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Cambodia-China Relations: Overcoming the Trust Deficit

Why China is having trouble overcoming suspicions about its motives in Cambodia.

By **Phoak Kung**

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It has never been easy to paint a rosy picture of Cambodia-China relations. Despite multiple high-level exchanges and a public display of unwavering friendship, mistrust between the two countries remains deep and pervasive. What is ironic is that even after China has given billions of dollars in aid, loans and investments to its close ally over the years, it does not seem to be able to overcome this deficit of trust and credibility.

History can be useful in explaining this conundrum. Tellingly, although relations between Cambodia and China are centuries old, the two countries only had formal diplomatic relations in 1958. At the apex of the Cold War, Prince Norodom Sihanouk decided to adopt a non-aligned foreign policy, but the West was deeply suspicious of his close relations with the Chinese leadership. Throughout his political career, he continued to play a central role in maintaining strong Cambodia-China relations.

Between 1975 and 1978, China lent its patronage to the notorious Khmer Rouge regime, which was responsible for killing around 1.7 million people and almost destroying the country. Further, China was also among a handful of countries that continued to support the Khmer Rouge after it was ousted from power by the People's Republic of Kampuchea, the precursor of the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), with the support from the Vietnamese troops in early 1979.

The signing of the Paris Peace Agreement on October 23, 1991 helped put an end to the civil war, but it did not immediately restore Cambodia-China relations to complete normalcy. Even the victory of the supposedly China-friendly royalist party, the National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC), in the 1993 election didn't fully restore relations.

The CPP still maintained a tight grip on power, and its leaders were wary of China given the troubling relations of the past. Only after 1997 did Cambodia-China relations began to improve. One possible explanation was that in the aftermath of the deadly clash in July 1997, it was clear that the CPP would be the dominant power in Cambodia's politics once it had defeated and captured forces loyal to the royalist FUNCINPEC party.

This shifting balance of internal power may have made China realize that it had to revisit its past strategy and engage with the CPP's leaders if it wanted to reinvigorate its crumbling diplomatic relations with Cambodia. As a result, China quickly emerged as one of Cambodia's most important donors. More importantly, China's long-standing policy of non-interference perfectly aligns with the interests of the ruling elites.

Besides financial support, China has also assisted Cambodia in strengthening its security forces, and has given millions of dollars worth of military equipment to its ally. For instance, in 2010, China agreed to give 257 military trucks and 50,000 uniforms to the Cambodian armed forces. In addition, China also provided 1,000 handguns and 50,000 bullets to the national police. These are just a few highlights of the military cooperation between the two countries.

In the aftermath of the July 2013 election, which the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) claims was plagued with massive irregularities, China was among a handful of countries that endorsed the CPP's victory. During his visit to Cambodia in August 2013, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi promises the ruling elites that "China will firmly support Cambodia to prevent foreign disturbance.

In return, the CPP's leaders strongly support the "One China Policy." As a result, in 1997, the Royal Government of Cambodia shut down the **Taipei Economic and Cultural Office**, accusing it of being responsible for terrorism. In July 2014, **Prime Minister Hun Sen** reiterated the government's irreversible position on "One China Policy." Cambodia also angered the West and the international community after **deporting 20 Uighur asylum seekers** back to China on December 19, 2009.

During the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Phnom Penh in 2012, Cambodia was accused of using its role as chair to prevent the regional body from making a strong statement regarding the South China Sea territorial dispute, in order to please the Chinese leadership. And for the first time in its 45-year existence, **ASEAN failed to issue a joint communiqué**. Many people were quick to point their fingers at the ruling elites, blaming them for putting their interests ahead of ASEAN's centrality and unity.

These incidents clearly indicate that Cambodia-China relations are stronger than ever before. Cambodia is probably the ally that China looks to first, to maintain its influence in Southeast Asia. There is thus reason for both countries to work together.

Yet, Cambodia-China relations hang by a thread. Of course, from the perspective of the ruling elites and the Chinese leadership, good ties seem to be obvious, since both sides get what they want. But that assumes that their governments have a firm grasp on power. Given its changing political landscape, that assumption no longer holds in Cambodia.

It would not be unreasonable for China to think that it ought not have to more for Cambodia than it already has done, given the billions of dollars it has sent to the country's elites. Yet if Beijing wants to maintain strong and lasting relations with Cambodia, it will need to go beyond its current approach in favor of largesse than benefits Cambodia and its people.

Unlike its Western counterparts, China can hardly advocate for democracy, human rights, and other governance issues, but this does not necessarily mean that its hands are tied. In fact, there are a wide range of policies that China could use to build trust and confidence among ordinary Cambodians, and which would have the additional benefit of winning greater support from the young cohort, who are emerging as the most potent force in Cambodian politics.

Over the past decade, Cambodia's economy has been growing at a rapid rate, lifting millions of people out of extreme poverty. Yet the country still faces serious skills shortages. Here, China could help, by providing more funding for vocational training programs and scholarships. The resulting increase in productivity would benefit the hundreds of Chinese companies in Cambodia that are struggling to recruit skilled workers.

Another factor hindering Cambodia's economic growth is the lack of technology. Despite the government's efforts to promote science, technology and engineering, results are minimal because of resource scarcity. China could play a crucial role. For instance, agriculture accounts for around 70 percent of employment in Cambodia, with a large majority of farmers still reliant on traditional methods. A technology transfer would boost productivity, enabling farmers to enjoy better living standards.

Although Chinese investments in Cambodia have increased significantly in recent years, the money has mostly gone to energy or labor-intensive sectors. That model is working for now, but if Cambodia really wants to achieve Prime Minister Hun Sen's vision of becoming an upper middle income country, it will need to strengthen its industrial and manufacturing sector. And China could again play a pivotal role in encouraging more investments from Chinese companies in this area.

Chinese aid to Cambodia has often come in for heavy criticism. Many Western countries accuse China of giving money to developing countries without regard to their poor democratic and human rights

records. Given China's non-interference policy, it will not seek to control how the money it gives is used by the recipient countries. However, attaching conditions to aid is not necessarily a bad thing.

Perhaps the most widely cited problem of Chinese aid to Cambodia is the quality of the projects that it has funded. There have, for instance, been widespread complaints that the bridges and roads that have been built by Chinese companies are of poor quality. This exacerbates the lack of credibility in Chinese aid. For instance, the first public reaction to the crash of a military helicopter on July 14, 2014 in Phnom Penh was that it must have been made by China. It was a cruel reminder to China that it really does not to rethink its approach to aid.

China is also seen as less interested in supporting social issues, in contrast to the many Western countries that concentrate much of their funding on the poor and vulnerable, which partly explains why they enjoy a high level of trust among ordinary Cambodians. To improve its image, China should actively engage in a wide range of social programs such as health, sanitation and education, among others. These activities will not just improve the plight of those most in need; they will also assist Cambodia's government in realizing its development goals.

A lack of insight into Cambodian realities is another major impediment for China. Resolving it will require broad and open dialogue, not just at the government level but between other stakeholders such as academics, civil society organizations, private companies, and citizens. In fact, there are signs that China is trying to get these sorts of dialogues underway, but it will do more in the form of research, workshops, conferences, cultural activities, and the like.

Stronger diplomatic relations would doubtless be in the best interests of both Cambodia and China. To get there, Beijing will need to go beyond its current approach and consider the concerns and interests of ordinary Cambodians. Only then will China be able to overcome its trust deficit. A good first step would be helping Cambodia prepare for ASEAN economic integration in 2015. Because surely a strong and prosperous Cambodia is good for China.

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