zero carbon footprint. Besides power generation, if appropriately designed, a hydroelectric dam can also regulate the water supply, helping to control floods and facilitating irrigation.

Other renewable energies such as biofuels, wind, and solar could also be an option for small-scale generation, but unstable output and high cost, and associated high prices, are making these alternatives less attractive for both household consumers and industry. Some advanced economies have been trying to introduce these alternative energies, but successes have been modest despite enormous investments.

As such, although environmental considerations are definitely required, public discussions should also balance the merits of hydroelectric power in the context of the country's overall economy and development. Specifically, besides an environmental analysis, a proper study should also be conducted to show the economic effects of a hydroelectric power plant; such as the number of households supplied, the reduction in consumer prices, the money saved, the number of companies the power plant attracts, the jobs created by those companies, the income those jobs create and the number of dependents on those incomes.

From the above argument, if economic benefits and national security are included in the discussion, it should be fair to conclude that at the current stage of development, hydroelectric power is more a "need" than a "want" for Cambodia.

# CAMBODIA IN URGENT NEED OF ECONOMIC POLICY DEBATE

Opinion, Cambodian Institute for Strategic Studies, 1 April 2016

The upcoming Cambodian general election is in two years' time, and Cambodian politicians should now begin their policy debate, especially on how to build a stronger economy.

The strength of the economy is not reflective of the amount of Lexus cars being driven in Phnom Penh or the amount of vacant high-rise buildings being built. It is instead more dependent upon how sizeable and healthy our middle-class population is, and how economic benefits are being distributed nationwide. Also central is the amount of government revenue to implement policy, provide public services, modernize the military, etc.

Past achievements have brought about peace and stability on which Cambodia has been able to stand firm in the international arena. However, Cambodia can't afford to just stand; we need to run or even leap in order to catch up with the time lost through Cambodia's tumultuous history.

As a young democratic country, we as Cambodians should be proud of ourselves in terms of the electoral process which is, although not flawless, widely accepted internationally and can be said to be relatively more democratic when compared to some of our ASEAN peers.

Unfortunately, even though we have had experience of five general elections, political debates are still very much limited to dichotomy politics and partisanship, intra-party power struggles, inter-party re-alignments, traditional blame games and credit takings for past legacies.

Cambodian voters deserve better from our politicians. The Cambodian public should be more exposed to policy discussions and politicians from both the ruling and opposition parties should be responsible for leading such discussions and inform the public more widely about current policies Cambodia is undertaking. It is time that we debate more about the future, about the

economy and business in this world of global competition for economic and sovereign territorial survival.

Considering the current challenges we are facing, policy topics are abundant. Yet, we seem to have lost sight of where we want to go, and our politicians do not sufficiently debate visions for Cambodia's future. The Cambodian government launched our Industrial Development Policy (IDP) 2015-2025 last year, but we haven't yet seen our politicians discussing this policy in public. Looking around us, we can easily see that competition in the region is tough. Every country is trying hard to better its economic status.

Vietnam is evaluating the viability of expanding into automobile manufacturing. Thailand will soon have a bullet train and its military government is creating ten new industrial zones along the border to maximize benefit from cross-border trade. Indonesia was seen trying to court Facebook and Google to support its digital economy and is aiming to replace Singapore and Malaysia as Southeast Asia's logistics hub. The Philippines has overtaken Thailand and Vietnam as the investment destination of choice in Asia amongst Japanese companies, as these companies try to diversify their investment beyond China. These are the types of developments that highlight the ambition of our ASEAN peers for the future and how they are competing to take the economic spotlight.

But what about Cambodia? What is our dream for the future? And what steps have we taken towards that dream? Our economy and national security are very much vulnerable and heavily reliant on our two big neighbors. When armed conflict broke out with Thailand in 2008, the Cambodian army was caught off-guard lacking military hardware; even simple clothing for soldiers. Fighting with Thailand put a strain on the national budget: every ministry had to cut down expenses, every institution conducted charity events to support soldiers at the frontline. However, charity cannot last forever, and nationalism and pride cannot protect us from missiles either. We need military hardware.

When Thailand decided to crack down on illegal laborers in 2014, nearly 200,000 Cambodians were loaded into trucks and dumped at the border. This inhumane imagery is still fresh in our memory. The destiny of an estimated one million Cambodian migrant laborers are in Thailand's grip. In November last year, during the water festival, 24 provinces in Cambodia experienced blackouts for more than one hour due to "technical problems" in Vietnam.

Despite the fact that Cambodia aims to become a major rice exporter, roughly one million tons of Vietnamese rice enters Cambodia illegally every year.

These are the issues that Cambodian politicians should debate more, with the aim to raise policy alternatives instead of playing the “blame-game”. Policy-making is not the exclusive right of the ruling party. In other words, you don’t need to become a ruling party before you can create and propose policy options.

The time is ripe for Cambodian politicians to lead Cambodian public discussion to a new level of debate to be based on policy alternatives instead of endless destructive criticism and emotional and personal attacks.



# CAMBODIA'S GROWTH METRICS NEED NUANCE TO UPLIFT CITIZENS

Opinion, East Asia Forum, 24 July 2018

Cambodia's fast growth rate over the past few decades has contributed to a rise in income levels and a drastic reduction in poverty in the country. All major financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and Asian Development Bank (ADB) forecast Cambodia's GDP growth to stand at around 6.9 or 7 per cent in the near term. Cambodia will likely transition out of its least developed country status after 2025 if it can maintain this growth rate.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) estimates that Cambodia's poverty rate could be below 10 per cent. But even if the poverty rate has fallen below 10 per cent, this does not mean that Cambodia's fight against poverty has come to an end. Rather, it means that the poverty rate will soon become an obsolete instrument through which to measure Cambodia's economic success.

Consider the case of Vietnam. Vietnam has been very successful in generating economic growth and reducing poverty over the last decades. The poverty rate decreased from 58.1 per cent in 1993 to about 10 per cent in 2012. Yet despite Vietnam's successes in poverty reduction, around 30 per cent of the total number of poor households in 2012 were non-poor households in 2010 that fell back into poverty.

The ADB and the World Bank have warned policymakers about the rate of the 'near poor' in Cambodia. Although the fight against extreme poverty is indeed a great success for Cambodia, more than 70 per cent of Cambodians still live on less than US\$3 a day. This means that many Cambodians remain vulnerable to falling back into poverty.

To avoid such a regression, measuring Cambodia's future growth should be based on two sets of criteria: improving Cambodians' quality of life and increasing their prosperity. In other words, the benchmarks should be 'people-

centred’.

To capture a better picture of people’s quality of life beyond income-based measurements, Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative Director Sabina Alkire and Professor James Foster created a new method for measuring multidimensional poverty in 2007. The use of Alkire and Foster’s ‘Multidimensional Poverty Index’ (MPI) has gained popularity in policy agendas in many countries around the world such as Mexico, Colombia, Costa Rica, Vietnam, the Philippines and China.

The MPI can be adapted to the national context and priorities of each country. For example, Mexico’s MPI incorporates the following dimensions: educational gap, access to healthcare, access to social security, basic services at home, quality of living spaces, access to food, the current income per capita and the degree of social cohesion.

In Cambodia, the UNDP has also used the MPI to analyse poverty through its Human Development Index (HDI). The HDI is a summary measure for assessing progress in three basic dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, access to education and a decent standard of living. In 2014, the poverty rate was 13.5 per cent in Cambodia but the HDI suggested that some 33 per cent of Cambodians were multidimensionally poor.

Cambodia must also consider how to measure increasing prosperity. When poverty is reduced, it means that those who were previously poor have now become better off. Measuring the size of the middle class can therefore also be a benchmark of Cambodia’s success in economic development.

On how to measure the middle class, Homi Kharas defined a global middle class as all those living in households with daily per capita incomes of between US\$10 and US\$100 in 2005 purchasing power parity terms. According to this definition, approximately 0.3 million people or 2.3 per cent of the total population of Cambodia were middle class in 2005.

Kharas’ method of measuring the size of the middle class should be subject to further scrutiny in its application, as there are likely to be differences between a global middle class and a middle class in Cambodia’s context that are not accounted for in this definition. Still, the MPI and the size of the middle class offer various options through which to measure Cambodia’s economic growth

to ensure that Cambodia's future development is people-centred, improves citizens' quality of life and enhances prosperity.

# **CAMBODIA'S UNDERTAKING OF BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE AND INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY**

Policy Brief Issue 3, Cambodia Development Centre, 28 September 2018

Cambodia is one of the strong supporters of China's BRI. In addition to cooperation agreement to further enhance comprehensive strategic partnership signed during President Xi's visit to Phnom Penh in 2016, Cambodia and China agreed on an 'Outline Cooperation Plan to Jointly Build the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road' a year later.

Cambodia's firm support of BRI is driven by both strategic and economic considerations. Strategically, the initiative represents opportunities for Cambodia to reduce dependence on the development of Western donors whose assistances in many cases frustrated the government via their strict conditions attached. Since the 2000s China overtook some major Western donors including EC and USA and emerged as "the largest single donor" to Cambodia. Equally important is the fact that the government of Cambodia favours China's non-interference policy on the ground that it enable Cambodia to maintain sovereignty and pursue independent foreign policy on the international stage.

Economically, BRI can be a new source of Cambodia's next stage of growth and development through ever increasing infrastructure development, investment, trade and tourism. During the visit of State Councilor Yang Jiechi in April 2017 in Phnom Penh, Prime Minister Hun Sen said: "the Belt and Road Initiative is of great historical significance, which will surely advance regional connectivity and the construction of regional integration, and bring enormous opportunities to the development of countries in the region. The Cambodian side hopes to realize better and faster development of its economy through further deepening bilateral practical cooperation under the Belt and Road framework". For China, Cambodia is its old and close ally that can play important role in promoting regional and sub-regional cooperation as well as the construction of its BRI (Pou 2017).

Cambodia already has its own national development policies such as the Rectangular Strategy Phase III and Industrial Development Policy (IDP). In consistency with the goal of BRI in promoting policy synergy, Cambodia's designed policies have been fully used to shape direction of cooperation between Cambodia and China within BRI framework.

Out of the 14 points of cooperation measures that have been laid out at the Belt and Road Forum, Cambodia and China have clearly identified specific areas of cooperation that best fit with Cambodian and Chinese national strategies. Based on the MoU on Formulating the Outline of Bilateral Cooperation Plan, Cambodia and China have identified 7 key areas namely infrastructure, agriculture, capacity building, industrial cluster, culture and tourism, finance and eco-environment protection. In the 7 key areas, there are 4 areas on the MoU that are in line with priorities of the IDP namely promotion of agro-industry, stronger boost for infrastructure, promotion of industrial cluster and industrial human resource capacity building.

According to the IDP, the strategic approach is to promote the development of the manufacturing sector and agro-processing industry through integration into regional and global production chain; positioning the development of industrial zones so as to ensure critical mass, economic linkages and competitiveness; development of economic corridors, streamlining the operational procedures for Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and developing new industrial parks and industrial clusters. With this policy, measures and action plans have been laid out namely promoting FDI focusing on improving the development of SEZs and preparation of industrial zones, promoting the agro-industrial sector and coordinating and supporting of policy focusing on skills and human resource development, science, technology and innovation promotion. This is in a sense signified how Cambodia's IDP has been utilized to guide the direction of the policy engagement with the BRI.

### *Funding and Working Mechanism*

For Cambodia, funding related to BRI are based on the expansion of the existing bilateral mechanism. Specific BRI cooperation mechanism is still in institutional building process. To be precise, both countries signed "Memorandum of Understanding on Formulating the Outline of Bilateral Cooperation Plan to Jointly Build the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime

Silk Road between the Kingdom of Cambodia and the People’s Republic of China” during the state visit of President Xi Jinping to Cambodia from 13 to 14 October, 2016.

Seven months later, the Outline of Bilateral Cooperation Plan to Joint Build the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road was formulated and signed when Prime Minister Hun Sen attended the Belt and Road Forum (BRF) for International Cooperation and paid official visit to China in mid-May 2017. In the Outline, both sides agreed to set up Cambodia-China Cooperation Working Group of Jointly Building the Belt and Road. The Working Group is in charge of the organization, coordination and implementation of the Plan, identify the list of priority projects, discuss and consult major issues during the implementation of the Plan and propose solutions and measures. Both sides agreed to make full use of existing bilateral cooperation mechanisms, and to jointly contribute to the implementation of the Plan and construction of the Belt and Road.

For IDP-specific mechanism, a new working group had been set up to shape a long-term view to develop the industrial sector and transform Sihanoukville into a multi-purpose industrial zone. Prime Minister Hun Sen made direct mentioning about the establishment of this Working Group at the cabinet meeting in late December 2017. The government is planning to build a massive economic zone in Preah Sihanouk province to accommodate up to 10,000 factories similar to Thailand’s eastern economic corridor. The joint working group consists of officials from the ministries of industry and handicraft, tourism, land management, environment, as well as economy and finance. The first action of the new group will be to determine what areas of the province are to be protected and preserved and which ones will be turned into industrial spaces. They will then create a master plan to lay out in detail development plans for the region.

### *Project Formulation Process*

The project formulation process often evolves around specific points of official visits of leaders. For example, during the visit of President Xi Jiping in October 2016, Cambodia and China laid out the list of Priority Projects of Productivity Capacity and Investment Cooperation by identifying eleven cooperation projects including the development of new Siem Reap international airport,

the construction of Phnom Penh-Sihanoukville highway, the construction of new power plants and development of agro-industrial Special Economic Zones (SEZ) in Northeastern provinces, among others.

In terms of agro-industry development, on 19 October 2016, Cambodia signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Agricultural Development with a Chinese company from east China's Shandong province. According to the MoU, the company has planned to invest about US\$ 2 billion in developing a 300-hectare Special Economic Zone in western Kampong Speu province, in which storage facilities, packaging factories, and processing factories for agricultural products will be built. The firm would also cooperate with the ministry to establish an Agricultural Research and Development Center and a Center for Sanitary and Phytosanitary Control and would try to attract more Chinese enterprises to invest in agricultural processing factories in its special economic zone.

Non-government level cooperation has also witnessed an increased enthusiasm along with the promotion of BRI. After the visit of President Xi Jinping, the Chinese government has encouraged well-known Chinese enterprises to redirect their focus to Cambodia. Concretely, a forum was held in December 2016 under the theme "Cambodia: The Kingdom of Opportunities Along the 'One Belt One Road'" gathering more than 600 enterprises and resulting in the signing of a US\$ 1.5 billion deal to build a Cambodia-China Friendship City in Phnom Penh's northern suburb.

Similarly, during Premier Li Keqiang's official visit to Cambodia on 11 January 2018, major infrastructure development projects that support the multi-modal transport and connectivity between Phnom Penh and strategic location of Sihanoukville province, the only deep-sea port coastal area, has been further developed. The latest deals were signed during the official visit of Premier Li Keqiang to Cambodia on 11 January 2018, following the 2nd Mekong-Lancang Leaders' Meeting hosted by Cambodia a day earlier. Marking the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations, Cambodia and China signed 19 agreements, amounting to billions of dollars in concessional loans on the financing of projects like the expressway to Sihanoukville and the new airport in Phnom Penh.

According to the Ministry of Public Works and Transport, the construction of

a 190-kilometer (120-mile) highway from Phnom Penh to Sihanoukville will cost US\$ 2 billion and will take at least 44 months to complete after beginning construction this year. The two prime ministers also witnessed the signing of Framework Cooperation Agreement for Stung Hav Port and SEZ Project in Preah Sihanouk province. Regarding this project, a month earlier before the visit of Premier Li Keqiang, China Metallurgical Group Corporation has asked Prime Minister Hun Sen to support its investing in a project at Preah Sihanouk's Stung Hav International Port and Special Economic Zone. Cooperating with local partner, the company plans to expand the existing Sihanoukville SEZ and enlarge the port so it can accommodate vessels of 50,000 tons.

### *Conclusion*

China's new grand strategy, BRI, together with the rise of economic and political power emerge as a new force that could have profound effects on regional economic landscape. Cambodia sees BRI as a new source of economic growth via infrastructure development, industrialization, and trade and investment expansion and tourism sector; whereas China regards Cambodia as its closest and strategic allies that can help achieve the BRI goal and vision.

From such evolution, it is clear that BRI is not a one-way initiative but rather an interaction, adjustment and synergy of national development policies from both sides. Cognizant of its relevance and importance, both countries work closely together to advance the coordination and implementation of BRI strategy through a number of endeavors including reciprocal state-level visits, integration of the initiative into national development plan, setting up Cambodia-China joint working, and expanding non-governmental cooperation and exchanges. These initial cooperation outcomes have been hailed as solid progress under BRI cooperation framework between Cambodia and China.

Since BRI and its associated mechanism can provide investment and financing support for Cambodia's much needed infrastructure development, industrial park and productive capacity cooperation from China, it can expedite Cambodia's industrialization and diversification process. Doing so requires both governments to formulate a concrete vision, implementation plan and action roadmap as well as assign a strong leading institution to coordinate the working group.



# DYNAMISM OF CHINESE INVESTMENT IN CAMBODIA

Opinion, Asia Times, 8 November 2019

According to the “ASEAN Investment Report 2019,” Cambodia’s FDI inflows reached an all-time high last year, with growth concentrated in manufacturing and services, particularly finance and insurance. Foreign direct investment increased by 15% to US\$3.1 billion, the highest level ever recorded.

Cambodia’s record FDI number is easily dwarfed by what other member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations are receiving, considering that the region’s FDI inflows reached a record high of \$155 billion last year, of which Singapore received \$77 billion, Indonesia \$22 billion, and Vietnam \$16 billion.

China is no doubt the current largest investor in Cambodia. In 2017 and 2018, China accounted for 23% and 26% of the total \$2.7 billion and \$3.1 billion respectively. It was followed by a combined FDI from ASEAN member states, at 22% and 25% in 2017 and 2018 respectively.

The unfortunate thing is that when there is talk about China, negative views always come up. It is strange that people are complaining about China while everyone is trying so hard to gain more trade, more investment, and larger tourist inflows from China. Simple examples abound. Bilateral trade between China and Vietnam hit \$106.71 billion in 2018. More than 10 million Chinese visited Thailand last year, contributing more than \$100 billion in revenue to the country. Every country in the region envies that number.

China contributes a lot to Cambodia’s economy, building infrastructure such as hydropower plants and road connectivities, contributing capital through the real-estate and construction sectors, creating jobs through increasing manufacturing investment and sending in more than 2 million tourists last year.

To improve connectivity between Sihanoukville and Phnom Penh, an

expressway costing \$1.87 billion under a build-operate-transfer arrangement is being constructed, the first expressway in Cambodia. The most rapid increase in high-rise building numbers in the provincial capital of Sihanoukville hit a record last year when 238 buildings were approved, up from 188 buildings in 2017.

Over-reliance on China does involve macro-economic risks that can be heightened further by superpowers' geopolitical rivalry and constant internationalization of Cambodia's domestic politics.

Chinese FDI mainly focuses on the real-estate and financial sectors, which typically are prone to boom-and-bust cycles and external factors. Rising domestic credit in the construction sector also increases the financial sector's vulnerability.

Geopolitically, Cambodia is often labeled as "being bought" or as a "vassal state of China" whenever the dynamism of superpowers' geopolitical rivalry is put into focus.

The internationalization of Cambodia's domestic politics has caused much harm to its economy and investment confidence at a level not seen in any other country in the region. Anti-China rhetoric provoked by opposition groups, threats of a coup or toppling of the government through people power, threats of the possible withdrawal of trade preferences provided by the European Union through the Everything But Arms (EBA) scheme, all of these have caused investors and tourists to drag their feet.

Even though it has yet to materialize, the threat of the EBA withdrawal has already caused investors to think twice about buying or sourcing products from Cambodia. According to a study by the World Bank, the estimated decline in Cambodia's garment and footwear exports if the EBA is suspended is \$510 million, or 5.4% of Cambodia's total garment and footwear exports. This does not take into account of the social impact caused by disruption of economic sustainability and efforts on poverty alleviation. It is hard to imagine the possible impact on the livelihoods of 800,000 garment workers, 80% of whom are women, should many of them be forced out of their jobs, leaving them to resort to migration or other forms of vulnerable jobs.

Cambodia understands that “internationalization” of its domestic politics will not go away any time soon, especially when its evolving young democracy is becoming “electoral currency” for some foreign politicians who often have oversimplified views over Cambodia’s historical and political complexities, and are not fully aware of the values of the “longest peace in Cambodia’s modern history.”

In addressing macroeconomic challenges apart from the above-mentioned political aspects, it is observed that the government is pursuing three major venues, namely structural and industrial diversification, drastic reforms to cut business costs and the strengthening of the logistics sector, and development of a digital economy.

Structural and industrial diversification has been pursued through various supports and incentives that the government is providing toward non-garment manufacturing companies, especially those that can create many jobs and provide technical training for higher-skilled labor. The main strategies and action lines are elaborated in the Industrial Development Policy (IDP).

Structural adjustment has been put into place starting from late March this year through drastic reforms that outlined a 17-point strategy to reduce the cost of doing business. With these new reforms, the government expects to save the private sector up to \$400 million a year. Development of Cambodia’s logistics masterplan and strengthening of a more competitive logistics sector also added up momentum to efforts in cutting business costs.

On cultivating new industries, Cambodia’s strong orientation toward building a digital economy presents opportunities not just for the country but also for potential investors. Cambodia’s digital economy has been gradually taking shape and creating new business activities in digital payment, online entertainment and e-commerce, while a tech-savvy new generation can become both market users or even a workforce to create such platforms.

# ADDRESSING INVESTORS' CONCERNS KEY TO DRAWING JAPANESE INVESTMENTS

Opinion, Phnom Penh Post, 13 August 2020

AEON is one of only two major Japanese companies that have chosen to invest in Cambodia. Addressing investors' concerns may help increase Cambodia's chances to welcome the next batch of Japanese companies.

Fine-tuning "industrial connectivity" is not new to Japan, which has a strong production and supply chain in the Southeast Asian region.

Japan has strategised the way it does business in the region by considering the latter as a single integrated production site with multiple exporting markets at the same time.

Integrated production site refers to the approach that Japanese companies diversify its production lines in various ASEAN member states following comparative advantages and incentives that each country has to offer.

For instance, the upper stream of works that require higher-skills can be located in countries with more skilled labour forces, while the lower stream can be outsourced to other neighbouring countries with non-skilled or lower-skilled labour, with much lower wages.

This has been made possible thanks to the enhanced connectivity in the region and this is where the concept of "industrial connectivity" is derived from.

Other than benefitting from a combination of comparative advantages, industrial connectivity is also important for diversifying risks.

For instance, there were compelling reasons for Japanese companies to spread their production lines to various countries when anti-Japanese sentiment was heated up in China, coupled with the disastrous flood in Thailand in the early 2010s.

The trend of factories shifting out is what we now know as the Plus One effect such as “China+1” and “Thailand+1”.

During that period, Myanmar was the “darling” of the next frontier market for Japanese investment. Cambodia was not a major destination but there were companies like Minebea and AEON who chose Cambodia.

Minebea’s case is the real successful example of “Thailand+1” in which the company can enjoy benefits from both Thailand and Cambodia’s connectivity and incentives while averting risks.

This was the major wave of Japanese investment in Cambodia that assisted the latter to diversify its industrial base beyond the garment sector.

Japanese companies are well known for their good treatment of workers, providing uniforms, air-conditioned factories, dormitories, and even opportunities for informal education.

Strikes against Japanese companies are things that we have never heard of. The most important thing is these companies prosper too.

With the current Covid-19 pandemic, the US-China trade war and superpower rivalry, another wave of Japanese factories’ outflow from China is occurring.

ASEAN member states are vying to welcome those factories, but this time Vietnam is the “darling” destination owing to geopolitical reasons, large market, investment-friendly climate and skilled labour force.

### Supply chain diversification

Japan’s Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) and the Japan External Trade Organisation (Jetro) are the leading implementors for the so-called “Overseas Supply Chain Diversification Support Project”.

This seeks to enhance Japan’s supply chain resilience in Asia, especially through bolstering ASEAN-Japan economic and industrial cooperation.

The project can provide a subsidy of up to approximately \$50 million for

Japanese companies seeking to increase the production capacity in ASEAN member states. In mid-July, the first batch comprising of 30 companies were selected out of the 124 applicants.

In the breakdown, while some companies have multiple destinations, Vietnam received the most number with 15 companies, followed by Thailand (six), Malaysia (four), Philippines (three), Laos (two), and Myanmar and Indonesia one each.

Product-wise, factories bound for Thailand are more advanced, producing rare metals, car spare parts, vaccines and semi-conductors.

For Vietnam, there are varieties of products ranging from personal protective equipment (PPE), air-conditioner motors, smartphone parts, hard-disk drive, car spare parts, and rare earth magnets to semi-conductors.

For Myanmar and Laos, products comprise of medical gowns, gloves and hard-disk drives.

If one specifically focuses on the Mekong region, Cambodia is the only country that was omitted from this new wave of Japanese factories' outflow.

Many reasons can be speculated, such as geopolitical considerations, connectivity to the region, investment climate, weak infrastructure, among others.

In October last year, the chief representative of Jetro-Cambodia, Miyao Masahiro, offered a gloomy picture of Cambodia's investment climate.

From the Japanese investors' perspective, especially manufacturers, electricity shortage, stability and price are still posing challenges for Cambodia if compared to Thailand and Vietnam.

Another challenge is the taxation system which is still different from the surrounding countries. Trade customs system, trade-related procedures, logistic system and cost are also major obstacles for investors seeking to enter Cambodia.

He was not hopeful for Cambodia to attract large companies as he thinks currently, the Kingdom is only fit for Japanese SMEs.

Such observations are rather discouraging for Cambodia-Japan relations which are seeking more enhanced economic interactions when aid is gradually decreasing.

Probably, Cambodian and Japanese policy-makers need to work out more for favourable and practical solutions for mutual benefits, friendship and strategic partnership.

Addressing investors' concerns may help increase Cambodia's chances to welcome the next batch of Japanese companies to be selected by METI and Jetro.

Indeed, countries are struggling to invite investors amid this global economic slowdown, and it is conventional wisdom that it generally takes time and perseverance to convince Japanese companies to come, but when they do come, they are here to stay.

Equally important, they stay to prosper together with local people.

# HOW IMPACTFUL IS AMERICAN BUSINESS IN CAMBODIA?

Opinion, Phnom Penh Post, 30 September 2020

For Cambodia-US bilateral relations, if there's anything that can really stand out, that would be trade.

Bilateral trade has been one of the most robust. Only 20 years ago, it stood at \$850 million. Last year alone, it reached \$5.9 billion – a seven-fold increase. And, despite the current Covid-19 pandemic, exports are up 23 per cent this year. After the US granted duty free access to travel goods in 2016 under the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) programme, travel goods exports from Cambodia increased from \$50 million to nearly \$1 billion last year, according to US ambassador to Cambodia Patrick Murphy.

In terms of investment, it is fair to say the US' presence is not yet significant. Accumulation of US investment from 1994 to 2019 stood at \$1.124 billion. And 12 investment projects worth \$151 million were approved in the last five years.

Nevertheless, it is also observed that the intention and interest for the American companies to do more and to take deeper root in Cambodia is constantly high.

Last month, the US-ASEAN Business Council with several members from the Forbes 500 companies conducted dialogue with Prime Minister Hun Sen and several of his Cabinet members. The areas of interest are quite diverse from oil exploration, automobiles, energy infrastructure, healthcare, cybersecurity, financial service, digital economy, to foods and beverages.

Some of those companies have established firm presence in the kingdom for decades already. For instance, General Electric Company (GE) has been doing business in Cambodia for 13 years in electricity infrastructure and healthcare. In 2017, GE was awarded a contract to supply major equipment for the Cambodian Energy II Co, Ltd (CEL II) 135 MW Coal Fired Power Plant



in Preah Sihanouk province's Stung Hav district.

This plant has helped reduce Cambodia's dependence on hydro generated electricity, using GE's Integrated Power Package which include boiler, steam turbines and air quality control systems. An MOU was also signed between GE and the Ministry of Mines and Energy to install a Continuous Emission Monitoring System (CEMS) to track and closely analyse local pollutant emission levels data in all power plants across the country, not just the plant that involves GE, according to the company's press release.

In healthcare sector, apart from business dealing through supply of medical equipment, especially in the fight against Covid-19, GE has also supported Cambodia through Safe Surgery 2020 programme with Cambodia being one of the first countries in Southeast Asia selected for implementation. The company has provided \$12 million in funding to bring in modern medical equipment and develop an in-country biomedical engineering equipment technician training programme (BMET) to more than 40 hospitals in 25 provinces, said the press release.

For automobiles, Cambodia is quite unique in ASEAN as it can accept both the European and the US automotive products standards and technical regulations. American vehicles, namely Ford, has made an increased visibility on Cambodian roads.

The above activities conducted by major US companies indicated that their presence does not stop at profit-making and packing home all the returns.

Their conducts are visible and transparent. They hire local people, including managerial positions. Their strong engagement in social activities, technology transfer, vocational training, and social development of the host country is commendable.

Such gestures manifest their long-term commitment and inclination for responsible business sustainability.

For that reason, attracting American investors undoubtedly receives top leadership level attention and whole-of-government support from Cambodia.

The US embassy is also working hard in this regard. They were instrumental in opening market of travel goods to Cambodia back in 2016. And the relentless efforts to achieve more are quite visible and have been consistent for all American ambassadors.

Of course, both governments can have differences, which is normal. But it is the duty for both governments to serve the interest of the two peoples. Trade and investment serve the people, and it is the responsibility of all governments to put people first.

# STRENGTHENING THE VISUALISATION OF 'CAMBODIAN ECONOMIC DREAMS'

Opinion, Phnom Penh Post, 2 February 2021

To strengthen the visualisation of “Cambodian Economic Dreams”, the Kingdom is in real need of “economisation of political discourse” against the current dangerous trend of “politicisation of economic discourse”.

Politicisation of economic discourse is dangerous not just for domestic politics but also for international relations. For instance, Cambodian diaspora is seen as pursuing high-level politicisation of economic discourse when they commonly call other nations to impose sanction on their own native countries.

This is a stark contrast to Vietnamese diaspora who always bring in investment capitals from all over the world to their own motherland, defying all ideological divide. Even among politicians in the Southeast Asian region, it is completely unheard of that they would resort to calling on foreigners to impose economic sanction on their own nations, no matter how harsh their political competition is.

In terms of international relations, the politicisation of trade barriers and discrimination of economic activities based on geopolitical orientation is a growing matter of concern. Such politicisation does not only divide nations, and limit self-determination on the choice of development but also disrupt the continuity and sustainability of economic development and empowerment of developing nations.

When one thinks of economisation of political discourse, there can be two approaches for discussion: future direction and policy tools.

## *Future direction*

The core question lies on what kind of future economy that Cambodia is aspiring to become. Such discussion should be based on the past achievements of Cambodia’s socio-economic development, and it cannot be an abrupt

imposition of perfect over-expectation of foreign economic and social models.

Does Cambodia want to become an industrialised economy or still want to pursue a modernised agricultural nation? This question remains a “tug-of-war” in terms of deep thinking, soul-searching and real development on the ground.

Some may think that agriculture cannot make Cambodia rich; agriculture sector still faces challenges in terms of unsustainable market development, cost of logistics and elevation of farmers’ living standard; profit from producing rice the whole year can only buy one iPhone but producing one iPhone a day can buy a whole year of rice stock, etc. This group of thought think that Cambodia should shift towards “industrialisation” and “digitalisation” of its economy.

But another group may think that Cambodia cannot be totally independent from agriculture considering its industrial structure and labour force. When it comes to “industrialisation” and “digitalisation”, we tend to be over-conscious or over-reliant on external market, and thus Cambodia can be vulnerable to external shocks.

It should be reminded that Cambodia was saved by agriculture twice, when the country was affected by the Asian financial crisis in 1997 and global financial crisis in 2008. Agriculture had acted as buffer industry to absorb shocks from the crisis when factory workers found safe haven by returning to the farmland of their parents. This can happen only because the current factory workers are first-generation factory workers. We would not be so sure that the second-generation of factory workers can rely on their parents’ farmland again when their factories face a similar crisis.

So we could see that developments of various industries are not totally self-exclusive and self-independent, rather they can be mutually stimulating and have simultaneous development. In a sense, such “tug-of-war” can also be healthy for Cambodia’s economic development as it seeks to build stronger industrial base while enhancing resilience towards external shocks.

### *Policy tools*

There are endeavours that Cambodia has been pursuing, and there can be

some new inspirations along the way too.

Firstly, the digital economy. Currently, the government is developing the digital economy policy and will introduce Policy Framework for Digital Society and Economy in the near future. Cambodia sees the opportunities that new technologies can provide to developing countries to skip the learning curve of the traditional industrial development phase.

Such policy will also better enhance Cambodia's capability to cope with the impact of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, or Industry 4.0. It is observed that the government's strategic vision is not to create a Cambodian version of a Silicon Valley but to focus on a robust digital environment that allows the countries' enterprises to connect with global value chains.

Secondly, the development of the multi-purpose special economic zone (SEZ). Cambodia plans to develop Preah Sihanouk province as a multi-purpose SEZ modeled after the Chinese city of Shenzhen. This is being pursued through, among others, the Industrial Development Policy (IDP) 2015-2025, and the formulation and consequent implementation of the urban development master plan emulated from the 1991 Shenzhen Master Plan.

Thirdly, the revitalisation of border economy. This is an inspiration from Thailand that is implementing its Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) to develop cross border trade with neighbours. In fact, Cambodia also has a lot of provinces with its neighbours; however, there is no known specific trade and economic policy designed exclusively for border provinces other than the establishment of checkpoints and corridors.

Indeed, there are many other inspirations for the development of Cambodia's economy. Many of these endeavours and policies have already been clearly laid out in the government's Rectangular Strategy Phase IV in a very comprehensive manner with substantive inputs from all policy-executors.

It is known that the Rectangular Strategy Phase IV is considered as policy tool to support Cambodia's goal of becoming an upper middle-income country by 2030 and a high-income nation by 2050.

But as we speak, not many people can really visualise what Cambodia's Vision

2030 and 2050 look like. It is anticipated that the next successor policy of the Rectangular Strategy, whatever the name may be, should provide the public a better visualisation of these ambitious economic dreams. It is important to make the dreams “visible” and “feel-able” for all Cambodian people in their ordinary livelihood beyond the numeric display of economic statistics.

For example, to aim for science-based agriculture with high productivity and good income generation for farmers. To make Cambodia become a “geographically-central” logistic hub in the Mekong region by 2050. To build highly operational railway links by 2050. To create nation-wide quality hospitals to mitigate reliance on overseas medical treatments, and reliance on central hospitals in the capital city. To create one million technological manpower by 2030. To create social security system to ensure that working people would not feel insecure when they fall ill, retire or lose their jobs by 2035. And so on and so forth.

These are merely the playing of thoughts. Of course, such dreams can be extreme, radical and unrealistic, but dreams can also be seen, felt and shared by people. Dreams can also give people the sense of hope on what economic development really benefits them in their daily life. Dreams can give Cambodian people strong confidence on their own country’s economic development, and feel the sense of security when we think of the wellbeing of our next generations. Dreams can also help strengthen Cambodian people’s pride on their nation and common identities.

We need to further promote “economisation of political discourse” so that we can collect and identify common desires among all stakeholders in our effort to further visualising and consolidating “Cambodian Economic Dreams” that are shared by the people and leaving no one behind.

# CAMBODIA'S NEW DRAFT LAW ON INVESTMENT AND ITS EFFECTS

Opinion, Phnom Penh Post, 16 February 2021

The Council for the Development of Cambodia (CDC) has completed the drafting of the long-awaited new Law on Investment. The draft will be later tabled at the Economic and Financial Policy Committee before being submitted to the Council of Ministers and the National Assembly for elaboration, and is expected to enter into force by the end of the first semester of 2021, if things go smoothly.

The new draft law is expected to enhance predictability and boost further incentives on top of the existing ones.

New incentives have been developed based on long-term consultations with the private sector and internal discussions among key government stakeholders. Within the government, introducing new incentives is the constant battles between dual duties and dilemma between the need to maintain and increase revenue collection, and the need to nurture long-term business and attract new investment. It is a “chicken-and-egg” discussion on which should come first, all the while without compromising the current level of national revenue.

The 21st Cambodia-Japan Public-Private Sector Meeting held on February 11 can offer a good glance of dialogue between public and private sectors on terms and conditions for investment, and even internal cross-sectoral debates between various government stakeholders. This platform is rather uniquely targeting Japanese investors, with a no-nonsense atmosphere and attachment to technical details saved for serious and real business dealings on the ground.

The Japanese side is represented mainly by the Japanese Business Association of Cambodia (JBAC) which currently boasts 270 Japanese company members belonging to various sectors including manufacturing, construction, real estate, trade, transport, commerce, finance, insurance and services. All of them are holding a high standard of compliance with Cambodian law and following

strictly new regulations, social rules and labour conditions. Therefore, their concerns are being taken care of very seriously by the Cambodian government.

And such platform is in fact beneficial not only for Japanese firms but also for the overall improvement of Cambodia's investment climate and confidence.

With the CDC as coordinator, other key Cambodian stakeholders include the Ministry of Economy and Finance; the General Department of Taxation (GDT); the General Department of Customs and Excise (GDCE); the Ministry of Commerce; the Ministry of Mine and Energy; the Electricite du Cambodge (EDC); the Ministry of Public Work and Transport; the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training; the Ministry of Environment; and other ministries that may vary according to challenges of the days raised by the Japanese side.

Discussion focused on extremely specific technical issues, namely seniority indemnity; applying accounting treatment of CMT (Cut-Make-Trim) to the whole manufacturing industries; parallel import; new price table for electricity; the Environmental Endowment Fund that is voluntary and the Social and Environmental Fund that is obligatory; early operationalisation of the Stung Bot border gate; and multi-stakeholder human resource development supported by the Japanese government.

The face-to-face discussion helped both sides to clarify on interpretation and implementation of new regulations, raise mutual concerns and update on key policy issues.

Some of the key concerns for Japanese companies have been structural challenges for Cambodia such as electricity cost; difficulties to localise managers and site managers; employee competency; increasing employee wages; underdeveloped logistics infrastructure; and difficulty in local procurement of raw materials and parts. It is worth noting that Cambodia's local content in terms of raw material and parts supply is relatively very low. According to the most recent survey conducted by the Japan External Trade Organisation (JETRO), only 5.4 per cent of inputs used by surveyed Japanese firms are procured locally compared to at least 20 per cent for other countries in the region.

These challenges are in fact the very essence of new incentives that the draft



Law on Investment aims to address.

For instance, the draft law provides for the exemption of value-added tax (VAT) for the purchase of certain production inputs that are locally produced. The draft law also gives special tax deduction rate of 150 per cent from the tax base for companies' expenses on research and development (R&D) and innovation; human resource development through provision of vocational training and skills for Cambodian workers; upgrading of machinery to serve the production line; construction of dormitories, canteens, and nurseries; provision of comfortable means of transport; and other expense that aims to promote the welfare of Cambodian employees. These are concrete structural policy measures provided by the new draft law to improve competitiveness as well as provide welfare support toward workers that in effect will also address challenges raised above by Japanese companies.

On top of that, the tax holiday has been revised to make it even more generous as Qualified Investment Projects (QIPs) can obtain an income tax exemption period from three to nine years from the beginning of the first income. After the end of tax holiday period, QIPs can also pay tax at a progressive rate for six years, while all imports are exempted from full duty including excise and VAT. In terms of operation, the draft law also provides for the enhancement of investment facilitation, particularly through the improvement of "One Stop Mechanism".

Learning especially from the Covid-19 situation, the draft law also provides government flexibility in giving special incentive for specific industries through the annual Law on Financial Management in the unforeseen circumstances or to newly emerging industries that are not stipulated in a separate sub-decree.

Stability and predictability are key for investment confidence. In other words, instability and unpredictability are the enemy for investors. Despite attraction to incentives, it is common that investors often seek early warning and are very cautious for abrupt policy changes that may disturb their mid- and long-term investment plan.

Strong political, social and macro-economic stability have been a great asset for Cambodia in the last two decades, resulting in a stronger investment confidence. Nevertheless, Cambodia still needs to constantly make more

efforts in gaining more trust and confidence from investors especially when it comes to legal frameworks, and implementation on the ground, if Cambodia wishes to further strengthen its competitiveness in the region.

# HOW COULD MIGRANT WORKERS CONTRIBUTE TO CAMBODIA'S FUTURE ECONOMY?

Opinion, Khmer Times, 20 April 2021

With over one million of migrant workers, if one of them send home \$100 a month, the annual remittance to Cambodia's economy would be at least \$1.2 billion annually. Remittance is one of the most basic measurements of contribution by Cambodian migrant workers. Labor migration is important in terms of complementing domestic job opportunities.

Remittance can be a good source of consumption by dependents at home. If managed well, it can be a good saving, or even seed money for initial investment when those workers return home.

That said, labor migration is not economically sustainable in the long run for home economy regardless of how abundant the sources of foreign jobs, and how high the level of incomes. At some points, those workers will have to return home as they cannot permanently stay and work at the host countries.

The fact is migratory work does not make people rich nor does it make the country become developed because it does not help strengthen the country's economic and industrial foundation other than private consumption.

Cambodia cannot become a country of labor exporter forever. As Cambodia's economy is developing, Cambodia also needs labor force to support its own economy and industry.

So the question that we need to ask is that, when a considerable number of those workers have returned home, how do we integrate them in Cambodian economy? Or to put it in other words, how could migrant workers contribute to Cambodia's future economy?

Migrant workers are expected to bring back home new ideas and skills thanks

to their exposure to developed societies that have strong entrepreneurial culture, and high technical skills, especially in countries like the Republic of Korea and Japan. These two countries have good work ethics and they strongly respect human rights and labor rights.

There can be many ways for migrant workers to contribute to Cambodia's future economy. Among others, two possible ways as below can be considered.

Firstly, they can contribute through improvement of domestic investment confidence in terms of supply of quality labor force. Korean and Japanese investors often complain that Cambodia lacks higher skilled labor forces, technicians and middle management staff.

Therefore, it is important that investors know that at certain point of time Cambodia does have a larger pool of skilled labors who used to be migrant workers in their own countries. To do so, the clustering of knowledges and resources is important. This can be done through the establishment of association of former migrant workers with specific skills, for example, the association of former migrant workers in South Korea in agriculture, manufacturing factories, or services. At least, investors should know whom should they contact for a large pool of human resources that have already been trained in their own countries and with good understanding of their culture.

If Cambodia has good clustering of such labor forces, we can possibly urge Korean and Japanese investors to outsource those jobs and factories to Cambodia as such options can be much cheaper than having to operate in their home countries, and bringing in labor forces overseas through many administrative arrangements. Equally important, such option is much safer for workers too. For Korean and Japanese companies, they would benefit much from those former migrant workers because they have technical capacity, understand their managerial demands, know the language, and also understand the culture.

As such, to prepare for such clustering, it is important that migrant workers should have a clear career goals, through for example career orientation programs, prior to their departure to make sure that they can address the skill shortages when they return home, and can play pro-active role in contributing

to the boosting of investment confidence at home.

Secondly, migrant workers can contribute to economy through the boosting of entrepreneurial culture. South Korea and Japan are good examples of strong entrepreneurial culture and management skills. If migrant workers are ambitious enough, they can learn those skills and can start creating companies of their own when they return.

There are some success stories of former migrant workers who have created successful businesses after they learned from Korean and Japanese experiences. And some tycoons can even give back to society especially during the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic.

Their success stories should be more amplified to encourage more migrant workers to learn from these good examples.

To help boost entrepreneurial culture and ecosystem, some successful migrant workers can possibly consider creating, for example, the Entrepreneur Association of Former Migrant Workers from South Korea or Japan.

If they are wealthy enough, they can possibly create the Entrepreneurship Fund for Former Migrant Workers to support those dreamers who are highly ambitious in creating their own Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). Former migrant workers know each other, and thus they can use their connection of trust to decide whether to provide funding for the initial capital investment for those who are believed to be capable of creating and running their own companies or those who have viable and innovative business ideas.

If such ecosystem can be created, migrant workers can contribute not only to sustainability and self-reliance of their own livelihood but also for others who seek jobs from their companies. For Cambodia as a whole, it could benefit from enhanced private sector-driven economy that creates more jobs, and stronger domestic markets and industries.

Either of the above two ways, the main goal is to ensure that the livelihood of migrant workers should become better when they return home, and to create an enabling factor for them to become the integral part of the growing Cambodian middle-class. They are the very people who help build and maintain

stronger economy at home with stronger trust and more integrated economy with countries that used to train them such as South Korea and Japan.

We should aim to create healthy economic relations with those countries that provide safe and dignified workspace for our workers, and enhance healthy relations that enable entrepreneurial cultures and support the dream of migrant workers to become the next Cambodian middle-class.

Migrant workers do have dreams, and their dreams are strongly related with Cambodia's future economy.

# CAMBODIA REFOCUSING ON SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC MODEL

Opinion, Asia Times, 3 June 2021

When Japan became the world's second-largest economy, Akio Morita, co-founder of Sony Corporation, used the terms "10-minute economy" and "10-year economy" to criticize the United States for being too reliant on intangibles such as financial trading and the stock market, which are immediately profitable, while giving less importance to manufacturing, which is more sustainable.

Most Japanese believe that the strength of their country's economy is sustained by its manufacturing industry, with its advanced technology and robust investment on research and development. When China became the second-largest economy, that was also attributed to its strong manufacturing industry, as China became the factory of the world.

As for Cambodia, it probably needs both the "10-minute economy" and the "10-year economy."

Although Cambodia is trying to promote manufacturing through the Industrial Development Policy (IDP), its industrial base is still weak, and almost entirely dependent on foreign investment, both in terms of technology and capital.

As a general observation, Cambodian businessmen also want to get rich quick through the "10-minute economy," especially through real-estate speculation, which does not require investment in factory construction, technology, and human-resource management.

The strong influx of foreign capital occurs only occasionally and it does not happen for a long period of time either. Thus when this high inflow occurs and involves mainly real-estate development and construction, it is difficult to blame Cambodian businessmen for being tempted to focus on land speculation rather than a more tangible manufacturing industry.

Looking back to the 1980s and 1990s, Cambodia used to rely on capital investment from Thailand and Vietnam, but the economy then was very fragile and capital inflows not that significant. It was a postwar economy, and instability ruled.

A major influx of foreign direct investment emerged from South Korea in the early 2000s after the civil war came to a complete end in 1998, but that did not last long because of the financial crisis in 2007.

Korean investment focused mainly on real-estate business with quick profits, and the financial crisis brought the real-estate industry to a standstill and caused the almost complete disappearance of Korean investors from Cambodia. Uncompleted construction like the 42 Gold Tower was a symbol of the Koreans' unfinished business, which was taken over by Chinese investment in the late 2010s.

Now Cambodia has embraced a large influx of foreign capital again. This time it is from China, which gained momentum especially after 2016, when Phnom Penh and Sihanoukville saw an abrupt increase in high-rise buildings. Some landowners in Sihanoukville, possibly numbering in the thousands, became overnight millionaires.

But one must remember that such significant inflows of foreign capital do not last forever, and such opportunities probably happen only once every 10 years or so. And if it flows in fast, it will flow out fast too, just like during the 1997 and 2007 financial crises. When the "10-minute economy" retreats, then the "10-year economy" must play a role in maintaining stability.

But creating a "10-year economy" is not easy, and based on the experiences in most countries, it must be conducted through state-led industrialization supported by local conglomerates. Examples abound in Japan and South Korea, where conglomerates have supported and participated in government-led industrialization in the early stages to crystalize those countries' long-term economic success.

In such examples, conglomerates worked closely with government to promote industrial capacity building, create new industries and boost the country's competitiveness on the international stage. The government also depends on



these giants, which in turn also rely on favorable state policies and incentives.

The most recent example is in Vietnam, where the Vingroup conglomerate has been able to develop and produce electric cars thanks to full policy support by the Vietnamese government.

Cambodia's industrialization effort is still in its infancy, as it has enjoyed uninterrupted peace for merely 20 years and has gradually changed its reputation from a country with a dark history to a country that is stable, fit, and confident for foreign direct investment.

Cambodia used to look like a no-go zone served only by those who conduct humanitarian affairs and adventurous travelers, but the tourists and investors who came to Cambodia in the 2010s were often forced to see that their previous perceptions and prejudices were no longer valid.

The future of Cambodia's economy requires more attention to the building of tangible industry by local companies with policy support from the government. It is encouraging that Cambodia has started to see some big local companies daring to hire foreign CEOs to provide expertise, to buy technologies from abroad, and also to offer high salaries to Cambodians who have internationally recognized qualifications.

Cambodia needs more of this kind of courage, larger domestic capital investments, higher political commitment and sustainability to mobilize national momentum, to create the sense of national direction, and to create an environment and ecosystem conducive for domestic companies to dare to invest in manufacturing.

# CAMBODIA'S ECONOMY: WHAT TO WATCH FOR IN 2022

Opinion, Asia Times, 4 February 2022

The country has largely brought the pandemic under control, and signs of a strong recovery are good

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, Cambodia was a world leader in economic growth and poverty reduction. It sustained an average growth rate of 7.7% between 1995 and 2019, raising its per capita income from US\$323 in 1995 to \$1,621 in 2019, and graduated to a lower-middle-income economy in 2015. The poverty rate fell from 47.8% in 2007 to 13.5% in 2014.

Like every country, Cambodia's economy as well as society as a whole has been severely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Nonetheless, since last November, Cambodia has reopened the country and started to live with Covid-19, betting on the kingdom's herd immunity built upon one of the world's highest vaccination rates.

As of November 28, the country was ranked second in Asia and seventh in the world for the total share of fully and partly vaccinated people in its total population. On December 20, the results of the so-called "February 20 community event" were declared an end after the government had struggled to contain the outbreak nationwide for 10 months.

The world is quite contradictory because the advanced economies have a surplus of vaccines and yet they are struggling with vaccine hesitancy, while developing countries have been battling for access to vaccines.

Cambodia is among the lucky few developing countries that can secure vaccines for its people, who welcome inoculation as the only means and strategy for national reopening up. The World Health Organization attested to Cambodia's vaccine success in that regard, but also warned of "vaccine optimism."

As of November, 87.7% of the population of about 16 million had been fully vaccinated, and Covid-19 has been under control with fewer than 3,000 deaths.

On top of public health measures, robust fiscal, economic and social-security measures have been pursued to prevent the full-scale fallout of the economy and people's livelihoods. In December, the government laid out 10 rounds of intervention measures to support survival and recovery of micro, small and medium enterprises and sectors most affected, namely garment and tourism, and to provide minimum basic needs for 700,000 vulnerable households.

According to the Ministry of Economy and Finance (MEF), \$829 million was spent for interventions in 2020, and \$1.454 billion in 2021. For the national budget in 2022, under the "3Rs" pillars ("Recovery, Reforms, Resilience"), the government has earmarked \$1.014 billion for intervention, making the total expense since 2020 amount to approximately \$3.4 billion.

The MEF predicted growth for 2021 at 3.0% and 5.6% for 2022, expecting the economy gradually to reach its potential in the medium term, supported by global demand and a gradual recovery in investment confidence.

For 2022, three trends should be key for observation on development of Cambodia's economy.

The first thing to watch is how well Cambodia can tap the benefits from the success of the inoculation drive.

Despite strong efforts to reopen the country and economy, tourists and investors are not yet ready to come back. The strength of the vaccination program offers assurance that Cambodia's production capacity and preparedness of working people are intact.

Indeed, people's cross-border mobility is still restricted, but the flow of goods is on the uptick and therefore contributing to growth of trade.

Cambodia's global non-gold trade exceeded \$36 billion in the first 11 months of 2021, rising by more than 24% year on year. Goods exports amounted to \$15.613 billion, up by 22.6%, driven by textiles, bicycles, furniture, fur

skins, rubber, plastics, wood planks, construction materials, wiring and wiring components, electronic components, sugar, bananas, cassava, mangoes and other agricultural produce.

Imports amounted to \$20.4 billion, climbing by 25.3%, mainly fabrics, construction materials and fuel.

Second, attention should be paid to the quiet but steady progress of public investment and reforms.

This is about turning crisis into opportunities. The pandemic has been turned around as a stimulus for domestic reforms to build more resilience, for robust infrastructure investment, and for formulations of various long-term policies.

On the issue of reform, the long-awaited updated investment law was promulgated on October 15, 2021. The revised law provides better business facilitation and more tailor-made incentives, and encourages investors to focus on priority areas that promote industrial diversification, as well as encouraging provision of support for capacity-building and welfare of workers.

### *Infrastructure projects*

In terms of infrastructure development, when tourist figures were at rock bottom, the government built and renovated 34 roads spanning 84 kilometers in Preah Sihanouk province, at a cost of \$294 million. A similar project was conducted in Siem Reap province, with 38 roads of more than 106km, costing \$149.21 million. These two major projects were completed.

Infrastructure mega-projects such as Siem Reap International Airport (slated for completion by 2023), new Phnom Penh International airport (26% complete as of November 2021) and Cambodia's first ever expressway running from Phnom Penh to Sihanoukville (progress 70% as of December 2021) are ongoing steadily.

When Laos inaugurated its high-speed railway last year, Cambodia remained the last country in the Mekong region without a properly functional freight and passenger railway.

Infrastructure development is still key to national production capacity and economic growth.

During Covid-19 hibernation, some long-term policies were developed and/or adopted last year.

For instance, in October, the MEF contracted a Shenzhen-based Chinese institute for the development of a master plan that seeks to transform Preah Sihanouk province into a “multi-purpose special economic zone,” modeled after the success of Shenzhen city as part of the implementation of the Industrial Development Policy 2015-2025 of Cambodia.

In a similar vein, the Ministry of Land Management, Urban Planning and Construction has officially approved the Sihanoukville Land Use Master Plan, or Vision 2038, to provide a framework and direction for the effective management and development of Sihanoukville City.

Apart from the great attention paid to the buzzing Sihanoukville City, the government also approved the draft Mondulhiri Tourism Development Master Plan 2021-2035 as a comprehensive initiative to attract 3 million domestic and international tourists annually to the northeast region’s eco-tourism and biodiversity gem of Cambodia by 2035.

If well developed, the master plan will turn the northwestern province of Mondulhiri into another major economic pillar of Cambodia, apart from Phnom Penh, Siem Reap and Sihanoukville.

In May 2021, the government also adopted the “Cambodia Digital Economy and Society Policy Framework 2021-2035” that sets out a long-term vision to build a vibrant digital economy and society by laying the foundations for digital adoption and transformation in all sectors of society.

The above are some of the major master plans and long-term policies that have been recently adopted as Cambodia is trying to rebuild a more resilient recovery and society.

The third key trend is about the ongoing quest for industrial diversification, which goes hand in hand with market diversification.

It is worth noticing that in recent years the non-garment sector has been on a growth trajectory. The garment sector used to play a leading role in the economy of Cambodia, accounting for 74% of total merchandise exports in 2018. Despite the accelerated growth rate of 6.8%, garment exports no longer account for the majority of goods exports but rather 45.9% of the total, amounting to \$5.82 billion during the first nine months of 2021.

Exports of travel goods surpassed those of footwear products and became the second-largest item, accounting for \$1.04 billion. Export of footwear products is third, reaching \$1.0 billion. The fourth-largest manufacturing export product is bicycles, which amount to \$470 million.

The fifth- and sixth-largest exported products are agricultural commodities, and milled rice and rubber, amounting to \$285 million and \$266 million respectively. The newly emerging manufactured products, which include electrical, electronic, vehicle parts, and cables combined, reached \$412 million.

### *Trade strategies*

While the US and the European Union continue to be the largest destinations for Cambodia's merchandise export, various free-trade agreements that have been adopted recently, namely the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and FTAs with China and South Korea, are expected to open up more market horizon for Cambodia's products.

Cambodia is negotiating with China to allow more import of diversified agricultural produce, especially items that Cambodia has strong capacity to produce and meet with high focus on quality from China's consumption market.

With Cambodia's geographically strategic location right in the heart of Southeast Asia, Japanese retailer Aeon has recently chosen the kingdom to develop its logistics hub within the region. The plan is to build a roughly 3-hectare logistics center in Sihanoukville, offering import storage, customs clearance and support for cross-border online retail.

This will become Cambodia's first bonded warehouse as the government has plans to develop a free-trade port, with backing from the Japanese government

and the Japan International Cooperation Agency.

Cambodia is also preparing for the next major economic transformation as it is expected to graduate from least developed country (LDC) status in the next several years. After graduating from the LDC category, Cambodia is expected to no longer benefit from LDC-specific international support measures.

One of the main support measures for LDCs is preferential access to developed economies' markets under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP), including the EU's "Everything But Arms."

Cambodia is conducting consultative meetings with various stakeholders to develop its own "National Smooth Transition Strategy." Among others, apart from cultivating new market destinations, Cambodia is studying preference erosion and is preparing itself for negotiation of GSP Plus to maintain market, stability of production, and investment attractiveness.

# **PART 3: SOCIETY AND CULTURE**



# CAMBODIA SAYS NO TO NEO-COLONIALISM

07 April 2010

An interesting interview of Mr. Om Yin Tieng, Head of Cambodia Human Rights Commission on Radio France Internationale (RFI) on 3 April 2010.

There were some emotional expressions used in his interview but the base line is clear: as a sovereign state, Cambodia does not want to receive “order” from any institutions. Some organizations are acting in the we-know-all-about-Cambodia attitude, or even we-know-Cambodia-better-than-Cambodia attitude. This is the mentality of colonialism that needs to be eliminated. As a representative elected from the will of people, the obligation of the government is to answer to what Cambodian people really need and not to the satisfaction of those groups.

A single negative voice speaks louder than the 10 positive voices and this sort of tendency has always distorted the general images of Cambodia. Some groups look at a single tree and describe it as forest.

Similarly, this is the major difference between Yash Ghai and Surya Subedi. The former came to Cambodia less than a week, read a few articles about Cambodia and then issued a formal statement in his capacity as Special Representative of the Secretary General for human rights in Cambodia. “But Surya Subedi takes different approach. He always says that he needs to know more, he wants to talk to more people”, Om Yin Tieng described characteristics of the latter, who is the current Special Rapporteur (not representative) on the situation of human rights in Cambodia.

An institution in the UK named Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) predicted last year that Cambodia has high potential in facing social disorder due to global financial crisis based on their *Political Instability Index* where Cambodia was ranked neck and neck with Sudan. But we can clearly see that their prediction was wrong. Cambodia even achieved modest economic growth of 0.1% (preliminary estimation) in 2009 amid hard time.

It is true that Cambodia has shortcomings, but we don't need a BOSS, we need FRIENDS/PARTNERS who cooperate not dictate or instruct. Once they work in Cambodia, they should at least know the mentality of Cambodian people. Cambodian people have pride and dignity. We respect others while we expect others to do the same. And this is universally true not only to Cambodian people.

While we respect our partners' opinions, one also needs to bear in mind that one cannot breed fat European cows, which are used to 4 different seasons, in a tropical country like Cambodia. Otherwise we need to build a farm equipped with air-cons, which is too much luxury for a developing country like Cambodia, where most people can only afford to buy fans. There are shortcomings that I think would come naturally in a country in the middle of development. But that is merely the dissatisfaction triggered from relative wealth comparison or the "Lexus effect" and is not the absolute poverty. In fact, most people are having better life compared with that of 10 years ago.

I think we just need to look at the basic points to understand how Cambodian society has evolved over the decade. People's fluctuation during festivities is a good example to see Cambodia's progress. Nowadays, people's fluctuation during festivities is in a larger magnitude than before both from the countryside to the city and vice versa. What does this phenomenon tell us? First, we have peace and security that make people feel safe when they travel. Then we have roads which make our trips possible. Then people have money to travel and to pay for the visit to their families.

To go to Siem Reap, 10 years ago, we used to take a day through the hell-like road. Cambodians even have the saying that: "if you want to go to Angkor Wat, don't pray or wish to go or even make a plan. Otherwise your wish will not come true." It was like a dream destination but now there isn't any person who believe in this superstitious saying anymore because we have roads that make Siem Reap accessible within less than 5 hours on a bus from Phnom Penh that cost us less than USD 10.

These are common things, but they tell us a lot about Cambodia's development progress especially peace. Peace doesn't mean simply the absence of armed conflict, but it also refers to the peace of mind of the people. Cambodian people did have peace when UNTAC came but mentally we didn't have peace as we

were always afraid that civil war would break out one day. But the situation is no longer like that after the dissolution of Khmer Rouge organization.

Of course, we must not rest content with current situation, but we should not lose our pride and hope either. If we think too negative, we always come up with the same answer: "it is impossible". This does not bring about any positive development to Cambodia. We need to understand the real situation and have pride in our action for the future development of Cambodia.

# AN UNDERSTANDING OF KHMER CHARACTERISTICS

Part of the article was published as Opinion, Khmer Times, 11 January 2019

“Khmer Characteristics” is a book written by Bunchan Mol, an anti-royalist, anti-French colonist, republican politician and member of Khmer Issarak. Published in 1973, the book described internal power struggle in Cambodian politics and bad behaviors of some politicians and public servants in the period from 1940s to 1970s. Earlier formed as a resistant guerilla force for the people, some members of Khmer Issarak increased their power to the level of fiefdom and had tendency to pursue barbaric bloody power struggle, which he described as “Khmer Characteristics.”

Although the book met the writer’s purposes, it is rather misleading in the way he entitled the book in a generalized manner as “Khmer Characteristics” because he only described about a handful of Cambodian politicians and public servants.

The context of the book was in the period from 1940s to 1970s, when Cambodia had never known sustained peace. Colonialism, guerrilla wars, internal fight for power was all that Cambodian knew of and the society never had the chance to educate its mass over the period of five centuries of endless chaos.

While he raised all the bad aspects, he did not suggest what should be the Khmer characteristics, which I intend to discuss here.

A reflective comparison came to my mind referring to how Japanese citizens can adhere to high morality by standing behind the long queue for food supply without looting and price hike after the devastating tsunami in 2011. Nobel laureate Amartya Sen always attributes the great development of Japanese society to the achievement of basic education in which Japan got all their people fully literate in 40 years after the Meiji restoration in 1868.

In those times, Cambodia had just fallen under the French colonization and educating the mass had never been the purpose of colonization.

Now that Cambodia is enjoying sustained peace, at least for the last twenty years, the majority of Cambodian people have had the chance to embrace education. Cambodia Socio-Economic Survey 2015 report shows that the adult literacy rate has increased up to 80.5 percent. State budget for education reached US\$850 million last year, a record quarter of the overall government budget. State also aims to equip every district with a high school, every commune a junior high school and every village a primary school.

While the access to primary education level was 93.5 percent for 2016-2017 school year, only 55.7 percent and 25.1 percent have enrolled in lower and upper secondary level. The figures also show that 20.7 percent have no education, 36 percent have some education and only 22 percent with primary level completion. Only 16.7 percent have completed secondary education level.

Even Cambodia is still at its early stage of institutional building, with this figure, Cambodia has reasons to hope that “Khmer Characteristics” will never be the same like the war-time period and those described in the book.

So then, what should be called “Khmer Characteristics” the qualities that Cambodians should aspire to? What are the qualities that all Khmer can draw common line of identities and kinship? What are the Khmer qualities that future generations should proudly learn to shape themselves?

Indeed, there are several qualities of “Khmer Characteristics” that Cambodia can aspire to when one observes the Angkor period, the period when Khmer empire reached the height of civilization. Here I would like to raise four qualities that I think can identify the high value of Khmer characteristics. Those are mercy, tolerance and kindness; respect for ancestors and seniors; diligence, teamwork and unity; and strong fighting spirit.

I call these qualities as the qualities of “Khmer-Angkor builders” and “Khmer-Angkor warriors.”

*Mercy, tolerance and kindness*

Mercy, tolerance and kindness was one of the Brahma-Viharas or four sublime states of mind which are Loving-kindness (metta); Compassion (karuna);

Sympathetic Joy (mudita); Equanimity (upekkha) in Pali. Among many explanations, the four-faces of Bayond temple were said to symbolize these four qualities of leadership of Khmer revered kings.

Examples are still abound today.

Even after nearly a century of French colonization and heavy bombing from the US, it is hard to say that Cambodian people hold any grudge against the French and the American.

The ways that Khmer people can live side by side putting aside all the past of atrocity and internal fight with the Khmer Rouge guerilla forces represented the high level of tolerance of Khmer people. Such peaceful co-existence was key essence to the current peace and is often unthinkable for any society with long history of communal violence in the world.

### *Respect for ancestors and seniors*

A Western friend wept when he joined our family in paying respect to grandparents' graves. He said that Khmer people still respect their parents even if they passed away which is not the case for him when he has to live all by himself without his children's care.

Strong family bond and respect for seniors, parents and ancestors is still strongly rooted in Khmer culture and tradition despite the current economic advancement and social modernization.

Without this quality, knowledge, tradition and art mastership cannot not be passed down through generations. Accumulation of expertise cannot be realized either. Before the beginning of most Khmer cultural shows, there always involves a small ceremony to pay respect to ancestors.

Perfectionism and refinement of Banteay Srey temple, the beautiful Khmer Royal Ballet and other UNESCO heritages of Khmer origin are not something that can be formulated within a generation.

This quality involves how Khmer people protect and respect the past achievements while further pursue continued national construction and

endless perfection.

From accumulation of all the big stones piece by piece into correct architectural structure to carving of bas-relief stroke by stroke in Angkor Wat and other temples; these were not done without the bond of mastership and continuation of ancestors' aspiration and planning. Some temples were even built by several kings.

### *Diligence, teamwork and unity*

This is interconnected with the previous quality. The continuation of expertise is linked with how diligent and strong teamwork that Khmer people can achieve.

One stroke of carving mistake can ruin the already accumulated stones. The deep carving of Banteay Srey bas-relief is nothing but perfection with intense diligence. A temple that was built over the course of 20 to 30 years means that teamwork and unity is an absolute requirement to sustain the long construction of each masterpiece as well as consistency of architectural styles and structures.

### *Fighting spirit*

It often involves a negative connotation when one discusses about Khmer's fighting spirit. Instead of being the quality, people often say this genetic trait is the root cause of endless Khmer internal fight.

This is incorrect because "Angkor Warrior" was formulated on how Khmer people resisted against foreign invasions and not the fight among Khmer people. Bas relief at Bayon temple showed how strong and heroic Khmer warriors fought against foreign forces.

Later heroes such as the legend of Oknha Khleang Moeang also symbolizes the fighting spirit of Khmer people. Instead of accepting to surrender, this legendary army commander killed himself to gather the army of ghosts to support Khmer soldiers to fight against foreign invaders. This was the strong fighting spirit in ancient times, which is somewhat similar to Japan's Samurai spirit that opts for honorable death instead of defeat.

The fighting spirit to protect sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity remains the same even today.

In the modern time, fighting is not about wars but about competition in knowledge advancement and economic modernization. The Khmer fighting spirit should be further modified in how Cambodian should drive ourselves to compete in the region and the world in all competitive indexes of positive development.

This is my humble attempt to draw discussion on the role models of Khmer Characteristics for future generations. Once we heard about many bad behaviors that we should avoid, it is equally important that we discuss on what good behaviors that we should pursue and this article is solely for the latter purpose.

Let Cambodian people re-ignite the spirit of “Khmer-Angkor builders” and “Khmer-Angkor warriors” for a future of sustained peace and prosperity for all Khmer peoples.



# CAMBODIAN POST-WAR MEMORY AND THE GENERATION GAP

Opinion, Khmer Times, 24 January 2019

Reactions to the Khmer movie related to genocide, or more precisely “self-genocide”, were mixed. There were those who didn’t want to see the movie for fear of rekindling past wounds and trauma-related stress. They didn’t want to experience pain and weep for days.

There were some who fear that history would repeat itself and the same atrocities would happen again. On the other extreme, there were those who were indifferent and emotionless. Frankly, they would not have given a damn. Also in this category, were those who rejected the film saying the genocide was a mere figmentation of the moviemaker.

Nonetheless, such differences stem from individual experiences and exposures.

As someone from the post-genocide generation, I belong to the group that fears the repeat of history.

Born in the 1980s, in the immediate aftermath of the war, it was the prevailing environment that shaped my thoughts. My father was a soldier, who went to the frontline to fight against the Khmer Rouge. At school, a ‘fatherless son’ was a common target for the bullies.

A study tour to Toul Sleng prison is a one-time memory that stays on forever. Some parts of the walls are still stained with dried blood. The smell and ambiance from building-to-building makes one feel that the spirits are demanding your attention. I never did dare climb up to the third floor. The current museum, however, is quite clean and is what a museum should be.

Every year on January 7, I remember three major films which are often highlighted on TV – ‘Killing Fields’, ‘Nine Circles of Hell’ and ‘Memory of the Heart’ (chet chong cham).

I recall the days of my childhood. Phnom Penh was dark and quiet after the evening curfew. Kids dominated the whole street playing and chasing each other after nightfall. The then Soviet Union's 'Rabbit and Fox' on TV was the kids' favourite, similar to that of 'Tom and Jerry'. TV broadcast was only in the evenings and the cartoon was shown regularly.

At night, I always heard melancholy music from the radio, appealing the Khmer Rouge to integrate into society. News was always about siege of particular battle fields. Sometimes, I heard the government forces won; sometimes, I heard the government was fighting to regain the same area they had earlier captured.

The sound of gunfire was a usual part of life. It was normal for people to point their weapons in the sky and shoot whenever there was lightning and rain.

Our school curriculum was dominated by Marxist-Lenin ideologies, fights against imperialism, capitalism and the Khmer Rouge.

At Bak Touk elementary school, the once and only Soviet hot milk I received tasted like heaven. We lived with Soviet and Vietnam-provided food supply. Rice was limited, meat was scarce. We always checked the amount of food first before we ate – worried that if we ate too much, there wouldn't be enough for tomorrow. Malnutrition and malnourishment were clearly reflected in the physical development of our generation.

Soviet and East European scholarships were exceptional chances to go abroad, to escape the darkness of Kampuchea.

At that time, provincial tourism would have been a risky choice. Koh Kong or Kampong Som (the current Sihanoukville) seemed so remote that only smugglers would dare travel to, risking their lives. Om Leang in Kampong Speu and Phnom Voir in Kampot, which are not far from Phnom Penh were close to the battlefields. Pailin, Banteay Meanchey and Kampong Thom sounded to me like provinces detached from Cambodia.

Such memories shaped my thoughts about the genocide, though I could never imagine the degree of trauma of those who experienced the brutal Khmer Rouge regime.

The fact that my relatives were killed and that my parents were almost killed before the Vietnamese came to save their lives remains deeply etched in my heart. Emotional experiences do not give me the chance to believe otherwise. After all what else can you remember when your life was about to be terminated?

Without the survivors, Cambodia would lose all that is required to be a nation anyway.

When I heard that some of those born in the 1990s were less emotional about the genocide, with a few even denying that it happened, I was hurt and perplexed. But now, I have got over it. I'm trying to put myself in their shoes. Different time and different era, I console myself. It's just like reactions to the Holocaust. We knew it happened during World War II, but different generations have different reactions to it.

Emotional attachment to the past can change across generations with a variety of perceptions and thinking. This is probably the current social reality of discourses on genocide in Cambodia.

# THE PRACTICE OF MODERATION

Commentary, Asian Vision Institute, 6 February 2019

Extremism and radicalism are dangerous for social harmony. Extremism and radicalism are belief systems based on the construction of infallible and 'exceptional' values. Aligning oneself with extremism means to reject competing belief and value systems well before analysis or judgment is passed. Extremism and radicalism mean to reject critical thinking.

Social change and activism that does not consider practical ideas, social evolution, and specific country development context, is not beneficial to society. The challenges of rising populism in Europe provide important lessons for Cambodia, especially considering Cambodia's already divisive society.

Opinion leaders, experts and analysts should be role models for the promotion of moderation, encouraging people to strike a balance between various value systems instead of wholeheartedly committing to one specific values system. Experts and analysts can be defined as people who have conducted lengthy researches, authored academic articles, or have extensive experience in specific fields. Their ideas or arguments are the result of compositing diverse perspectives, which have withstood challenges and scrutiny from their academic peers.

Practicing the balance of different social values and interests would ensure more moderation in thoughts and acts. Values are based on subjective judgment and sometimes it is difficult to decide between a clear-cut right or wrong. Here, I would like to raise some questions to challenge our thoughts.

What is justice? If the Khmer Rouge kills your family, will you kill them for justice? What is the meaning of justice to the victim, to the law, society and peace?

If the public believes that a famous bamboo bridge should be preserved at the price of the owner's financial loss, are the owner's interests excluded from the public interest?

When we believe that majority is important, then what if all of us want to work less but want more money and don't want to pay tax? In such a case, is a simple majority the best reflection of interests that bring the most benefit to society?

When we believe that preserving cultural identity is important, does it mean that we must maintain a primitive identity for touristic purposes?

Similarly, when we promote gender equality, does it mean that we have to eliminate "Chbab Srey" (a Khmer traditional manual for women) to conform to a universally applicable standard of gender equality, divorced from cultural context and nuance? Or does it mean that we need to dissolve the Ministry of Women Affairs to prove that our society is already gender-balanced?

If an eco-tourism resort owner's revenue cannot afford him a one week holiday in Europe, while the average wage in an iPhone factory allows workers to enjoy a one month holiday at an eco-tourism resort, what career path will people choose? If the annual revenue from growing rice can buy a farmer an iPhone, yet producing one iPhone a day can buy the same annual rice stock, then what career path will people choose?

How do we balance the preservation of some hundred rare species of turtles with building the Neak Loeng Bridge, which would provide benefit to millions of Cambodian people?

If we are told not to develop hydropower by countries that have utilised their many hydroelectric power plants, fossil fuel power stations, or even nuclear power plants for decades or centuries, are we not to reap the same dividends from these energy sources that they have previously enjoyed? If we tell those countries to close down some of their power plants for environmental consideration, will they follow what they preach to us?

If we complain every day that local authorities perform poorly, how many university graduates would be willing to work to better social development in the sub-national government?

These are questions that challenge what we constantly believe to be fixed values to justify our choices or thinking. The more we work, the more we

put the task at hand, the more we see actual contradictions and challenges. After all, for a country at this level of social economic development, one can only expect social discontent and it is easy to ignite peoples' extremism and radicalism from such social shortcomings. However, extremism and radicalism can clearly never be a force for positive development of society because it does not seek harmony within society that naturally comprises many different values.

# SIHANOUKVILLE: A CAMBODIAN CITY LOSING ITS 'CAMBODIAN-NESS'

Opinion, The Diplomat, 20 April 2019

Unchecked development by Chinese investors has come at a cost, freezing out locals and changing the city's character.

Sihanoukville, the coastal city and only deep sea port of Cambodia, is no longer a sleepy, undeveloped town for backpackers. This is a fact that should be welcome. But the rapid urbanization has caused social and environmental impacts that cannot be ignored. The lack of "Cambodian-ness" and "inclusiveness" is something that needs to be discussed.

The whole city is under construction, with cement trucks running across unfinished roads; large-scale cranes sweep across the whole city landscape ready to erect high-rise buildings one after another. At a very fast speed, the city has changed unrecognizably into a construction and casino boom town.

For any Cambodian, a visit to the city always sparks a soul-searching exercise. The frustration is caused by the city's limited capacity to manage growth and the lack of Cambodian-ness in the development process.

Simply put, the city's basic infrastructure was not ready to handle the abrupt influx of massive capital flows. The resulting development is anything but a livable city. It is dusty in the dry season and muddy in the rainy season, with bumpy, unfinished – and sometimes unpaved, due to new development — roads almost everywhere. Utility requirements in regard to waste management, sewage systems, and water supply have gone beyond the city's original capacity.

The negative effects stemming from the ecosystem of the casino industry has also drawn concern even from the Chinese embassy in Cambodia, which frequently pleads for enhanced law enforcement to ensure the positive image of Chinese contribution to Cambodia's development.

The lack of Cambodian-ness is self-evident in Sihanoukville.

Signboards are mostly in red, with name prefixes such as “zhong guo” or “China”; some signboards feature misspelled Khmer characters that shop-owners seemingly took directly from Google Translate, giving odd meanings to the names.

Although the beach and coast are public property, there is no sufficient supporting infrastructure — such as affordable hotels, guesthouses, and Khmer restaurants — for a wide range of Cambodians to enjoy their holidays and festivities here.

The huge investment from China manifests itself in little Cambodian content. Other than the benefit from rental fees and real estate speculation, which is reserved only for a limited number of Cambodian people with access to property, there are no success stories wherein local Cambodians across the socioeconomic spectrum can benefit from the value-added interest of the massive investment projects.

One needs to ask: Beyond the menial jobs that Chinese investments offer, how many mid-management level jobs or skilled labor or engineering work do Cambodians have access to? How many local products, both hard and soft, are being used within the development process of Sihanoukville city?

It can be argued that Cambodia lacks the skilled labor to support Chinese investment but such an argument cannot provide sufficient explanation for the way that Chinese are dominating the local economy even in small grocery shops, hair salons, street food, and health clinics.

While Chinese investment has been able to wake up the sleeping town, the process has been left to the mercy of the free market economy — the so-called “invisible hand of God.” Without proper management and a clear projection of Cambodian vision, the free market economy can also turn into the “invisible hand of the devil” at the cost of local people’s interest.

With all the above issues notwithstanding, this is not a case of a loss of sovereignty; clearly the right to decide and authority to enforce the law are totally on the Cambodian side. Moreover, it is an undisputable fact that the



Chinese embassy in Cambodia has publicly denounced all illegal acts committed by Chinese in Cambodia and requested stronger law enforcement to ensure that China can protect its good image in terms of positive contribution to Cambodia's development.

Still, there is a need to ensure that China's massive investment benefits both Cambodia and China, and that a wide strata of Cambodian people receive the fruit from this rapid development. With all the issues raised, now the questions is how to do this: How to ensure the Cambodian-ness of development and to project Cambodian vision in Sihanoukville? How to ensure more inclusiveness in that development?

Indeed, practical solutions exist, but these require flexible and innovative approaches to governance and development.

As Cambodia aspires to welcome ASEAN leaders in 2022 in Sihanoukville, the current magnitude of development challenges is probably too huge to be handled by the limited institutional capacity of the provincial government. If Cambodia is to develop Preah Sihanouk province into a multipurpose Special Economic Zone, an interministerial committee that is action-oriented and headed by a prominent figure that can coordinate and bulldoze over interministerial bureaucracy is urgently needed.

This committee should have the teeth and power to implement and decide the "development destiny" of the whole Preah Sihanouk province, especially the acceleration of development of public infrastructure such as roads, sewage system, water supply, and waste management. Perhaps local grown knowhow such as the APSARA authority, which oversees the sustainable development of Angkor heritage, can be an inspiration.

In terms of urban planning, there should also be a clear zoning policy for casino areas, family recreational areas, and industrial zones. The city should work to ensure that more public space can be enjoyed by local people with proper supporting facilities such as affordable hotels and Khmer restaurants.

Although it is hard to do in a free market economy, Cambodia should also have policies to limit foreign business activities that can harm local micro-enterprises.

In terms of enhancing institutional capacity for law enforcement, there is reason to hope for improvement with the recent visit of Interior Minister Sar Kheng to China and of Police Commissioner Neth Savoeun to the United States.

Financial regulation and better taxation should also be enhanced to ensure that Cambodia as a whole can benefit beyond rental fees and real estate speculation.

The development of Preah Sihanouk province should not become an example of failure to ensure the Cambodian-ness and inclusiveness of development. To that end, the responsibility falls heavily on the Cambodian side in terms of law enforcement and concrete implementation of national development policies.

# CHALLENGES IN TACKLING LAND ISSUES IN CAMBODIA

Opinion, Khmer Times, 11 June 2019

Cambodia is facing complex structural challenge to deal with land disputes. As the economy grows with high influx of capital investment ready to rip benefit from speculation and structural weaknesses of the land management system, tackling the land issues is becoming even more difficult.

The first Land Law was promulgated in 1992 and amended in August 2001. Cambodia has a dual land tenure system containing both 'soft' and 'hard' titles. Soft title applies to land rights that are registered by a local authority. Hard title applies to land rights registered by national level under the jurisdiction of the Land Management and Planning office. Cambodia aims to eventually register all the estimated 7 million land parcels with nationally recognized hard title by 2021. By the end of December 2018, around 5.1 million land titles were issued, which is equivalent to 73.25%.

In any land dispute, it is extremely difficult to identify who is the real victim. There are conflicts between the poor and the rich but there are also conflicts among the riches. For instance, an anecdote had it that a commune chief certified soft title over the same plot of land to two different tycoons. When asked why he did so, the commune chief told the court that he had no choice because he was threatened by two very powerful tycoons.

On another aspect, it does not mean to say that the poor are always the victims. There are some cases that certain individuals exploit the public sympathy by labelling themselves as the "poor" and "vulnerable" but in fact they are illegal land encroachers who stand on the mantra that say, "if you win, you get the land; if you lose, you will get the government's compensation."

Whenever there are land disputes, it is hard to find examples of successful resettlements owing to the involvement of many stakeholders. Sometimes the issues are politicized, demonized and victimized. So far, the settlement of the relocation of peoples from the White Building can be considered as a

model for future redevelopment projects, where resolutions were smooth and acceptable by parties concerned.

In addressing land dispute, it is suggested that Cambodia should set a uniform standard formula to address those issues; however, such requirement is quite challenging- considering that different locations of lands would pose different sets of problems and resolutions, including the size of financial compensation and types of lands for resettlement.

Despite many structural challenges and limited capacity, coupled with challenges posed by social, economic and political externalities, many practical measures have been put into place to accelerate the resolution of the outstanding land disputes so as to provide justice for the people who are the real victims and to promote social harmony.

Concerning the dispute settlement mechanism, with the recent nomination of the Minister of Land Management to lead the National Authority of Land Conflict Resolution, Cambodia now has a single window to address all land disputes.

Regarding the economic land concessions (ELCs), a moratorium was put in place in 2012 owing to the understanding that some companies did not conducted investment activities as pledged and only created problems such as deforestation and forced evictions. After the review in February 2016, 23 of the 113 ELCs issued by the environment ministry had been revoked and other four companies had voluntarily handed their concessions back to the state. State also pledged nearly 1 million hectares of re-appropriated property to be handed over to the poor families.

Sugarcane ELCs have been at the center of contentious land issues. For current update, in Koh Kong province all the disputes with 986 families were fully resolved. In Kampong Speu province, the land ministry has received 3,349 identification information sheets, among which nine cases had been resolved, other 195 cases have been successfully negotiated, while the other remaining cases are under review.

In Preah Vihear province, 57 cases have been settled and 230 cases were rejected by the authorities for reasons that some cases already received

settlements; some claims are not related to the ELCs and some claims overlapped with the forest coverage as well as other forms of state's public property.

In Oddar Meanchey Province, three licenses of ELCs have been revoked and a complete settlement has been reached for 412 households. The affected families were provided a total of 1,028.37 hectares of land through a social land concession.

Regarding the issues of indigenous communal land registration, it is worth to note that such land registration is not for the purpose of private ownership. It is for collective use/ownership, and therefore cannot be used as a collateral or security for private financial handlings.

In actual implementation, the procedure for indigenous communal land registration can be time consuming. The size of land is relatively bigger, and some boundaries are accessible only through forests. In addition, Ministry of Environment and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries need to review the existing maps before the requests submitted to the government for land reclassification as private land of the State for communal registration.

Sometimes, there is difficulty in reaching internal agreement within the communities as certain community members are not willing to register the land for collective ownership. Some communities even demand more land than their actual need. As such, among the 137 indigenous communities that had already been registered as legal entities, only 59 communities have submitted requests for communal land registration. As of May 2019, the Ministry of Land registered land entitlement for 24 indigenous communities (equivalent to 684 parcels, 22,682 hectares).

Comparing with other countries in the region, Cambodia is the leading country in terms of indigenous communal land registration. Cambodia has 24 ethnic minority groups with an estimated population of 200,000, equal to 1.5% of Cambodia's total population. However, since the start of indigenous communal land registration in 2009, Cambodia has registered 24 indigenous communities.

Thailand, which has 20 ethnic minority groups with an estimated population of

1,000,000 living in 20 provinces, has registered the land for only 4 indigenous communities in Nakhon-Pathom and Lamphun provinces. Laos PDR, which has 160 ethnic minority groups with an estimated population of 3,000,000, has registered land for only 3 indigenous communities. Vietnam, which has 54 ethnic minority groups and number about 14 million equaling to 13% of the total population, has no collective land registration but has allowed the establishment of only forest communities. Myanmar, which has 130 ethnic minority groups or 30% of the total population, has yet to conduct any indigenous communal land registration. Indonesia, which has 1,128 ethnic minority groups, has registered the land for only 9 indigenous communities.

# COVID-19 BRINGS OUT THE BEST IN CAMBODIA: SMALL COUNTRY, BIG HEART

Opinion, Khmer Times, 14 February 2020

Amidst all the sad headlines on coronavirus or COVID-2019 outbreak, a Japanese song “Ue o Muite Arukou” by Kyu Sakamoto or known as “Sukiyaki” released in 1961 keeps ringing in my head.

“I look up when I walk, So that the tears won’t fall, Remembering those spring days,.....Happiness lies beyond the clouds, Happiness lies above the sky.....Sadness lies in the shadow of the stars, Sadness lurks in the shadow of the moon”.

How could we put our heads up amidst the sad and sudden circumstances?

When human lives are concerned, we cannot avoid being emotional. Worse still, the world is fighting a novel virus that has much to be known. The panic and fear, health and medical risks, economic risks, containment measures, confidence on authorities are complex issues to handle and how to handle them with maximum calmness and assurance require an extremely strong nerve.

Under the snow, Prime Minister Hun Sen and his entourage visited Beijing on 5 February, without masks. Cambodia is lending moral support with “foot on the ground”, being the first and by far the only foreign leader to visit China after the outbreak when many countries have been distancing themselves from China, issuing travel ban, etc.

His Majesty the King Norodom Sihamoni and Her Majesty Queen Mother even donated their personal wealth to the cause.

Another event has turned the world upside down. A small country that is often portrayed negatively in international media shocked the world with awe.

Cambodia dared to receive all passengers and crew aboard Holland America’s

MS Westerdam cruise ship, which docked in Sihanoukville, after medical clearance that showed that none of them were infected with COVID-19. The MS Westerdam, owned by Holland America Line, was turned away by five countries before finally docking in Cambodia, with 1,455 guests and 802 crew members of 41 nationalities on board.

They were welcome with Khmer traditional scarves “Kroma”, and roses on Valentine’s day, “day of love.”

Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organization, wrote on his Twitter, “Cambodia exemplifies the international solidarity we have consistently been calling for. I am deeply grateful to the government, particularly Prime Minister Hun Sen, for accepting the Westerdam and its passengers. It’s time for solidarity, not stigma.”

US Ambassador Patrick Murphy wrote various notes on his Twitter, “We greatly appreciate the support of the Cambodian authorities and people in assisting all passengers on the Westerdam”, and “Heartwarming sights in Sihanoukville as passengers begin disembarking from the Westerdam – with Cambodian hospitality on full display.”

The Delegation of the European Union to Cambodia wrote on their Facebook page, “The EU Delegation to Cambodia would like to thank the Cambodian authorities for authorising the docking of the Westerdam, and to express its sympathy to the passengers and crew members of the ship, hoping they will soon be safely repatriated.”

Human rights and human life actually have similar a rhyme.

Humanity and compassion are in full blown and it humbly shines from Cambodia, “a small country with a big heart.”



# **CAMBODIA'S COVID-19 RESPONSE: AN INSTITUTIONAL APPROACH TOWARDS "SAVING LIVES, SAVING LIVELIHOODS"**

Asian Vision Institute, Mekong Connect Volume 2, Issue 2, December 2020

Cambodia's response to Covid-19 can be seen through the simultaneous implementation of two major approaches, "saving lives, saving livelihoods".

## *Saving lives*

The first approach focuses on health security and is managed by the National Committee to Fight COVID-19 established on 18 March 2020. The committee is responsible for formulating policies and national strategies; leading the implementation of those strategies; managing impacts on political, economic and social aspects at the national and international levels; and leading as well as coordinating the execution of inter-sectoral and inter-institutional measures at the national and sub-national levels.

Headed by Prime Minister Hun Sen, the Ministry of Health (MoH) is the core actor in this committee dealing mainly with technical health response, resource mobilisation as well as public relations. Having the prime minister at the top helps enforce an effective coordination across the country and avoid possible delays by inter-institutional bureaucracy in times of emergencies.

Strong cooperation of international partners in terms of equipment provision, dispatching of experts, and technical as well as financial assistance has also contributed to Cambodia's fight against the pandemic. In the country, good cooperation of the World Health Organization (WHO), the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the Pasteur Institute in Cambodia is commendable for supporting MoH's efforts.

The Cambodian government, with supports from WHO and those partners, has developed and implemented the 'National Master Plan for COVID-19'. WHO provides policy advice and technical support to each of the plan's nine

priority areas in order to respond to the pandemic, while at the same time preparing for the possibility of widespread community transmission.

The government's core public health responses including case detection, isolation, contact tracing and quarantine have been central to Cambodia's overall response strategy in preventing community transmission and controlling the spread of Covid-19. In addition to the universal preventive measures such as hand hygiene and cough etiquette, the government has also been implementing a number of physical distancing measures. Schools were closed in mid-March; international travel restrictions were imposed in late March and gatherings at entertainment venues were restricted in early April. The prime minister also ordered the cancellation of Khmer New Year holiday in mid-April and placed restrictions on travel between provinces during that time. Screening and quarantine measures were introduced to respond to a large number of Cambodian migrant workers returning from Thailand. The quarantine measure was also implemented to deal with some garment workers and company employees who had violated the government's order by taking leave to visit their villages during Khmer New Year.

The early vigilant approach to the outbreak is an effective way in curbing the danger through the '5Es' mantra: Early detection, Early tracing, Early isolation, Early treatment, and Early prevention. As of November 2020, Cambodia has recorded zero death and had no community transmission.

Cambodia can tell a humble story of how a small country has been effective in controlling the Covid-19 pandemic based on real efforts, leadership, good cooperation and carefully-planned approaches, not based on luck. Mindful of its limited capacity and resources, Cambodia cannot afford to be careless, and such a mindset has underscored the vigilant mentality of Cambodia's healthcare providers and recipients alike.

Taking firm measures against fake news is also important. In fighting against the unknown disease, preventing public fear is paramount. Fake news can obstruct the government's efforts and reduce public confidence in dealing with the outbreak and impact of Covid-19. Swift provision of facts, reliable information and scientific data has helped keep the public informed and manage fear in a rational manner.

## *Saving livelihoods*

This approach is coordinated by the Committee on Economic and Financial Policies headed by the Ministry of Economy and Finance. This inter-ministerial institution is mandated to formulate, coordinate and monitor the implementation of economic and financial policies of the government.

For the Covid-19 related actions, the committee is responsible for designing comprehensive fiscal, financial and social security measures. As of early November 2020, six rounds of measures have been unleashed by the government.

Fiscal measures include, among others, the exemption of monthly taxes for the hospitality sector in Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, Preah Sihanouk, Kep, Kampot, Bavet and Poi Pet for 11 months starting from February to the end of 2020. Income taxes in 2020 have been relieved or waived for one year for factories producing garments and bags. Garment factories have been relieved from paying social security. The minimum tax has been waived for 10 months until the end of 2020 for aviation companies.

Financial measures include, among others, co-financing and risk-sharing of up to USD100 million through SME Bank. The scope for credit provision has been extended to cover companies that produce medical equipment and medicine. A credit guarantee fund has been allocated in the amount of USD200 million. Another USD300 million has been earmarked for growth stimulus during and after the pandemic crisis. Through the Agriculture and Rural Development Bank (ARDB), a USD50 million worth of funding has been set up to provide low-interest loans for SMEs.

Social security measures include, among others, Cash for Work Programme, which hires labour for small infrastructure development. This programme is supported by USD100 million funds. A cash handout programme for poor and vulnerable households has also been implemented, targeting 560,000 families. The programme spends USD25 million per month out of the total USD300 million reserved for this purpose.

Supporting workers' livelihoods has also been considered. Those whose jobs have been suspended in the garment and tourism sectors receive an allowance

of USD40 per month. Those workers can also have access to reskilling and upskilling training programmes while receiving a monthly stipend of USD120 for up to six months. The National Employment Agency (NEA) has also been assisting them in finding new jobs.

### *Other important measures*

The above-mentioned measures are not exhaustive. There are other long-term measures for economic recovery such as infrastructure development and negotiations for free trade agreements, just to name a few.

Large scale infrastructure development has not been noticeably hampered by the Covid-19 pandemic. The Cambodian government has disbursed USD350 million to build road infrastructure in Preah Sihanouk province with a goal to transform the coastal city into a multi-purpose special economic zone, international financial centre and potentially the industrial hub of Cambodia. Sihanoukville Airport is being refurbished with an extended runway up to 3,800 metres and will be put into operation later this year. The renovation of the passenger arrival terminal will be completed by 2022.

In Siem Reap province, a budget of USD150 million has been earmarked for the development of 38 roads. Once completed, the roads will highly ease people's livelihoods and boost national economic growth in the post Covid-19 era.

The construction of a second airport in Phnom Penh has been ongoing despite the recent flood caused by tropical storms in October. The government is developing the new Phnom Penh International Airport on a 2,600 hectares piece of land stretching between Kandal and Takeo provinces. The new airport will be a 4F-class type, which means it will be able to accommodate large aircrafts such as Airbus A380-800s and Boeing 747-800s. A total investment of USD1.5 billion comes from loans from foreign banks and local investment.

The Ministry of Commerce has made a tremendous endeavour in negotiating Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with China and the Republic of Korea to substitute job losses and diversify market access for Cambodia's export goods after the EU withdrew partially the Everything-But-Arms (EBA) trade preferences from Cambodia, affecting many garment workers. FTA with China

was signed on 12 October 2020, making it the first FTA Cambodia has with external partners. The negotiation of FTA with the ROK is on-going.

### *Conclusion*

Both in the immediate and long term, it is observed that the government has managed the situation well in terms of protecting health security and mitigating the socio-economic impacts caused by the pandemic. However, while the health impact is not severe, the scale of socio-economic impact is relatively huge and widespread, and no one really knows when this crisis is going to end. The gradual reopening of their countries is being pondered by many states at the risk of a possible re-emergence of infected cases. Countries cannot be over-optimistic; preventive measures should be consistently in place while awaiting mass production of vaccines that will help restore normality in international travel. A vaccine is possibly the only hope for countries to reopen their borders, but it will take a while to realise the hope.

# PROPOSAL FOR PARADIGM SHIFT ON ENVIRONMENT COOPERATION IN CAMBODIA

Opinion, Khmer Times, 29 April 2021

The conventional wisdom or at least the mainstream media narrative would be that the Cambodian government is so corrupt, and has destroyed the whole forest coverage just for personal gains, and the deforestation has been the major cause of flood and drought in Cambodia.

That is the story we normally hear.

Such narrative creates the perception of “presumed guilt” towards the government, and thus environmental cooperation with Cambodian government tends to focus on investigative reporting of forest crimes and accountability issues rather than on the long-term solutions to Cambodia’s environmental problem as a whole. This tendency also adopts a narrow definition of “environmental issues” in Cambodia, which are deliberately being confined to merely “deforestation issues”.

This tendency can be clearly understood by looking at the long list of foreign NGOs funded by foreign embassies who deal with environment issues. The disturbing fact is that most of the staff, including foreign personnel and experts, are not professional ecologists and environmental scientists but rather advocacy activists and human right activists.

Rather than being technical and scientific, the approach is superficial because basically everyone, with the assistance of social media, can undertake this advocacy roles that are attractive to sensationalism and public emotions.

This approach is not productive because it assumes that the government is doing nothing to curb the crimes. It does not help or encourage local authorities who have limited capacity and resources to deal with the issues, but it rather projects that local authorities are accomplice of the crime.

Like the stories of child labor or human trafficking, instead of reporting to local authorities concerned for solution, some NGOs opt for media outcry and make direct report to their funders so that they can compile an annual report to project a grim image of the specific issue.

While this approach can benefit trust from the funders to those investigative NGOs, justify the rationale of the donors' assistance, and thus secure the funding sustainability, this approach has caused a huge trust deficit between stakeholders concerned who are supposed to cooperate and assist each other to address the big issues of environment, which of course are not limited to deforestation alone.

Considering the size of Cambodian forest, a simple math can tell that one ranger needs to take care of 5,714 hectares of forest, which is simply impossible. If we are to dwell into accountability issue alone, then every ranger will be guilty for failing to be a "superman" to protect Cambodian forest.

Activists and rangers alone cannot protect Cambodian forest, and sticking to this limited approach will only make people feel hopeless, exhausted and distrustful.

There should be three levels of solutions to environmental issues.

The first level is the advocacy approach, which is being dealt with right now by overwhelming NGOs who are not necessarily scientists or ecologists. In fact, beyond the deforestation issues, Cambodian environmental issues should be treated and approached in multi-dimensional manners based on scientific and technical facts and solutions. Unfortunately, most NGOs are still mixed up technicalities with political heroism.

They tend to monopolise the love of environment to the orchestrated "marginalised heroic activists".

Therefore, government, NGOs and development partners should move up their partnership to the next level of solutions.

The second level of solutions should focus on two key components, "sustainability of localised solution" and "livelihood of the people". Only local

Cambodian people can sustainably protect Cambodian forest. Assistance should focus on enhancing their capacity to protect the forest, and providing ways and means for rangers and local people to protect the forest.

Loving the forest alone is not enough. People need to feed their stomach too. If they have sustainable job and income, they would stop wandering in the forest, risking their lives due to landmines danger or risking arrests due to law violations. The “livelihood of the people” here does not refer to cash-handouts by NGOs and donors because they are not sustainable. It refers to creation of sustainable local jobs for local incomes in those areas. As raised below, the income from sale of carbon credit can also be a long-term solution to the livelihood issues.

The third level of solutions are “country-wide environmental harmony” and “legalisation of sustainable forest commercialisation”.

“Country-wide environmental harmony” should create a general sense of love for environment for the whole Cambodian people.

Interestingly, in time of Covid-19 pandemic, when people cannot travel abroad, we have started to see more and more local tourists enjoying nature and hiking in the forest and mountains, that were once dominated by rangers and environmental activists. Thousands of photos of Cambodia’s nature from different parts of the country have been posted and shared. Forest and nature have been loved and visited widely in an unprecedented manner.

This positive momentum should be further nourished to create a nation-wide movement for the love of nature and biodiversity.

“Legalisation of sustainable forest commercialisation” should be considered more robustly.

Domestically, Cambodia should start to consider the planning of industrial forest plantation for legal forest commercial activities. Cambodia can learn from Indonesia on how it conducts the managed forest plantation for industrial and commercial purposes. And the legal buyers should be those foreign counterparts who are strongly supportive of Cambodia’s enhanced protection of forest and environment.



At the international level, foreign counterparts should support more the selling of Cambodian carbon credits so that the nation-wide incentives can be created with support of concrete and sustainable incomes.

The shift of paradigm should encourage all stakeholders to find sustainable and localized solutions to the environmental issues, to avoid focusing on finding mistakes and criminalities from each other, and to put an end to “environmental porn” for the sake of donation sustainability at the cost of Cambodian people’s pride and ownership of the issues.

# REFOCUSING ON POOR COUNTRIES' CAPACITY TO DELIVER

Opinion, Asia Times, 18 June 2021

Civilization is supposed to promote the well-being of people, allowing them to live in dignity and prosperity. People advance science that cures illnesses, invent things that make their lives easier, create institutions that support peace and well-being of all mankind, leaving no one behind.

In what we claim to be human civilization, unfortunately there is still a huge divide between rich and poor countries. While the rich demand rights, the poor demand rice.

Rights and freedom for the poor are freedom from hunger, freedom from dying without health care, freedom from fear of not being able to raise the next generation, and leaving them to the streets on piles of garbage.

The freedom to demand whatever they want is the natural desire of human beings. Whether states and societies can provide them this freedom or not is a totally different issue.

This is the core of the issue that the world should focus upon: states' capacity to deliver.

In poor countries, it is not freedoms and rights that matter. In poor countries, the capacity to deliver matters.

Spending hundreds of millions of dollars just to produce reports and global rankings of how poor or weak countries are does not help.

It is merely narcissism.

It is merely an act of self-satisfaction, and the original good intentions to help in fact turn out to be a punishment, discouragement and obstruction of development.

Poor and weak countries don't need other countries to tell them that they are poor and weak. They need support to work out their problems and strengthen their weak institutions. They know they are weak and poor. They are trying to fight the problems of poverty and development, and they don't want to fight distraction and obstruction.

Like people, countries also need self-esteem. How would you, as an individual human being, feel if someone keeps saying you are a loser? It does not create encouragement, it only creates anger and disappointment.

If a foreign non-governmental organization has more capable human and financial resources than a poor country's ministerial portfolio, do the criticisms of weakness and this asymmetric situation mean anything at all? It is just a confirmation of the obvious.

Poor countries don't need millions of dollars' worth of reports just to confirm their weaknesses; they need those dollars in the form of education that gives them real job skills. They need those dollars in the form of roads, bridges, hospitals, medicines and medical equipment, electricity, railways, ports, airports, markets, investments, factories – all the basic things that countries need to run their economy and support people's livelihoods.

Civilization should not create a culture that make countries feel good when they punish the poor and the weak for their poverty and weaknesses. Civilization should create a culture that makes countries enjoy helping each other, not through pointing out weaknesses, but through concrete actions and tangible outputs in overcoming developmental challenges and poverty that have been the core issues for human civilization since time immemorial.

# TOP US PAPER MISLEADING WORLD ON CAMBODIA'S COVID FIGHT

Opinion, Asia Times, 29 July 2021

An article by Charles McDermid published in The New York Times on July 24, 2021, titled "They Were Once Luxury Venues. Now They Are Grim Covid Camps" presents a distorted picture of Cambodia's struggle to contain the spread of Covid-19.

The Times is telling the world that the Cambodian government is imprisoning its own people during the pandemic instead of providing medical treatment.

It is a fact that Cambodia is small and weak. We Cambodians are well aware of this fact and we are not hiding anything. The difficult situation of Covid facilities is in plain sight, and those who are in the facilities can share photos or videos on social media.

It is also a fact that Cambodia is in a "red line" situation and complaints are inevitable, and the government has publicly announced the seriousness of the situation.

The government even allows people with mild cases to receive treatment at home as health personnel are struggling to cope with the increased number of cases, which explains the slow pace of testing and care provided to individual patients or quarantined citizens.

To cope with the shortage of personnel, military doctors and volunteer doctors have been mobilized to support the vaccination campaign as well as treatment efforts.

But to suggest that Cambodia has descended to a level of "grim Covid camps" and is imprisoning its own people, as described by The New York Times, is totally misleading.

With the level of resources Cambodia has to respond to the pandemic, how

can it be called “grim” when compared with New York state, which has had more than 2 million infections and more than 53,000 deaths despite all the resources it has in terms of finance, medical personnel, and medical facilities?

Let’s look at the numbers so we can put the comparison in better context.

New York state has a population of around 19 million, a little more than Cambodia’s 16 million. In terms of gross domestic product, New York state’s is more than US\$1.5 trillion and Cambodia’s around \$25 billion. The vaccination rate in New York state is more than 70% while Cambodia’s is more than 60%. At time of writing, Cambodia has had more than 70,000 infections and around 1,300 deaths.

By spotlighting the cases of infection of those who have been vaccinated in Cambodia, the Times is also misleading the public on the medical fact that vaccines cannot fully protect people from getting infected but can reduce the severity of cases. Even US Congress members and staff at the White House have been infected despite full vaccination.

No one can take this situation lightly.

Cambodia is trying its best to flatten the curve, to protect people’s rights to life, and to ensure that no patient is left unattended.

And Cambodia is not doing that alone.

The World Health Organization is always here with us. Friendly nations, including the US, are supporting us through provisions of vaccines, medical supplies, and equipment through both bilateral and multilateral schemes. And Cambodia also helps others even if we are in hardship.

In February last year, we received the Westerdam cruise ship with 662 American citizens out of the total 1,455 passengers and 802 crew members on board when no one else dared to accept it, including Guam; we provided masks and medical supplies to Laos, Myanmar, Timor-Leste and Nepal, and recently we also provided Vietnam with masks, oxygen concentrators and funding to help it suppress a surge of cases.

Foreign residents of Cambodia can also receive free vaccinations the same as locals.

Cambodia is not a rich country but we are not selfish, and we walk the talk when we say that “no one is safe, until everyone is safe.”

Cambodia is trying to build treatment and quarantine facilities in border provinces as Covid-19 cases in Thailand also keep increasing, and more and more Cambodian migrant workers are rushing home. These facilities are not luxurious and indeed not up to New York’s standards, but the country is doing all it can with what it has.

Cambodia cannot escape from the obligation to receive its own citizens, and taking care of them, while it also needs to ensure that any imported cases should keep to the minimum without spreading across the communities.

Cambodia’s minimal budget is not allocated to the medical fight alone. We also are trying to take care of the socio-economic impact that has been adversely affected by the pandemic.

We are running programs such as cash transfers to poor and vulnerable households, wage subsidies, low-interest loans and tax relief for businesses in hard-hit sectors, a cash-for-work program in rural areas, and support to small and medium-sized enterprises. The government has been providing cash relief to nearly 700,000 poor and vulnerable families.

Human-rights advocates, whether they are Cambodians or foreigners, should call for international support in times of emergency, and they should stand in solidarity with the Cambodian people. Casting Cambodia’s efforts to save lives as suppression of selective rights is erroneous and self-serving.

# HOW HUMAN RIGHTS GROUPS CAN HELP CAMBODIA'S COVID-19 RESPONSE

Opinion, East Asia Forum, 15 September 2021

According to the Asian Development Bank, Cambodia's economy contracted by 3.1 per cent in 2020. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) predicts that Cambodia's poverty rate will rise to 17.6 per cent, around 8 percentage points higher than before the COVID-19 pandemic.

UNDP modelling suggests that a social protection stimulus of 3.5 percent of GDP in Cambodia would prevent 570,000 people from sliding back into poverty. In response, the Cambodian government is providing cash transfers to poor and vulnerable households, wage subsidies, low-interest loans and tax relief for businesses in hard-hit sectors, a cash-for-work program in rural areas and support to small and medium-sized enterprises. Government cash relief has reached nearly 700,000 poor and vulnerable families.

The economic contraction adversely affected employment. According to a study by the Asia Foundation and the Center for Khmer Studies, average households in the garment and footwear sector lost one-third of their income. Disruption or closures of businesses due to the COVID-19 surge meant that many migrant workers were forced to return to Cambodia. Tourism workers were hurt the worst by COVID-19, reportedly losing 90 per cent of their income.

The study suggested some policy recommendations for financial institutions to improve loan restructuring policies to better provide protection to borrowers, including vulnerable workers. This study is a good example of how civil society organisations can provide practical assistance and policy advice. Such an approach prioritises looking for solutions from different angles instead of blaming institutions for the impacts of an unprecedented crisis.

Human rights groups tend to focus solely on political rights, yet this results in an incomplete picture, especially during COVID-19. During the COVID-19 crisis, fundamental human rights — including the right to life, to a decent job,

to food, shelter, healthcare, education and subsistent livelihood — should be equally prioritised.

COVID-19 is life threatening. As such, every element of society, including human rights groups, should put the right to life above anything else. Political rights and individual freedoms — such as the right to spread disease, disseminate fake news and conduct civil disobedience — are harming society at this critical time.

Human rights groups should refrain from sowing disunity, hatred and distrust within Cambodian society, for example through providing advocacy support and encouragement to people spreading fake news. Instead, rights groups can educate people about their civic duties and encourage them to fully cooperate with necessary government measures, such as mobility restrictions and quarantine. Human rights groups can also help promote awareness of rights to healthcare by disseminating information about where to go for medical advice and how to adhere to the state's COVID-19 preventive measures.

Human rights group can also help promote awareness of the importance of vaccination. For instance, the British embassy in Hanoi has offered a grant of up to US\$165,000 to support ASEAN in addressing vaccine hesitancy. Human rights groups and foreign embassies should follow its lead.

In Vietnam, companies have managed on-site manufacturing by imposing a strict isolation policy and providing personal-care products to stop workers from going outside. Any worker who chooses to stay at the factory is rewarded with US\$239.

Cambodia does not need to emulate Vietnam's example but human rights groups should make suggestions and recommendations on how to protect the health security of workers. Again, blaming private companies should be avoided as an approach to find appropriate solutions for the promotion of the rights of workers.

Oxfam Cambodia's program is another good example. COVID-19 has made women working in the informal economy more vulnerable due to unemployment, domestic violence, unintended pregnancies and financial insecurity. Women also tend to be forced to take on greater responsibilities to



care for the sick and educate their children during school closures. Oxfam is advocating for more attention and programs to support maternity protection. This advocacy is encouraging the government to better align labour legislation and regulations with the ILO Maternity Protection Convention No 183 and the business community to promote family-friendly policies and better distribute unpaid care work in households.

Human rights groups can also help educate people about how to distinguish fake news on social media and receive information from reliable sources, who to contact when help is needed and where to get information about vaccinations.

Human rights groups in Cambodia need to be aware that their voices are important. Rights groups engage at the grassroots level, so they can directly mobilise local people to conduct civic engagement in the joint fight against the pandemic. Their voices are vital in shaping international solidarity and multilateral actions which address fundamental human rights holistically.

# **PART 4: FOREIGN AFFAIRS**

## BID FOR SECURITY COUNCIL HAS MERIT

Letter to Editor, Phnom Penh Post, 30 January 2012

Dear Editor,

Having read Tony Guterres' letter (Post, January 26), I would like to make the following comments.

First, it's unfair, and too narrow a view, to evaluate Cambodia's past co-operation with the UN in a few paragraphs. Twenty years of co-operation have brought many tangible benefits, from a democratic transition to socio-economic development and the building of human resources.

Many of the post-conflict nations where the UN has helped broker peace are still marred by divided armed factions, but Cambodia has developed not only its domestic well-being but has contributed to the international community by turning itself from a recipient country of peacekeeping forces to a dispatching country of such forces.

Second, the United Nations Security Council is not an exclusive club for perfect countries (if there is such a thing in this world). UN bodies belong to every member country. As such, they have a fair representation not only in terms of region but also level of development.

It's common for member states to have different opinions from the UN, and UN bodies are not always right. The UN consists of many countries that naturally have their own agendas. Who would say UN was sane enough to recognise the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime after 1979?

Finally, having more than 100 countries support Cambodia's candidature means they recognised Cambodia's ability to represent the voice and interests of the many vulnerable countries in this world, and its ability to actively participate in maintaining peace and security in the world, based on its experiences in peacebuilding and national reconstruction.

# CAMBODIA-US: DEBT AND WAR COMPENSATION

Letter to Editor, Phnom Penh Post, 14 December 2012

Dear Editor,

There's a Khmer saying that goes: "If you point your finger at others, the other four fingers actually point at yourself."

During the landmark first visit by a serving US leader to Cambodia, America may have had no time to pay tribute to the late His Majesty Norodom Sihanouk, the father of the Cambodian nation, but it didn't forget to talk about Cambodia's debt and preach to it about human rights.

Concerning the "bloody debt" that was perceived by most Cambodians, US ambassador to Cambodia William Todd recently made a further clarification that this perception was in fact based on "misunderstanding" and "misinformation" because the debt "arose from shipments of agricultural commodities". Todd also described Cambodia as being "unwilling to pay" compared with, for example, Iraq and Afghanistan.

According to a statement on February 14, 2008 by Kirk Miller, of the US Department of Agriculture, during a hearing before the House of Representatives, Cambodian officials had confirmed in writing in February 2006 that Cambodia owed the US \$162 million in principal. If interest is included, the total amount owed as of now may well have risen to approximately \$400 million, as has been reported by the media.

We are not trying to shrug off the previous administration's legacy and ignore our current human-rights situation, which is not perfect.

But to keep things on an equal basis, I believe many Cambodians would also want to hear the US talk about war compensation, an apology and its own human-rights practices in Cambodia during the early 1970s.

More than two million tonnes of bombs were dropped on Cambodian soil,

and this act alone denied Cambodian people's right to life itself. Was it not a human-rights issue when innocent Cambodians had to run for their lives to shelter from this carpet bombing?

If we make a simple calculation of the destructive power of one tonne of bombs, we can come up with a figure for the cost of this destruction that could easily exceed Cambodia's debt of \$400 million. Although it is perhaps an unfair comparison, the US is still in a better position than Cambodia because the debt is refundable, but the loss of the families of Cambodian people can never be refunded.

Nowadays there is none of the "fog of war" that Robert S. McNamara, Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon experienced during the 1970s. So, as a member of the post-war generation, I earnestly hope the US can view Cambodia in a better light and that it will try to understand more about Cambodia and its people by learning from the past so both nations can look forward to enhanced bilateral relations. Cambodian people can be very forgiving, but we will never forget the pain of our recent history.

# **CAMBODIA'S RELATIONS WITH CHINA, US NOT INCOMPATIBLE**

Opinion, Asia Times, 26 July 2019

As the competition between the US and China for influence is heating up, Cambodia cannot discount the importance of its relations with either of the two despite the extreme pressure to do so. This is not only because of Cambodia's constitutional adherence to neutrality and non-alignment, but also because of the potential impact upon its national interests should Cambodia opt to disengage from either Beijing or Washington.

In bilateral terms, for good or for bad, both China and the US have played a big part in Cambodia's contemporary history, and therefore their disengagement from Cambodia is simply not an option. Both countries have invested a lot in Cambodia, and not just in monetary-value terms. Nor is tangible cooperation confined to the military sphere and/or vague grand visions without clear definitions and methodology, leaving everybody to guess or giving space for both China and the US to accuse each other.

It is a fact that Cambodia can never sever ties with either of these powers. It is in the national interest of Cambodia to look for complementarities between the two.

From a political standpoint, both China and the US always claim that they support Cambodia's independence and sovereign choices. The question is whether there is any difference between how China and the US define Cambodia's independence. If it is the same, both countries should feel comfortable with and be respectful of Cambodia's national interest. If it is not the same, then their claim is nothing but lip service.

It is natural that both countries want to take the best from Cambodia and it is fair to say that Cambodia also wants to take the best from them. Unfortunately, respect for equality of sovereignty is not always practicable in world politics. Considering the differences of power, asymmetry of relations sometimes is very obvious, and that is not only the case for China and the US.

For instance, some countries' ambassadors always demand to meet only with the Cambodian foreign minister, while Cambodian ambassadors can barely meet with those same countries' technical-department directors.

From an economic perspective, it is easy to understand that Cambodia's relations with the US and China are complementary and inseparable.

China is building Cambodian infrastructure that helps enhance connectivity of its territorial landmass and eventual domestic market connectivity and production chains. China is investing heavily in Cambodia's garment sector simply because Cambodia receives preferential treatment from the US market. Billions of dollars invested from China has turned into billions of dollars' worth of exported products to the US. If Cambodia has no market, China will not come to invest. If Cambodia has no production capacity supported by China, the provision of preferential market treatment by the US is meaningless.

The US benefits from cheap products from Cambodia; China benefits from production value chains; Cambodia benefits from job creation, income generation, enhanced labor safety standards, work ethics, fair treatment of laborers, and so on. This is economic complementarity that benefits all parties

The US benefits from cheap products from Cambodia; China benefits from production value chains; Cambodia benefits from job creation, income generation, enhanced labor safety standards, work ethics, fair treatment of laborers, and so on. This is economic complementarity that benefits all parties.

From a military strategic point of view, it is not in Cambodia's interest to become a military arm of any country. In the past, Cambodia supported the so-called Sihanouk Trail on its territory that connected with the Ho Chi Minh Trail in southern Laos, which together constituted secret passages from North Vietnam to South Vietnam. The trail functioned as a logistical supply system that was used by the People's Army of Vietnam and the National Liberation Front (Viet Cong) during the Vietnam War, which lasted from 1960 to 1975. Because of this, the United States carpet-bombed eastern Cambodia from the late 1960s until the 1970s, with an estimated more than 2 million tons of bombs, leaving a minimum of 100,000 Cambodian civilian casualties and 2 million of our people homeless.

Besides the carnage, many believe that the US carpet-bombing of Cambodia partially gave rise to the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime. Since then, security equilibrium architecture in Southeast Asia has not been favorable to Cambodia's peace and stability. In the 70 years since the end of World War II, Cambodia has suffered from more than 30 years of proxy wars and civil strife. How is it possible for Cambodia to forget such bitter and tragic recent past?

For the sake of national security, it is natural that Cambodia enhances military cooperation with all friendly nations including China, the US, and members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. This should not be seen as support for other countries' military projections or building of alliances.

There is no necessity for Cambodia to imitate Thailand and Singapore in hosting foreign military facilities. Considering the enduring unstable relations with the US, Cambodia sees no interest in getting on the nerves of Washington. To a lesser extent, it does not do Cambodia any good either to provoke neighboring Thailand and Vietnam considering the current stable and excellent relations with those two countries.

If Vietnam, a communist state that is conducting more than US\$100 billion worth of annual trade with China, can equally engage with the US, there is no reason that Cambodia cannot simultaneously engage with the US and China. Besides, Vietnam does not host any foreign military bases despite its competing claims with China in the South China Sea.

While Cambodia needs to diversify its military cooperation further, external partners should be aware of Cambodia's perception of national-security threats, such as regime change, infringement of sovereignty and domestic interference. These concerns are equally applied to all external partners. Without such assurance, military cooperation is a risky choice for Cambodia, where the legacy of war is still visible across the country.

With all the above rationales, direction for the diversification of foreign relations was clearly spelled out at a diplomatic conference this year, requiring the Foreign Ministry to "strengthen internal reform and increase external partners in the spirit of national independence and sovereignty." It was also decided that Cambodia should further promote self-reliance and reduce its dependence on foreign assistance as much as possible.



As such, both China and the US should respect and honor Cambodia's efforts in this regard. They should understand that Cambodia's protecting its national interest is not a crime.

The question regarding incompatibility of relations with the US and China is also relevant for other countries in the region. From a larger regional perspective, there are challenges within the foreign policies of both China and the US.

The most obvious case is the Philippines, when President Rodrigo Duterte dared the US to declare war against China in the South China Sea so that he could follow suit. He considered China a threat, but he equally expressed distrust of the US in terms of security assurance.

It is in China's interest to assure smaller countries in the region that it is a respectable rising power that should not be feared as a hegemon. Considering its current confrontational relations with the US, it would be beneficial for China to strengthen trust with countries in Southeast Asia.

As for the US, it should be more predictable on its commitment to engage with the region in terms of tangible cooperation across the board. When the US threatened Huawei for a couple of months and then reversed its position; when one day President Donald Trump attacked Kim Jung Un and the next day they shook hands; countries in the region find it very difficult to determine policies of engagement with the US.

Either way, it is a common desire for all countries in the region to see stable and engaging relations between China and the US instead of the current intense confrontations that have stirred anxieties, and have gradually affected regional stability, if not security. Because all the countries in the region believe that their relations with the US and China are not incompatible.

# 'ASEAN WAY' KEY TO SOLVING SOUTH CHINA SEA CONFLICTS

Opinion, Asia Times, 17 October 2019

The South China Sea (SCS) issue has been a bottleneck for ASEAN-China cooperation, a cause of strain in the unity of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, and a reason for allegations and geopolitical conspiracies. Every ASEAN member state, including Vietnam, China's largest trading partner in Southeast Asia, acknowledges that the ASEAN-China partnership is the most dynamic. However, with the uneasy relations between China and Vietnam on SCS issues, the concern looms whether ASEAN will be put into direct confrontation with China under Vietnam's ASEAN chairmanship and membership of the United Nations Security Council next year.

ASEAN as an institution has been increasingly exhausted by the internationalization of SCS issues. Drafting sessions of ASEAN statements always involve enduring overnight negotiations from technical level to ministerial level. ASEAN is constantly on the verge of a breakdown like what happened during the negotiation of the joint communiqué in Phnom Penh in 2012. In any circumstance, there is a growing trend to accept the oversimplification that any failure to reach a consensus over a joint communiqué or any other ASEAN statements in which SCS issues are involved are caused by Cambodia, which is perceived as a vassal state of China, despite the fact that negotiations among 10 actors with different interests and positions are highly complex.

The focus on ASEAN integration and community-building has earned secondary attention because of the great energy spent on SCS issues. Countries find themselves squeezed over how they should define regional interest, how to ensure unity and solidarity in accordance with the "ASEAN Way" – which utilizes compromise, consensus, and consultation while prioritizing informal decision-making processes and non-conflictual ways of addressing outstanding issues – and how to ensure the mutual trust and confidence that have supported the ASEAN community thus far.

It is in ASEAN's interest that it tries to visualize the community beyond the

SCS issues. It is in the interests of both ASEAN and China that they find better ways to mitigate the growing distrust between Beijing and some ASEAN claimant states over these issues.

Internationalization, antagonism and confrontation do not serve the interests of peace and stability in the region.

Looking at past experiences, ASEAN has its own know-how on mediation. There are examples of how the bloc dealt with complex internal issues between ASEAN member states as well as between ASEAN member states and external actors.

The most recent case was when Malaysia mediated for a compromise text between Bangladesh and Myanmar over the issues of Rakhine state during the Ministerial Meeting of the Coordinating Bureau of the Non-Aligned Movement (CoB-NAM) in Caracas, Venezuela, in July.

When clashes erupted between Cambodia and Thailand over the ownership of the land surrounding the Preah Vihear Temple, the mediating role of then-Indonesian foreign minister Marty Natelegawa through “shuttle diplomacy” in 2011 was exemplary. Marty’s diplomacy helped cool the situation down and partially contributed to stopping bloodshed.

In retrospect, Cambodia’s conflict with Thailand proved that internationalizing territorial disputes has not led to any solution. Cambodia and Thailand were told by ASEAN member states not to internationalize territorial issues, and that both countries should resort to international law, to conduct dialogue peacefully, to prevent wars and to find ways that both countries’ governments and people could accept with grace and honor.

While Cambodia has two International Court of Justice rulings, in 1962 and 2013, to back its legitimate claims, none of the current claimant states of SCS territory has any ICJ ruling that has universal binding effect.

When China, Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam have overlapping claims, who is supposed to judge their legitimacy? When claims are not settled, the heated discussion on SCS issues raises the question of whether it is about the advocacy of international law and rule-based international order

or about alliance-making and profiteering from strategic containment policy of or by the superpowers.

At the end of the day, bilateral trust and dialogue are the only way out. The fact is even though Cambodia has two ICJ rulings in hand, would the situation be calmed down without common desire and mutual trust between Cambodia and Thailand?

For the SCS issues, one has to acknowledge that the trust factor has been diminished among the claimant states to support robust bilateral dialogues. Trust cannot be built by the increase of military-related activities, sending of aircraft carriers, increase of naval fleets, submarines, oil exploration or building of encircling alliances. Mobilizing all ASEAN member states, including the non-claimants, to gang up against China or tarnishing China's image in international fora deviates from ASEAN's modus operandi, which prioritizes consultation, dialogue and non-conflictual and non-confrontational ways. Such actions do not encourage China to engage meaningfully in negotiations either.

There is a need for brokerage and mediation to restore and stabilize trust among claimant states so that they can return to institutionalize bilateral talks firmly. To that end, Indonesia is probably the best candidate to do so. As a non-claimant to disputed territory in the SCS, coupled with Indonesia's non-antagonistic relations with China, its maturity in maintaining ASEAN centrality and balancing regional interest with external partners, Indonesia knows best how to utilize the "ASEAN Way" and enjoys considerable trust from all parties involved to undertake such an important task for international peace and stability.

# CAMBODIA AS EMERGING CONNECTOR BETWEEN THE EU AND ASEAN

Opinion, Khmer Times, 4 November 2019

Cambodia and the EU has enjoyed a strong multifaceted cooperation for decades. With the evolving geopolitical landscape, trade wars and weakening multilateralism, both sides understand the importance in bolstering ties as great opportunities to promote mutual interest.

First, although Cambodia's democracy is young, Cambodia is not a communist nor socialist country and therefore it can easily adapt with the EU's strategic values and principles. Cambodia always attaches great importance to quality relations with the EU taking into account of Cambodia's "longest peace in modern history", peaceful democratization, and promotion of human-centered development.

For the EU, Cambodia is seen as an emerging connector in the relationship between the former and ASEAN. Despite being a small state and latecomer, Cambodia has proven to be an active proponent of multilateralism. The boldness of assuming its first ASEAN chairmanship in 2002 after merely three years of accession demonstrates a strong political will and commitment to complying with multilateralism. This small nation will take this important work again in 2022. The EU also knows that Cambodia always supports the establishment of a strategic partnership between ASEAN and the EU. Cambodia's hosting of the 13th Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM13) next year will become another milestone in further strengthening the ASEAN-EU collaboration with the Kingdom as an enabling platform. The increasing attention of the EU towards ASEAN is not surprising considering the latter's sophisticated regional architecture and solid results as a hub for regionalism and multilateralism and a powerful growth engine of the world economy with an increasingly integrated market.

From Cambodia's perspective, maximizing relations with the "EU Trio", namely France, Germany and Brussels are of utmost importance.

France is considered as Cambodia's "Plus Grand Ami en Europe" (most grand friend in Europe) considering France's past heritage in Southeast Asia. The linkage is socially very visible as Cambodia continues to be a Francophone with many universities possessing the intellectual legacy in French such as law schools, public administration, engineering and technologies, and medical sciences. Cambodian foreign ministers often deliver statement at the United Nations General Assembly in both French and English, and it is interesting to note that French is used in the most sensitive parts of the speech to express Cambodia's concerns and nuances. There are around 140 French companies out of a total of around 400 European companies in Cambodia. France is Cambodia's largest rice buyer in Europe with 86,050 tons of import in 2018, and the 5th largest EU's individual trade partner with Cambodia, after Germany, United Kingdom, Spain and the Netherlands.

In the case of Germany, it is seen as a strong and reliable partner for Cambodia. Being an economic powerhouse, and a pragmatic and open-minded friend, Germany has long supported peaceful democratization of Cambodia through assistance towards structural reform, social investment, modernization and capacity-strengthening of state apparatus. The recent visit in October of ministers holding key portfolio related to such purposes are self-evident. It is no doubt that Germany is one of the most important actors in the EU. Germany currently sends 96 MPs to the European Parliament. It was the largest net contributor to the EU in 2017 and paid 13 billion euros more to the EU than it received from it in funding. Germany will hold the rotating Presidency of the Council of the European Union again from July to December in 2020. Moreover, the current President of the European Commission is also German, Ursula von der Leyen.

The next important player should be Brussels. The EU is Europe's compounding complex of diverse powers and interests. Being able to navigate across various actors and interests within Brussels, which is the EU's de-facto capital is of paramount importance to enhance better understanding of Cambodia as well as to identify areas of practical cooperation as much as possible for mutual benefits. Multi-stakeholders should be involved in this process including through parliamentary framework.

Without prejudice to the good relations that Cambodia is having with other

EU member states, besides these three trios, another layer of focus can be also observed through the asset that Cambodia has in terms of its relations with Eastern Europe. It is worth to note that Cambodia also has many friends in Eastern part of Europe who are now becoming more affluent with vibrant democracies within the EU. Cambodia never forgets that Eastern Europe recognized the existence of genocide and had extended a helping hand during Cambodia's difficult times.

In the future, with consistently strong economic growth, Cambodia will graduate from Least Developed Country (LDC) and the likelihood of becoming an upper-middle-income country by 2030 and a high-income economy by 2050 is not illusory. In the new development phase, aid will evaporate and be gradually substituted by trade, which is more powerful and sustainable tool in terms of wealth and job creation, and reduction of dependency. Like other traditional donors, the EU will gradually phase out its Official Development Assistance (ODA) from Cambodia. As such, to prepare for this structural shifting of Cambodia's economy, Cambodia and the EU should also start discussing on topic such as "trade-not-aid strategy" to ensure economic sustainability through industrial and market diversification.

The future looks bright for both sides in terms of promoting bilateral interest as well as multilateralism that is supportive of common peace and shared prosperity in the region.

To Cambodia and the EU: let's remain strongly connected, be future oriented and be bolder.

# THE EU NEEDS TO BE MORE REALISTIC

Opinion, Khmer Times, 17 December 2019

Protectionism is re-emerging as a common challenge that all regional and global mechanisms try to address. That holds true for both the European Union (EU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Despite sharing determination to fight against trade barriers and protectionism, interactions between the EU and some ASEAN member states (AMS) do not show that this mission is equally practised.

For instance, recently, the EU is trying to ban Malaysia's palm oil, ban Thai fishery products and considering whether to withdraw a trade preference scheme from Cambodia. Malaysia's case relates to the banning of palm oil.

Thailand's case relates to the issuance of Yellow Card for Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing (IUU). Cambodia's case relates to the possible withdrawal of trade preferences under the Everything but Arms (EBA) trade tariff scheme.

While the first two cases involve the possible banning of specific products, Cambodia's case, if the preferences are withdrawn, does not involve the banning of products or the closure of specific markets but rather the application of normal tariffs to the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) to which the EU is supposed to provide preferential treatment.

The EU has market power that can combine force and strength of the proposed sanctions and non-tariff measures (NTMs). The actions taken by the EU against AMS provoked the issues of asymmetrical relations between a united organisation, the EU, against specific members of another organization, ASEAN, that is not a union.

Asymmetrical issues also drew the questions whether the EU, as an organisation, has better compliance than ASEAN in terms of human rights, democracy and environmental values. Although the EU's actions affect particular AMS' trade in generic term, they can also hamper ASEAN's institutional image as



a region that gives less consideration to human rights, democracy and the environment. Whether ASEAN, as an organisation can accept such labelling or not is another issue for discussion between these two organisations.

### Challenges, complexities

At the bilateral level, the unpleasant interactions between the EU and AMS that the AMS cannot fully foresee are the scope and scale of the impact of the EU's legislations and complicated procedures while the EU's decision is largely dependent on bureaucrats and politicians in Brussels who may not clearly understand AMS's challenges, complexities and values as well as the sustainability impact of each decision. One Thai analyst said, "Thailand sacrificed blood, sweat and tears to overcome the stringent criteria outlined by the EU."

Apart from the pure application of their technical procedures, the EU's decisions can also be swayed by internal political situations, such as European parliamentary elections, as well as the EU's own geopolitical calculations, for instance the China factor in regard to Cambodia's EBA.

Once the procedure is launched, it is hard to stop or reverse. Malaysia had tried to lobby some EU member states with the belief that some of them may block the EU's legislations.

The case of Thailand offered a successful example by way of conforming to the EU's demands. Thailand could make it because the EU's demands are involved largely with law enforcement and amelioration of technical management of the issues. Therefore, responses from Thailand can be visible, measurable and, most importantly, "do-able".

Malaysia's case is relatively harder than Thailand's to comply with because the nature of the product itself is considered by the EU as not environmentally friendly. It involves much larger schemes than simply elevating the quality of products or enhancing consideration over the environment. The environmental standard imposed by the EU is very vague and, as the case has proved, the EU did not accept the certification standard set by Malaysia in terms of environmental acknowledgement criteria over the products.

The EU's demands with regard to Cambodia's case are seen as the most difficult to comply with because the latter considered some of the EU's requests as going beyond the red line of respect for sovereign independence and the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs of state. It is not about the issue of law enforcement, product quality, labour standards or environment considerations but about the perception regarding space for civil and political rights, which is hard to measure because the standard of compliance can vary even within the members of the EU.

## Human rights

Despite the fact the EU is proving it is adhering to moral standards of human rights in providing trade preferential treatment, for Cambodia or other LDCs, the application of standards can equate to the denial of market access itself regarding the development phase of LDCs. For the post-conflict nations, it is an unrealistic expectation to demand they fully comply with all human rights conventions and treaties that they have ratified.

At the regional level, while the EU has mechanisms to resolve NTMs applied to EU member states or to utilise NTMs against third countries, ASEAN as an organisation does not have such tools and it does not appear that it is heading in that direction.

The EU side has many organisational tools in its approaches towards external partners, ranging from technical NTMs to non-technical NTMs, such as the cases of Malaysia using environmental justification, or the case of Thailand applying compliance issues of IUU or the case of Cambodia over the issues of democracy and human rights or geopolitical balance against China in the EU's foreign policy.

As ASEAN is applying consensus in the decision-making process, AMS can block any progress or decision regarding cooperation with a specific dialogue partner. A case in point: In January 2019 Malaysia and Indonesia had deferred ASEAN's decision in elevating its relations with the EU towards strategic partnership because of the EU's discrimination against palm oil.

There are several lessons learned and applicable tools for member states to interact with one another when the NTMs are applied. The ideal is that states

should not apply NTMs but, if they face NTMs, they may choose to conform or retaliate or use both approaches.

NTMs have caused mistrust and are considered as hindrances to the enhancement of cooperation, mutual respect and understanding. In a growing inter-dependent world, NTMs and sanctions rarely yield satisfactory results unless the affected states are totally isolated, which can never be the case. Moreover, as the above cases have shown, it may also provoke political, economic and geopolitical backlashes against states that choose to utilise NTMs.

If states intend to pursue equal partnerships, they should seek to balance mutual interests, to understand the specific context of their partners and to seek agreeable win-win solutions over differences instead of one-sidedly imposing their own agendas or interests because such actions are proven to be counterproductive.

# CAMBODIA FACES QUESTIONS OF CONSCIENCE, SELF-RELIANCE

Opinion, Asia Times, 12 February 2020

The European Commission's partial withdrawal of trade privileges under the EBA pact has combined with other factors affecting Cambodia

February 12, 2020 was reported widely as "EBA judgment day" when the European Commission announced its decision to withdraw temporarily some trade preferences Cambodia had enjoyed under the Everything But Arms deal between Phnom Penh and the European Union.

In effect, a supranational body of one region is imposing its judgment over a sovereign state in another region. How powerful does that sound, when an extraterritorial judgment can be executed thousands kilometers away?

Cambodia is being punished based on criticism of imperfections in its democratic progress and evolution as a nation. In fact many self-acclaimed midwives delivered a baby democracy in Cambodia that falls repetitively as it learns to walk.

The EC decision creates the temptation to recall the history of the "white man's burden" and "mission civilisatrice" (civilizing mission). The dialogue that was undertaken leading up to the decision was a challenging discourse of empathy, a constant fight with mutually justified egos, and most of all questions of conscience. The desire for independence that may cause economic casualties, the ambition to be freed from conditions, the desire to move on toward the future, the righteousness and sense of self-appreciation for noble and altruistic deeds offer links with the causes of humanity.

There is a Khmer saying, "Klean cha-gnanh, srolanh la-or," literally translated as "Food is good when you are hungry; seeing beauty when you are in love." In this sense, looking at the European Union's trade practices in the region, it is observed that the shady records of universal values can sometimes be overruled by the beauty and strengths of market capitalism. But imposing

punishment under laws and values that are supposed to protect people seems to prove otherwise, as no one really knows the exact impacts of this punishment.

It is like in William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* where Shylock demands "a pound of flesh" for a due debt and claims that he has that right under Venetian law:

"What judgment shall I dread, doing no wrong?..."

The pound of flesh, which I demand of him,

Is dearly bought; 'tis mine and I will have it.

If you deny me, fie upon your law!

There is no force in the decrees of Venice."

But Shylock cannot challenge the natural human law that "a pound of flesh" cannot be taken without shedding blood. The questions of universality of values and principles also lead to questions as to what those values and principles are for in terms of people's livelihood.

How do we measure impact? Different state institutions provide different levels of impact analysis, from minimal and manageable impacts claimed by the government to the industrial fallout as claimed by some pessimistic critics and doomsday prophets.

Now, on the question of self-reliance. The interdependence that the world has benefited from can be both a strength for development and a disruptive power. On the positive side, interdependence magnifies mutual benefits; in negative terms, interdependence undermines self-reliance.

Cambodia relies on China for investment capital, production chains and material supplies. Cambodia relies on Europe for a market for the finished products made from those materials. A disruption of China's supplies due to the recent coronavirus outbreak can cut short delivery to European markets. Likewise, restricted access to the European market due to the partial EBA

withdrawal can also cut short factories' purchase orders.

Thus the question of over-reliance here is not only about China. Cambodia, which is in the middle of this production and supply chain, can be said to be over-reliant both on China and the EU.

Apart from the issue of diversity, questions can be pondered about the lack of competitiveness and vulnerabilities of Cambodian economic structures, and probably matters of complacency and sluggish reforms to adjust economic structures and enhance the country's competitiveness in the region.

Challenges for Cambodia's economy will be multiple and global in nature. China's economic slowdown, a global disruption of supply chains due to the coronavirus, impacts from the partial EBA withdrawal, trade wars, geopolitical rivalry between superpowers and regional powers, weak domestic competitiveness compared with other nations in the region, lack of diversity – these are among the compounding factors that may slow down Cambodia's economy.

Come what may, adaptive solutions will be devised including market and supply-chain diversification, drastic internal reforms, economic stimulus packages, social safety nets, and human capital development. The recent chain of events could provide an exceptional opportunity and driving force for Cambodia to push for a gradual economic structural shift from a low-skilled, labor-intensive growth model toward a knowledge-based and skills-driven one.

Cambodia has braced itself for these challenges. Cambodia will move on. Cambodia will adapt and transform.

# THREE PATHWAYS TO WAR BETWEEN THE US AND CHINA

Opinion, Asia Times, 15 June 2020

Conflict involving trade, currency or technology is the hotly debated battleground between the global giants

According to the theory of international relations, the world is constantly in a state of anarchy and countries always seek a balance of power to maintain their own security.

With China's rise, the US and its allies fear losing the equilibrium that supports American domination of the global order. Considering China a "revisionist state," they have raised concerns about Beijing's unchecked attempt to change the status quo, to pursue military expansionism and follow a path toward hegemony.

From geo-strategic flashpoints in the South China Sea to Taiwan, to trade wars and technological wars, the likelihood of confrontations seems inevitable.

That raises a simple question. Will war between the US and China result from the current tension? If so, what form of war will that be?

If history is any indication, three speculations can be made for war between the US and China: World War III, Cold War 2.0, and regional proxy wars.

World War III would be the most extreme. When China is considered a security threat and that seeks hegemony through military expansionism, should one consider it as equivalent to Germany and Japan during the two World Wars?

Has China invaded and occupied any countries? Has China pursued imperialist colonialism? Has it committed a mass atrocity, or is it a terrorist state?

Similarly, if war is to happen between the two superpowers, then what might trigger the United States' involvement? Events like the attack on Pearl Harbor?

The second form of war is Cold War 2.0, which is being hotly debated as the closest to the current realities. But this time it is not about ideologies, space war or nuclear brinkmanship. It is more about a trade war, currency war, technological war, cyber war or even hybrid war that combines elements of some or all of these.

Competition for the domination of multilateral frameworks is one of the possible fronts of Cold War 2.0, which has gradually divided nations along this polarity if it truly exists – for instance, the competition between the Belt and Road Initiative and the Indo-Pacific Strategy.

But if Cold War 2.0 does exist, it would be a limited version of Cold War 1.0 with fewer fronts and features owing to China's reluctance to take global leadership on every front as the former Soviet Union tried to do vis-à-vis the US.

Using the word "competition" on multilateral frameworks is not totally right either, because while China is increasing its contribution to multilateral system, the share is still low compared with the US.

It would not constitute a competition either if the US is withdrawing from every multilateral system that it helped built after the World War II. Modern China in fact has benefited from the system created by the domination of the US, and it has yet to create any global governance system, either politically or economically.

China has not tried or at least has not been seen as attempting to impose or spread its own system. Thus far, no country has proclaimed that it is adopting China's governance system.

The next possible type of war is a regional proxy war in the Asia-Pacific, which is the main platform of competition between the US and China. Like in Cold War 1.0, the US-China rivalry could result in "hot wars" between peripheral states. Regional flashpoints such as the South China Sea and Taiwan could ignite such hot wars.

For the Mekong region, the likelihood of Vietnam War 2.0 cannot be ruled out while China and Vietnam keep confronting each other in the South China Sea.



Cambodia used to be a sideshow of Vietnam War 1.0. When Cambodia helped Vietnam by allowing it to use the so-called Sihanouk Trail in its territory to provide covert logistic support, the US bombed Cambodia with an estimated more than 2 million metric tons of bombs, leaving a minimum of 100,000 Cambodian civilian casualties and 2 million homeless.

The bombing was said to be one of the major triggers of the consolidation of the Khmer Rouge's power and the genocide that followed. While other parts of Southeast Asia remained peaceful, half of the Mekong region experienced prolonged bloodshed during the Cold War until the late 1990s when the civil war finally came to an end in Cambodia in 1998.

It is true that China and the US do not want to confront each other in any direct war. As for China and Vietnam, even if they constantly confront each other in the South China Sea, they do not want direct war either owing to the strong ties between the two Communist parties and enormous trade relations.

However, one cannot ignore the fact that these two countries did experience multiple wars between each other after World War II, including a brief and bloody battle in 1974 over the Paracel Islands. Even if the US and China themselves do not want direct war, proxy wars could re-emerge, and small states would pay the price, as was the case during the Vietnam War.

These are the three speculations of possible types of wars between China and the US. Onlookers like Cambodia and other peripheral states can divide themselves in the new polarity at their own risk. Like in the previous Cold War, silence and neutrality would not be an option.

Few policy options would be left for small states. Like it or not, these few options often present risks to their sovereignty and independence. Countries can stay safe and secure only if they can learn from history, which can be horrifying, cruel and bloody, at least in the case of Cambodia, because Cold Wars are only cold for the superpowers.

# CAMBODIA-EU: THE DEBATE ON 'TRADE-NOT-AID'

Opinion, Asia Times, 3 July 2020

While Cambodia struggles to cope with Covid-19, EU policies are hurting the very people whose 'rights' it wants to protect

To Cambodia as well as the rest of the world, the Covid-19 pandemic has presented the worst form of challenges to fundamental human rights, ranging from the right to life to decent jobs, education, food and shelter. The loss of direct income due to the disruption of global production and supply chains has already forced 400 garment, footwear and travel-goods factories in Cambodia to suspend their operations, leaving more than 150,000 workers jobless.

Amid these challenges, Cambodia recently launched a large-scale cash transfer program for poor and vulnerable households to sustain the livelihoods of those hit hard by the Covid-19 crisis. The government is expected to spend US\$25 million monthly, benefiting 560,000 households or 2.3 million Cambodian people.

Some critics say this social-security scheme is "too little" as it will not do much to help people cover their expenses, noting that residents of Phnom Penh need at least \$300 a month to meet their needs while those in rural areas require at least \$190.

Cambodia has received both punishment and assistance in this difficult time.

While Cambodia is trying to cope with the pandemic, the Swedish government decided to phase out development cooperation with the Cambodian government to refocus its support only on human rights and democracy aspects.

Last year, then-European Trade Commissioner Cecilia Malmström, a Swedish national, launched a procedure to suspend Cambodia's trade preference under the framework Everything But Arms (EBA), which would hit hard the multibillion-dollar garment industry in Cambodia. Ironically, it was she who

also came all the way to Vietnam, a communist state, to sign the EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement in June of the same year.

In a contrasting position, the Swedish retailer Hennes & Mauritz (H&M) has pledged to continue placing orders to improve the garment industry's situation. The differing approaches by Sweden's government and its private sector represent different voices in a democratic country.

However, it is still difficult to understand when one hand is trying to help yet another is doing otherwise.

For example, while the European Union is mobilizing about \$504 million to support Cambodia's fight against the pandemic and mitigate its socio-economic impact, at the same time, it is about to eliminate trade preferences, which may cut off billions of dollars of direct incomes to a few million Cambodian garment workers and their dependents.

This is not to underestimate the EU's development assistance, which has contributed significantly to Cambodia. But the lingering question would fall under the debate on "trade-not-aid."

For Cambodia, trade represents direct income to its people. The more diversified the trade, the wider the demographic scope whereby the income can reach the people directly. For Cambodia, trade offers a stronger chance of economic independence and self-reliance. Cambodia's weak point still lies on its small market power and production capacity as compared with its two larger neighbors, Thailand and Vietnam.

As far as aid is concerned, even if China and Japan are Cambodia's largest donors, Cambodia's exports to these two countries have remained small compared with those toward the US and the EU. For instance, Cambodia exported only \$1.3 billion worth of goods to China in 2018, and \$1.7 billion to Japan in 2019, as compared with \$3.8 billion to the US in 2018 and \$6 billion to the EU that year.

Cambodia is now trying to negotiate free-trade agreements with China and South Korea, while an FTA with Japan seems still to be far away. Some countries provide Cambodia a lot of trade preferences but only on items that

it has no capacity to produce. Non-tariff measures have also been used to mitigate Cambodia's ability to export, even though on the surface, it seems like those countries have provided many concessions.

In this debate, a piece written by the late secretary general of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, back in 1999 remains relevant even today.

"They are right to be concerned about jobs, about human rights, about child labor, about the environment, about the commercialization of scientific and medical research.... It seldom makes sense to use trade restrictions to tackle problems whose origins lie, not in trade, but in other areas of policy. By aggravating poverty and obstructing development, such restrictions often make the problems they are trying to solve even worse....

"So it is hardly surprising if developing countries are suspicious of those who claim to be helping them by introducing new conditions or restrictions on trade. They have been told time and again that free trade is good for them, that they must open up their economies. And they have done so, often at great cost."

At a time when the country is still climbing the development ladder, "trade-not-aid" should be the next feature of discourse between Cambodia and its foreign partners if they are truly supportive of Cambodia's stronger self-reliance and sustainable development.

# CAMBODIA: BETWEEN COVID-19 AND EBA WITHDRAWAL

Opinion, Euractiv, 22 July 2020

For Cambodia, the impact of COVID-19 is similar to a simulation of the withdrawal of the EU-driven Everything But Arms (EBA) trade scheme. If EBA is withdrawn, it would be “a nail in the coffin” of the already dying garment industry, the country’s biggest employer, writes Sim Vireak.

Back in December 2019, the IMF warned that the withdrawal of the European Union’s trade preferences under the Everything But Arms scheme from Cambodia would cause a decline of exports to the EU of about 13%, and a 3 percentage point decline in GDP growth, without prejudice to other indirect effects.

In terms of jobs, an estimate was made that in the vital garment sector, 43% of workers (nearly 225,000 people) plus 20% of workers in footwear factories (more than 20,000 people) would become unemployed.

This projection is becoming reality but not because of the actual EBA withdrawal but due to the global epidemiological and economic crisis unleashed by COVID-19.

In the latest report in May 2020, the World Bank estimated that Cambodia’s economy is likely to register its slowest growth since 1994, contracting between -1% (baseline) and -2.9 percent (downside). Poverty could increase between 3 and 11 percentage points from a 50% income loss that lasts for six months for households engaged in tourism, wholesale and retail trade, garment, construction, or manufacturing.

With job losses, the same goes for income. This has caused severe strain on many workers that have applied for microloans, using their jobs as leverage.

According to the Cambodia Microfinance Association (CMA), 137,000 people have already requested loan relief amid the economic slowdown in the form

of loan restructuring, interest payment deferrals or postponement of all payments.

This accounted for only 5% of the total 2.2 million microloan borrowers, and the worst has yet to come.

In terms of jobs, as of May 2020, with the suspension of 256 garment, footwear and travel goods factories in Cambodia due to the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 130,000 workers have been affected. Besides, about 169 companies in tourism sector had also been closed temporarily, leaving roughly 16,891 people unemployed.

Cambodia's garment sector is not an isolated case. Vietnam's garment and textile exports in the first four months fell 10 per cent year-on-year and could fall much further as buyers cancelled orders due to COVID-19. It is estimated that Vietnam's 2020 apparel exports could decrease by 20% over the previous year with a global number drop between 20-25%.

For Cambodia, the impact of COVID-19 is similar to a simulation of the possible EBA withdrawal. In the current situation, if EBA is withdrawn, it would signify "a nail in the coffin" of the already dying garment industry.

Amid these economic challenges, Cambodian government has taken various emergency measures to curb the impact on possible fallout of an industry that feeds billions of dollars of incomes to Cambodian workers, mostly women. The EU had recently made a \$66.7 million grant to help Cambodia's economy.

In early June, the government unleashed the fourth round of interventions aimed to minimise impact on the whole Cambodian economy, especially on growth pillars such as the garment, tourism, and construction industries. These included tax measures to stabilise businesses and the living condition of employees. The government has exempted all kinds of monthly tax on the hospitality sector in Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, Preah Sihanouk, Kep, Kampot, Bavet and Poi Pet for two months from June to July 2020. Employers will also be exempted from payments for insurance and the national fund for social security.

Secondly, financial funding support for businesses was allocated by providing

special fund of \$50 million to be implemented by the Rural and Agricultural Development Bank, and \$100 million to be implemented by SME Bank of Cambodia. Additionally, \$300 million is also being earmarked for the Ministry of Economy and Finance to support key growth sectors during and after the crisis.

Finally, social measures have also been devised. The “labour for cash programs” will receive \$100 million to absorb labour forces that have been affected by factories’ suspension. This budget will be used to build small physical infrastructures at local levels for the sake of uplifting agriculture and rural economy.

Beyond the emergency intervention measures, it is equally important that Cambodia considers taking various long-term measures to prepare the country for the post-Covid economy. Many examples can be taken from countries in the region.

For instance, Thailand and Vietnam are competing hard to welcome factories’ relocation from China, utilising their sophisticated logistics network and pro-business environment. Many companies have been looking for alternatives to China to manufacture goods, originally to get around US tariffs. However, Covid-19 outbreak has strengthened this trend after the severe disruption of production and supply chain that relies heavily on “Factory China”. Thailand also embarked on five infrastructure megaprojects in their Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) to support foreign investment, such as high-speed railway linking three airports; U-tapao aviation city; a maintenance, repair and overhaul (MRO) centre; development of Laem Chabang seaport; and development of Map Ta Phut seaport.

In the same vein, Cambodia’s massive infrastructure development in Sihanoukville indicates similar rationale. Cambodian government has disbursed \$350 million to build road infrastructure in the Preah Sihanouk province with the future goal to transform the city into a multi-purpose special economic zone, international financial center and potentially the industrial hub of Cambodia. Sihanoukville airport run by the French Vinci Group has been refurbished with extended runway up to 3,800 meters to be put in operation later this year. The renovation of the passenger arrival terminal will be completed by 2022.

Beside physical infrastructure, industrial diversification to non-garment sectors and future job creation measures should be put on top priority.

In Singapore, National Jobs Council has put up a package that aims to support close to 100,000 job seekers over the next 12 months by creating new vacancies, traineeships and skills training places.

Countries in the region have increased efforts to support the growing size of the digital economy. For instance, Indonesia will impose a 10% value-added tax on digital services provided by non-resident companies starting on 1 July. According to the new regulation, the tax applies to companies with a “significant economic presence” in the country, operating in sectors such as software, multimedia, and data. The Philippines is also considering similar measures.



# MEKONG COUNTRIES DON'T NEED TO BANK ON OUTSIDERS

Opinion, Asia Times, 15 September 2020

Nations in the region think that technical matters should be kept separate from geopolitical issues

Recently there have been attempts to politicize issues relating to the Mekong region or even treat it like the South China Sea.

Truth be told, Mekong sub-regional frameworks have been overstretched by multi-layered structures just to accommodate specific partners. When competition between these partners increases, Mekong frameworks have become the “melting pot” of mechanisms characterized only by beautiful statements, hollow pledges, and verbal attacks among major powers that do not contribute to real development for people in the region.

Valid political and security concerns exist, such as over the lack of transparency on water data and non-participatory attitudes toward water-resource management. This tendency also stems from the “Sinophobia” of some actors that are at odds with or feel security threats from China.

But such sentiment is not equally shared by Mekong riparian countries. While most countries agree that water-resource management should be improved, it is also true that most do not agree on securitizing Mekong issues.

Countries in the region think that technical matters should be separated from geopolitical issues. And comparing the Mekong issues to territorial issues like those of the South China Sea is absurd. The complexities and time elements are completely different, because disagreements on management of the Mekong are temporary and manageable, unlike territorial contests in the South China Sea that are extremely complex and have existed for centuries.

The attempt to push for security considerations of the Mekong is self-serving. Some suspect this push represents a desire to provide a platform

for superpower rivalry, which can be dangerous in terms of security in the region itself. Mekong riparian countries do not have the individual capacity to manage major-power rivalry and the extreme pressure to take sides.

Such attempts will also divert the limited energy and human resources under the Mekong frameworks that are already struggling to cope with increased cooperation. Securitization will make the region lose track of what we are trying to achieve within the sub-regional cooperation frameworks: To serve local people or to serve the agenda of major powers?

There is a saying that goes, "A good neighbor is better than a far-away relative." And there is also another saying, "You can change friends, not neighbors." Countries in the Mekong region are trying to promote peaceful and harmonious co-existence among themselves even if they have differences.

Under pressure for transparency, China last year agreed to continue sharing hydrological data with the Mekong River Commission (MRC), which would contribute to better river monitoring and flood forecasting in the Mekong countries. The MRC was also granted an "observer status" to join the working group on water resources under the Mekong-Lancang Cooperation (MLC) framework with China.

In terms of development, MLC is project-based cooperation that supports Mekong countries with small and medium-sized projects with up to half a million US dollars per project. These projects are aimed at capacity-building, education, agriculture support and improvement of local livelihoods.

MLC projects are more transparent than those under the Belt and Road Initiative because no one really know which projects are under the BRI or whether they are government supported or by private investment. The official list of projects is hard to find.

This transparency issue does not only apply to China. Some development partners often pledge a huge amount of assistance and initiatives but no one really knows what those projects are, who are the implementers and who are the beneficiaries.

Concrete projects are important for development cooperation. Local

stakeholdership and ownership are also crucial. Recipient governments or even technical agencies that have jurisdiction over the areas of cooperation often hear reports of big amounts of assistance that they don't know of. They don't know how those funds are being spent, to do what, by whom and for whom.

This is not only the case for Cambodia, but we keep saying thank you for their assistance because we cannot afford to be disrespectful or we don't want to spoil relations.

Some development partners do not even care to deal with local host governments that are supposed to be their official counterparts. They only deal with affiliated non-governmental organizations but always ask the host governments for acknowledgement of their activities that have never been reported. Some partners collect data from governments but never share their study results. Transparency of partners should be questioned too.

Partners should support Mekong development through promotion of synergy and complementarities, streamlining of the existing frameworks, and should not push for alienation, securitization, and mutual demonization at the detriment of development interest of the Mekong region.

They should assist the Mekong countries in addressing practical issues such as illegal fishing that has depleted fishery resources of the Mekong so much more than the occasional drought or low level of water in the river. They should help the Mekong countries manage their water resources in a scientific, data-based analytical and impartial manner.

Last, partners should support and encourage the harmonious co-existence and good neighborliness in this region that has known the ravages of war for far too long. It is not a distant concern that over-securitization of issues may invite another proxy war like the Vietnam War, which was devastating to the Mekong region. The security threat stemming from the possibility of Vietnam War 2.0 is not far-fetched, especially for Cambodia. It is quite a haunting trauma. It is a decades-long nightmare, whose legacy still lasts.

As the last country to have peace in Southeast Asia as well as in the Mekong region, Cambodia has no wish to be invited to the "sideshow" of another Vietnam War.

# BRIDGING THE CHASM IN CAMBODIA- VIETNAM TRUST

Opinion, Asia Times, 6 October 2020

If you rely on official statements, Cambodia and Vietnam have a long tradition of friendship owing to the strong ties between their leaders and ruling parties. But an undercurrent of irritants such as constant border incidents, though minimal, suggests deep discontent or distrust on both sides.

It is worth remembering that before being labeled as China's puppet, Cambodia used to be called Vietnam's puppet.

It is normal for small states to be seen as puppets of stronger states that they have good relations with. "Puppet theory" is being used to humiliate small states and allege their weaknesses, lack of independence and sovereignty when their national interest does not fit with geopolitical agenda and interest of the theory's proponents. It can be shaped through repetition of accusations.

For instance, when the Pentagon asserted that Beijing had likely considered locations for military logistics facilities in five Southeast Asian countries, Ian Storey, a senior fellow at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore, drew a simple conclusion that "such willingness [to host a Chinese base] appears to be in short supply, except in the case of Cambodia."

For a small state like Cambodia, none of its arguments seem to make sense or be convincing enough for regional pundits. To those observers, explanations and rejections by Cambodia's prime minister, foreign minister and defense minister combined don't seem to carry the same weight as a single explanation by the Indonesian foreign minister.

This is how "puppet theory" is being created.

It seems that against the same Cambodian government, "puppet theory" is being shifted from Vietnam to China. This is probably one of the major factors for growing distrust between Cambodia and Vietnam. But the story is two-sided.

From Vietnam's view, Cambodia is distrusted because of its growing good relations with China that has competing territorial claims in the South China Sea. This act is considered "ungrateful" for the lives Vietnam sacrificed to liberate Cambodia from the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime or save from national extinction.

From Cambodia's view, a centuries-old history of invasion, thorny issues of borders, illegal Vietnamese immigrants and lack of independence or again the "Vietnam's puppet theory" compound distrust.

Cambodia has a sense of inferiority when its sacrifice for Vietnam's quest for independence and unification is not equally appreciated. Cambodia's support such as the "Sihanouk Trail" that led to the US bombing causing at least 100,000 Cambodian civilian casualties during the Vietnam War is a case in point.

While Cambodia-Vietnam friendship monuments have been built in the capital Phnom Penh and many provinces in Cambodia, the equivalent memorials are not seen in Vietnam to honor the loss of Cambodian lives for Vietnam's independence and reunification.

For the Cambodian opposition, the "Vietnam's puppet theory" still works very effectively and powerfully to ignite nationalism. The topic of the border is well known to all parties as a deeply contentious issue in Cambodian politics and one that goes to the heart of Cambodian nationalism. Thus, the constant incidents and unilateral actions by Vietnam at the border raised question about Vietnam's motives.

These actions are seen as a form of indirect interference in Cambodian domestic politics and a cause to destabilize the support base of the incumbent Cambodian government. Ultimately, they challenge the legitimacy of the Cambodian government when increasingly demanding voters see it as too soft on border protection.

To solidify a healthy relationship, both countries should focus more on building bonds that link friendship and create the bedrock for good neighborliness.

At the moment, both countries seem to focus too much on the past. While bonds can be built on past sacrifices, they can also be built through investment

in the future such as enhancement of people-to-people exchanges, mutual understanding and mutual respect.

Both sides need to remember that their peace and war are intertwined. The Vietnam War did not stop at the Vietnamese border nor did the destruction of Pol Pot's genocidal regime stop at the Cambodian border. Both countries need to understand that they need one another to ensure domestic and regional peace and stability.

Consolidating mutual trust is time-consuming and requires a lot of investment but still it costs less than facing the challenges of conflicts and instabilities.

An inspiration can be taken from the longstanding program called the "Ship for Southeast Asian and Japanese Youth Program" (SSEAYP) funded by the Japanese government to gather youth from Southeast Asian countries and Japan for an intensive period of exchanges.

Probably, Cambodia and Vietnam could create a "Ship for Mekong Youth Friendship Program" gathering youth on a ship journey from Vietnam's Mekong delta up to Cambodia's Tonle Sap to create opportunities for youth to open their hearts to learn from one another on topics from culture to issues affecting the region such as climate change and its impact on the livelihood of people in the region.

The two countries could also consider setting up an annual Cambodia-Vietnam Student Conference by emulating the like of the Japan-America Student Conference (JASC), which is a student-led program, gathering students from both countries from various backgrounds to the rotating host country for site visits and to conduct in-depth exchanges and debates on bilateral relations.

Of course, there can be many kinds of innovative action for that purpose, but all action should ensure strong people bonds from all levels for the sake of durable trust and friendship.

# CAMBODIA HAS NO REASON TO FEAR A BIDEN PRESIDENCY

Opinion, Asia Times, 13 November 2020

The US is not a police officer and some countries' anti-China policy does not mean Cambodia has to do the same

This article is a response to the piece written by David Hutt, which appeared on Asia Times on November 12, suggesting that "Cambodia should be worried about the Biden presidency."

His suggestion does not make sense, for the following reasons.

First, Cambodia is not a criminal, and the US is not a police officer or prosecutor. Relations between Cambodia and the US are between sovereign states that have different sets of cultures, history and social fabrics. It is normal that over seven decades of relations, there have been ups and downs in accordance with each administration's preferences and policies, but that does not make the relationship comparable to that between police and criminal.

Second, the fact that some countries adopt an anti-China policy does not mean that Cambodia has to do the same. It is now common to see that some countries are adopting a "friend selection criterion" that categorizes friends as those who are anti-China, regardless of whether those friends are communist or democratic.

Those who are not anti-China will be subject to trade and political sanctions just like what the European Union did to withdraw partially the trade preference from Cambodia under the facade of concern for human rights and democracy. Again, it does not make sense, because some of the EU's closest friends are not necessarily democratic.

Currently, those who are anti-China are being treated like trendy superstars or first-tier countries while those who have good relations with China are being treated like convicts or second-tier countries. Are we going to adopt a

world order based on “anti-China” criteria now?

Third, Cambodia has no preference on who should be the US president. Cambodia does not interfere in US politics or express preferences on American leaders. Cambodia doesn’t choose American presidents, nor does America choose Cambodian prime ministers. Suggesting that a specific US administration is good or bad for Cambodia does not change Cambodia’s inclination to enhance friendship and cooperation with all United States’ administrations.

It is also worth noting that although it is highly likely that Joe Biden will be the next president of the United States, which I have nothing against, the US president and vice-president are not elected directly by citizens. Instead, they’re chosen by “electors” through a process called the Electoral College.

Each state’s electoral votes are counted in a joint session of Congress on January 6 in the year following the meeting of the electors. The president of the Senate then declares which persons have been elected president and vice-president of the United States. The president-elect takes the oath of office and is sworn in as president on January 20 in the year following the general election.

David Hutt seems to suggest that the Biden presidency will likely take a strong stance on human rights and democracy, and that this is something for Cambodia to worry about.

As a matter of fact, it is the sovereign right of the US to decide based on its national interest what policies to adopt vis-à-vis Cambodia, but likewise Cambodia also has its own national interest and sovereignty to consider.

The simple rationale is that “your enemy is not necessarily my enemy” unless the US is adopting a policy akin to the anti-terrorism approach in the George W Bush administration that was pushing the strong line of “you are with us or against us.” In this case, the US might think it needs to treat China as a terrorist state and block all economic activities with it.

Fourth, it does not make sense to argue that one is respecting Cambodia’s sovereignty and independence, but one doesn’t let Cambodia makes its own choices.



Pundits keep arguing that they fear that Cambodia will lose its sovereignty and independence to China, falling under China's orbit or becoming China's vassal state whatever they may call it. Hutt suggested that Cambodia's demolition of a US-sponsored building and the constant rumors of Cambodia's intention to host a Chinese military base are the major sources of concern.

Then does Cambodia have to pay back all the costs or report back to donors each time it needs to amend a sponsored structure? If China or the US helps build any facilities in Cambodia, will they have special privileges?

This is nothing but hypothetical. However, one thing is certain, no matter what any donor contributes, it will definitely not become any sort of "shareholder" or "board director" over Cambodia's sovereignty, territory and military base. It is the sovereign right of Cambodia to decide from whom it should seek assistance, and friendly partners should respect that. And Cambodia's approval is definitely required before utilizing the sponsored facilities based on mutually beneficial terms.

Building infrastructure is costly, and thus far Cambodia only has one deep-sea port, which was built in colonial times. As a nation emerging from war, Cambodia is infrastructure-hungry, and the current superpower rivalry between the US and China is poisonous for certain aspects of Cambodia's development. It is likely disrupting Cambodia's self-determination in choosing a development path because, as Hutt suggested, Cambodia needs to worry all the time what the US might think when dealing with China.

Many pundits talk about sovereignty issues, but their arguments suggest that Cambodia should give up its sovereign decisions by listening to or following their lines. That seems to suggest that there is a "right" and "wrong" about independence and sovereignty based on whom you are partnered with. This is very self-contradictory especially when taking account of relations between nation-states.

Either way, the rumor about a Chinese military presence in Cambodia is a zombie case that will continue to haunt Cambodia so long as superpower rivalry continues. Cambodia needs to stand firm and expect constant attacks from anti-China forces.

No matter who will be the president of the US, Cambodia will always continue to promote friendship and cooperation with the US based on mutual respect and mutual interest, mindful that over the long term, it is normal for relations to have ups and downs.

If history is any indication, over more than seven decades, the bilateral friendship between Cambodia and the US has never changed regardless of shifts of administrations. If policymakers are swayed by periodical waves of hatred and discrimination against relations between countries, they are self-defeating and lack the qualities of statesmen. They will become seasonal online pundits who are out of touch with person-to-person contacts, which are definitive for relations between states.

# CAMBODIA'S CHALLENGES IN DEALING WITH FOREIGN ACTORS

Opinion, Asia Times, 10 December 2020

In Cambodia's nation-building process, it has faced two main challenges when dealing with foreign actors who are keen on molding the country into their own forms of democracy, with domestic actors and policies supportive of their own interests.

The first challenge is the internationalization of Cambodian domestic issues, and another is the "Cambodian puppet theory." The latter is long-standing, with patrons changing according to time and geopolitical landscape. These two challenges create pressure on and obstructions to domestic political and economic development.

By regional or even global standards, Cambodia's domestic affairs have attracted inordinate levels of unsolicited foreign attention and intervention, from freelance pundits and politicians alike.

It is understandable for pundits to write negatively about Cambodia because it is their job, but it is incomprehensible when foreign parliamentarians with many issues at home can still find the time to concentrate on Cambodian issues. In other words, Cambodia's imperfections are conveniently used as leverage for their own domestic political point-scoring.

These days, it is also unfortunate that anyone can easily become an "expert" on Cambodia simply by compiling negative articles accessible online even if they have never visited the country, have never met or talked with real persons here, or have only a few years, if any, of working experience in the country.

No matter how logical their criticisms seem to be, the fact is that making and implementing policy is not a linear process, and multi-stakeholder challenges are something that only people with institutional working experiences can empathize with.

For that reason, a claimed understanding of Cambodia is often a by-product of already crafted and twisted images about the country and its administration. But those convicted to the cause can still justify themselves as crusaders who are neutral, nonpartisan and independent.

There are two common regrets that foreign actors of this ilk share. First, they regret that they failed to remove the current government actors from the state apparatus when they had the chance to intervene in the 1993 UN-brokered election. The second regret is that they were not able to come to the rescue of the believers in the liberal system when Cambodia fell into the hands of the bloody Pol Pot regime.

These two regrets share common characteristics in that they are altruistic and do not include local elements at all.

The second regret is natural for external actors because no country or group of countries can ever have enough planes, ships or welfare packages to bear the burden of receiving millions of war refugees for their belief in a specific ideology.

While it is normal to have a love-hate relationship with a specific administration, it is usually unclear whether foreign actors are attacking Cambodia as a country or its rulers. But either way, their punitive actions, such as the embargo in the 1980s, have affected Cambodia as a whole.

The Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations requiring that all official business shall be conducted with the approval of the receiving state, and that each mission has the duty to promote friendly relations between the sending state and the receiving state, is not relevant any more. Defying the Convention, some foreign actors seek to deal only with non-state actors of their preference.

In its modern history, Cambodia is the real-life university for experiments in governance and ideology, as it has experienced them all, including the worst forms in human history, en route to establishing a multi-party liberal democracy with a constitutional monarchy.

Nevertheless, the firmness and absoluteness of Cambodia's constitution

in regards to the principles of its governmental system and foreign-policy approaches are still not sufficient to convince some foreign actors. For them, changing the administration seems to be the only solution to enable Cambodia's perfection of its democracy.

They have a strong conviction that Cambodia is being run by a handful of individuals, elites or an establishment that is untouchable by ordinary people. But again, anti-establishment tendencies exist everywhere. Equally important, the Cambodian government has no means to ignore the voices and grievances of the people when citizens have direct access to the prime minister's Facebook messenger.

With a mere 20 years of full peace and opportunities to build state institutions, it is unfortunate that some already take peace for granted and criticize the administration for benefiting from the peace legacy for far too long.

However, as a post-conflict nation that did not have a proper state apparatus from the beginning, yet has been able to achieve sustainable peace, high economic growth, poverty alleviation and a certain degree of democratization, Cambodia is historically an extremely rare case. Other countries that faced similar situations as Cambodia in the 1980s and 1990s are still struggling with factional wars.

Peace is like oxygen that people tend to take for granted. With the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, when people are required to wear masks, one should realize how important it is to have unobstructed access to oxygen. Only with instability comes the consciousness of peace.

Looking at Cambodia's evolution for seven decades after World War II, foreign actors should be happy to see its development as a nation that does not have internal strife or export its problems outside any more. Cambodia is now sending peacekeepers abroad.

With its limited resources, it even has strong compassion as "a small country with a big heart," as in its responds to the humanitarian crisis of the Westerdam cruise ship, support multilateralism, and South-South cooperation, such as through provision of masks and medical supplies to Myanmar, Laos and Timor-Leste to support efforts against the Covid-19 pandemic.

Despite all the above facts on peace, economic development and international contribution, some foreign actors cannot give credit to Cambodia for fear of being seen as supportive of the current administration.

For the foreseeable future, these challenges will persist, and constitute an obstruction to Cambodia's political and economic development. Cambodia should continue to walk its own path and stay focused on its own goals and be firm on what it really wants: to achieve a durably peaceful, prosperous and independent nation that is caring about its people's well-being.

# PUTTING CAMBODIA'S ECONOMIC DIPLOMACY IN CONTEXT

Opinion, Phnom Penh Post, 24 January 2021

It was a historical moment for Cambodia's diplomacy when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation launched the nascent "Economic Diplomacy Strategy (2021-2023)" on January 18, 2021.

In the wider definition of economic diplomacy, such strategy is not new. For instance, Cambodia's efforts to integrate its economy with the region and the world through its accession in ASEAN and the World Trade Organisation in 1999 and 2004 respectively can be considered as the early phase of economic diplomacy.

Economic diplomacy has also been conducted all along by technical ministries and institutions, such as the Ministry of Commerce, the Council for the Development of Cambodia and the Ministry of Economy and Finance.

What is new is rather the narrow and literal definition of economic diplomacy in the sense that the foreign ministry is trying to embed economic and trade mission within the diplomatic corps.

The endeavour has various distinctive characteristics.

Firstly, the modernisation of diplomacy. The strategy is one of the major institutional reforms initiated by foreign minister Prak Sokhonn with full blessing from Prime Minister Hun Sen in 2018. The minister has embarked on his reform mission in five major aspects, with economic diplomacy being a part of it. The intention is to put priorities on modern diplomacy focusing on promotion of trade, economy, culture and tourism, on top of the traditional diplomacy.

Secondly, the institutionalisation of human resource development. The early phase of economic diplomacy strategy focuses on capacity building and setting up of information-sharing platform. The strategy provides clear action

plan with concrete Key Performance Index (KPI), timeline, Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E), budgeting and provision of supporting means and resources, and training programmes to consolidate the long-term institutionalisation.

The strategy also provides for the establishment of a dedicated economic diplomacy department within the ministry to assist overseas missions and diplomats on information collection. Therefore, diplomats don't need to gather information randomly or inquire domestic line agencies for piecemeal data when they need it. They can focus more on "promotion" works rather than "preparation".

In the future, Cambodian diplomats are expected to be able to proactively provide analysis on tailored-made strategy to meet specifications of individual host country in the efforts to diversify Cambodia's trade and inbound investment.

Thirdly, the launching of economic diplomacy strategy demonstrates the gradual shifting from over-reliance on development assistance. Modernisation of diplomacy is one key aspect but the country's political economic development also helps push the concretisation of this strategy.

With constant economic growth, Cambodia's economic status has been elevated and Cambodia is seen as preparing for and adapting to the gradual withdrawal of economic assistance, notably grant aid. With higher status, trade preferential treatment that is normally reserved for the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) will also inevitably become target for review in the near future. Therefore, it is becoming a matter of urgency for Cambodia to strengthen its self-reliance, and promote further the discourse of "trade-not-aid" with foreign partners.

It is also important to underline that such effort by the foreign ministry is not a replacement or integration of trade and investment functions into the ministry. It is rather a complimentary action to maximise the utilisation of the existing Cambodia's overseas missions, which are undoubtedly the first accessible windows of Cambodia for foreign nations. The ministry is not trying to gain extra portfolio but rather it is playing a coordinating role in terms of basic information provision and early bridge-making with foreign investors, traders and tourists.



Technical aspects such as trade negotiation, investment approval and detailed technical conditions, legal frameworks, etc, remain the core works of technical ministries and institutions.

Comparing to the region, Cambodia is lagging behind in terms of integrating economic and trade strategy within the professionalisation of diplomats. Nevertheless, the ministry is seen as taking the first step towards concrete actions on the long path of institutional reform endeavours.

# CAMBODIA'S PREPARATION FOR THE ASEAN CHAIRMANSHIP IN 2022

Opinion, Phnom Penh Post, 02 March 2021

The year 2022 is just around the corner and Cambodia will soon undertake the role of ASEAN chairmanship for the third time. This would be a moment of pride and also pressure.

ASEAN has always been an integral part of Cambodia's foreign policy. Despite being a latecomer, Cambodia has proven to be an active and constructive supporter of the ASEAN Community-building. The country's boldness in assuming her first ASEAN chairmanship in 2002 after merely three years of her participation in this regional grouping demonstrated a strong political will and unwavering commitment of Cambodia's top leadership towards regional integration and multilateralism. Such commitment remains unchanged but ever more resolute.

We are proud to be an active actor in the ASEAN Community that is very relevant in the global community of nations. Despite criticism of being a "talk-shop", countries outside the region often look for ASEAN for platform to address concerns in the region, for investment destinations, for trade partners, and for all other benefits that functional multilateralism can offer.

As a matter of fact, despite challenges caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, ASEAN is probably one of the most active regional bodies that are making efforts to provide innovative and regionally coordinated solutions to these unprecedented challenges. The establishment of the Covid-19 ASEAN Response Fund, the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework (ACRF), the ASEAN Travel Corridor Arrangement (TCA) Framework, and the proposed establishment of the ASEAN Centre for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases (ACPHEED) and the development of the ASEAN Public Health Emergency Coordination System (APHECS) are key evidence of proactive policy coordination works across the region that is probably unseen in other regions of the world.

As an ASEAN citizen, we should be proud of that instead of sinking into the talk-shop narrative of ASEAN.

So then, what is next for Cambodia's chairmanship in 2022?

First and foremost, it is important that we need to identify key mega trends affecting the region. Covid-19 will be here to stay, and countries around the world will continue to struggle on how to rebuild economies and businesses that are almost at the brink of collapse. Operation wise, the prospect of having physical ASEAN meetings is still gloomy even if Cambodia strongly desires for physical meetings in 2022.

Great power rivalries will persist, and the emerging bifurcation of politics, trade, economy, cyberspace, and technology is a growing matter of concern.

Within the region, traditional security concerns, namely the possible emergence of civil strife, complex land and maritime border issues, will continue. Non-traditional security issues such as natural disasters, cyber-crimes, cross-border crimes, trafficking in persons, internally displaced persons and climate change will intensify the magnitude of challenges that ASEAN has to deal with.

Of course, Cambodia is not too naive to rule out that we would succeed or fail in making a historical turn for any mega trends when our chairmanship ends. This is where pragmatism and idealism clash. Cambodia will pursue idealism in a pragmatic manner, but we also hold that idealism should not be the end to itself. We also hold that Cambodia's chairmanship is not a standalone chairmanship to be judged by oversimplification of specific success or failure. Cambodia's chairmanship is obviously a continuation of various chairmanships, and any achievement or progress is credited to all the 10 members.

This is where the ASEAN Way comes into play in the maintenance of ASEAN Centrality and relevance within the challenging and dividing mega trends. The fact that ASEAN has continued to be cohesive in one piece is because we maintain the modus operandi of ASEAN Way that cherishes unity in diversities, consensus building, and dialogues and consultation in a discreet manner that is respectful to sovereignty and the principle of non-interference when addressing difficult issues. This is because ASEAN promotes unity for peace, cooperation, and development but not unity for confrontation.

Looking at these mega trends, it is one of the most important priorities for Cambodia in 2022 that we shall continue to maintain and manage the situation/environment that is conducive for peace and stability to sustain, and prosperity to be enhanced. Like every other ASEAN chair, we always strive to find issues that bind us together, instead of those that are dividing us. Not that we are shying away from problems, but simply because ASEAN is trying to be practical in terms of how we should find ways to move forward. For instance, on superpower rivalry, practically there is not much that ASEAN can do. If both superpowers can find or help find agenda that can enhance their cooperation instead of accusations and demonisation, it would be a lot helpful for every ASEAN chair, or maybe it is a merely wishful thinking.

The other most important thing to do is to try to promote the “tangibility” of benefits for the people.

This is the effort to address the most basic yet difficult question from ASEAN citizens: “What are the benefits for having ASEAN Community?”

In identifying priorities for the Chairmanship 2022, we try to focus on how we could deliver tangible benefits for ASEAN citizens – something that are touchable and feel-able so that we can provide ASEAN citizens a strong sense of pride and hope for the future, and confidence for the wellbeing of generations to come with no one left behind.

Along this line, we are trying to look at how we can enhance that “tangibility” for the people through our actions on Covid-19, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership agreement, various free trade agreements, intra-regional trade, digital economy, as well as the enhancement of migrant worker protection and disaster management capabilities, climate change, railway connectivity, industrial connectivity, among others.

These are on top of the existing tangible benefits the likes of visa-free travelling, ASEAN highway connectivity, opportunities for youth exchanges and scholarships, infrastructure development, foreign direct investment, technical assistance and development cooperation from partners, etc.

We also try to ensure a proper balancing among and between the three Pillars, namely the ASEAN Political-Security Community, ASEAN Economic Community

and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. Domestically, it is to ensure that we have everyone on board, taking the “whole-of-Cambodia” approach towards the undertaking of this historical chairmanship role. Regionally, it is to ensure that all benefits from the Community building efforts are being shared to all levels and sectors, and especially to the very ASEAN peoples that this regional grouping is mandated to serve.

# ASIAN IDENTITIES AND THE US-CHINA BIFURCATION OF WORLD ORDER

Opinion, Asia Times, 19 March 2021

The shift from the term 'Asia-Pacific' to 'Indo-Pacific' in regional discourse does a disservice to the millennia-old concept of 'Asia'

With the growing bifurcation of world order through the increased rivalry between the US and China, there is a tendency that the term "Asia-Pacific" is being eliminated gradually, which is unfortunate in terms of Asian social construction, diverse cultural identities, and inclusive geographical definitions.

During Barack Obama's administration, "pivot to Asia" was the mantra for the United States' approach to the Asia-Pacific region considering the increased notations of concepts such as "the rise of Asia" and "the Asian Century." The insinuation was that these phenomena were centered in the Asia-Pacific and were becoming China-centric, which was undesirable for the America's dominance of the global order.

As the No 1 superpower, the US has reasons to worry about China's rise, whether it is peaceful or is challenging the current world order in which the US is central. From the American point of view, China's status is evolving gradually from "competitor" to "challenger" and maybe in the future to "rival" or even "enemy."

The term "Indo-Pacific" was introduced as a strategic concept to challenge that evolution, not against the Asia-Pacific as a whole but against a China-centric Asia-Pacific. The "Indo-Pacific Strategy" was featured clearly in the 2017 US National Security Strategy. From that time on, the term "Asia-Pacific" seems to have gradually disappeared from the discourse of international relations for the region.

For Washington, the term "Indo-Pacific" made sense, especially in strategic and military terms, when the US started to expand its Pacific Command westward to cover the Indian Ocean region as its area of responsibility in

2018 by renaming it the Indo-Pacific Command. The Indo-Pacific Strategy was seen as a containment policy to compete against the increased popularity of China's Belt and Road Initiative, and China's rise itself.

Including "Indo-" in the term suggested that the US wanted to have India help contain China's rise.

Countries in the Asia-Pacific region cannot outright deny the promotion of the Indo-Pacific Strategy, as they do not want to offend the US. Thus, for instance, countries in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations have walked a tightrope by introducing their own "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific" (AOIP) in 2019.

While the term Indo-Pacific makes sense in a military-strategic context, it does not do justice to the millennia-old concept of "Asia" in terms of geography, cultural identities and social constructs that are inclusive and diverse.

There are Indian civilizations and Chinese civilization, but there are also many other civilizations, although smaller, in the Southeast Asian region. Even small nations like Cambodia can have cultural influence toward a much larger one such as China.

For instance, after the Chinese Three Kingdoms period, in the 6th century Buddhism became the motif of cultural interaction between China and the Funan Kingdom centered in what is now Cambodia. Especially during the reign of Emperor Liang Wudi, numerous prominent Funanese monks traveled to China to propagate Buddhist teachings at the request of the Chinese emperor.

The millennia-old word "Asia" is more neutral, inclusive and diverse, but when scholars are starting to use "Indo-Pacific" to describe the Asia-Pacific region, that suggests the rejection of their own cultural identities and social constructs because of the geopolitical power struggles in the region.

Asia does not belong to China or India alone. And all Asians, China and India included, should be proud of their own cultural diversities.

The growing usage of the term Indo-Pacific is because many states in the Asia-Pacific region fear offending the US, and such fear can mean that cultural

and geographical identity can be sacrificed.

This is unfortunate even if it is only being used by scholars in the area of international relations.

Indeed, the US is not the only country that is feared; China is too. Despite strong economic benefits and trade relations, some states in Southeast Asia and powers in the Asia-Pacific region such as Japan, India and Australia are afraid of China's rise too, especially in terms of its military assertiveness and geopolitical and economic dominance.

They fear that despite arguing that its rise is peaceful, China will someday adopt the concept that the late US president Teddy Roosevelt used to describe his foreign policy, namely "speak softly, and carry a big stick."

Of course, China cannot simply reduce its economic and military power to earn trust and address fear from countries concerned. But so long as the growing bifurcation of world order is concerned, countries in the Asia-Pacific region wish to see stable relations between the two superpowers, China and the US, at the global level.

At the regional level, it is fair to say that they wish to see how China can address fear of China's rise by countries in the Asia-Pacific region in a meaningful and constructive manner.

Whatever approaches taken by China and the US, they should not be seen as China's defeat by the US or the US losing its hegemonic dominance of the global order. Unfortunately, this is an extremely difficult solution to find.



# **DANGERS OF US-CHINA BIFURCATION OF WORLD ORDER: A CAMBODIAN VIEW**

Opinion, Khmer Times, 29 March 2021

The US-China talks in Alaska has become a prelude of the consolidation of bifurcation of world order. The level of concerns for tensions can range from fiercer competition, to rivalry, and to wars at different forms and fronts.

When China announced the relief of conditions for visitors who had received Chinese vaccines, it drew a question that: what if different countries set different requirements for different types of vaccines? How would people's mobility, medical choices, business interactions or even nationalities, would be impacted from such requirements? The racism and anti-Asian hate crime in the US is quite disturbing already.

Some of the impacts have been pre-existing, especially in terms of trade and technological wars.

In these domains, US-China bifurcation creates complications for economic and market choice with the camouflage of ideological competition as the overarching context, and mutual accusations of technical and technological deficiencies, thefts, unfair competition and protectionism as the logics on the ground.

Countries have been struggling to choose which source of 5G technology they should adopt. For Thailand, its Digital Economy Promotion Agency (depa) and Huawei opened Thailand 5G Ecosystem Innovation Centre in Bangkok in September 2020. For Singapore, in June 2020, the Singaporean Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA) finalized 5G contract with Nokia and Ericsson by avoiding Huawei. Thailand's case offered a courageous move while Singapore's case a cautious one amid the Huawei's becoming one of the prime cases for US-China technological war.

For infrastructure development, China's Belt and Road Initiative has been contested by the US' Blue Dot Network, and Japan's Partnership for Quality

Infrastructure.

Indonesia's development of Jakarta-Bandung high-speed railway offers a good case study on China-Japan bidding war. Indonesia has jiggled between China and Japan before the decision to choose China's offer in 2016 but Indonesia has secured more Indonesian workforces and the increase of technological transfer.

Amid harsh geopolitical competition, if handled carefully, countries can benefit. If not, countries will become the constant subject for scrutiny. But the question is about how and who should judge whether the decision is right or wrong? Is Thailand wrong to choose collaboration with Huawei in developing its 5G ecosystem? Is Indonesia wrong to choose China's offer to build its high-speed rail? Is Singapore wrong to choose Nokia and Ericsson as its 5G supplier?

The problem here is not limited to market choice or development choice. It raises big question when one's economic and development choice has become or has been treated as ideological mistake even if that economic and development choice is supposed to be a sovereign decision. To some extent, if it is a national level protectionism to maintain one's own industry, it is understandable but if it goes up to the global scale, something is just not right in terms of market capitalism and freedom of choices.

Ideologizing market competition is something to be worried about because this forces countries to choose not based on quality and price, and market freedom but on ideological and geopolitical "crimes and punishment" basis.

This is where and how the bifurcation of world order has disrupted economic development in real practice. Sometimes, small states are left with no choice but to halt the development for fear of being dragged into the bifurcation conundrum.

Disruptions and impacts can be more serious especially for countries like Cambodia, which has been perceived as China's vassal state.

For example, if the Sihanoukville Port in Preah Sihanouk Province is being renovated by Japanese, there is no noise at all. But when the port and airport are being built by Chinese at Dara Sakor, Koh Kong Province, noises have been

amplified to the extreme level from environmental issues, to corruption, and even to the alleged China's military power projection and strategic dominance over the South China Sea all the way from Cambodian seaports in the Gulf of Thailand.

One cannot be sure of the rationality whether it is a real military calculation or an overrated China's paranoid. And it is obvious that Cambodia does not have the luxury to escape from scrutiny and criticism like Thailand and Indonesia do for whatever choice Cambodia made that is related to China. The next day, it would be all in the media that "Cambodia adopted China-styled, etc. etc."

Wrong moves can always be subject for "crime and punishment" by the Western countries who always use unilateral, extrajudicial, and extra-territorial sanctions to exert their power and influence. Bifurcation does not stop at economic sphere. It can go to political, diplomatic and multilateral spheres, where the Western countries have stronger leverages.

Due to bifurcation, states that have close relations with China often become subject of criticism on human rights and democracy from Western countries, and double-standard can be applied for those states who have good strategic and geopolitical relations with the Western countries.

For instance, Cambodia is often the target of the EU's criticism on human rights and democracy. When the EU has 27 members, the EU has 27 bullets to shoot at single Cambodia at the Human Rights Council as they can simply take turn to carry out the onslaught against Cambodia. And it is very easy to pick on Cambodia, even if it is in the middle of the fighting against the Covid-19 pandemic.

In the most recent case, Finland ironically criticized Cambodia's Covid-19 law when Finland has already invoked lockdown and state of emergency in their own country. Such double-standard deprives Cambodia of its sovereign rights to decide on its own on how it should protect peoples' lives. As of 25 March 2021, Finland has over 70,000 infected cases and over 800 death while Cambodia has 7 death from Covid-19. Finland's comment was not helpful at all, rather it was disturbing especially when Cambodia is struggling very hard to suppress the current 20 February Community transmission.

This time, Finland is the actor, and the next day, a new actor and speaker will appear to discredit Cambodia based on the systematic bifurcated world view, and double-standard based on geopolitical divide.

Cambodia is easy, convenient and favorite target because it practically has no leverage to fight back.

Sanctions are the diplomatic and economic weapons of choice to use in the bifurcated world.

These are the real and existing dangers of the bifurcation of world order.

Of course, conventional wars are not out of sight. Proxy wars can always happen again like in the past Vietnam wars and Cambodian 30-year civil wars, and civilian lives will be sacrificed.

How the world should cooperate to prevent such bifurcation should be the priorities for all states.

# CHALLENGES OF DEMOCRATIZATION: THE PERILS OF INTERVENTION

Opinion, Asia Times, 18 July 2021

Francis Fukuyama in his famed essay “The End of History” back in 1989 focused on the turning point of human history when the Soviet Union and communism were on the verge of collapse, and when liberal democracy succeeded as an unchallenged ideology.

Some advocates like Jake Donnelly have been uncompromising on the compatibility of human rights, democracy and development. Nonetheless, he acknowledges that pure democracy and free markets are justified by arguments of collective good and aggregate benefit, not individual rights or social equity.

Therefore, he suggests that the welfare state is an important device to ensure that a minority that is disadvantaged in, or deprived by, markets is treated with a minimum of economic concern and respect.

In reality, not many states, especially developing, post-colonial and post-conflict countries, have the capacity to provide sufficient welfare.

In the late 2010s, Francis Fukuyama, agreeing with Larry Diamond’s “democratic recession,” acknowledged that state capacity in many new and existing democracies had not kept pace with popular demands for democratic accountability. The notable shift in his argument is the acknowledgement of the importance of state capacity for state-building in the promotion of democracy.

The United States’ pullout from Afghanistan has presented yet another failed attempt for democratization without proper plan for state-building, with some likening it to the fall of Cambodia to Pol Pot’s genocidal regime.

From the perspective of developing countries, Adrian Leftwich provided a more pragmatic understanding on the processes of democratization and

development. He argued that democratic politics is seldom the politics of radical economic change but rather of accommodation and compromise.

He asserted the importance of state capacity to deliver public services, not only because that is required to ensure governments' legitimacy but also for democracy to be sustained when demands from the people become diverse and disruptive.

Given diversity of interests in society, democracy is improbable in highly polarized societies, whether divided by income, class, ethnicity, religion or culture. As such, it is important that democratic politics does not promote the politics of radical change in the control, accumulation, distribution or use of wealth.

Rather, the promotion of democratic politics should be consensual, conservative and incremental in the change it brings about.

Democracy promoters often believe in interventionist policy. They care little about the consequences in terms of peace and stability due to the collapse of societies after ideological social experiments.

Peace and stability are also often left out of the discussion, or they are secondary to the values of democracy, while in reality, states cannot achieve anything when they are at war.

For developing countries, peace and stability are the primary goals, while from the perspective of interventionist democracy promoters, conflicts can be considered acceptable externalities so long as some forms of democracy are introduced.

Interventionists do not question who should be responsible for the loss of peace, nor do they question who should be responsible in ending wars caused by the imposition of democracy by external forces. For them, the moral responsibility for social collapse caused by democracy promotion is less important than the moral responsibility for not promoting democracy.

They lack due consideration of the violence that generally occurs due to abrupt changes, the inherent social behavior that is less tolerant to diversities

and differences, levels of public education and awareness of democracy, and ability of citizens to distinguish among rights, freedoms and duties.

Democracy promotion also often presumes that people are rational and unselfish when choosing and deciding on policies that are beneficial for the nation. In fact, this is not always the case, because people are selfish in nature, and unpopular policy can push a government out of power. As such, electoral cycles can deter governments from taking risks for long-term social economic investment, even in advanced democracies.

Voters' selfish demands can also provide a breeding ground for populism. Populism prospers not just on identity, interests and ideology, but also on the selling of ideas that are not economically or financially viable but are beneficial for voters in the short term, such as cash-handout programs and tax cuts. Diplomacy, border issues and national security are sensitive issues but they are prone to being exploited for short-term political gains.

Therefore, it is important that democracy promotion is consensual and that changes are incremental, while such promotion should not jeopardize peace and social harmony, which are still unachievable dreams for many countries.

Democracy advocates should also take due consideration of the capacity of the state to deliver public services, the level of education of the masses on democratic tolerance, and the masses' critical thinking to distinguish among rights, freedoms and duties.

# MULTILATERALISM FOR HUMANITY – FROM A CAMBODIAN PERSPECTIVE

Opinion, Phnom Penh Post, 19 July 2021

This article aims to discuss what multilateralism should or should not be, and on the importance of multilateralism for humanity.

When we discuss multilateralism, we need to go back to historical global and regional events and ask: why was the UN created in the first place? Why was ASEAN created? Why does ASEAN have 10 members?

If we don't constraint ourselves to any ideological thought or geopolitical self-censorship, we can come to a simple yet common answer for everyone. Multilateral institutions were created because we want peace, harmony, development, freedom from miseries and poverty, and bright future for our next generations. Principles and purposes of all multilateral organisations always share these common goals for humanity, leaving no one behind.

We human being, after two consecutive destructive World Wars, decided to sit down and devise mechanism through which we can manage instabilities, irregularities, risks of mistrust, and mitigate or eliminate all kinds of miseries that human being can think of.

Despite having common ideals, gaps of approaches are inevitable.

Some societies are striving for perfection. Some societies are struggling yet for their most basic needs. When these societies interact with one another, they are divided by power gaps, ideologies – for instance during the Cold War, and the ways each state pursue their governance and development path. And these realities create struggles among states, and within multilateralism.

When we have multilateralism to remind us of what humanity needs, we also have multilateralism being used to leverage struggles between states based on geopolitical and ideological divides.



The latter is not the multilateralism that we want.

From Cambodian experiences, multilateralism should not give the seat at the UN to the genocidal Pol Pot regime that had killed more than two millions people. Multilateralism should not impose 12 years of diplomatic and economic embargo on Cambodian survivors from the Pol Pot regime. Multilateralism should not be the engines to propel, enlarge, and prolong proxy wars, and support particular sides in political or territorial conflicts. Multilateralism should not impose economic sanctions when people are suffering from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Multilateralism should put peace and stability above all else and should not be characterised by the imposition of external ideological or geopolitical wills upon others.

With wars, democracy, communism, socialism, human rights mean nothing. With wars, there is no dream for humanity because people can only dream whether they can survive for another day. By all moral and humanity justification, it is not absolutely alright to kill others for their being communist or democrat, and to argue that one should be safe and protected for being democrat or communist. This is not called humanity. This is not the multilateralism for the sake of humanity.

The “rule of multilateralism” should prevail over the “rule by multilateralism”. Multilateralism in the form of extraterritorial, extrajudicial and unilateral punitive measures based on geopolitical and protectionist agenda, and double standards, is not the multilateralism that we all want.

Multilateralism should not seek to classify states on the status of their development for the mere purposes of punishments, sanctions and alliance-making.

When perfectionist requirements are being imposed upon imperfect development of states, poor countries know that they will never get there to make the grade, for example when they want to access the rich countries’ markets. This is nothing but multilateral protectionism. Such approach will only create vicious cycle of mistrust, and it does not create localised sustainable solution in developing countries, because the latter need capacity to deliver

the most basic needs of the people and they practically have no resources and human capacity to dwell on perfectionist demands from the developed countries' standards.

Such interaction only creates walls of lasting division between "the can" and "the cannot".

Multilateralism should not be reduced to the voice of the few, who claim to represent all interests.

When ASEAN was created with five countries, people questioned whether it would last owing to its diversity of political systems and development status. Later on, even if SEATO was defunct, ASEAN has evolved proudly for over 50 years even to include all the 10 countries. When ASEAN has 10 members, people question again whether unity will last. But ASEAN's multilateralism has proved that it can march together in "unity in diversity" based on the "ASEAN Way". The increasingly integrated ASEAN Community has become the "centre of growth" that attracts every region to create partnership with ASEAN. One-man show has no place in multilateralism, and does not accommodate "unity in diversity" that has supported ASEAN for the last five decades. Therefore, it is important that multilateralism should be based on humility and consensus-building approach like what ASEAN has done thus far.

When asking about multilateralism, we need to go back to where we came from: to the root ideals, principles and objectives that bind us together in the first place. We have to look beyond the divide. We have to look at humanity.

Multilateralism for humanity should be the common goals for nations and institutions to strive for.

# ECONOMIC ASPECTS OF ASEAN COMMUNITY BUILDING EFFORTS

Opinion, Khmer Times, 20 December 2021

There is a tendency for media and public opinion to overly focus on the political security aspect of ASEAN. Indeed, the aspect is of high importance because without peace, a wide spectrum of cooperation and community building efforts cannot be done.

Nonetheless, with the intensification of superpower rivalry, while ASEAN can be flattered to receive unprecedented attention, it can also be submerged with agenda of superpowers and get lost from our own goals for the sake of community interest.

While ASEAN is being praised for being the center for specific geopolitical strategies of superpowers and major powers, in other words, it also means that ASEAN is becoming the central platform for superpower and major power rivalries.

There can be optimistic view that competition between major powers creates balance of power that in turn supports stability and prosperity of the region. But this narrative is only partially completed. We need to remind ourselves that geopolitical competition and rivalry had been pursued at the expense of peace for some part of the region during the 1970s and 1980s.

This lesson should not be forgotten, and not least, be repeated in the region. Being the theater for superpower and major powers rivalry does not serve the whole region well, if history is of any reminder for all of us.

For ASEAN, political security is not all about confrontation and rivalry. And ASEAN is not all about political security either.

For the benefit of our community, apart from the maintenance of peace and security, we need to constantly think about what kind of tangible benefits that the ASEAN community bring towards people in the region. How could

the ASEAN community support the betterment of people's livelihood in the region? This is where the economic pillar comes into play.

When Covid-19 is still looming, the prospects for the economy is gloomy as countries look internally for economic security and survival, and resorted to de-globalization, or at worst protectionism. Ensuring resilient economic recovery, revitalising post-pandemic competitiveness are among the key economic priorities for ASEAN in the near future.

To that end, among many areas of cooperation, three key areas should deserve stronger attention from media and public opinion.

Firstly, revitalisation of trade. We don't have much optimistic economic news at the moment. However, at the beginning of the year 2022, at the start of Cambodia's chairmanship of ASEAN, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) Agreement will enter into force. This is a great positive light amid the gloomy global economic situation. It is worth to note that RCEP negotiation was launched in 2012 in Cambodia, and will enter into force in 2022, also during Cambodia's chairmanship. Of course, it is not a credit for Cambodia alone but for all the participating members who believe in multilateralism, and rule-based international trade. It is a beacon of hope against trade protectionism when geopolitical rivalries also affect trade and economic aspects.

All countries in the region need to make sure that all interested parties and stakeholders are well aware of the benefits from RCEP so that they can maximise opportunities from this mega trade agreement for the interest of the people in the region. In the process, local MSMEs and women and youth entrepreneurship should be targeted for leveraging benefits from the RCEP.

Apart from that ASEAN also continues to make strides on the Plus One Free Trade Areas (FTAs). The upgrade for the ASEAN, Australia, New Zealand FTA (AANZFTA) is currently under negotiations, with a targeted conclusion date of September 2022. Discussions are under way to conduct a review or study of the ASEAN-Korea FTA (AKFTA), ASEAN-China FTA (ACFTA), and the ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITIGA), to explore areas that could be considered in possible upgrade negotiations.

ASEAN is also making progress with potential new FTA partners. ASEAN has agreed, at the official-level, on a reference paper for a possible ASEAN-Canada FTA. In addition, Hong Kong, SAR has expressed their interest in acceding to the RCEP; while Chile has requested to join the AANZFTA.

Secondly, on digital economy. Covid-19 has highlighted the importance of digital space in our new normal, from economic exchanges, business platforms, education and even the countless meetings through videoconference.

The ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2025 (ADM2025) which was endorsed by ASEAN Digital Ministers in January 2021 provides the strategic direction for ASEAN to emerge as a leading digital community and economic bloc, powered by secure and transformative digital services, technologies and ecosystem. Recognising the opportunity of the entry into force of the ASEAN Agreement on E-commerce to spur significant economic growth and the regional economic integration, the 53rd ASEAN Economic Ministers' Meeting in September 2021 endorsed a Work Plan on the Implementation of the ASEAN Agreement on E-commerce 2021–2025 which specifies a harmonised approach for all members to conform with the commitments while aligning their laws and regulations with international best practices.

But this area is not without challenges. There are gaps of laws on policies, and there are also gaps on digital infrastructure and supporting ecosystem. Moreover, this area is not immune from geopolitical rivalries either. Digital technology is also an area of geopolitical divide and decoupling, which has pressured on market choice and market freedom of states when major powers are campaigning for mutual exclusion, restriction and discrimination of technologies, platforms, and supporting infrastructure. The rivalries can create complexities for development.

Inter-operability between and among different origins of technologies should be further enhanced if major powers are keen for healthy competition and care for common interest of end-users. Digital taxation is also a matter for discussion when small countries and small markets have little means and leverage to implement.

Thirdly, on connectivity. Undoubtedly, physical infrastructure connectivity is the most feel-able tangible benefits for people in the region.

Linking of transport and logistics system has enhanced intra-regional trade, economic and people-to-people exchanges, and also the sense of community for people in the region. This is what make people proud to be ASEAN when people can travel across countries more conveniently for business, education, works and leisure.

Chaired by Cambodia, the ASEAN Transport Ministers met in November this year to discuss and lay the ground work for post Covid-19 recovery by focusing on building sustainable and resilient connectivity.

ASEAN is also working to encourage the promotion, development and operationalisation of Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans (SUMP) and the Metropolitan Transport Executive (MTE) model in ASEAN Member States, though the issuance of Phnom Penh Declaration on Sustainable Urban Mobility by the ASEAN Transport Ministers in November 2021.

This benefit also holds true vis-à-vis ASEAN's relations with external partners.

For instance, the successful completion of the negotiation on the ASEAN-EU Comprehensive Air Transport Agreement (AE CATA) in June 2021 is another milestone to strengthen air connectivity between and beyond ASEAN and Europe. There are also ongoing Air Services Agreement (ASA) negotiations with Japan, New Zealand and ROK.

With China, the meeting welcomed the adoption of the draft 2021-2025 Action Programme of the Revised Strategic Plan for ASEAN-China Transport Cooperation. With Japan, the two deliverables were the Report on Proof of Concept (PoC) on ICT Solutions for Over-loaded Vehicle Control; and ASEAN-Japan Certification Audit Guidelines on Cold Chain Logistics Standards. The meeting also welcomed the new initiative on Utilisation of Big Data to Improve Mobility under the ASEAN-Japan Transport Partnership (AJTP) Work Plan for 2021-2022.

As with the U.S., we are working toward establishing a formal dialogue on transportation which will start at senior official levels. The 1st ASEAN and the U.S. Senior Transport Officials Dialogue (ASEAN-U.S. STOD) will be held in 2022.

The above are merely a small capture of economic aspects of ASEAN community building efforts.

ASEAN people should be able to benefit directly from these efforts of cooperation through concrete and practical activities, and projects. Beautiful speeches and super grand inter-continental schemes without concrete activities and funding don't deliver tangible benefits to the people.

Healthy competition can bring benefits for people, but rivalries can disrupt development and cooperation at the expense of interest of the people who are keen to understand what ASEAN means to them and the region.

# LONG LIVE ASEAN!

Opinion, Asia Times, 14 October 2022

By staying true to its founding principles, the association has not only survived for 55 years but grown stronger

It is not unusual for pundits to say the Association of Southeast Asian Nations is doomed to fail, or the end of ASEAN is coming. In fact, it has been said since its creation.

After all, with nations that are so colorful as those in ASEAN, everyone can question how the organization will stick together. But the organization has survived for 55 years. More than that, ASEAN has expanded from five to 10 members, and is making steps toward 11.

There are three rationales, conscious or unconscious, behind the naysayers' arguments.

First is the misperception that new members add burdens for ASEAN. Second is the misperception that the older members are always united and aligned. And third is a sense of hopelessness over ASEAN's slow action on divisive international and regional issues.

On the first rationale, Cambodia is a good case study for discussion.

Back in the 1980s, "Cambodian problems" were a major security challenge for the region. Peace and stability were threatened as countries in the region were fearful of the domino effects of communist expansionism.

Indonesia and Thailand had been active in supporting peace negotiations among Cambodia's different parties. Well ahead of the Paris Peace Agreements of 1991, the proactive contribution from ASEAN to Cambodia's peace-making process is historically recorded. Large-scale war was fading gradually from Cambodia as well as the region. And as peace solidified, Cambodia applied for ASEAN membership, and acceded to the grouping in 1999.



The fact here is that even when Cambodia was not a member of ASEAN, the organization was proactive in helping Cambodia to achieve peace, and in securing the whole region from large-scale war and the humanitarian plights that are the consequences of war.

This proved that the founding fathers of ASEAN were open-hearted, altruistic and farsighted. They were not selfish at all. The great ASEAN statesmen of those times chose to mediate Cambodian problems even if Cambodia was not a member of ASEAN, because they knew that it was in the interest of ASEAN to do so.

Now, ASEAN is benefiting from a safer and more developed Cambodia. After all, Cambodia sits in the heart of Southeast Asia, and ASEAN would not want to have a poor and war-torn country within its borders.

After entering ASEAN, even though Cambodia was poor, it is wrong to think that Cambodia was an additional burden for ASEAN. Cambodia did not drag anyone down. It did not mean that since we were underdeveloped as a nation, we were taking everyone else's resources to develop our country. We were in fact trying to develop ourselves to meet the duties and obligations, and standard of development, of the older members.

This endeavor has served Cambodia well, as its economy is increasingly integrated into the region, and more opportunities for development have been tapped.

ASEAN has been gracious in giving new members the space to adapt, but this does not mean that new members were de-accelerating growth of the old members.

What is significant is that with 10 members, ASEAN's economy has grown from strength to strength, and foreign investment keeps flowing into the region. Investments to old members have kept increasing too, not decreasing. Therefore, it is wrong to think that new members are slowing the growth of older members or stealing pieces of the economic pie from them.

In fact, we all grow together, and the size of the pie keeps increasing.

The second and third rationales are interlinked.

It is naive to believe that the five founding members – Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand – are always united and aligned on every position. The founding fathers did foresee differences, and that is the reason they made consensus decision-making ASEAN's key protocol. They wanted to ensure that the cohesiveness of ASEAN was sustained despite differences. And they were right.

The most critical example is the short life-span of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization. SEATO was a military alliance in the ASEAN region but it did not bode well with the principles and objectives of ASEAN.

Creating SEATO meant ASEAN was taking sides, leaning toward the Western bloc. Such a move against the original wisdom of neutrality by the founding fathers was short-lived.

ASEAN was not designed to be homogeneous, and it is naive to believe that currently all five of the founding members are in complete unity on every regional and international issue.

ASEAN principles and working methods were designed to accommodate differences and cherish "unity in diversity." The founding fathers were inclined to enhance consultation, cooperation, harmony and integration, and not confrontation, alienation, exceptionalism and disintegration.

ASEAN principles are to accommodate differences not just among member states but also with external partners.

At the height of the Cold War, ASEAN was created not to serve or propagate any specific ideology or to build alliances or blocs. ASEAN was created to save its members from the heat of superpower rivalries. Instead of taking sides with a specific superpower, ASEAN has excelled in providing institutional platforms for rival superpowers to meet and talk, and in certain moments, to ease tensions among themselves.

This approach of consultation and consensus-building takes time, and that explains the frustrations of those who are skeptical of ASEAN. But the

assessment of institutional development should not be made just by looking at the agenda of the day, or based on popularity of current topics.

If we look back 55 years, there were multiple dangerous crises that ASEAN went through, and if it had changed its principles and working methods each time, today's generation would not be able to debate the values and viability of ASEAN.

The founding fathers were open-minded, altruistic, visionary and farsighted. They were not moved by temporary disruptions and the geopolitical evolution of the day.

After 55 years, their noble wisdoms live on, defying doomsayers and naysayers. As the grandchildren of the ASEAN founding fathers, our generation can only admire their visionary leadership, grandeur and big hearts.

It is the duty of the next generation to continue the founding fathers' noble wisdoms, keeping their founding principles alive, keeping the region safe and making our people prosperous, leaving no one behind.

ASEAN's next generations should be true to the ASEAN spirit, which has set the example of regional multilateralism.

Long live ASEAN!

# ASEAN'S ACHIEVEMENTS UNDER CAMBODIAN CHAIRMANSHIP 2022

Opinion, Khmer Times, 10 January 2023

It was with great pride and honor that Cambodia successfully hosted the 40th and 41st ASEAN Summits and Related Summits in November, and the whole Cambodian team can finally feel relieved as we passed on the chairmanship to Indonesia after the year-long dedication and hard work from each and every member of the organizing committee.

We have tried our best to put a smile on the face of every leader who attended the summits, and allow everyone to return home with a good memory of a fulfilling visit to Cambodia, both in terms of success on the substance of the deliberations, revitalization of friendship and direct personal engagement among leaders after a long hiccup caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The support and assistance, cooperation and flexibility extended by all ASEAN member states, as well as our external partners, have been indispensable for Cambodia to steer the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' process successfully throughout 2022 under the theme "ASEAN A.C.T.: Addressing Challenges Together."

Everyone can agree that 2022 was an exceptionally challenging year, with many "hot stones" – the term coined by Prime Minister Hun Sen suggesting difficult issues even more serious than hot potatoes – affecting the region and the world at the same time as other rising geopolitical tensions, such as impacts of the war in Ukraine, the Myanmar crisis, escalation of the situations in the Korean Peninsula and the Taiwan Strait, while we already had our hands full with intensifying efforts to recover from Covid-19, climate-change impacts, and many other existing issues.

Yet ASEAN and our partners succeeded in showing the world that multilateralism is still the best solution for global problems. With our joint efforts through the ASEAN process, we can better manage uncertainties and complexities, or even prevent the dangers of miscalculation, amid intensifying superpower

rivalries and regional wars, as well as the threat of a nuclear war.

In listing what we have achieved, we have to carefully and constantly bear in mind that the achievements belong to all ASEAN member states, not just Cambodia alone. And the achievements under Cambodian chairmanship are also the results that stemmed from the work of the previous chairmanships. This continuity of the ASEAN process holds true for every other ASEAN chairmanship, including that of Indonesia this year.

To begin with, in January 2022, we started our chairmanship with the entry into force of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership agreement. This is a greatly positive light amid the gloomy global economic situation. It is worth noting that RCEP negotiation was launched in 2012 in Cambodia also during that country's chairmanship. It is a light of hope against trade protectionism when geopolitical rivalries also affect trade and economic aspects.

In August 2022, at the 55th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting (AMM), all eyes focused on Cambodia with suspicion owing to the non-issuance of the traditional Joint Communiqué (JC) in 2012. But Cambodia successfully chaired the 55th AMM, and the JC was adopted smoothly after lengthy negotiation to bridge differences among all the ASEAN member states.

Adoption of the three ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) statements is another excellent example of success. Chairing a negotiation among 27 countries' positions with conflicting parties sitting at the same table was an uphill battle.

Everyone was on the brink of giving up. But thank God, all three statements were adopted. Phnom Penh had become the platform where China, Russia and the US were together in two major platforms, the ARF and the East Asia Summit (EAS), and they exchanged their contrasting views in a civilized manner.

Trust and confidence were given back to Cambodia after 10 years, because countries recognized and acknowledged the sincerity and honesty of the Cambodian chair, which diligently tried to listen to all of their concerns.

Combining the achievements from the summits with the AMM, more than 130

documents have been adopted and noted; seven new countries have become parties to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (now 50 parties in total); the US and India have become comprehensive strategic partners; Brazil and the United Arab Emirates have become sectoral dialogue partners; and Timor-Leste has been accepted in principle to become the 11th member of ASEAN.

Having Timor-Leste accepted after more than a decade of application is nothing short of a miracle. Under Cambodia's chairmanship, the issue has been made one of ASEAN's top priorities.

The fact-finding missions to Timor Leste by ASEAN delegation from the two pillars, namely the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and the ASEAN Social-Cultural Community (ASCC), were conducted in July 2022 after being delayed for two years by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The fact-finding mission of the ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC) was completed in September 2019. ASEAN Leaders also tasked the ASEAN Coordinating Council to formulate the roadmap for Timor-Leste's full membership and report it to the next summit for adoption.

ASEAN continues to rejuvenate fruitful cooperation with all the 11 dialogue partners. Besides the heavy duty of co-chairing many summits with dialogue partners in Phnom Penh, Prime Minister Hun Sen also successfully co-chaired with President Joe Biden the ASEAN-US Special Summit, the first ever to be held in Washington, DC, on May 12-13, 2022.

Moreover, he also co-chaired with President Charles Michel of the European Council the ASEAN-EU Commemorative Summit on December 14, 2022, in Brussels on the occasion of the 45th anniversary of ASEAN-EU dialogue relations.

As 2025 is just around the corner, ASEAN also needs to develop the ASEAN Community's Post-2025 Vision. With Malaysia as the permanent shepherd of the High-Level Task Force on the ASEAN Community's Post-2025 Vision (HLTF-ACV), Cambodia co-chaired five meetings of the HLTF-ACV, and we could finally adopt the Recommendations on Strengthening ASEAN's Capacity and Institutional Effectiveness and take note of the proposed Core Elements of the ASEAN Community's Post-2025 Vision that would enable ASEAN to be

responsive and better adapt to a fast and dramatically changing world.

On Myanmar's political crisis, the meetings commended the utmost efforts of Cambodia as the ASEAN chair and the special envoy of the ASEAN chair in implementing ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus (5PC) with a view to helping Myanmar restore peace and stability, and return to normalcy.

Extremely serious negotiation was made until the last minute before the ASEAN leaders could adopt the ASEAN Leaders' Review and Decision on the Implementation of the Five-Point Consensus, which contained 15 points including the call for the development of an implementation plan that outlines concrete, practical and measurable indicators with specific timeline to support the 5PC.

On the South China Sea (SCS), progress was made by ASEAN and China in the negotiations of the Code of Conduct (COC). Last year, Cambodia hosted two meetings in a row to negotiate the COC, once in May in Siem Reap, and the other in October in Phnom Penh.

These meetings were the first resumption of physical negotiation of COC after a two-year disruption. The Joint Statement of the 20th Anniversary of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) was also adopted at the summit level.

On the war in Ukraine, Cambodia firmly adheres to the principles enshrined in the UN Charter and the universally recognized norms concerning the respect for the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political independence of the UN member states. Thus Cambodia voted on October 12, 2022, in favor of and co-sponsored the resolution on "Territorial Integrity of Ukraine: Defending the Principles of the UN Charter."

Cambodia opposes the invasion, the use of force, and the annexation of any state.

As the ASEAN chair in 2022, Cambodia coordinated to have three ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Statements issued to express concern over the situation in Ukraine, and to call for an immediate ceasefire in Ukraine and a return to political dialogues.

We encouraged and provided opportunity for the foreign ministers of Ukraine and Russia to talk to each other and give peace a chance through diplomacy while they were in Phnom Penh. Even though that did not happen, they both had good opportunities to present their views.

This was the prime example of how Cambodia exercised independent foreign policy based on the rule of law.

Under the Cambodia-Japan-Ukraine tripartite cooperation, Cambodia has decided to send a number of technical experts to train demining techniques and skills to Ukrainian deminers in Poland. At the same time, Cambodia will also provide technical training and share experiences directly to 15 deminers and management personnel from the State Emergency Service of Ukraine this month in Cambodia.

Cambodia, despite being a small and relatively still a poor country, will consider other possible assistance to support the safety of the Ukrainian people.

On superpower rivalry, it is noticeable that on November 22, US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin and Chinese Defense Minister General Wei Fenghe met face-to-face on the sideline of the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus), in Siem Reap, the spiritual ancient capital of Cambodia. This meeting was described as “productive and professional” and a “substantive dialogue on reducing strategic risk and enhancing operational safety.”

On the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN welcomed any initiatives from external partners that aim to contribute to regional peace, stability and prosperity. ASEAN Leaders adopted (1) the ASEAN Leaders’ Declaration on Mainstreaming Four Priority Areas of the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific and (2) the ASEAN Roadmap on Promoting ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific, which is the initiative of Cambodia.

These are real examples of ASEAN’s diplomacy and multilateral leadership in the common endeavor for peace, security, stability and prosperity by utilizing ASEAN-led mechanisms. The successful ASEAN and ASEAN-related meetings during Cambodia’s chairmanship reaffirms respect for ASEAN centrality in the regional architecture, and also support for the relevance of ASEAN mechanism



in providing an open and inclusive platform for constructive dialogues address common concern, resolve differences and de-escalate the situation.





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