

Asia's Leadership in Regional and Global Affairs

The Cambodian People's Party's Affinity toward China: Trends in Cambodian Politics

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1. Introduction

The current Cambodian government led by Prime Minister (PM) Hun Sen of the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) came to power with Vietnam's support after the Vietnamese military overthrew Democratic Kampuchea led by PM Pol Pot in 1979. The government then had to engage in rebuilding the nation owing to the Pol Pot regime's genocide and deal with the civil war that followed. With the signing of the 1991 Paris Peace Accords, the United Nations (UN) Transitional Authority in Cambodia was established, and the current constitution came into effect in 1993. The CPP has held power without interruption since 1979, and Hun Sen's reign is in its 38th year, after he took office in January 1985 at the age of 32.

Some view Cambodia as a democracy due to the UN's transitional rule and the success in the following elections. While it is true that a democratic political system was introduced in the country, the regime has been authoritarian. Furthermore, the regime's dictatorial tendency has strengthened of late, as witnessed with the dissolution of the largest opposition party and the CPP sweeping all parliamentary seats. This suggests that Cambodia has transitioned from a "competitive authoritarian regime" in the 1990s, when opposition parties could win some seats through an election, to a "hegemonic authoritarian regime."

Since the 2000s, Cambodia has increasingly been leaning toward China. In June 2021, Hun Sen told Japanese media that "China supports the development of infrastructure such as bridges and roads. Apart from China, who else can Cambodia rely on?" In the past, the CPP considered China, which supported the Pol Pot regime, its worst enemy. However, in the 2000s, after the civil war in Cambodia ended and development started gathering pace, China adopted a "three-pronged" economic strategy of trade, investment, and aid. Consequently, as seen in Hun Sen's statement above, the stance toward China shifted from that of "the source of all evils" to "the most trustworthy friend."

2. Characteristics of and changes in Cambodian diplomacy

Let us review the geographical conditions and historical background that define Cambodian diplomacy. Geographically, Cambodia is sandwiched between two bigger powers, Thailand and Vietnam, and its challenges of how to maintain its independence and secure its

territorial integrity in the face of threats from the two neighbors persist till today. Cambodians see their history as divided into two periods: the “glorious” Angkorian era (802–1431) and the “declining” post-Angkorian era when its territory was encroached upon by Siam (Thailand) and Vietnam (1431–1863). During the latter period, the Cambodian king of the time signed a protection treaty with France in 1863 to ensure the region’s territorial integrity, following which, it was under French colonial rule for 90 years. We can thus conclude that the historical experience of seeking assistance from a big power outside Asia to deal with neighbors’ threats, loss of territory, and geopolitical predicaments defines post-independence Cambodian diplomacy.

Among the successive governments since achieving independence from France, King Norodom Sihanouk’s government originally adopted the non-alliance/neutral stance to extract aid from both the United States (US) and Soviet Union, but partly due to the expansion of the Vietnam War, it severed its diplomatic link with the US and strengthened its relationship with China. King Sihanouk was ousted in a coup d’état, and the successive Lon Nol government was completely dependent on the US both militarily and economically. In contrast, the Pol Pot government, which came next, was supported by China—this government launched a cross-border attack on Vietnam, which it considered its worst enemy, but was defeated in the end by the Vietnamese forces’ invasion. Then, a civil war broke out between the Vietnam-supported government of the Kampuchean People’s Revolutionary Party and the three-party coalition government of King Sihanouk, Pol Pot, and Son Sann’s factions, which supported the preceding governments. The coalition government was supported by the US, China, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

As mentioned earlier, the civil war ended in 1991, and in 1993, a coalition government of FUNCINPEC and the CPP came to power. Drawing from the experiences till then, it adopted permanent neutrality and non-alliance as its basic diplomatic principles. It also started to strengthen its relations with western countries and Japan to attract development aid and with the aim of joining ASEAN.

3. History of the pro-China stance and the current situation

In these circumstances, how has China succeeded in approaching and reconciling with the CPP? When the FUNCINPEC-CPP government came to power in 1993, China supported the royalist FUNCINPEC due to its historical closeness to King Sihanouk. However, “first PM” Prince Norodom Ranariddh favored the US as a trading partner and a development aid donor, and Taiwan as an investor. Consequently, China started seeking reconciliation with the CPP. In 1996, China invited “second PM” Hun Sen to Beijing and agreed to build a relationship between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and CPP. Hun Sen gained power on the back of the “July incident” of 1997, seen as a coup d’état to deny the election results. Western countries and Japan froze development aid, ASEAN suspended Cambodia indefinitely, and Cambodia’s seat in the UN General Assembly was considered vacant. In other words, the country was internationally isolated. Under these circumstances, China acknowledged the Hun Sen regime and, in addition to opposing international sanction against Cambodia, called upon the international community to refrain from interfering in Cambodia’s domestic politics and provided military and development aid. In

response, Hun Sen declared his support for the “One China” principle, and the CPP and CCP grew close. The CPP won the general election held the following year, that is, 1998; the two-PM system was abolished, and Hun Sen became the sole PM. Following this, not only the two parties but also the two states, Cambodia and China, became close.

Since 2000, China has been the second-largest importer of Cambodian goods after the US and is the largest exporter to Cambodia, besides providing it with the largest investment and bilateral aid. Militarily, in 2017, Cambodia suspended joint military drills with the US, which had been started in 2010. Instead, it carried out military drills with China in 2016 and between 2018 and 2020. It is also reported that there is a secret agreement between Cambodia and China to allow China to use the Ream Naval Base. Diplomatically, Cambodia has earned the nickname of “the Chinese representative” speaking for China at ASEAN. Since 2016, it has extradited Taiwanese suspects arrested in Cambodia not to Taiwan but China. Thus, it is evident that Cambodia is cozying up to China, and its pro-China stance is visible in various policies.

4. Domestic factors that facilitate Cambodia’s pro-China stance

Now, let us investigate the factors in domestic politics that facilitate Cambodia’s pro-China stance. To begin with, there were some domestic changes. Cambodia’s relationship with Thailand reached its lowest point twice: first, because of the 2003 anti-Thailand riots, and then, due to the border dispute between the two countries from 2008 to 2011. At this point, Cambodia sought conflict resolution through ASEAN, but it did not work, and thus, its trust in ASEAN decreased. With respect to Vietnam, the Cambodia National Rescue Party, which had a strong anti-Vietnam stance, won many seats in the 2013 general election. As a result, the CPP was compelled to take a more aggressive approach toward Vietnam, including deporting illegal Vietnamese immigrants. When the Cambodia National Rescue Party did well even in the 2017 local election, the CPP took measures to dissolve the party. Due to this, Cambodia’s relationship with the West soured, and it was sanctioned by the European Union. Thus, as Cambodia’s relations with its two neighbors, Thailand and Vietnam, became unstable and those with western countries worsened, China became the one to support the CPP regime’s survival, both economically and militarily.

What about Cambodia’s relationship with Japan though? The two countries have long maintained an amicable relationship, and Cambodians are, on the whole, pro-Japan. They agreed to establish a “new partnership” in 2007, a “strategic partnership” in 2013, and a “comprehensive strategic partnership” in 2023. However, considering Japan’s constitutional restrictions and the fact that it is not a permanent member of the UN Security Council, Cambodians are aware that Japan’s military/strategic role is limited.

In sum, the CPP regime believes that ASEAN alone cannot guarantee Cambodia’s security and economic development, but it also recognizes the risk of excessive dependence on China—it appears to place importance on collaboration with ASEAN and Japan and to seek ways of strengthening its relations with other regions and global big powers. The CPP is fundamentally pragmatic, and its priority is to stay in power. Though it has currently taken an extreme pro-China stance because of the related tangible benefits, this may well change depending on future

developments in domestic politics.

5. Toward collective succession of power

With the CPP regime's hold on power continuing, Hun Sen's personal rule has also strengthened. After the death of Chea Sim, the CPP president seen as the PM's rival, in 2015, Hun Sen has been referred to as "the core of the Cambodian People's Party," "the peacemaker," and "the father of peace," which suggests that he is increasingly being positioned as the nucleus of Cambodia. Simultaneously, it is also becoming clear that his eldest son will succeed him—Lieutenant General Hun Manet, deputy commander-in-chief of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces and commander of the Royal Cambodian Army, has acquired a major post in the CPP astonishingly fast. After Hun Sen nominated him as his successor, the party's Central Committee unanimously elected him as "the future prime ministerial candidate." In 2022, articles in the constitution on the PM's election were revised to grant Hun Sen the authority to appoint Hun Manet as the PM. This clearly shows that succession by the eldest son is gathering pace.

This attempt at inter-generational succession of power is not limited to Hun Sen. Since the latter half of the 2010s, children of high-ranking officials of the CPP have joined the party's leadership and acquired posts in state institutions, which suggests an emergence of the Cambodian version of the "princelings"—scions of the party establishment—often noted as a feature of contemporary Chinese politics. These children have acquired posts in the ministries under their fathers' influence, or in their fathers' constituencies, and there is collective succession of power, with Hun Sen at the center, from a small group of rulers to their children.

As for the future of the "Hun Sen regime," we may see the new PM Hun Manet installed between the 2023 and 2028 general elections at the earliest. However, if Hun Sen remains party president even after stepping down as PM, the "Hun Sen regime" effectively continues, which means drastic change in Cambodian politics and its diplomacy is unlikely even after the new PM assumes office.

Moreover, even if power is transferred to the next generation, it is not clear if they can remain united for nearly 40 years, as their fathers have, and since transfer of power is not institutionalized in Cambodia, it is not clear how things will stand after Hun Sen leaves office. These are important points to consider when examining Cambodia's future diplomacy.

(This is an English translation of an outline of the lecture delivered by YAMADA Hiroshi, Associate Professor, Niigata University of International and Information Studies, at the 93rd Policy Plenary Meeting of CEAC on November 14, 2022.)