

## AVI COMMENTARY

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### **Funan Techô Canal Project: Upholding Sovereignty and Development in Cambodia**

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In an era of technological advancement and infrastructure development, the Funan Techô Canal Project, otherwise also known as the Tonle Bassac Navigation Road and Logistics System Project, stands as a beacon of progress and innovation. The construction of this 180km canal will commence later this year, which will connect the Cambodian coastal province of Kep on the Gulf of Thailand with the inland provinces of Kandal, Takeo, and Phnom Penh. The completion of this canal will catalyse socio-economic development by creating employment opportunities, stimulating trade and investment, and enhancing connectivity within Cambodia, the ASEAN community and beyond. Creating this new waterway will facilitate the transportation of goods and people, reducing logistical challenges and fostering economic growth in rural areas of Cambodia.

Undoubtedly, the Funan Techô Canal Project, like any ambitious endeavour, has faced its fair share of scepticism and criticisms. These range from concerns about its environmental impact and economic feasibility to potential geopolitical implications. It is important to acknowledge these concerns and address them directly, demonstrating our commitment to transparency and accountability. We understand the significance of this project in promoting national development and sovereignty while also adhering to international agreements such as the 1995 Mekong Agreement, the UN Charter's principle of sovereignty and non-interference and the UN Sustainable Developmental Goals.

While the concerns raised about the project's environmental impact and potential disruption to aquatic ecosystems and biodiversity are valid, it is essential to acknowledge the rigorous environmental assessment mitigation measures undertaken by the relevant Cambodian authorities in accordance with international practices. The project's proponents are not just committed but unwaveringly dedicated to minimising ecological damage and ensuring the sustainable management of natural resources, thereby striking a balance between development and environmental conservation. The canal will be strategically constructed with three sluice gates in Kandal, Takeo and Kep provinces, which will ensure that the salt water cannot infiltrate the network of fresh water. As a result of this, the canal will also be able to reduce flooding in Cambodia province as well as prevent excess water from flowing into Vietnam. This project will help maintain the sustainability of the environment and ecosystem since it will be constructed along the natural and ancient waterways that existed since the Kingdom of Funan.

Furthermore, the Funan Techô Canal Project aligns with the principles of the 1995 Mekong Agreement, which emphasises cooperation among riparian States (Laos, Thailand, and

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Vietnam) for the sustainable management of shared water resources. Cambodia's initiative to develop the canal not only enhances intra-regional connectivity but also fosters collaboration with neighbouring countries in promoting transboundary water governance. The only stipulation the Agreement has imposed on the signatories is for the relevant State to notify and provide appropriate details to the Joint Committee of the Mekong River Commission, to which Cambodia has been engaged in constructive dialogue and consultation to demonstrate our commitment to uphold the spirit of regional cooperation.

Moreover, since a project such as the Funan Techô Canal Project resides within Cambodia's territory, we must refer to the principles of sovereignty and non-interference enshrined in the UN Charter, which emphasises the sovereign right of each nation to pursue its own development path without external interferences. The Funan Techô Canal Project is a manifestation of Cambodia's sovereignty and its determination to chart our own path towards progress, leveraging technology to address socio-economic challenges and improve the livelihoods of our people. Crucially, this project is also materialising Cambodia's commitment to pursuing the UN Sustainable Developmental Goals such as economic growth, infrastructure and industrialisation, and partnerships, etc.

Criticisms have also been drawn from China's state-owned China Bridge and Road Corporation's sole sponsorship of the construction of the Funan Techô Canal, which is estimated to cost \$1.7 billion. While criticisms of China's contribution may stem from geopolitical concerns or perceptions of undue influence, it is essential to separate political motivations from the tangible benefits that such aid can bring to Cambodia. China's contributions can facilitate technology transfer, knowledge sharing, and capacity building, which are essential for Cambodia's long-term development goals.

However, the core contention arises from foreign factions' portrayal of the canal as a security threat, claiming it jeopardises the region's water resources and agriculture in the Mekong Delta. This securitisation, echoed through various media and academia, contrasts sharply with the economic and developmental nature of the project. Responding to this narrative, it is crucial to note that this project is an economic initiative intended to bolster national agriculture and water transport capabilities, not a security threat. Accusations regarding the canal's ecological and economic impacts should be grounded in joint scientific research rather than speculative or politicised narratives. These negative narratives can potentially, unnecessarily, intensify regional tensions rather than addressing sustainable water management and ecological conservation.

In summary, the Funan Techô Canal Project is a bold initiative by Cambodia to leverage modern technology and infrastructure for national advancement. Instead of yielding to scepticism, the project should be embraced as a commitment to progress, regional integration, and sustainable development. By adhering to responsible development principles and sovereignty, the project can unlock tremendous opportunities and a more prosperous future for Cambodia and our neighbours.

*The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Asian Vision Institute.*