

Cambodia today or is China eating America's lunch in Southeast Asia?

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This study aims at analyzing Chinese and American, as well as Thai and Vietnamese influences over Cambodia. This seemingly unimportant Southeast Asian country has long been a geopolitical playground for its strong neighbours and superpowers, and it paid a heavy price for it. Enormous changes have taken place since the end of Cold War, but is Cambodia able to get over its historical legacy to raise this once so powerful kingdom again? To succeed, Cambodia must harmonize different interests colliding on its territory.

Introduction

Cambodia is a relatively small country in Southeast Asia that we don't hear of very often. On the surface, Cambodia is integrated in global economy, the country is a member of most major international organizations, including the UN and its specialized agencies, and became a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1999.¹ Cambodia is also member of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the World Trade Organization (WTO).²

But if we have a closer look, this integration is partial: Cambodia remains heavily reliant on foreign assistance and thus depends on donor countries' good will. Despite recent development, the Cambodian economy still suffers from the legacy of decades of war and internal strife. The kingdom is one of the poorest countries in Asia, with nearly 80% of its population engaged in subsistence agriculture. Per capita income and education levels are lower than in most neighbouring countries.³

This article aims at describing the system of foreign relations of this seemingly unimportant country that has long been victim of its unfortunate geographical location. This study focuses on two major geopolitical players in Southeast Asia: the United States and China and their struggle for influence in Cambodia. It also emphasizes the role of strong neighbours on Cambodian psyche, taking into account the Vietnamese and Thai intentions in the Kingdom.

Received: June 6, 2010

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A key to understanding Cambodian foreign policy lies in Cambodia's modern political history.

Modern political history

The Kingdom of Cambodia gained its independence from France in 1953 under the leadership of the popular king, Norodom Sihanouk. In 1955, Sihanouk abdicated in favor of his father, obtaining the post of Prime Minister and head of the ruling party. When his father died in 1960, Sihanouk assumed the title of Prince. In 1965, Prince Sihanouk broke off diplomatic relations with the United States in response to U.S. and South-Vietnamese military incursions into the kingdom and growing U.S. influence in the Cambodian armed forces. Diplomatic relations were restored in 1969.⁴

The seventies were cruel years for the Khmer people, and their impact is still being felt nowadays. The decade started by replacing ruler Prince Norodom Sihanouk, who had been in power from 1941, during the period when the war in Vietnam spilled over onto Cambodia. Cambodia was militarily weak and was trying to stay neutral in the middle of surrounding war, but was unable to prevent "*a succession of upheavals, punctuated by foreign incursions, civil war, and famine*".⁵ The Khmer Rouge, led by Pol Pot, took power after ousting General Lon Nol's pro-Western government in 1975.

Although it was indigenous, Pol Pot's revolution would not have swollen to a major force if the US had not been destabilizing Cambodia both economically and militarily. These secret operations started after the escalation of war in next-door Vietnam. In 1969, the US began a secret B-52 bombardment of Cambodia.⁶ American military leaders believed that Cambodian territory was providing a transportation route from North to South Vietnam and a haven where North Vietnam established its headquarters. The American bombing of Cambodia was a closely guarded secret primarily because the U.S. was not at war with Cambodia.

The American military action against Cambodian countryside intensified until 1973 when Americans imposed a halt: 540,000 tonnes of bombs had been dropped, half of them in the last six months. Up to 150,000 civilians had been killed.⁷

Following the bombing, many peasants were so outraged at the United States and their puppet leader, Lon Nol in Cambodia that they chose to join the Khmer Rouge, which started out as a marginal revolutionary communist group but it soon grew widely popular.⁹

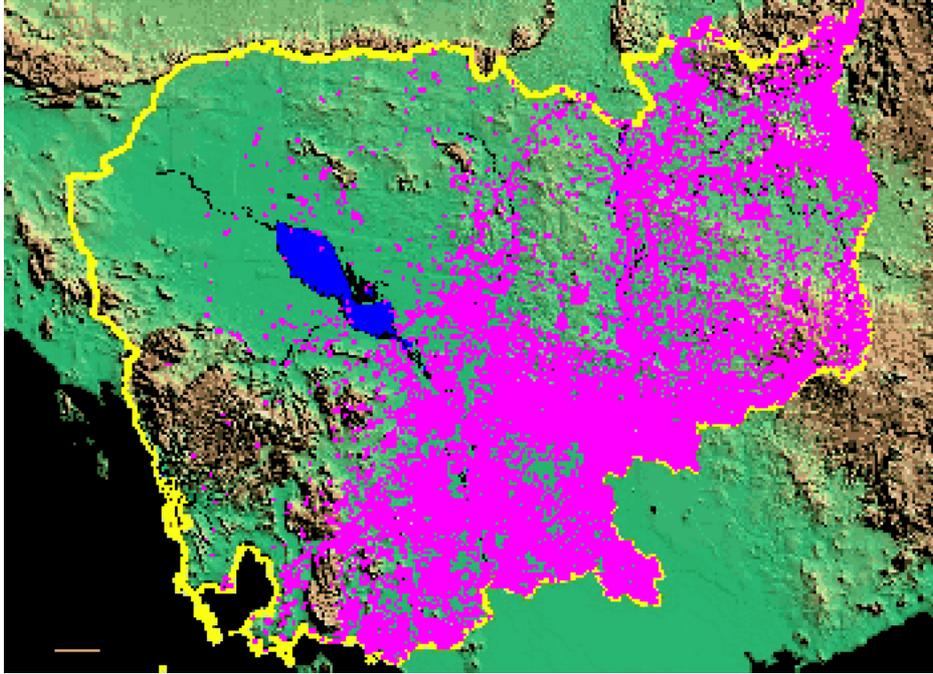


Fig. 1. US Bombing Points in Cambodia, 1965–1973⁸

The brutal Pol Pot regime had disastrous effects on Khmer people. After seizing power, hundreds of thousands of politicians, bureaucrats, teachers accused of association with previous governments were executed. Phnom Penh was turned into a ghost city as depopulation of the cities and the foundation of rural communes was part of Pol Pot's agrarian communist utopia. Experts put the death toll inflicted by the Khmer Rouge at 1.7 million,¹⁰ approximately 21% of the country's population died from execution, torture, overwork, starvation, and disease.

In 1979, however, Vietnam ousted the Khmer Rouge system and installed a puppet regime headed by Heng Samrin, a former Khmer Rouge military commander. This was on one hand response to border skirmishes initiated by the Khmer Rouge government but on the other hand it was the first step towards a Vietnam-led Indochina. But it wasn't so easy to justify the invasion to the international community. A 13-year civil war ensued, in which Khmer Rouge, Cambodian nationalist (KPNLF), and royalist (ANS) insurgents were fighting against the Vietnamese-backed regime. Hundreds of thousands became refugees.¹¹

The pro-Vietnamese Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party won the elections to the National Assembly in 1981 but the international community refused to recognise the new government.¹² The government-in-exile, which included the Khmer Rouge (!) and Sihanouk, retained its seat at the United Nations.¹³

Vietnamese troops finally left Cambodia in 1989 as the decline of Soviet aid made the stationing of Vietnamese troops in Cambodia difficult and Vietnam suffered from international isolation during the last decade due to its invasion of Cambodia.¹⁴

A peace settlement was signed in Paris in October, 1991 which officially ended civil war in Cambodia. The first democratic elections were held in May, 1993. Prince Sihanouk returned to Cambodia as king.¹⁵

The election resulted in the victory of FUNCINPEC party (National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative Cambodia), which obtained 58 seats in the new National Assembly, more than the Cambodian People's Party that won 51 seats. After the CPP declared that it would not accept the result, FUNCINPEC agreed to form a coalition government.¹⁶

But unfortunately the democratic process proved to be fragile as FUNCINPEC members realized that military and administrative power remained largely in the hands of the CPP. As the next elections were approaching in 1998, the FUNCINPEC tried to regain its previous popularity and tried to secure itself some administrative and military advantages. The tension rose and led to a coup: on 5 July 1997, the CPP won control over the key military and security forces and administrative positions by military means.¹⁷ The CPP-leader, Hun Sen secured his position by this violent coup against FUNCINPEC and replaced his co-prime minister Prince Ranariddh, who was overseas at the time, with Ung Huot, a more pliable FUNCINPEC figure. Hun Sen's action shocked the international community.¹⁸

Despite the coup, elections scheduled for July 1998 proceeded as planned. Hundreds of international monitors arrived in Cambodia to declare after the polls that the elections were relatively free although scores of people – mainly opposition supporters and activists – were killed or beaten in the run-up to elections. The election resulted in a plurality of votes for CPP but it again failed to win an outright majority. Prince Ranariddh and another opposition candidate, Sam Rainsy, fled abroad and openly contested the outcome of the election. In November the CPP and FUNCINPEC reached an agreement and decided to form a coalition government: Hun Sen became prime minister and Ranariddh became president of the National Assembly.¹⁹

Pol Pot died in 1998, and by early 1999 most of the remaining Khmer Rouge troops and leaders had surrendered. Rebel troops were integrated into the Cambodian army.

In the 2003 general elections, Hun Sen gained a majority, but it took 11 months of protracted negotiating before he formed a coalition with the runner-up, Funcinpec. The government was finally ratified in July 2004.²⁰ The last general elections in 2008 were said to have run far more smoothly than previous elections. The CPP won an outright majority beating its main challenger, the Sam Rainsy party.²¹

Hun Sen has been leading Cambodia since 1985. He is one of the most controversial figures of Southeast Asian history: before fleeing to Vietnam he was even a member of the Khmer Rouge for a while – although he denies accusations that he was any more than an ordinary soldier. Nowadays he talks proudly about his own role in Cambodia's recent development. Cambodia has achieved high economic growth under Hun Sen – that's a fact. But this growth is largely due to foreign donations and unilateral revenue from the garment and tourist industries. On the other hand, inflation is soaring and there is growing discontent over endemic corruption.²²

Foreign relations of Cambodia

Cambodian foreign policy is defined by the following main factors: first, the atavistic fear from its stronger neighbours (Vietnam and Thailand), second, the reliance on foreign aid and thus the need to maintain friendly relations with all donor countries (US, Australia, Japan and China) although lately Cambodia has definitely moved towards China.

The United States is conditioning its donations: they insist on Khmer Rouge trials, human rights and transparency, to quote only some of the numerous requirements. On the other hand, China has never asked "anything" in return for the financial support and large-scale investments...

When Hun Sen first became prime minister in 1985, he was no more than a puppet of the pro-Vietnamese forces in Cambodia. Currently he has very concrete ideas on Cambodian foreign policy.

He knows very well that Cambodian economy is completely dependent on foreign investments and aid. External funding accounts for over half of the country's government budget. The European Union, Japan, Australia, and the United States are the largest providers of official development assistance (ODA) to Cambodia.²³

Although Hun Sen's system has several authoritarian traits and the lack of real political freedoms still bother Westerners, several developed countries are engaged in Cambodia under various forms of investments. Relations between Cambodia and developed country aid donors, such as Japan, Australia, and the United States, are rather friendly but cannot be compared to Cambodian devotion to China. The latter is rather an investor than a simple donor. China provides one of the largest sources of external

support due to its investments in infrastructure, public works, and hydropower projects in the kingdom.

Chinese-Cambodian “special relationship” or Phnom Penh is becoming China’s Casablanca?

On 21 February, 2009 during a business meeting Cambodia’s king said China is the “*most reliable friend*” of Cambodia and he expressed his gratitude for China’s long-term support and economic assistance and for its contribution to Cambodia’s national reconciliation, peace and development.²⁴

“*China needs Cambodia,*” U.S.-based Cambodian economist Tith Naranhkiri says. “*If a security problem occurs, for example, a war with Taiwan, China may need Cambodia...Secondly, for economic reasons, it needs gas and oil.*”²⁵

Chinese interest in one of the poorest countries in Southeast Asia is nothing new. This powerful ally has been considering Cambodia a strategic partner for decades, independently of the nature of Cambodian government. China already supported Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge era. China was a sort of big brother that time, Pol Pot openly followed maoist ideals (inspired by the Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution). China felt so protective of his “pupil” that when Vietnam invaded Cambodia in 1979, China even launched an offensive against Vietnam in an attempt to dissuade it from involvement in Cambodia. The invasion resulted in a more than a decade-long civil war. During this period, Chinese-Cambodian relations shrank to a minimal level, although China was consistently campaigning for an independent Cambodia at the United Nations.²⁶

The end of Vietnamese occupation in 1989 marked a new era in Sino-Cambodian relations as well. China played a huge role in shaping the new, modern Cambodia. After the first elections in 1993 Cambodia obtained huge amount of donations from various actors of the international community: United States, European Union, Japan, China and later on World Bank, International Monetary Fund and Asian Development Bank all gave a helping hand to rebuild the devastated economy.²⁷ Foreign investment helped boost the economy by an average 7% between 1993 and 2003 and by a stunning 11% the next three years.²⁸

When in 1997 – after Hun Sen’s coup – the United States banned direct bilateral aid to Cambodia, China was very glad to fill in the space left by Americans. China never criticized human rights issues, political leaders, elections in Cambodia. China let concrete economic steps speak instead of declarations. Economic diplomacy gradually grew stronger and stronger after 1997. And what did Cambodia give in return? Hun Sen

promptly expelled Taiwan's unofficial liaison office from Phnom Penh after his coup, claiming that Taiwan had been covertly supporting the FUNCINPEC forces (his enemies that time).²⁹

In the last ten-fifteen years, China intensified donations and investments at the same time. China also became one of the key trade partners of the country.³⁰ Statistics over a course of 15 years show that Chinese investors invested the largest amount among all foreign investors in Cambodia. According to figures from the Council for the Development of Cambodia, China invested from 1994 to September 2009 as much as US\$6,511 million in Cambodia mostly in the forestry sector, textiles, construction materials, and agricultural development.³¹

Besides investment and assistance, China has also granted military assistance to Cambodia since the late 1990s in the form of military barracks, schools, hospital, trucks, and ambulances. China reportedly also has provided military and police training and de-mining support. In addition, in October 2006, China pledged assistance for Cambodian army human resource training and the repair of military equipment³² and provided the country's dilapidated navy with five warships in 2005 and seven patrol boats in 2007.

And for all that, China seemingly does not expect anything in return. But is all that money flowing into Cambodia for free? Chan Sophal said China's interests in Cambodia were clear: *"They help us, but they also look into the resources we have, such as mines, oil, gold, iron, and land. They need land to grow agricultural and agro-industrial crops to meet the demands of the Chinese population."*³³

There are concerns though about China's rising influence in Cambodia. For instance, some critics say the money China invests in Cambodian infrastructure ends up going to state-owned Chinese companies that build roads and hydropower dams. The opposition party claims that the deals for the dams – which are funded by China, and which will be built and operated by Chinese firms on a 30-year basis – are not transparent, and riddled with corruption. As for the IMF, it is worried that Phnom Penh's blanket guarantee to buy all the power produced by the Chinese-built dams could prove too expensive, and might even risk Cambodian efforts to reduce poverty.³⁴

Rights activists and anti-corruption campaigners point to a huge increase in illegal logging, land-grabbing, and worker exploitation as a secondary consequence of Chinese money.³⁵

Human rights activists have also pointed to Phnom Penh's decision last year to send 20 Uighur refugees back to China, at Beijing's request. Days later Cambodia received economic assistance deals worth \$1.2 billion.³⁶ The United States and other countries sharply criticized Cambodia for deporting the Uighurs.

So it seems that China's policies toward Cambodia are determined by only one fact: Beijing doesn't care who runs Cambodia as long as the ruler is keen on helping China maintain its strategic position in the region.

The US and Cambodia

Although nowadays the US tries to intervene in Southeast Asia using dollars and ballots, things weren't always this way. In the 1970s, they used bombs and troops.

Cambodia would not have been too important for the United States if the country didn't share a long border with Vietnam in the east and southeast. As the war in neighbouring Vietnam burst its borders, the US launched secret bombings on East Cambodia in order to wipe out Vietnamese communists who allegedly had found a safe haven in neutral Cambodia.

In March 1970, while Sihanouk was abroad, his prime minister, General Lon Nol, seized power and ruled Cambodia from 1970 to 1975. His pro-American attitude wasn't popular among Cambodians. Outrage over US bombing, starvation and destruction rapidly built popular support to Cambodia's Khmer Rouge.³⁷ That's why David Roberts writes the following in his book (US intervention in Cambodia from bombs to ballots): "*The legacy of US interference is written in blood and misery across the map of Cambodia.*"

When Vietnam liberated Cambodia from the murderous Khmer Rouge in 1979, the international community did not accept the pro-Vietnamese puppet government as legitimate ruler of the country and though Cambodia was completely devastated, throughout the 1980s, the Cambodian government was deprived of all humanitarian and development assistance by the United Nations. In the diplomatic arena, the USA led most of the Western world to support the exiled Khmer Rouge over the Vietnamese-sponsored government of Cambodia. The Carter and Reagan Administrations both voted for Pol Pot's representative to occupy Cambodia's disputed UN seat. In 1989, U.S. Secretary of State James Baker, in an attempt to replace the Hun Sen government, suggested including the Khmer Rouge in a new regime (!).³⁸ Meanwhile the CIA itself, ensured food relief and military assistance for the Khmer Rouge and its allies. The United States and its allies waged a proxy war against Vietnam and the Soviet Union. "*The US campaign to destabilize Cambodia and, by extension, Vietnam – the ultimate target of its aggression – was largely successful...the West was actively supporting the perpetrators of the Khmer Rouge genocide...*"³⁹ In reality, Cambodia was punished for the mistake of having liberators from the wrong side of the Cold War, as British journalist John Pilger once wrote.

After the Paris Peace Agreements that officially ended war in 1991, first elections were held in 1993.

US official presence in Cambodia after Cold War dates back to 1991, when after a 16 year-long break the United States restored diplomatic relations with Cambodia by opening the U.S. Mission in Phnom Penh.

The United States declared its requirements regarding Cambodia very openly: in return of massive financial support, they expect good governance, democracy, and respect for human rights as well as reducing the threat of terrorism, facilitating trade, and bringing Khmer Rouge leaders to justice.⁴⁰

In 1997, after Prime Minister Hun Sen's allegedly illegal seizure of power,⁴¹ the United States opted on banning direct bilateral aid to Cambodia. This ban was only lifted ten years later, in 2007, according to numerous experts, as a sign of warming relations between the two countries.⁴²

Despite the ban, the United States and Cambodia have been maintaining strong ties through aid and trade. From 1997 until the lifting of legislative restrictions on bilateral assistance in 2007, U.S. assistance to the Cambodian people was provided mainly through non-governmental organizations, which flourish in Cambodia. Statutory exceptions have allowed for US assistance to the central government of Cambodia for reproductive, maternal, and child health care, preventing and treating HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases, basic education, combating human trafficking, rule-of law programs, cultural and historic preservation (the temples of Angkor Wat), counter-narcotics activities, and developing international adoptions procedures. For most of these activities, the US government has collaborated with the central government of Cambodia but provided funding only through NGOs.⁴³

In the past three years, bilateral relations between the US and Cambodia have deepened and broadened. After lifting the ban, more direct technical assistance was provided. US assistance to Cambodia administered by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) mission in 2009 totalled nearly \$62 million for programs in health, education, governance, and economic growth.⁴⁴

In December 2009, after Cambodia deported twenty Uighur asylum seekers to China at Beijing's request, US-Cambodian relations were strained for a while, the US even cancelled the delivery of 200 military trucks earlier this year as a result.⁴⁵

But in March, 2010, the US State Department issued a message to the Cambodian government, congratulating it on the successful completion of the first trial of Khmer Rouge leaders and declaring the following: *“Over the last year, the partnership between our two nations has grown stronger and deeper. Together we have expanded*

cooperation on law enforcement issues, food security, the environment, and international peacekeeping,” Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said in the statement.⁴⁶

So it seems that America lately has been satisfied with Cambodian developments. Cambodia’s short-term aim is to convince the US to cancel debts of about \$300 million that the kingdom has owed to the United States since the Lon Nol regime of the 1970s. The US has so far not agreed to the prospect...⁴⁷

As for the future, it is obvious that America is trying to counterbalance China in Southeast Asia. But many experts fear that as Chinese economic support increases, the United States and other Western donor countries might lose their influence on the Cambodian government to get more engaged in democratic practices.

Neighbours

Cambodian foreign policy is also defined by the atavistic fear from stronger neighbours. Their suspicion is understandable if we take a closer look at history: Cambodia was often invaded by Thai or Vietnamese armies which, in turn, would be expelled by forces assembled by the other neighbour. This constant warfare resulted in the Cambodian Kingdom getting on the brink of extinction by the mid-nineteenth century. West Cambodia was controlled by Thailand and the rest by Vietnam. It was at this point, that the French “offered” the Cambodian King their protection.⁴⁸

The animosity towards stronger neighbours persisted after independence. Anti-Vietnamese and anti-Thai feelings continue to smoulder today among many Cambodians.

As Cambodia is becoming economically more integrated with neighbouring countries, official relations are less strained nowadays. Although Cambodia has had border disputes with both Vietnam and Thailand, it seems that Vietnamese-Cambodian relations are flourishing (after settling some of the contentious borders in 2005 in a treaty). Bilateral exchanges, meetings have become regular in recent years. In January, 2009, Vietnamese president Nguyen Minh Triet declared the following during a meeting: “*Vietnam and Cambodia were side-by-side with each other in the past struggle for national independence, therefore it is necessary for today’s generation to continue this solidarity to ensure further development.*”⁴⁹

The political opposition has frequently criticized Hun Sen as being Hanoi’s puppet, but it seems that although he started his political career as a Vietnamese-backed leader, now he is only trying to establish friendly relations. “*We are trying to strengthen the bilateral cooperation that we’ve had since long ago,*” said Koy Kuong, an

undersecretary of state at the Cambodian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. *“Between Cambodia and Vietnam, we have a long [history of] friendship and cooperation.”*⁵⁰

Some analysts suggest that Cambodia is strengthening economic and political ties with Vietnam in order to replace its declining trade and diplomatic relations to Thailand. The latter has an ongoing border dispute with the Kingdom over the temple Preah Vihear.

Skirmishes take place from time to time between Thai and Cambodian troops at the temple. Politicians tend to escalate tension: e.g. Thai foreign minister Kasit Piromya referred to Hun Sen as a “gangster” in the local media. When Hun Sen demanded an apology, Kasit re-phrased his insult by calling Hun Sen “a gentleman who has the heart of a gangster”, but he later issued a written formal apology.⁵¹

Relations have become even cooler since Thaksin Shinawatra, deposed Thai prime minister, was appointed economic adviser to Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen.⁵²

Opposition leader Sam Rainsy, who often criticized Hun Sen for his strong ties to Vietnam, thinks Vietnam is trying to take competitive advantage of Thailand’s internal political problems and border conflict to take its place as Cambodia’s most important trade partner. *“This is part of a larger geopolitical play in this region – the current tension with Thailand benefits Vietnam, as Vietnam can increase its influence over Cambodia.”*⁵³

But Son Soubert, a member of Cambodia’s Constitutional Council says the current border skirmish with Thailand distracts from Vietnam’s more serious border infringements,⁵⁴ which are overlooked by Hun Sen and his government. Soubert claims that Vietnam is still omnipresent in Cambodia: *“You don’t see [Vietnam’s] presence, but they’re present ... You can accuse me of being biased or paranoid, but in the eyes of Cambodians, that’s the reality.”* Cambodians even have a joke that has been making the rounds in Phnom Penh lately: *Spoken in the voice of a Vietnamese, the nationalistic jab goes: “The Thais are stupid because they try to steal a stone,” referring to the Preah Vihear temple.*

*“We are smarter, we just steal the land.”*⁵⁵

Cambodia’s future

Although this article only gave a brief overview of Cambodia’s role in the Southeast Asian region, the reader might have a notion now of all those influences this small country has to cope with on a daily basis.

The United States and China are competing for Southeast Asian dominance. Countries in this region, and among them Cambodia, are trying to take full advantage of

the short-term Chinese economic developments, while taking less into account their longer-term security concerns. They seek maximum economic benefit from Chinese rise while keeping an eye on the possibility that one day China might use all its economic power to dominate the region. The United States is trying to counterbalance Chinese intentions but China is culturally and geographically closer to the region. It is very hard for small countries to resist this giant living next door. American culture is so different and expectations are so obvious and explicit that it disturbs the Asian way of thinking. As a Cambodian analyst said on condition of anonymity: “*There are a number of reasons why Cambodia is receptive to China. One is the way it does business. China understands Cambodia. It doesn’t throw us scraps of aid and then scold us in front of the world like a naughty child. That is not the Asian way - that is the colonial way.*”⁵⁶

Neighbours also seem to try and dominate Cambodia. Hun Sen and his ruling party, CPP has strong ties to Vietnam. To flame nationalism in Cambodia, Hun Sen is trying to divert all Cambodian attention to the temple Preah Vihear. According to experts, his success at recent elections is largely due to his openly anti-Thai declarations that only fuelled the border conflict instead of solving it.

Cambodia should try to maximize the economic benefit it can take from diverging geopolitical intentions in the region and to balance the country without shifting too much towards the East.

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