


RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Local rivalries, foreign entanglements: the role of domestic politics in Cambodia's Chinese embrace

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## Abstract

No country in Southeast Asia is as close to China as Cambodia is at present. Under Hun Sen's leadership, Cambodia has actively participated in the Belt and Road Initiative and repeatedly blocked ASEAN's statements on the South China Sea (SCS). How can we better understand Cambodia's embrace of China? We argue that Hun Sen chose to embrace China due to the convergence of challenges posed by Cambodia's domestic opposition forces and international democratic pressures. The more severe the domestic political challenges, the more Hun Sen and his ruling party need China's support. Since Hun Sen remains the most powerful figure in Cambodia despite his recent resignation as prime minister, whether Cambodia's dependence on China can be altered depends on the ability of the West to modify its approach and attitude toward Hun Sen, his successor, and their domestic opponents. Nevertheless, regardless of how the future unfolds, domestic politics is likely to play an important role in Cambodia's foreign alignments in the foreseeable future.

**Keywords:** Cambodian foreign policy; China-Cambodian relations; Chinese foreign relations; domestic politics and foreign policy; domestic politics in Cambodia

## Introduction

Today, no nation in Southeast Asia is as close to China as Cambodia. For the past two decades, Beijing has developed affectionate ties with the country's long-ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) and former Prime Minister Hun Sen, who led the country under various guises from 1985 to 2023. Even though Hun Sen stepped down as Prime Minister and transferred the position to his son, he remains the de facto leader of the country. Conversely, this developing nation of sixteen million is now the closest thing Beijing has to an ally in the Asia-Pacific. On a state visit to Cambodia in October 2016, President Xi Jinping described the Sino-Cambodian friendship as "ironclad" and the two countries as "good neighbors, real friends who are loyal to each other" (Thul, 2016).

As a result, China is now Cambodia's most important international economic and political backer. From 1994 to 2021, Cambodia received US\$41 billion in FDI, of which China accounted for 43.9%, making it Cambodia's largest investor. Despite the pandemic, Chinese investment in Cambodia increased significantly, with fixed-asset investments reaching US\$2.32 billion in 2021, a 67% increase from US\$1.39 billion in 2020 (Ngin, 2022). China remained the top foreign investor in Cambodia in 2022, accounting for 42% of the total investment of US\$40.32 billion (Jia, 2023). Chinese firms are present in every sector of Cambodia's economy: real estate, agriculture, manufacturing, tourism, mining, and hydropower.

At the same time, China has risen to be Cambodia's number one trade partner, a position that was likely entrenched by the signing of a Cambodia-China Free Trade Agreement between the two nations

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in late 2019. The two-way trade between China and Cambodia grew by 36.47% to US\$11.686 billion in 2022, compared to US\$8.563 billion in 2019 (Pisei, 2023, 2022). Moreover, although China has been the primary source of Cambodia's imports for years, it also became Cambodia's largest export market in 2022 (Chheang, 2023). In addition, China has surpassed Japan as Cambodia's largest provider of official development aid (ODA) and soft loans since 2012 (Martinus and Lim, 2023). From 2001 to 2022, China granted Cambodia a total of US\$2.06 billion in aid (Vannarith, 2023). The Cambodian government has also been an enthusiastic participant of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) since it was proposed in 2013. Highways, bridges, and power plants and other large-scale infrastructure projects in Cambodia were mainly constructed by Chinese state-owned enterprises.

Over the past several years, deteriorating US-China relations led to Washington's increased interest in Cambodia's apparent drift into Beijing's orbit. US officials and think-tank analysts have expressed fears that China is on the cusp of establishing a military presence on Cambodian soil (Page *et al.*, 2019), while the international press has reported on the disruptive impact of Chinese investments in Cambodia, particularly in the port city of Sihanoukville, which become the site of flamboyant Chinese tourism and gambling developments (Ellis-Petersen, 2018).

Relations between Cambodia and China have come a long way since the 1980s, when Phnom Penh and Beijing stood on opposite sides of the Cold War divide. During that period, Beijing spearheaded an international effort to isolate the new Vietnam-backed communist government of Cambodia (the forerunner of today's CPP), leading Hun Sen to describe China as "the root of everything that was evil" in Cambodia.<sup>1</sup> The two countries' interests began to converge as Cold War hostilities waned in the late 1980s. October 1991 saw the signing of the Paris Peace Agreements, an international accord designed to end Cambodia's long-running civil war via the establishment of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC). The UNTAC mission of 1992–1993 was aimed at putting the country on the path toward democracy and respect for human rights by disarming and demobilizing four armed Cambodian factions and organizing landmark multiparty elections in May 1993.<sup>2</sup>

The blossoming of China–Cambodia relations can best be understood as an outgrowth of the political economy produced by the UNTAC mission (Hughes, 2003) – particularly, the international effort to democratize Cambodia – and the way in which this liberal ideological project become intricately bound up with domestic political struggles.<sup>3</sup> The political economy of Cambodia's "triple transition" – from peace to war, from one-party communist rule to multiparty democracy, and from a communist command economy to the free market (Hughes, 2003) – thus helped to drive the steady convergence of strategic interests between China and Cambodia. In short, Chinese investment and financing has helped Hun Sen's government evade international democratizing pressures and maintain order and stability to enhance the legitimacy of the CPP. For this reason, Cambodia's government has supported China's core interests in the region, including Beijing's expansive maritime and territorial claims in the South China Sea.

Domestic politics has played a crucial role in the dynamics of convergence of international ideological currents and external strategic alignments. Additional factors come into play, including Cambodia's small size and perceived strategic unimportance, its highly personalized political culture, and the remarkable longevity of the country's political structure, which has remained largely unchanged since the last decade of the Cold War.

## Literature review

Many scholars have addressed the bilateral relations between Cambodia and China mainly from the Chinese perspectives and various Chinese policy initiatives. Most existing studies in this category

<sup>1</sup>This anti-Soviet coalition also included the United States, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and much of the democratic West. For Hun Sen's quote, see Lintner (2009).

<sup>2</sup>For the full text of the Paris Agreements, see: <https://peacemaker.un.org/cambodiaparisagreement91>.

<sup>3</sup>This dynamic is addressed at length in Strangio (2014).

make the unequivocal argument that China has pursued a very proactive policy toward Cambodia and gained tremendously from this bilateral relationship. For instance, Raymond (2020) explores how China has used Buddhism to promote Chinese influence in Cambodia. Hsiao and Yang (2014) study the soft power influence of Confucius Institutes in Cambodia in comparison to Myanmar. Marks (2000) believes that the development in Sino-Cambodian ties has been a result of China's application of diplomatic, economic, military, and informational instruments of power.

However, some analysts tend to slightly disagree with the nature and efficacy of China's strategic approach to Cambodia. They caution against overstating Beijing's strategic influence over Cambodia. They argue that Beijing's influence over Phnom Penh has been constrained by the following factors: China's own domestic institutional fragmentation, US regional supremacy, regional states' insufficient trust of China, alternative support from China's rivals, relative inter-state peace in Asia, as well as norms such as non-interference and emphasis on sovereignty in Chinese foreign policy (Ciorciari, 2015; Mertha, 2015). Moreover, some scholars suggest that China may not be able to advance its political clout over Cambodia even with its economic power. Hu *et al.* (2019) argue that Chinese investors face five major challenges in Cambodia: frequent land disputes, severe government corruption, single contract models that incur high risk, inadequate financing for project construction, and ecologically destructive projects. Taking Sihanoukville as a case study, Po and Heng (2019) find that despite economic benefits, Chinese investments have also produced significant negative results in Cambodia. While questioning whether Sino-Cambodian cooperation is positive sum, Pheakdey (2012) explains how Chinese economic activities in Cambodia have generated various controversies, including the exacerbation of corruption, the weakening of governance, the violation of human rights, and the destruction of Cambodia's natural resources and environment. On top of the negative impact of economic activities on Sino-Cambodian relations, Reeves (2014) further argues that China's structural economic power over Cambodia may increase the latter's domestic insecurity in the economic, political, environmental, societal and military sectors, and consequently translate into "greater regional insecurity for China either at the systems level (state-to-state relations) or sub-system level (state-to-society)" (Reeves, 2014).

Realizing that China's strategies and influence may not be sufficient to explain why Cambodia embraces China, scholars have turned to examine China–Cambodia relations from the Cambodian perspective. The debate is centered on whether to categorize Cambodia's strategy toward China as hedging, an approach defined as seeking to offset risks and maximize returns by pursuing multiple policy options (Cheng-Chwee, 2008), or bandwagoning, that is, clear attempts to curry favor with China in all policy matters (Kang, 2009). One group of scholars argue that Cambodia has been taking a bandwagoning or soft/limited bandwagoning stance toward China, by seeking political support, military protection and economic cooperation with Beijing (Chen and Yang, 2013; Leng, 2019; Po and Primiano, 2020). Ciorciari (2015) goes further by saying that Cambodia has carefully accepted its client-state status and reciprocated Chinese patronage. The second group of scholars, such as Koga (2022) and Chheang (2022), put forward the argument that though Cambodia has been increasingly dependent on China, its China policy is hedging. For instance, it is hedging against China by forming strategic partnership with Japan. Meanwhile, some other scholars suggest that Cambodia used to hedging China, as seen in Phnom Penh supporting China-led Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) and US-led Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) simultaneously, but has gradually shifted to bandwagoning in recent years (Doung *et al.*, 2022; Železný, 2022).

Although the debate continues, there is a broad consensus among scholars that Cambodia, under the leadership of Hun Sen, has increasingly adopted a pro-Beijing policy in general, and the embracement has become Cambodia's explicit strategic policy choice. Furthermore, a number of scholars have identified a few notable motivations behind Phnom Penh's embracement. Examples include historical interactions between the two countries (Po and Primiano, 2020), Cambodia's dependence on China's participation for its social and economic development (Chanborey, 2015; Chen, 2018; Leng, 2019), Hun Sen's pragmatic personality (Leng, 2017), and China's supporting role in ensuring Cambodia's

sovereignty and national security against its immediate neighbors, namely Vietnam and Thailand (Chanborey, 2015; Chong, 2017; Leng, 2017; Pang, 2017).

Some scholars go further to argue that despite the fact that Cambodia has been subject to various transnational pressures, the country is not entirely a passive agent; “rather there is active manipulation of foreign influence for local, often private, ends” (Marston, 2002). Consequently, they highlight that Cambodia’s embrace of China is due to the fact that Cambodian ruling elites, especially Hun Sen himself, have relied on China for their domestic political authority and performance legitimacy (Chanborey, 2016; Leng, 2019; Po and Primiano, 2020). For instance, Luo and Un (2021) contend that the CPP has become more dependent on China for aid, trade, and investment in order to support the economy and retain the party’s performance legitimacy due to Cambodia’s deteriorating relations with the West and the resulting losses in financial aid and trade preferences. Po and Sims (2021) agree that bandwagoning with China to secure support is one of Hun Sen’s tactics to guarantee the survival of his regime against the democratization pressure from the international community. Loughlin (2021) even conclude that Hun Sen’s quest has been quite successful and “constitutes an important feature of Hun Sen’s adaptive authoritarian resilience.”

Instead of distinguishing whether Cambodia is hedging against or bandwagoning with China, we build upon the broad consensus that Cambodia has increasingly embraced China and join the debate on why the country, under the leadership of Hun Sen, has chosen to do so. While acknowledging that regime survival has been a very important factor in Hun Sen’s decision to take a pro-China policy, we attempt to further explore the changing intensity in Phnom Penh’s strategic embrace of China. Many existing studies have well explained the impacts of Cambodian domestic politics on Cambodia-China ties in general terms, but we would like to take a step further to explore the causal mechanism between Cambodia’s domestic political context and its strategic approach to China. We first demonstrate how the confluence of domestic opposition forces and international democratic pressures compelled Hun Sen to embrace China. Second, we argue that the severity of political struggles in Phnom Penh increased the Hun Sen government’s acceptance of China’s presence and influence in Cambodia. Whenever Hun Sen encountered threatening political challenges from his domestic rivals, his usual response was political repression against his competitors, which consequently worsened Cambodia’s ties with its major Western donors. In this context, Hun Sen regime had no choice but to turn to China for support. Therefore, the more severe the political challenges, the more Hun Sen sought China’s support.

### Geography matters

Scholars of international relations generally agree that domestic politics plays an important role in the formation of a state’s foreign policy in two ways. First, the foreign arena is used to defend or advance domestic interests. Second, domestic political pressures often determine a nation’s behavior abroad (Lumsdaine, 1996). However, scholars tend to disagree on the impact of domestic politics vis-à-vis structural or systemic factors, or whether it is possible to distinguish domestic political pressures from other factors in the first place (Fearon, 1998).

The neo-realist theory of international relations (IR), such as the paradigmatic argument advanced by Kenneth Waltz in 1979, de-emphasizes nations’ traits, whether these are associated with culture, geography, or political economy. Systemic IR theory, Waltz argues, is analogous to the neoclassical microeconomic theory of markets, which treats firms as “black boxes” without considering the details of their internal processes (Waltz, 1979). As the realist scholar Hans Morgenthau put it, it is “a popular fallacy” to suppose that “the philosophic or political sympathies” of statesmen will color their decisions in “foreign policy” (Morgenthau, 1997).

Yet while structural factors have a significant role in the formation of Cambodian foreign policy – particularly its asymmetric relationship with China – they fail to fully explain the speed and extent of the convergence between Cambodia and the People’s Republic of China over the past two decades. Therefore, we must account for the role of domestic politics. To be sure, an important structural

underpinning to Sino-Cambodian relations exists: China's relative closeness to Cambodia, alongside the lack of friction due to the lack of a shared border, has made it a frequent, and in some ways, natural partner of successive Cambodian governments.

The geographical context implies that the Cambodian view of China is not as negative as the Vietnamese or Thai view of China (Strangio, 2020). Vietnam and Thailand, both rival rising powers, capitalized on Cambodia's weakness following the decline of the Angkorian Empire in the fifteenth century. For several centuries, these kingdoms meddled in Cambodia's politics and slowly encroached on its territories. With few natural barriers to invasion (especially in the east), Cambodian monarchs survived by allying themselves with one or other of the two rival powers against the other (Chandler, 2008).

This historical experience left a deep imprint on the later development of Cambodian nationalism in the early twentieth century. For several centuries, ethnic Vietnamese had migrated south from the Red River delta, gradually occupying regions of what is today southern Vietnam that once lay within the ambit of the Angkorian Empire. The migration culminated in an attempted Vietnamese colonization of Cambodia in the 1830s. The colonization attempt, which was strenuously resisted, inculcated persistent folk beliefs about Vietnamese perfidy (Chanda, 1986). As a result, from its earliest inception, Cambodian nationalism carried a strong anti-Vietnamese sentiment. As the bogeyman of the Cambodian nationalist imagination, Vietnam today remains a subject of intense fear and suspicion among the public and a source of bipartisan consensus. In a 2014 speech, Sam Rainsy – now highly critical of China's presence in Cambodia – declared his party's support for China's claims in the South China Sea, on the logic that anyone opposing Vietnam must be Cambodia's friend. "The islands belong to China," he told a crowd of CNRP supporters (Naren, 2014). It is for this reason that Cambodia has generally been a friendly place for ethnic Chinese immigrants, a fact that has been noted by Western observers since the early twentieth century (Thompson, 1937; Willmott, 1967). Today, ethnic Chinese have assimilated deeply into Cambodian society.<sup>4</sup>

Cambodia's vulnerable position, namely being sandwiched by Thailand and Vietnam, the two relatively powerful and historically antagonistic neighbors, has constantly inclined its monarchs and successive Cambodian governments to seek an outside protector who could keep both Vietnamese and Siamese encroachments at bay. During his travels through Cambodia in the late 1850s, the French explorer Henry Mouhot made the following prediction: "It will not probably be long before what remains of this unfortunate land will fall under the dominion of some other power" (Mouhot, 1864). By the time Mouhot's words made it into print in English, the country had fallen under the dominion of a French protectorate, which King Norodom invited in 1863 in the hope that it would keep Cambodia's neighbors at bay. Indeed, the French protectorate probably saved the Cambodian kingdom from being absorbed and partitioned between the two powers. This move initiated a pattern in modern Cambodian history in which the country's leaders sought a strong outside power that could keep neighboring countries at bay.

Given China's relative proximity to Cambodia, China was well-equipped to play the role of protector. However, the country's subjugation by Western imperial powers and Japan from the mid-nineteenth century meant that China did not play an active role in Cambodian affairs until the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. After Cambodia's independence in 1953, Norodom's great-grandson, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, looked to communist China to shield Cambodia from the turbulent politics of the day. In 1966, he described China as "the synonym for Cambodia's survival with independence, peace, and territorial integrity." He also warned that by moving "away from China, we will be devoured by the vultures [i.e. the Vietnamese], which are the eternal swallows of Khmer territory" (Chanda, 1986).

A similar calculation was made by Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge, the ultra-communist movement that ruled the country from 1975 until early 1979, and whose radical policies led to the deaths of an estimated 1.7 million Cambodians – around a quarter of the country's population. China was one of

<sup>4</sup>For a detailed historical overview of the role of ethnic Chinese in Cambodia, see Edwards and Sambath (1996).

the regime's few sources of outside support and by far the most significant (Mertha, 2014). As the Chinese communists' relationship with their Vietnamese comrades soured after the reunification of Vietnam in 1976, so did the Khmer Rouge's relationship with Hanoi, which had supported its seizure of Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975. As relations between Pol Pot and Vietnam deteriorated into open conflict in 1977 and 1978, and Pol Pot launched bloody raids to reconquer long-lost territories in the Mekong Delta, their relationship further disintegrated into open enmity.

Vietnam responded to Khmer Rouge attacks by invading Cambodia in late 1978, overthrowing the Khmer Rouge, and installing a rival faction of more loyal faction of communists (today's CPP) in its place. Vietnam's responses ushered in a period of rare hostility between Beijing and Phnom Penh, which lasted throughout the 1980s. Also relevant to our discussion today is the extent to which the CPP's historic association with Vietnam has haunted Hun Sen and his party in the subsequent decades. The relationship between the CPP and Vietnam was weakened by suspicion in the context of Cambodian politics, and it remained a target for leading opposition figures, namely Sam Rainsy and Kem Sokha. Despite the relative waning of Vietnamese influence, poor relations between CPP and Vietnam are expected to persist due to the increasing sway of China.

The relationship between Cambodia and Thailand has fluctuated since the thirteenth century, as evidenced by the territorial disputes along the 800-kilometer-long border between them (Kasetsiri, 2003). The question of national sovereignty and territorial integrity has been "historically and geo-strategically" at the heart of Cambodia's foreign policy (Chheang, 2022). As a result, as perceived by Cambodian leaders, the one-century-long persistent dispute with Thailand regarding the ownership of the Preah Vihear temple, an outstanding masterpiece of Khmer architecture, and its surrounding area along the shared border is considered to be a top challenge for Cambodia's national security (Var, 2017). The dispute led to armed conflicts in 2008, which lasted for several years. Due to a lack of confidence in solving the conflicts with its bigger neighbor bilaterally, Cambodia sought help from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) but was disappointed. ASEAN's failure to address the armed conflicts between Cambodia and Thailand motivated Phnom Penh to increasingly rely on an external great power, i.e., China, to ensure its sovereignty and territorial integrity (Cheunboran, 2017). As made explicitly by a Cambodian diplomat, "if Cambodia has conflict with its neighbors, the U.S. won't help [Cambodia]. China will" (Luo, 2024).

While these structural factors – particularly its location between Thailand and Vietnam and its geographic proximity with China – explain the trajectory of Cambodia's strategic direction and the generally accommodating Cambodian perceptions of China, it does not fully explain the extent of the country's increasingly close alignment with China in recent years. To address that, we need to consider the role of domestic politics during Cambodia's unique political trajectory, in particular the way in which domestic political rivalries interact with international pressure and alignments since the end of the Cold War.

### The confluence of international and domestic democratization pressure

As suggested in the historical overview, as a small nation, Cambodia has always found itself unusually exposed to the actions of outside powers. In 2002, the anthropologist John Marston argued that the key to understanding contemporary Cambodia lies in "the way transnational forces interface with local agendas." He explains that Cambodia's "poverty and history of war, the ineffectiveness of state bureaucratic mechanisms, and the way that Vietnam and the United States played major roles in recent history in the creation of the current state apparatus, all bear on the fact that Cambodia stands particularly exposed to a variety of international pressures" (Marston, 2002).

In order to understand the country's present alignments, we need to address two issues: (a) the nature of Cambodia's "triple transition" since the end of the Cold War, and (b) the way in which the country's domestic politics collided and dovetailed with the political, ideological, and economic forces that converged on the country after the signing of the Paris Peace Agreements and the end of the Cold War.

As mentioned, the Paris Peace Agreements were signed on October 23, 1991, with the aim of bringing Cambodia's long civil war to an end. The signatories of the Paris Agreements included eighteen nations and representatives of the four Cambodian armed factions that had been fighting one another since the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge in 1979: the CPP (formerly the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party), which had ruled the country since 1979, is backed up by a large Vietnamese occupation force; the Khmer People's National Liberation Front, which is a loose collection of pre-war republicans and nationalists; Funcinpec, a royalist faction, which was founded by the pre-war leader Prince Norodom Sihanouk in 1981; and the so-called "Party of Democratic Kampuchea," the rebranded Khmer Rouge, which, thanks to Cold War expediency, continues to occupy Cambodia's seat in the UN General Assembly.

The Paris Agreements created the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), which was tasked with taking temporary control of the Cambodian state and guiding its transition to peace and democratic elections. The UNTAC had the challenging mission of coordinating a ceasefire and the withdrawal of all foreign (i.e., Vietnamese) forces from Cambodia, followed by the disarmament and demobilization of the four armed factions. Refugee camps along the Thai border were emptied and the UNTAC resettled hundreds of thousands of refugees who had fled there in 1979. The UNTAC staffs were given sweeping vice-regal powers over key ministries to create the "neutral political environment" for a free and fair election. During the transitional period, sovereignty was temporarily vested in a thirteen-member Supreme National Council consisting of delegates from each of the four factions, with Sihanouk serving as the body's "neutral" president. The scope and ambition of the UNTAC mission was at the time unprecedented. Retiring UN Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar, described it as "probably the most important and most complex in the history of the United Nations" (Riding, 1991).

The Paris Agreements and the UNTAC mission coincided with a singular moment of optimism that followed the end of the Cold War. In many quarters, particularly in the democratic West, the collapse of the Soviet Union heralded a belief that the world would give way to an era of cascading democratic norms. The tenor of the time was best summed up by the American political scientist Francis Fukuyama, who in 1989 hailed the "end of history," arguing that the break-up of the Soviet Union marked "the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government" (Fukuyama, 1989).

In Cambodia, the pressure of Western liberal democracy was intense, in contrast with the immense suffering and turmoil that had engulfed the country since its independence in 1953. Indeed, underpinning the Paris settlement was a determination to compensate the Cambodian people after years of coping with the devastation of a Cold War proxy conflict. A newly united "international community" working with empowered local NGOs was expected to usher a victim of Cold War realpolitik along the road toward post-history – an Elysian state of human rights, democratic government, and free markets. Cambodia was seen in the light of past tragedies and future utopias. The quintessential victim of the Cold War would become the quintessential beneficiary of the post-Cold War liberal order.

However, this optimism was not shared by the faction whose actions and opinions perhaps mattered the most: the CPP has controlled 90% of Cambodia's territory since the collapse of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979. The UNTAC's mission posed a direct challenge to the CPP's hold on power. Not only had the Paris Agreements treated the CPP as formally equal to the three much smaller rival factions, the UNTAC's arrival also opened up Cambodia's opaque political landscape and introduced competitive politics for the first time since the early 1970s (Heder and Ledgerwood, 1996). During this period, civil society groups, news agencies, international non-government organizations, and international financial institutions were established through foreign development projects and thousands of expatriate support staff, as well as an influx of investment capital. Henceforth, the country's politics would be examined, scrutinized, and judged. Moreover, having become accustomed to power, Hun Sen and his colleagues were now expected to compete on equal footing with small factions that they had once regarded as enemies.

The CPP also doubted the sincerity of the United States and other Western governments, which after years of fueling Cambodia's civil war, now supported Cambodia's "triple transition." Between 1979 and 1991, the party had been on the receiving end of a cynical Cold War accommodation. Instead of being given credit for toppling the Khmer Rouge (one of the worst regimes of the twentieth century), the new administration was ostracized and embargoed, while the three rival resistance factions, including the Khmer Rouge, were offered diplomatic and military support from China, the United States, and ASEAN. This embargo was the product of simple Cold War realpolitik: the desire of Beijing and Washington to isolate Soviet-backed Vietnam. But it fueled a further round of conflict in Cambodia and hampered the country's reconstruction.

This experience profoundly shaped the worldview of Hun Sen and other senior members of the CPP; they were inclined to view the coming of democracy not as a historical watershed, but a more sophisticated way of removing them from power. This attitude was made clear following the UN-organized election in May 1993, which the CPP lost to Funcinpec. Instead of accepting this loss, the CPP claimed fraud, threatened a secession of the country's eastern provinces, and forced its way into an equal share of power in a new coalition government (Strangio, 2014). Under the ensuing power-sharing agreement, Funcinpec's leader (and Sihanouk's son) Prince Norodom Ranariddh became "First Prime Minister," while Hun Sen became "Second Prime Minister." The ensuing years were followed by political intrigue and struggle between the two coalition partners. These years of power contestations culminated in July 1997, when Hun Sen ordered his forces to launch a violent coup de force that crushed Funcinpec's military wing and seized de facto sole power. In the following year, the national elections were conducted in an atmosphere of fear and tension; de facto became de jure – and Hun Sen has been in power ever since.

The key point here is the extent to which post-UNTAC Cambodian domestic politics came to be bound up with the liberal ideological project initiated by the Paris Agreements. In order to co-opt the country's new democratic institutions, Hun Sen and the CPP sought to navigate the transition to multiparty politics by employing patronage, threats, and violence. Their opponents fought back by seeking foreign support. Supported by Cambodian diaspora communities that fled the country during its long years of civil war, the opposition leaders sought to harness the international pressure generated by the Paris Agreements. In doing so, they became adept at promoting Cambodia as the leading liberal project of the post-Cold War era.

This tendency was encapsulated in the figure of Sam Rainsy, a former financier and Funcinpec member who served briefly as the Minister of Finance before being dismissed from his position for raising protests against high-level government corruption. In 1995, Rainsy established the Khmer Nation Party (later renamed the Sam Rainsy Party) and lobbied foreign governments. Fluent in French and English as well as his native Khmer, Rainsy effectively spoke the language of democracy and gained the support of Western powers. Rainsy and other opposition politicians were also able to shape international perceptions of Hun Sen as a Gaddafi-like villain that had thwarted Cambodia's democratic transition.

Sam Rainsy used the commitments of the Paris Agreements to pressure foreign governments to take a hard line against Hun Sen. Where Hun Sen struggled to shed Cambodia's status as a special democratic "project," Rainsy labored to reinforce it through the capitals of the West, portraying himself as an Aung San Suu Kyi-like figure, the one leader who could fulfill the democratic promise of the Paris Agreements (Strangio, 2014). (To domestic audiences, he usually perpetuated historic animosities toward Vietnam.)

To a great extent, Rainsy was pushing at an open door. His lobbying efforts were aided by, and in turn helped reinforce, the redemptive position that Cambodia came to occupy in the Western imagination in the post-Cold War era. In the years after UNTAC, Cambodia continued to be viewed as the recipient of international aid and charity for rebuilding its war-torn country. Cambodia is also viewed as a democratic "project" because of its small and relatively unimportant status; thus, Cambodia is a place where Western nations could stand on principle without strategic risks.



In this way, international energies aimed at democratizing Cambodia came to be deeply bound up with domestic political struggles. The political opposition viewed Western democratizing energies as central to its effort to unseat Hun Sen; the CPP came to view them as a de facto form of regime change. Cambodia's status as an international subject of democracy-building efforts thus posed a constant challenge to Hun Sen and his government. In the years after UNTAC, Cambodia remained heavily reliant on overseas development assistance to rebuild vital infrastructure and develop its war-torn economy. Initially, much of this aid was offered by democratic development partners including Japan, the European Union, Australia, Canada, and the United States, as well as multilateral financial institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the Asian Development Bank.<sup>5</sup>

Given that much of this assistance was tied to good governance and human rights benchmarks, Hun Sen was forced to maintain a delicate balance in his attempt to blunt domestic political challenges. The outcome was an oscillating political climate, in which Hun Sen tightened control over civil society and opposition parties during periods of tense political contestation, usually around elections, and then loosened it after securing his immediate political objectives, with promises of reform to foreign donor constituencies. While the government successfully balanced its domestic political goals and the need for outside support, it permitted the opposition to remain active and free to participate in Cambodia's quinquennial national elections, where, despite the CPP's best efforts to shape results with intimidation and patronage, it continued to threaten electoral gains (Sullivan, 2016).

### China as the only alternative

Potentially, Japan could be Cambodia's all-round useful partner. Indeed, Japan has been instrumental in Cambodia's rebuilding and development since the end of the Cold War. Japan's aid for Cambodia has been detached from the values of democracy and human rights. Although Japan's status as the largest donor to Cambodia was surpassed by China in recent years, Tokyo remains one of the top donors for Phnom Penh, accounting for 25% of all external assistance to Cambodia (The Government of Japan, n.d.). Japan's less critical approach to Cambodian democracy and importance for its economy and development are well received by Cambodian leaders, as the two countries have remained close ties and upgraded their relationship to a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" in 2023 (Lim, 2024). However, Cambodian leaders are also aware of the constraints in their engagement with Japan; Japan is unable to provide sufficient military or security assistance beyond humanitarian purposes because of its pacifist Constitution (Luo, 2024). Furthermore, Cambodian leaders also understand that Japan is not a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council and that its military and strategic role in the region is limited (Cheunboran, 2017).

It is in this context that Hun Sen's government came to view China as a more attractive partner. This fact was underlined by the latter's remarkable economic growth following the end of the Cold War. In 1992, the year of UNTAC's arrival in Cambodia, China's economy was small; that year, its per capita GDP sat at just \$366, and its exports amounted to less than \$85 billion. But twenty-five years later, its per capita GDP grew more than twenty-fold; the value of its exports increased twenty-six times over (Gan and Xin, 2018). Thus, Cambodia's government found a new potential patron that could offer it the support it needed, minus the conditions around democratic reform, good governance, and human rights – and minus the need to maintain the pretense of substantive democratic progress.

At first, relations between Beijing and Phnom Penh remained cautious but progressed. The first step forward took place after Hun Sen's violent coup de force against Funcinpec in July 1997. In the aftermath of the bloodshed, Hun Sen vaguely intimated that Ranariddh had received covert support from Taiwan and closed down Taipei's trade office in Phnom Penh. Chinese leaders were pleased. A few months later, China gave Cambodia a \$10 million loan to replace Western aid which was

<sup>5</sup>Between 1992 and 2011, Cambodia received an estimated \$12 billion in development assistance. See CDC-CRDB (2011, 14).

suspended after the violence; it also sent a \$2.8 million shipment of military trucks and jeeps, which were used to equip security forces loyal to Hun Sen. The Cambodian leader praised China: unlike Western countries, China “does not poke its nose into Cambodia’s internal affairs” (Storey, 2011). Henceforth, Sino-Cambodian relations improved as dissonance increased between the dominant Western visions of Cambodia (as a post-Cold War democracy-building subject) and Hun Sen’s domestic political prerogatives.

Relations improved steadily in the ensuing years, but it was a domestic development that marked a watershed in Hun Sen’s reliance on China. During the elections in 2013, a new, unified opposition party called the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) scored significant gains on the back of mounting discontent with CPP rule (Strangio, 2014). The party was formed in 2012 when Sam Rainsy’s eponymous party merged with Kem Sokha’s Human Rights Party. It scored significant gains on the back of mounting discontent with the CPP’s rule and the canny use of Facebook. Across the country, huge crowds turned up to see Rainsy and Sokha, who promised a new dawn for Cambodia after years of cronyism and corruption. According to official results, the 2013 election saw the CPP’s majority in the 123-seat National Assembly drop from 90 seats to just 68. The CNRP won the remaining 55 seats.

But the CNRP claimed that it had been robbed of victory by election fraud and it refused to take up its seats in the National Assembly. The party announced a campaign of public demonstrations calling for an independent investigation of the election. Tens of thousands of people poured into the street on numerous occasions in late 2013. These demonstrations later evolved into provocative calls for Hun Sen’s resignation. While Hun Sen survived the challenge, his government made sure that such a situation would not recur.

In late 2017, the authorities launched a fierce crackdown out of fear of further weakening of its hold on power. The authorities shuttered critical media outlets and arrested opposition politicians and human rights defenders. In September 2017, the CNRP President Kem Sokha was arrested and charged with treason, on allegations that he conspired with the United States to bring down the CPP government. Two months later, a CPP-controlled court banned the CNRP altogether. Facing little effective opposition, the CPP swept the board at the election, winning all 125 seats in the Cambodian National Assembly, a result that effectively repudiated the democratic legacy of the UNTAC era.

In the event of the CPP’s landslide victory at the 2023 elections, the one-party rule in Cambodia can be reinforced. Moreover, as Hun Manet (Hun Sen’s eldest son and his designated successor) made his debut in this election, it was critical to ensure that the results of the election could legitimize a generational transition from first- to second-generation CPP leaders and Cambodian prime ministers (Norén-Nilsson, 2023; Thul, 2023a). Therefore, before the elections, Hun Sen intensified his crackdown on domestic opposition forces to make sure that the election ran smoothly and produced ideal results. He tightened media control even further. In February 2023, for instance, the Hun Sen government revoked the operating license of Voice of Democracy (VOD), one of the last independent news outlets in Cambodia (Oliver, 2023).

More domestic rights activists were also targeted. For example, three land activists were arrested on charges of plotting against the government by provoking a peasant revolution (Associated Press, 2023). Moreover, two prominent opposition figures were barred from running in the 2023 election and in future elections. Kem Sokha was sentenced to twenty-seven years of house arrest and prohibited from participating in or casting a ballot in the election (Thul, 2023b). Sam Rainsy was also banned from running for office for twenty-five years (VOA Cambodia, 2023). Cambodia’s National Election Committee (NEC) disqualified the sole opposition party, the Candlelight Party (CP), from contesting the 2023 election due to a failure to submit proper registration documents. Even though the CP filed an appeal and sought to negotiate a political settlement, the Cambodian authorities insisted that the ruling was final. The spokesperson of the CP claimed that the rejection of their participation is “politically motivated” (Narim, 2023), as it eliminated the only credible challenge to Hun Sen and the ruling CPP. The worsening trajectory of civic and democratic space in Cambodia drew wide criticism from international community, especially the West. Both the European Union and

the United States condemned the disqualification and called it “undemocratic” (EEAS Press Team, 2023; U.S. Department of State, 2023).

To mitigate the resulting pressures and economic sanctions imposed by the West, Hun Sen relied heavily on China’s support. Given China’s rapid economic growth, China’s role in providing foreign aid could feasibly substitute for the role of Western aid partners. In 2013, Chinese leader Xi Jinping announced the BRI, which Cambodia’s government embraced with enthusiasm. The declining reliance was accompanied with the declining need to subscribe to democratic norms. Eroding domestic support thus provided the catalyst for Hun Sen to effectively abrogate the Paris Agreements and reset Cambodian politics on his own terms. China’s view of “non-interference” was seemingly tailor-made for Hun Sen. As Western governments have voiced strong criticisms against Cambodia’s authoritarian turn, China remained neutrally supportive, treating the crackdown as the country’s “internal affair.” The tone was set shortly after Kem Sokha’s arrest, when a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson announced that China supported “the Cambodian government’s effort to uphold national security and stability” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2017).

The Hun Sen regime faced increasing pressure from the West since the 2023 election. After the CPP declared a landslide victory in the election, the United States expressed its reluctance to recognize the result: the election was “neither free nor fair.” The United States added that the CPP had taken punitive measures, including halting some foreign assistance program in Cambodia and imposing visa bans on individuals who undermined democracy in the country (Reuters, 2023). In contrast, Xi Jinping congratulated Hun Sen on his victory and promised to continue supporting Cambodia’s development (Xinhua, 2023). Hun Sen also has another strong motivation for improving ties with China: it allows him to put some distance between himself and Vietnam, which has long loomed as a political liability for the CPP government.

At the same time, when the US government criticized the 2017–2018 political crackdown, Hun Sen took steps to downgrade his government’s ties with Washington. In January 2017, Cambodia unilaterally canceled the Angkor Sentinel military exercise with the US Army – a month after holding its first Golden Dragon exercise with China’s People’s Liberation Army (Sopheng, 2017). The cancellation was followed that April by the ejection of the “Seabees,” a US Navy engineering battalion working on charity projects (Dickison and Odom, 2017), and in August by the expulsion of the US-funded National Democratic Institute (Beech, 2017). All the while, Hun Sen repeatedly criticized the United States in speeches for bombing Cambodia during the Vietnam War, for supporting the Khmer Rouge alongside China throughout the 1980s, and for refusing to cancel more than \$500 million Cambodian debt contracted during the civil war of the early 1970s (Wallace, 2017).<sup>6</sup>

In truth, this slow turn against the West had been happening for some time. Back in 2011, the Cambodian government indefinitely postponed the regular donor meetings that had taken place since the early 1990s, in which the country’s “traditional” development partners scrutinized its progress on an agreed series of benchmark development reforms (Peter, 2011). The cancellation followed a spike in loans and concessional financing from China.<sup>7</sup> But the 2013 election, together with the mass protests that followed, sent the CPP the message that even the limited freedom that it permitted posed a threat to its hold on power. If freedom from outside democratizing pressure was Hun Sen’s goal, China provided a decisive answer. The 2018 election and the response from Western governments drew the CPP closer to China. Where Cambodian politics had previously been characterized by a curious mix of freedom and repression, oscillating with the political seasons, now it settled into a more permanent state of de facto one-party rule backed by Beijing.

<sup>6</sup>See also, Fresh News (2019).

<sup>7</sup>In December 2009, then-Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping paid a visit to Phnom Penh, where he and Hun Sen signed a package of loans and grants totaling a reported \$1.2 billion. Even taking into consideration the notoriously inflationary nature of the official reporting of such agreements, Xi’s 2009 visit, which coincided with Phnom Penh’s forced the deportation of twenty ethnic Uighur asylum seekers to China, marked an important inflection point in the balance between China and Cambodia’s “traditional” development partners. See Strangio (2014).

The economic sanction imposed by the EU by partially withdrawing its “Everything But Arms” (EBA) trade privileges from Cambodia in February 2020 only pushes Cambodia closer to China, as the negotiation of the Cambodia-China Free Trade Agreement (CCFTA) was concluded in just eight months (Chheang, 2023). Hun Sen defended his China’s policy by stating, “If I don’t rely on China, who will I rely on? If I don’t ask China, who am I to ask?” (Nikkei Asia, 2021). This trajectory became clearer when the 2023 election was around the corner. Hun Sen paid a three-day visit to Beijing in February 2023, just five months before the national election. During the visit, Cambodia and China vowed to build “a high-quality, high-level and high-standard China–Cambodia Community with a Shared Future in the new era” and agreed to establish the Diamond Hexagon cooperation framework (Global Times, 2023).

Besides, while attending the inauguration of a Chinese tire factory in Sihanoukville, Hun Sen publicly accused Western diplomats of supporting the opposition ahead of the 2023 election (Strangio, 2023). His inclination toward China is evident in his interest in Chinese investment, while his discontent with the West is evident in his condemnation of Western governments, along his call for the West to remain silent until the election (Panha, 2023). After the election, Hun Sen reiterated that the new Cambodian government, which led by his successor, will not change the country’s China policy (Zaobao, 2023).

This broad domestic political dynamic includes two more factors. The first is the highly personalized nature of Cambodian political culture, which ensures that personal political ambition plays an unusually determinative role in the country’s foreign alignments.<sup>8</sup> This trait is underscored by the surprising continuity of the main personalities involved since the end of the Cold War. In January 2021, Hun Sen marked his thirty-sixth year in power, and at the age of sixty-eight, he could conceivably lead Cambodia for a further decade or more. Similarly, seventy-one-year-old Sam Rainsy has been the de facto leader of the Cambodian opposition since the mid-1990s, while sixty-seven-year-old Kem Sokha has been similarly active in opposition politics before the Paris Agreements. The personalized nature of Cambodian political culture, the fact that Cambodian politics remains dominated by the same people for three decades, and the continuing political antagonisms between its main players---have all arguably helped to perpetuate the domestic political dynamics that have driven Cambodia in the direction of Beijing.

The second factor is Hun Sen’s years of accumulated personal resentments toward the United States and other Western governments, which continue to drive him into the arms of China. As the leader of a nation that Western governments sought to fashion into a liberal democratic state, Hun Sen has always been held to high democratic standards. His career has been characterized by resentment that he has never been treated as an equal, nor given his due for overthrowing the Khmer Rouge regime, for ending the Cambodian civil war in the 1990s, and for bringing a modicum of development to the country. Beijing, on the other hand, was willing to grant Hun Sen something he never received from the West: legitimacy. As the Cambodian leader crowed in February 2018 during the groundbreaking of a \$57 million Chinese-funded bridge over the Mekong River: “The Chinese leaders respect me highly and treat me as an equal” (Beech, 2018). On another occasion, Hun Sen claimed that China “has treated Cambodia with equality, understanding, and respect. China always walks the walk instead of talking the talk” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2016).

## Conclusion

As mentioned, structural realist or neo-realist theories have much to say about why Cambodia’s present government has aligned itself with China to such a significant extent. In many ways, Cambodia’s history and geographic location predispose it to accept good relations with Beijing. This has been further aided by Cambodia’s long history of contacts with China and its people, and the absence of the

<sup>8</sup>For a perceptive discussion of Cambodian political culture, see Jacobsen and Stuart-Fox (2013).

deep anti-Chinese sentiment that predominates in other parts of Southeast Asia. However, a structural realist account also suggests that it would be in Cambodia's national interests to seek to balance China's influence by reaching out to rival powers, including the United States – something that has decidedly *not* happened.<sup>9</sup> This paper argues that the reason can be found in the Cambodian political actors' manipulation of the interplay between Cambodia's domestic politics and external political and ideological currents.

While evidence shows that Hun Sen wants to improve his government's relations with the United States and other Western governments (or is at least aware of the need to do so), he is constrained by domestic interests, particularly the imperative of regime survival (reinforced by the paranoia and personal resentments of the senior CPP leadership). These domestic interests originate from rivalries and enmities that date back to the 1980s.

Therefore, Cambodia finds itself in a fraught position amid the growing strategic rivalry between China and the United States. The fact that Cambodia was such a focus of the post-Cold War liberal order makes it unsurprising that it is the Southeast Asian nation where liberal norms are currently most directly contested. China's important role in this challenge has also made the country a point of convergence for various strands of competition – economic, strategic, and ideological – between Beijing and Washington. As democratic norms have receded and Chinese influence has grown, the United States has begun to view the Cambodian government as a client state of Beijing.

It is not clear how Cambodia's situation will change in future. The current dynamics appear to be entrenched as political rivalries prevail. Locked out of Cambodian politics after having been exiled in late 2016, Sam Rainsy has doubled down on depicting Cambodia as a global cause. He has dutifully latched onto the anti-China sentiment in the United States and other Western capitals and used it to call for fresh interventions in Cambodian affairs. Hun Sen is likely to continue to seek China's support as long as his opponents continue to use the foreign pressure of democracy to undercut the CPP government's power.

For this dynamic to change, Hun Sen (or his successor) has to make legitimate democratic reforms in order to reduce tensions with Western governments and use them as a hedge against China. Alternatively, Western governments have to adopt a more pragmatic approach by moderating their expectations of Cambodia. Even though Hun Sen has resigned and handed his power over to Hun Manet, he retains his position as President of the ruling CPP, making him the most powerful figure in Cambodia. Although he has promised not to meddle in the work of the new Prime Minister and the Cabinet, he has made it clear that he will take back the power if his son fails to meet expectations. More importantly, he also declared that his governing model will endure because any divergence would only mean disrupting peace and undoing the achievements of the older generation (Baldwin, 2023).

Hun Manet vowed to carry out his father's words (Khmer Times, 2023). In other words, legitimate democratic reforms in Cambodia are less likely to happen anytime soon. While American personnel on the ground in Phnom Penh have done their best to engage and build trust with their Cambodian counterparts, a similar perception has not taken hold in Washington, where perceptions of Cambodia continue to be colored by liberal ideology, with little chance of this slackening any time soon. Indeed, as the United States makes strategic accommodations with other authoritarian governments in the interests of containing China, there is a good chance that Cambodia will only become more important as a symbol of American commitment to liberal and democratic norms – and of the need to contain Chinese power. Whatever happens, all of things ensure that domestic politics is likely to play an important role in Cambodia's foreign alignments in the foreseeable future.

**Competing interests.** None.

<sup>9</sup>To be sure, Cambodia has enjoyed a close relationship with Japan to the extent of counterbalancing its reliance on Beijing. But Tokyo's approach to the country has always been much more pragmatic and non-ideological compared to many Western governments, suggesting that it has largely been immune to the dynamics described in the preceding sections.

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