



CAMBODIA'S FOREIGN RELATIONS IN REGIONAL AND GLOBAL CONTEXTS

SECOND EDITION

Edited by
DETH SOK UDOM



CAMBODIA'S FOREIGN RELATIONS IN REGIONAL AND GLOBAL CONTEXTS

2nd Edition

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Cambodia's Foreign Relations in Regional and Global Contexts

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ENDORSEMENT

Dear readers,

I recall with fond memories that in 2017 I had the honor of writing an endorsement remark for a book edited by Deth Sok Udom, Sun Suon, and Serkan Bulut, titled *Cambodia's Foreign Relations in Regional and Global Contexts*, published by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) Cambodia. Today, it is an even greater honor for me to write an endorsement for the second edition of this important work, now edited by Dr. Deth Sok Udom. While the first edition explored the historical and contemporary dimensions of Cambodia's foreign relations within regional and global contexts, this updated edition provides deeper and more nuanced analyses of Cambodia's evolving foreign policy amid an increasingly complex international environment.

So much has changed since 2017—both geopolitically and geoeconomically. First came the devastating COVID-19 pandemic, with all its far-reaching consequences—not only health-wise but also politically, economically, and socially. Then came the missed physical ASEM13 Summit, salvaged at the last minute through Zoom technology. This was followed by the war in Ukraine and Cambodia's careful diplomatic positioning, which, in hindsight, safeguarded our ASEAN Chairmanship in 2022. The bright spot that year was the entry into force of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). The year 2023 witnessed a generational leadership transition in Cambodia's political landscape, accompanied by renewed vigor for reform. The election of President Donald Trump in 2024 and his reciprocal tariff measures marked 2025 with both fear and hope. The darkest moment, however, was undoubtedly the deadly five-day border clashes between Cambodia and Thailand.

On the global front, regional tensions and open conflicts continue to simmer in the Middle East, Eurasia, and the Indo-Pacific region. Likewise, international affairs are increasingly shaped by climate change policies and rapid technological advancements driven by artificial intelligence.

I am confident that readers will appreciate the in-depth and fresh perspectives offered in this volume on Cambodia's contemporary foreign policy and its implications for the Kingdom's bilateral and multilateral relations with key regional and global partners. I am certain that this second edition will appeal to academics, researchers, policymakers, diplomats, and students of international relations and Southeast Asian studies alike.

Best regards,

Dr. SOK Siphana

Senior Minister in charge of Special Missions (Multilateral Trade and Economic Affairs) and
Chairman of the Trade Policy Advisory Board

PREFACE

In December 2017, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) Cambodia published the first edition of *Cambodia's Foreign Relations*—a collection of twenty articles exploring the Kingdom's diverse and evolving external engagements. That inaugural edition provided a comprehensive overview of Cambodia's diplomatic relations with its neighbors; its interactions within maritime Southeast Asia; its partnerships with regional and global powers; and its participation in international organizations, economic cooperation, and security affairs.

Now, seven years later, we at KAS Cambodia believe it is high time to revisit and update this important work, which has since become a key reference for students and scholars of international relations, as well as for the diplomatic community. The past decade has witnessed profound changes in the regional and global order. Strategic rivalries have intensified, new economic partnerships have emerged, and pressing transnational challenges—from climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic to digital transformation—have reshaped the landscape of international cooperation.

In Southeast Asia, the geopolitical balance has continued to evolve, marked by growing competition between major powers and renewed debates on ASEAN's centrality and cohesion. The Belt and Road Initiative has expanded its footprint in the region, while new frameworks such as the Indo-Pacific Strategy and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) have altered the dynamics of trade and security. Cambodia itself has taken on new responsibilities within ASEAN, deepened its engagement with development partners, broadened its diplomatic outreach beyond the region to cultivate stronger ties with the Middle East and Latin America, and continued to manage its complex relationships with China, the United States, and its immediate neighbors. Domestically, the country has undergone two significant shifts—the post-pandemic recovery and the top leadership transition—both of which carry important implications for its contemporary bilateral affairs.

This new edition of *Cambodia's Foreign Relations* brings together both eminent and emerging Cambodian and international scholars, analysts, and practitioners who offer fresh perspectives on the country's foreign policy and diplomacy. Their contributions provide not only factual updates but also critical reflections on how Cambodia's external engagements have evolved in response to shifting geopolitical realities, domestic priorities, and regional integration efforts.

It is my sincere hope that this volume will serve as a valuable resource for policymakers, researchers, and students seeking to better understand Cambodia's role in an increasingly complex international environment. Beyond its analytical contributions, this publication also reflects KAS Cambodia's enduring commitment to fostering informed dialogue, academic exchange, and regional cooperation. We firmly believe that constructive dialogue and effective collaboration must be grounded in evidence-based knowledge and mutual understanding.

I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation to our editor, Dr. Deth Sok Udom, for his dedicated and professional work in shaping this volume. My deep gratitude also goes to the contributing authors, whose insights and expertise have greatly enriched its content. Finally, this publication would not have been possible without the unwavering commitment of the KAS Cambodia team—particularly our program manager, Luy Ung Techhong—whose hard work and dedication were instrumental in bringing this project to fruition.

I hope that the second edition of *Cambodia's Foreign Relations in Regional and Global Contexts* will inspire continued dialogue, research, and cooperation on Cambodia's role in the region and its engagement with the wider world.

Daniela BRAUN

Country Director

KAS Cambodia & KAS Philippines

EDITOR'S NOTE

The first edition of *Cambodia's Foreign Relations in Regional and Global Contexts*, published in 2017 by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) Cambodia and edited by DETH Sok Udom, SUN Suon, and Serkan BULUT, provided one of the earliest comprehensive accounts of Cambodia's external relations in both historical and contemporary perspectives. Bringing together Cambodian and international scholars, it examined the evolution of Cambodia's diplomacy, regional integration, and international positioning within the dynamic landscape of the Asia-Pacific.

Since that publication, the world—and Cambodia's place within it—has transformed significantly. The COVID-19 pandemic upended global mobility and disrupted supply chains. The resurgence of great power rivalry, ongoing wars in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, and intensifying contestations in the Indo-Pacific have reshaped the international order. Meanwhile, climate change, digital transformation, and emerging technologies have introduced new dimensions to global governance and security. At home, the peaceful transition to a new generation of leadership under Prime Minister Hun Manet in 2023 has marked an important moment of political continuity and renewal, calling for fresh reflection on Cambodia's foreign policy outlook in a changing world.

Against this backdrop, this second edition of *Cambodia's Foreign Relations in Regional and Global Contexts* builds on the intellectual foundations of the 2017 edition. It revisits Cambodia's foreign relations in light of these profound transformations and offers new analyses of the Kingdom's strategic adaptation to the emerging multipolar order. The rationale for this new edition is twofold. First, building on the foundation of the previous edition, it seeks to provide an updated discussion of Cambodia's bilateral and multilateral engagements, while broadening the analytical scope by incorporating newly salient regions such as the Middle East and Latin America. It also highlights Cambodia's growing use of soft power, economic statecraft, and its commitment to sustainability through climate diplomacy. Second, it aspires to offer timely academic and policy-oriented insights into how Cambodia's long-standing foreign policy principles—neutrality, non-alignment, peaceful coexistence, and independence—are being recalibrated to respond to an increasingly complex and volatile international environment shaped by both domestic transitions and global developments.

To that end, the book is organized as follows. *Chapter 1*, titled "Cambodia's Foreign Policy in a New Era," outlines the enduring principles and adaptive strategies that underpin Cambodia's external engagement, emphasizing both continuity and innovation in the context of a new generational transition of leadership.

Chapters 2 to 18 focus on Cambodia's bilateral and multilateral relations as well as regional engagements, examining its complex and evolving relations with ASEAN member states, regional and global powers, strategic partner countries, and multilateral organizations such as ASEAN and the European Union, as well as emerging partners in other continents. Newly introduced in this edition are standalone chapters on Cambodia's relations with Myanmar,

Germany, the Middle East, and Latin America, which were not included in the previous edition. As such, these chapters devote relatively more attention to historical discussion as a necessary backdrop for their contemporary analyses.

Chapters 19 to 22 assess Cambodia's national strategies in global contexts by exploring its defense and security outlook, economic statecraft, soft power, and climate diplomacy—most of which are new themes in this edition and highly relevant to Cambodia's contemporary foreign policy outlook.

Finally, the *Concluding Remarks* synthesize the key findings across the volume and offer a forward-looking reflection on the challenges and opportunities for Cambodia's diplomacy amid geopolitical uncertainty and in an increasingly multipolar world.

This volume could not have been completed without the steadfast institutional support and collaboration of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) Cambodia, whose continued commitment to advancing scholarly and policy dialogue on Cambodia's international affairs has made this project possible. I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Bradley J. Murg, who served as Editorial Advisor, for his intellectual guidance and encouragement throughout the preparation of this second edition.

As editor, my role has been to support the authors in enhancing the conceptual clarity and analytical rigor of their chapters, to ensure consistency in structure and formatting, and to promote thematic cohesiveness across the volume. Every effort has been made to minimize language errors and errata. Nevertheless, each author has retained full academic autonomy, and the analyses and opinions expressed in their respective chapters are solely their own.

I am deeply grateful to all contributing authors—both eminent and emerging scholars—for their dedication, professionalism, and insightful contributions. Their collective efforts have made this volume a timely and substantive addition to the study of Cambodia's foreign relations at a critical juncture in the country's history. The blend of seasoned and fresh perspectives has enriched the discourse, offering readers both depth and diversity of analysis.

In its current coverage, this book is certainly not without limitations. The scope of the volume could not permit the inclusion of every major country, partner, or sub-region that likewise deserves scholarly attention. Nonetheless, as with the previous edition, this updated collection aspires to serve as a key reference work on Cambodia's foreign relations—one of significant relevance to students, scholars, diplomats, policymakers, and the interested public at large. I wish all readers an engaging and intellectually stimulating journey through this book.

DETH Sok Udom, Ph.D.

Editor

Phnom Penh, 2025

LIST OF BIOGRAPHIES

EDITOR

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Dr. DETH Sok Udom is a Professor of International Relations at Paragon International University and the Chief Operating Officer of Paragon Education Co., Ltd. He graduated with high honors in Sociology from Boğaziçi University (Türkiye), earned a master's degree in Southeast Asian Studies from Ohio University (USA), and holds a Ph.D. in Southeast Asian Studies from Humboldt University of Berlin (Germany). As an academic, he has authored several book chapters and articles on Cambodia's political history and foreign affairs. He was a co-editor of *Cambodia's Foreign Relations in Global and Regional Contexts* (KAS Cambodia, 2017) and *Cambodia 2040* (KAS Cambodia & Future Forum, 2019), and he is currently a co-editor of the *Journal of Greater Mekong Studies (JGMS)*. His latest book is titled *A History of Cambodia–Thailand Diplomatic Relations, 1950–2020* (Galda Verlag, 2020).

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Chapter 1: Cambodia's Foreign Policy in a New Era (Page 1)

Dr. CHHEANG Vannarith is a public policy analyst and social innovator with over 15 years of hands-on experience across the academic, public, and private sectors. He currently serves as Chairman of the Advisory Council of the National Assembly of Cambodia and Chairman of the Angkor Social Innovation Park, a social enterprise dedicated to supporting the innovation capacity of SMEs in Cambodia. Prior to these appointments, he served as President of the Asian Vision Institute, Visiting Fellow at the ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, Lecturer at the University of Leeds, Southeast Asia Consultant at the Nippon Foundation, Executive Director of the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, and Assistant to the Minister of National Defense of Cambodia. His research interests focus on innovation and leadership, as well as the geopolitics and geoeconomics of Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific.

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Martin RATHIE

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Martin RATHIE is an independent researcher currently based in Toowoomba, Australia. Since the early 1990s, he has been studying the history and politics of Mainland Southeast Asia. He first visited Laos in the mid-1990s and then went to work there in 1998. His interest in Cambodia began in his youth, but he did not visit the country until August 1998 when he attended the reopening of Preah Vihear. He began doing research on Khmer Rouge-Pathet Lao relations in 1997 and cooperated with staff from the DC-Cam and ECCC in the 2000s. During 2005-2024 he was based in Vientiane and worked in various parts of Laos. He has served as an advisor with the Kaysone Museum. In addition, he carried out a conservation project with the Lao News Agency. He has published articles and chapters dealing with history of ethnic Lao in Cambodia. He has a working proficiency of Lao, Khmer, Thai and Vietnamese. In 2022 he co-authored the 4th edition of the 'Historical Dictionary of Laos'. In early 2026 he will feature a chapter on Lao-Vietnamese relations in the 'Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Laos'. He is also compiling a detailed study of Lao-Cambodian revolutionary relations for future publication.

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from previous international conferences and was honored by the Cambodian Ministry of Education as one of the nation's top outstanding students. During the Khmer–Thai border skirmish, Dana lobbied ASEAN leaders for peace through writing and personal discussions, becoming the first and youngest Cambodian woman to hold a dialogue with former Prime Minister Tun Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad.

EK Bunly

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Chapter 12: Cambodia–Australia Relations: Toward a New Era of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (*Page 243*)

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Chapter 12: Cambodia–Australia Relations: Toward a New Era of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (*Page 243*)

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Chapter 13: India–Cambodia Relations in the Shadow of Great Power Politics (*Page 261*)

Dr. RO Vannak is an Assistant Professor of International Relations at Paragon International University. He is currently a Research Fellow and Editorial Board of the Journal of Greater Mekong Studies (JGMS) at the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace (CICP). Prior to reentering academia, he was involved with Transparency International Cambodia, where he worked to advance good governance, integrity and institutional accountability. From 2013 to 2024, he provided insightful assessments on Cambodia's political landscape, foreign policy, geo-economics, geopolitics, and grand strategy to various media outlets, researchers, and policy analysts. His analyses of Cambodian and regional issues have appeared in both international and local media such as Nikkei Asia, Voice of America (VOA), Radio France Internationale (RFI). As a researcher, his research focuses on great power competition, Cambodian foreign policy, ASEAN, Geopolitics, Geo-economics, and the grand strategies of the United States and China. He has published book reviews, academic papers, and articles in these areas. Alongside his research and teaching responsibilities, Dr. Vannak has supervised a dozen of Master students and is currently supervising one PhD student, majoring in political science.

Dr. CHUM Chandarin

Chapter 13: India–Cambodia Relations in the Shadow of Great Power Politics (*Page 261*)

Dr. CHUM Chandarin is the President and Professor at the University of Technology and Entrepreneurship (UTE). He holds a Ph.D. in Public Administration Sciences from the University of Public Service, Budapest; a Master's in Education Management from Yogyakarta State University, Indonesia; and a Bachelor's in Education from the Institute of Foreign Languages, Royal University of Phnom Penh. He previously served as a Visiting Scholar and Research Fellow at the Free University of Berlin and the German Institute for International and Security Affairs. Before joining UTE, he was Director of Research and Associate Professor at a private university in Phnom Penh, where he advanced research governance and contributed to international university rankings, including Times Higher Education and AppliedHE. Dr. Chandarin has provided research and training consultancy for organizations, including GIZ, the Heinrich Böll Foundation, German Institute of Development and Sustainability, World Church Relief, the Ministry of Economic and Finance, and the Ministry of Environment, advancing evidence-based policymaking and institutional development. He used to serve as managing editor at the Journal of Cambodian Health and guest editor at the Cambodian Education Forum. Currently, He is the Editor-in-Chief of the Journal of Education, Technology, and Entrepreneurship.

SENG Kim Hour

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Chapter 22: Cambodia's Climate Diplomacy: What Is Needed for Effectiveness?

(Page 417)

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Chapter 1

Cambodia's Foreign Policy in a New Era

Dr. CHHEANG Vannarith

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- I. Introduction
- II. Principles of Cambodia's Foreign Policy
- III. Strategic Direction and Priorities
- IV. Strategic Approach: Hedging
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I. Introduction

This chapter seeks to shed light on the key features of Cambodia's foreign policy and its adaptation to a new era defined by heightened uncertainty, unpredictability, ambiguity, and volatility. The contemporary global landscape is shaped by shifts and reconfigurations in global power dynamics, the emergence of a fragmented multipolar—or “multiplex”—world, intensifying geopolitical rivalries, economic fragmentation, and the disruptive geopolitics of global supply chains. Additionally, the rise of trade and technology wars, coupled with ideological contestation, has further complicated the international environment. In this context, Cambodia's foreign policy is being tested as it navigates these complex and interconnected challenges.

The chapter briefly discusses key angles of Cambodia's foreign policy including key principles, strategic directions and priorities. Furthermore, the chapter delves into specific forms of diplomacy that Cambodia employs, including peace diplomacy, economic diplomacy, parliamentary diplomacy, party diplomacy, and public diplomacy. Finally, it outlines ways forward before drawing conclusions.

It is argued that Cambodia's foreign policy is rooted in the core principles enshrined in its Constitution, particularly those of permanent neutrality, non-alignment, and peaceful coexistence. Cambodia has also demonstrated strategic flexibility in its implementation, allowing it to adapt to the rapidly changing global environment. Hedging strategy is a key approach to enhance Cambodia's agency.

Cambodia has consistently promoted multilateralism and a rules-based international order, while simultaneously building synergies across various forms of diplomacy—state, parliamentary, party, and public. By integrating these diverse diplomatic approaches, Cambodia has sought to enhance its strategic autonomy, economic resilience, and international standing in an increasingly contested international arena.

II. Principles of Cambodia's Foreign Policy

After independence in 1953, Cambodia crafted a small-state foreign policy anchored in neutrality under Prince Norodom Sihanouk. Seeking room for maneuver amid Cold War bipolarity and historic pressures from Thailand and Vietnam, Sihanouk positioned Cambodia as a bridge between East and West, using Bandung-style nonalignment to defend sovereignty. Mounting threats—cross-border violations by South Vietnam and Thailand, U.S. hostility to neutrality, and covert meddling—pushed him toward *realpolitik*: by the mid-1960s, he tilted to China and North Vietnam for guarantees of territorial integrity and aid. That alignment eroded Cambodia's international image of neutrality and drew the kingdom into the Vietnam War, fueling domestic crisis and culminating in the 1970 coup that toppled Sihanouk (Path, 2017).

The Khmer Republic (1970–75) under Lon Nol replaced neutralism with a U.S.-leaning, intensely anti-Vietnamese posture. Militarily weak and economically fragile, Phnom Penh relied on American support while alienating South Vietnam and persecuting Vietnamese minorities—policies that deepened isolation and fed the civil war. The Khmer Rouge victory in 1975 ushered in a hyper-nationalist, China-backed regime that escalated conflict with Vietnam; border clashes and atrocities triggered Vietnam's 1978 intervention and a decade of occupation. The People's Republic of Kampuchea (1979–89) survived within the Soviet orbit, confronting ASEAN, China, and the West until shifting great-power dynamics and Vietnam's withdrawal in 1989 opened a path to settlement leading to the 1991 Paris Peace Agreements. The strategic lesson running through this evolution is clear: external patronage can buy time but risks dependency. Strategic autonomy for a small state rests on internal strength—economic competitiveness, human capital, technological upgrading, sustainable development, and good governance—so Cambodia can balance among major powers while safeguarding its core interests (Path, 2017).

Cambodia's foreign policy is fundamentally anchored in principles enshrined in its 1993 Constitution, notably neutrality, non-alignment, and peaceful coexistence. These principles serve to protect the nation's sovereignty and territorial integrity while promoting international cooperation and integration, open and inclusive multilateralism, and rules-based international order. These principles also reflect Cambodia's strategic intent to navigate complex global and regional dynamics through pragmatism.

Permanent Neutrality

Permanent neutrality means that Cambodia is unaligned with any military blocs or alliances and avoids participation in coalitions or groups that oppose a third country. It is not interested in taking sides in the geopolitical competition. Cambodia supports all regional and international initiatives that contribute to peace and development, do not target a third country, and support ASEAN unity and centrality. Notably, Cambodia is the first Southeast Asian country to register its support to the China-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific. Moreover, Cambodia believes that the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) provides a neutral and inclusive ground for regional cooperation and connectivity.

By intentionally choosing not to take sides in global conflicts or political confrontations, Cambodia aims to preserve its neutrality and prevent external disputes from compromising its sovereignty and independence. However, this neutrality does not imply passivity or silence when faced with serious violations of international law, especially breaches of the UN Charter. Cambodia actively engages in international forums to uphold the principles of justice, peace, and the rule of law, demonstrating that neutrality can coexist with a firm commitment to global norms. Its position on the war in Ukraine is a case in point showing that neutrality does not mean silence when there is a violation of the UN Charter.

Non-Alignment

The Constitution further reaffirms Cambodia's commitment to non-alignment, explicitly stating that the country will not join military alliances or permit the stationing of foreign military bases on its territory. By refraining from entering into military pacts, Cambodia ensures that its foreign policy remains solely guided by its national interests rather than external pressures.

This underlying principle holds particular significance in a region increasingly influenced by great power competition. It allows Cambodia to navigate complex geopolitical landscapes with flexibility, avoiding the pitfalls of becoming a pawn in larger strategic rivalries. Consequently, Cambodia is able to pursue balanced diplomatic relations and position itself as a neutral actor, capable of serving as a bridge of trust and cooperation within the region and beyond.

As one of the founding members of the Bandung Conference and a key proponent of the Non-Aligned Movement in the mid-1960s, Cambodia continues to uphold the spirit of Bandung. This year marks the 70th anniversary of the Bandung Conference, a milestone that highlights Cambodia's ongoing commitment to principles of independence, sovereignty, and peaceful coexistence.

Peaceful Coexistence

Peaceful coexistence refers to the state in which diverse groups, communities, or nations live together harmoniously, without resorting to violence or conflict. It entails a situation where entities, despite their differences, manage to coexist through mechanisms that promote mutual understanding and cooperation. This concept underscores the importance of respecting each other's sovereignty, avoiding aggression, and refraining from interference in internal affairs. It presupposes an obligation to refrain from violations of territorial integrity and sovereignty of other states. Furthermore, it emphasizes the necessity of promoting equality and mutual benefit (Khrushchev, 1959).

Cambodia's foreign policy is also firmly rooted in the principle of peaceful coexistence, encapsulated in the motto "friend to all, enemy to none." This principle highlights mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, underscoring Cambodia's commitment to non-aggression and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states. It reflects a consistent advocacy for resolving disputes through dialogue and negotiation, with a strong emphasis on adherence to international law and agreements, in pursuit of regional stability, mutual understanding, and win-win cooperation.

The border conflict with Thailand—including the five-day clash of 24–28 July 2025—posed a grave test to Cambodia's sovereignty and security. In response to military aggression and economic coercion, Cambodia exercised its legitimate right of self-defense and adopted measured strategic deterrence. These actions do not diminish Cambodia's commitment to peaceful coexistence with its neighbors. Phnom Penh continues to pursue de-escalation and negotiated solutions grounded in existing bilateral agreements and international law.

Independence

Independence means that Cambodia makes its decisions and choices based on its own national interests, rather than external pressures or the desire to favor other countries. In essence, Cambodia is pro-Cambodia. This principle enables the nation to exercise its agency and pursue a foreign policy that reflects its unique historical, geopolitical, and economic circumstances, while maintaining flexibility to adapt to changing global conditions.

By safeguarding its independence, Cambodia reduces reliance on any power or bloc, thereby strengthening its strategic autonomy in an increasingly multipolar world. As Prime Minister Hun Manet (2023) articulated, “Cambodia will continue on its current path of pursuing an independent and neutral foreign policy designed to promote national interests, deepen existing friendships, and foster amicable international relations.” He further emphasized that “Cambodia remains steadfast in opposing the threat or use of force in international relations, interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states, and acts of aggression against independent nations.” Moreover, Cambodia’s Constitution explicitly prohibits the presence of foreign military bases on its soil. As Hun Manet reaffirmed, “Cambodia shall not permit any foreign military base on its territory. It will neither allow any country nor any group to utilize its territory to threaten or target other nations.” (Hun Manet, 2023).

Multilateralism

Multilateralism is a generic institutional form in international relations that coordinates relations among three or more states based on generalized principles of conduct. Multilateralism is not merely a set of specific organizations or agreements but a fundamental way of organizing international relations. It involves the deliberate coordination of policies and interactions among multiple states. Multilateralism is defined by a commitment to certain norms and principles, such as nondiscrimination, that shape the interactions among states. Multilateralism entails a sense of indivisibility among the members of a collectivity, where actions affecting one member are of concern to all. Successful multilateral arrangements generate expectations of diffuse reciprocity, where benefits are expected to balance out in the long run, without requiring specific quid-pro-quo at every turn. Multilateralism is not synonymous with formal international organizations but is a broader concept that can be expressed through various institutional forms (Ruggie, 1992).

Cambodia is committed to an open and inclusive multilateralism. For instance, as the rotating Chair of the 13th Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) in November 2021, Cambodia emphasized “strengthening multilateralism for shared growth.” Leaders from Asia and Europe reaffirmed the importance of this partnership, advocating for dialogue and action-oriented cooperation based on consensus, equal partnership, mutual respect, and mutual benefit to further advance a strong, inclusive, and transparent multilateralism capable of addressing global and regional issues.

During a UN Security Council session on July 16, 2024, a Cambodian diplomat highlighted that “multilateral cooperation is central to Cambodia’s foreign policy because,

in an increasingly interconnected world characterized by multifaceted challenges and opportunities, collective action through international cooperation is indispensable.” He urged all member states to renew their commitment to international collaboration, mutual respect, and solidarity to build a more just, democratic, and sustainable world (Soth, 2024).

Respect for International Law

At the 2021 UN General Assembly, the then Prime Minister Hun Sen emphasized the vital importance of respecting international law, stating, “Countries should not be hindered by unilateral sanctions, embargoes, or other coercive economic measures that contravene international law and violate the principles in the UN Charter” (Hun Sen, 2021). Building on this foundation, Prime Minister Hun Manet highlighted the necessity of restoring global trust and security through strict adherence to international norms: “It is crucial to rebuild strategic security trust among nations and confidence in the rules-based global system—where all states respect international laws and principles enshrined in the UN Charter. Strengthening the UN’s role is vital for re-igniting global solidarity and fostering a safer, more prosperous world for all. Priority must be given to addressing development issues and preventing conflicts from escalating” (Hun Manet, 2023).

Furthermore, Prime Minister Hun Manet underscores the importance of resolving disputes peacefully and in strict adherence to international law. As he stated, “Cambodia urges all states committed to rule-of-law-based foreign policies to promote the peaceful settlement of disputes in accordance with international law. Resorting to legal mechanisms does not constitute war-mongering; rather, it provides a lawful and transparent means to prevent violence and clarify rulings for the public. Ignoring legal processes undermines the rule of law and contravenes the norms of the international legal order” (Hun Manet, 2025). In this spirit, Cambodia has submitted cases concerning four of the most complex disputed areas—Mom Bei, Prasat Ta Moan Thom, Prasat Ta Moan Touch, and Prasat Ta Krabei—to the International Court of Justice in June 2025, reaffirming its firm commitment to peaceful dispute resolution through international legal institutions.

III. Strategic Direction and Priorities

Cambodia’s foreign policy is guided by five key strategic directions and six priorities—reflecting its commitment to autonomy, multilateralism, and economic growth, and navigating the challenges posed by geopolitical rivalries and global power shifts. Together, they form a cohesive framework that allows Cambodia to balance its domestic priorities with its international cooperation.

Five Strategic Directions

According to the official homepage of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, five strategic directions are laid out as follows:

Preservation of National Independence, Sovereignty, Territorial Integrity, and Neutrality

At the heart of Cambodia's foreign policy is the steadfast commitment to preserving its national independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and neutrality. These principles, enshrined in the Constitution, serve as the foundation for Cambodia's approach to both domestic and foreign policy as discussed above. Cambodia advocates for the peaceful resolution of disputes through diplomatic means, emphasizing dialogue, negotiation, and adherence to international law. Furthermore, Cambodia exercises its sovereign rights by pursuing policies that protect its territorial sovereignty and core national interests, while also addressing the needs of its citizens abroad. This includes cooperating with host countries to provide social and legal support to Cambodian migrant workers, thereby safeguarding their rights and interests.

Diplomatic Engagement and International Partnership Building Rooted in National Sovereignty

Cambodia's foreign policy emphasizes diplomatic engagement and the building of international partnerships, all grounded in the principles of national independence and mutual respect. Cambodia seeks to strengthen existing diplomatic ties while cultivating new partnerships, particularly with emerging economies in different parts of the world. This diversification of partnerships allows Cambodia to reduce its reliance on any single power and enhance its strategic autonomy.

Within the ASEAN framework, Cambodia is committed to advancing the development of the ASEAN Community, promoting a people-centered and inclusive approach to regional integration. Cambodia's efforts to uphold ASEAN's unity and centrality are underpinned by the principles of consensus-based decision-making and non-interference in the internal affairs of member states. By leveraging ASEAN as a platform for regional cooperation, Cambodia aims to promote socio-economic development and stability while enhancing its agency.

Advancement of Economic Diplomacy

Economic diplomacy has emerged as an important instrument in Cambodia's foreign policy, aligning with the government's strategic vision of transforming the country into a high-middle-income economy by 2030 and a high-income economy by 2050. Economic diplomacy aims to enhance Cambodia's attractiveness to foreign direct investment (FDI), diversify its investment sources, broaden its export markets, and promote tourism. Additionally, economic diplomacy seeks to elevate the international profile of Cambodian culture, thereby contributing to the country's soft power.

Cambodia's commitment to economic liberalization, trade openness, and international integration is evident in its active participation in multilateral trade regimes, notably the World Trade Organization (WTO), ASEAN and ASEAN Plus frameworks, Regional Comprehensive

Economic Partnership (RCEP), and bilateral free trade agreements with key partners such as China and the Republic of Korea. These efforts are aimed at integrating Cambodia into the regional and global economy, while also reducing its vulnerability to external economic shocks.

Commitment to Multilateralism and Global Governance

Cambodia is a staunch advocate of multilateralism and a rules-based international order, recognizing that global challenges such as climate change, pandemics, and economic inequality require collective action. The country actively participates in international peacekeeping efforts, contributing personnel to United Nations (UN) missions, and emphasizes the importance of adherence to international law and humanitarian diplomacy.

Furthermore, Cambodia supports initiatives that promote regional cooperation and mutual benefits, advocating for synergy among prominent regional frameworks such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Indo-Pacific Strategy, and mechanisms under Mekong sub-regional cooperation. By engaging in these initiatives, Cambodia seeks to address shared challenges and realize sustainable development goals.

Capacity Building and Professionalization of the Diplomatic Service

Enhancing the institutional capacity, efficiency, and professionalism of Cambodia's diplomatic corps is critical. This entails comprehensive internal reforms, including infrastructural development and capacity-building programs, aimed at cultivating a diplomatic workforce characterized by competence, patriotism, and proactive engagement. Investment in human resource development, particularly through the National Institute of Diplomacy and International Relations (NIDIR), is viewed as essential for cultivating a highly capable diplomatic service capable of effectively representing Cambodia's interests.

Six Priority Areas

To reinforce these strategic directions, Prime Minister Hun Manet has outlined six key priorities for Cambodia's foreign policy:

- **Deepening bilateral ties:** Expanding cordial relations with all nations by fostering mutual trust and understanding, and building win-win partnerships across political-security, economic, and socio-cultural pillars.
- **Advancing multilateralism:** Actively engaging in global governance, supporting UN peacekeeping operations, and reinforcing Cambodia's contributions to peace, stability, and sustainable development worldwide.
- **Enhancing ASEAN's centrality:** Consolidating ASEAN unity and its central role in maintaining regional stability, supporting peaceful conflict resolution, and contributing to the realization of the ASEAN Community Vision 2045.
- **Promoting economic and cultural diplomacy:** Broadening Cambodia's perspective in the global marketplace, increasing trade relations, attracting foreign investment,

promoting tourism, and leveraging the country's cultural heritage to bolster economic growth and national image.

- **Strengthening public diplomacy:** Combating misinformation and promoting Cambodia's positive image and national interests on the world stage.
- **Enhancing diplomatic strength:** Implementing institutional reforms to improve the operational efficiency and professionalism of Cambodia's foreign service. (Khmer Times, 2025b).

IV. Strategic Approach: Hedging

Hedging involves three key strategies aimed at reducing risk: (a) maintaining a neutral, balanced position by signaling neither support nor opposition, thus avoiding the risks of being trapped or abandoned; (b) diversifying economic and strategic connections to prevent over-reliance on a single partner, reducing the threat of economic dependence and political pressure; and (c) employing a flexible mix of actions that counterbalance each other, such as simultaneously engaging and isolating, or showing selective respect and resistance, to mitigate various risks. Together, these approaches provide fallback options if circumstances deteriorate undesirably (Kuik, 2025).

Cambodia has employed hedging and diversification strategies to reinforce its strategic autonomy and independence in an evolving geopolitical landscape. These strategic approaches enable Cambodia to navigate complex international dynamics while maintaining agency in its foreign policy. The country aims to minimize risks through hedging efforts while simultaneously expanding international cooperation based on principles of independence, non-interference, mutual respect, mutual understanding, mutual trust, and mutual interest, as well as the respect of national sovereignty (Chheang, 2022a).

Cambodia has invested in strategic diversification while strengthening open, inclusive multilateralism and a rules-based international order. Despite possessing limited material resources and having experienced foreign interventions historically, Cambodia maintains the capacity and flexibility for strategic maneuvering. Pragmatism together with omnidirectional engagement and international integration provide Cambodia with strategic space to adapt and reform its foreign policy in response to shifting, fast-changing geopolitical trends (Chheang, 2022a). Such flexibility ensures its continued sovereignty and strategic autonomy, positioning Cambodia to survive—and even thrive—in the rapidly changing international environment.

Cambodia has cultivated comprehensive strategic partnerships with key countries, including China and Japan, which bolster its geopolitical and economic standing. Additionally, it has established strategic partnerships with Thailand and the Republic of Korea. The country is also exploring strategic partnerships with Australia, France, India, and other key nations to diversify its international relations and enhance its geopolitical resilience. Cambodia also leverages regional mechanisms—particularly through strengthening ASEAN's regional framework—to maintain independence and strategic autonomy. Cambodia regards ASEAN as a protective shield and a key platform to advance its national interests (Chheang, 2021a).

V. SWOT Analysis

The editorial from Khmer Times offers an interesting SWOT analysis of Cambodia's foreign policy, as detailed below:

Strengths

A primary strength of Cambodia's foreign policy lies in its national cohesion. The synergy among pivotal institutions responsible for foreign policy formulation—namely the state, the ruling party, and the parliament—ensures a unified and coordinated approach in international relations. This became more evident in the latest conflict with Thailand. Such unity enables Cambodia to present itself as stable and dependable in diplomatic engagements.

Strategic foresight and leadership, prominently under the direction of Hun Sen, play a critical role in crafting Cambodia's foreign policy. Hun Sen is recognized as the principal architect of this policy. His extensive experience and profound understanding of both regional and global contexts lend consistency and pragmatism to policymaking. His leadership has been pivotal in maintaining a foreign policy that is both adaptable and balanced, effectively safeguarding national interests.

Weaknesses

Despite these strengths, Cambodia encounters notable weaknesses within its foreign policy framework. A significant deficit is evident in intelligence collection and analysis capabilities, constraining the nation's ability to develop strategic foresight, make informed decisions, and effectively and safely ride geopolitical and geo-economic waves. Robust intelligence and scenario analysis systems are essential for strategic foresight, which Cambodia must fortify to enhance its diplomatic proactiveness.

Additionally, the absence of a robust strategic communication strategy is another shortcoming. Effective foreign policy demands clear, coherent, and persuasive communication to articulate national positions and combat misinformation. A lack of a coordinated, effective, and efficient communication strategy risks international misunderstanding and misrepresentation.

Threats

Cambodia's sovereignty and political stability are subject to external threats. Foreign interference and the potential for color revolutions pose ongoing risks, as external entities might attempt to influence internal matters under various guises. Such interference could jeopardize national unity and disrupt Cambodia's trajectory towards peace and development.

Furthermore, ongoing sovereignty disputes and issues of territorial integrity with neighboring countries represent complex structural challenges entrenched in historical

and identity politics. Ultranationalist or extremist factions might exploit these historical grievances to incite tensions or conflicts. This situation necessitates vigilant diplomacy and the implementation of confidence-building and preventive measures.

Moreover, accusations by certain countries that the Ream Naval Base serves as a Chinese military outpost—particularly amid rising tensions in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait—risk undermining Cambodia's neutrality and its commitment to peace diplomacy.

Opportunities

In spite of these challenges, Cambodia has considerable opportunities to harness its foreign policy for economic and strategic advancement. Initiatives aimed at regional economic integration and connectivity present opportunities for strategic diversification and resilience. ASEAN-driven open regionalism, particularly the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), strengthens Cambodia's economic stance while mitigating dependence on any single major power.

Expanding networks of strategic and economic collaborations with key global players such as China, Japan, South Korea, and Australia offer further prospects for investment, trade, and technological progress. By fortifying these partnerships, Cambodia can amplify its diplomatic influence and economic security (Khmer Times, 2025a).

Peace Diplomacy

Cambodia's peace diplomacy strongly aligns with a win-win approach that emphasizes collaboration over conflict and shared development rather than division. Concerning border negotiations and demarcation with neighboring countries, Cambodia remains committed to a peaceful resolution grounded in diplomatic and legal processes. Within the ASEAN framework, Cambodia has adopted a proactive stance, actively engaging in efforts to facilitate political settlements and provide humanitarian assistance in Myanmar (Chheang, 2022c).

Fundamentally, Cambodia's peace diplomacy is rooted in the principle that peace must be prioritized above all else. Influenced by its painful history, this ethos informs both its foreign policy and domestic governance. By understanding, embracing, and embodying the values of peace, Cambodia has charted a path that offers valuable lessons for other nations. As Cambodia's foreign policy continues to evolve, its dedication to peace diplomacy remains a central focus. Through dialogue, trust-building, and diplomatic initiatives, Cambodia seeks to ensure its own stability while actively contributing to regional security and prosperity beyond its borders.

A key architect in Cambodia's peace diplomacy is Hun Sen, widely regarded as the architect of peace in the country's modern history. His Win-Win Policy serves as a cornerstone for Cambodia's approach to peace, combining negotiations, peacebuilding, and national reconciliation. At the heart of this policy are trust and confidence-building measures, deeply rooted in Buddhist principles of forgiveness, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence.

The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), also known as the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, exemplifies a successful model of post-conflict transitional justice. By integrating international and Cambodian judicial expertise, the ECCC has established a global standard for justice in post-conflict societies. Its extensive outreach programs—including film screenings, study tours, and school lectures—have engaged hundreds of thousands of Cambodians, ensuring that the lessons of the past are preserved for future generations. The tribunal’s live broadcasts and accessible public galleries exemplify transparency and civic engagement. Without the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, Cambodia would not have been able to confront and document the atrocities of the regime nor bolster the rule of law that underpins its society today.

Moreover, Cambodia has transitioned from a recipient of UN peacekeeping missions to an active contributor to global peace efforts. Since 2006, Cambodia has demonstrated its commitment to peace and security by deploying more than 10,000 peacekeepers to United Nations missions in conflict zones worldwide. Notably, Cambodia has also committed to contributing women peacekeepers, who now account for over 20 percent of its peacekeeping personnel. These contributions underscore Cambodia’s firm dedication to international peacekeeping and multilateral security efforts.

In an era marked by escalating geopolitical tensions, Cambodia’s peace diplomacy offers a relevant lesson: how nations can transform conflicts into opportunities for lasting peace (Chheang, 2024). To deepen this role, Cambodia could invest more resources in peace research and dialogue initiatives. The proposed establishment of the ASEAN Peace Park or Mekong Peace Park in Cambodia could serve as additional avenues to promote and sustain the country’s leadership in peacebuilding and regional stability.

Economic Diplomacy

With the acknowledgement that economics determines politics and economic security is national security, economic Diplomacy is one of the key pillars of Cambodia’s foreign policy. In January 2021, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation formally introduced ‘economic diplomacy’ to actively promote trade, investment, tourism, and the development of Cambodia’s cultural identity. This marks a critical step toward the institutionalization, systematization, and modernization of Cambodia’s foreign economic policy. Notably, it is the first time that economic diplomacy has been placed at the forefront of Cambodia’s international engagement strategy.

The economic diplomacy strategy for 2021–2023 is set to be instrumental in advancing Cambodia’s integration into the global economy. It aims to diversify the country’s economic partnerships, expand export markets, and attract more foreign investors and tourists. Moreover, it seeks to turn the international environment into a catalyst for national development and poverty reduction. The strategy is designed to support Cambodia’s vision of becoming a higher-middle-income country by 2030 and a high-income country by 2050 (Chheang, 2021b).

Parliamentary Diplomacy

Cambodia's parliamentary diplomacy experienced significant advancement during the 7th legislature, particularly under the leadership of Senate President Hun Sen in mid-2024. This form of diplomacy involves various international initiatives by parliamentarians aimed at fostering mutual understanding among nations, enhancing governmental oversight and representation, and reinforcing the democratic legitimacy of inter-governmental organizations.

Parliamentary diplomacy, as compared to executive diplomacy, offers distinct advantages such as more flexibility in engaging a broad array of local and regional actors and the ability to communicate openly, even on sensitive issues. This approach is transforming traditional diplomatic paradigms and bridging gaps in foreign policy decision-making (Chheang, 2023).

Both the National Assembly and the Senate have undertaken active and proactive measures to strengthen parliamentary diplomacy. The President of the National Assembly emphasized Cambodia's strategic positioning: "In a world facing increasingly complex, unpredictable, and rapidly evolving challenges, Cambodia remains firmly committed to an independent, permanently neutral, and non-aligned foreign policy. We will continue to actively contribute to peacebuilding and partnership development based on international law and the nation's core interests" (Khmer Times, 2025c). She added that "parliamentary diplomacy plays a vital role in strengthening Cambodia's global standing by promoting dialogue for peace, addressing global challenges, and deepening people-to-people ties with a people-centred approach" to help safeguard the nation's core interests including peace, security, stability, national identity, and prosperity (Khmer Times, 2025c).

A significant initiative under Hun Sen was the launch of the Universal Peace Charter, adopted at the 11th International Parliament for Tolerance and Peace (IPTP) in November 2024. The Charter seeks to foster peace and tolerance through dialogue and diplomacy, engaging a diverse range of stakeholders, including members of parliament. Its core principles include: (1) unity in diversity, respect for national sovereignty, territorial integrity, good neighborliness, friendship, non-aggression, and non-interference; (2) mutual respect, understanding, trust, and shared interests for peace and prosperity (M4P2); (3) tolerance, love, equality, fairness, and justice; (4) peaceful coexistence and the peaceful settlement of disputes; and (5) a culture of peace and dialogue.

In a special lecture during the event, Hun Sen remarked: "The Peace Charter: For People and the Planet is crucial for the future of Cambodia and its coming generations. It preserves the nation's history and identity and safeguards the hard-earned legacy of peace that Cambodia has achieved. Every stage in our history—political regime changes, leadership transitions, ideological rivalries, internal struggles for power, and genocide—stands as a profound lesson for our nation. These experiences have built our resilience in the face of crises, guiding us in building peace, national reconciliation, tolerance, and unity for development and prosperity. It is this resilience that has laid the foundation for our transition into a modern era—connecting us to a new, prosperous, and lasting civilization" (Hun Sen, 2024).

Party Diplomacy

The ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) has been vigorously engaged in party diplomacy through both bilateral and multilateral frameworks. In the realm of bilateral engagement, the CPP maintains active exchanges with key parties such as the Communist Party of China, the Communist Party of Vietnam, and the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, among others. On the multilateral front, Cambodia is a participant in the International Conference of Asian Political Parties (ICAPP), having joined in 2003, and the Centrist Democrat International (CDI), which it entered in 2016.

The CPP hosted the 6th ICAPP General Assembly in 2010 to foster dialogue and consultation among political parties on regional and international issues. Most recently, in November 2024, the CPP hosted the 12th ICAPP General Assembly, which culminated in the adoption of the "Phnom Penh Peace Declaration." This declaration is designed to bolster cooperation among political parties both regionally and with international partners, advocating for unified efforts to promote peace and reconciliation globally. The assembly stressed the value of exchanging insights and experiences, exploring effective collaboration frameworks at national, regional, and global levels, and advancing peace through dialogue and mutual understanding. It also reinforced the importance of upholding international law, embracing cultural diversity, and sharing the wisdom of diverse cultures to promote reconciliation and cooperation.

Furthermore, in November 2024, the CPP also hosted the Executive Committee Meeting of the Centrist Democrat International (CDI), which resulted in the adoption of the Siem Reap Declaration entitled "Galvanizing Political Synergy in Peacebuilding under the Universal Peace Charter: For People and the Planet." This declaration emphasizes the global commitment of CDI member parties to peacebuilding efforts rooted in the principles of the Universal Peace Charter. It reflects dialogues on fostering peace, international solidarity, and multilateralism, underscoring the significance of restoring trust, upholding inclusive political systems, and adhering to core principles such as sovereignty, non-aggression, and peaceful coexistence.

The leaders of CDI committed to reinforcing trust among nations, supporting inclusive systems, and adhering to the five pillars of the Universal Peace Charter: conflict prevention, peacebuilding, transitional justice, post-conflict reconstruction, and sustainable development. These commitments underscore a shared global agenda aimed at promoting peace, stability, and sustainable growth through collective effort and dialogue.

Public Diplomacy

Cambodia has adopted modern diplomacy by integrating economic diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, public diplomacy, and nation branding into its traditional framework, which has historically emphasized peace, security, sovereignty, and independence. This transformation reflects Cambodia's acknowledgment of the evolving global landscape and underscores the necessity of a comprehensive diplomatic strategy that leverages soft power elements to enhance its international presence.

Equally significant is the evolution of Cambodia's public diplomacy from a legacy of propaganda to a more sophisticated tool for public communication and engagement. This shift introduces a new dimension to diplomatic practice by fostering closer connections between the government and its citizens, promoting transparency, and strengthening mutual understanding with the international community.

During the annual conference of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation in late 2024, public diplomacy was officially incorporated into Cambodia's five core strategic directions for foreign policy. This move exemplifies a deliberate effort to utilize diplomatic communication not only as a means of shaping global perceptions but also as a vital instrument for building trust and credibility.

Rich in its historical and cultural heritage, Cambodia possesses valuable assets that can significantly enhance its global image through cultural cooperation and engagement. The country aspires to become the cultural gateway of the Mekong region, showcasing its unique traditions, arts, and history to the world. Cambodia has already demonstrated success stories of international collaboration in preserving and safeguarding its heritage sites, sharing these achievements with partner countries (Chheang, 2022b).

Furthermore, a key component of Cambodia's modern diplomatic approach involves actively promoting a positive international image and national prestige while countering the spread of fake news and disinformation that could damage the country's reputation. These efforts are vital to ensuring that Cambodia's narrative accurately reflects its genuine progress, values, and contributions to regional stability and sustainable development.

VI. Moving Forward

The road ahead is very rocky and full of risks and danger. Any misstep can lead to national disasters. National unity and resilience remain the foundations of national survival. Foreign policy and international engagements will help the Kingdom to realize its national interests and potential. As a small and open economy, Cambodia has no choice but to integrate and connect. The more connected and integrated Cambodia becomes, the more opportunities it will have.

Learning to Adapt to Survive and Thrive

To navigate the shifting geopolitical landscape, Cambodia must begin with a reality check: Where does it stand? What are its core interests and principles? How can it remain relevant?

The answer lies in adaptability. Change is constant, and Cambodia must foster a mindset that embraces transformation as a norm. This requires continuous learning, self-awareness, and an in-depth understanding of national and global trends.

A forward-looking foreign policy should be anchored in strategic foresight, scenario planning, and a well-defined vision supported by a practical action plan. This entails identifying megatrends, assessing potential risks and opportunities, and positioning Cambodia in a safe and favorable condition.

Adopting a Whole-of-Government Approach

Foreign policy is not the sole domain of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. Its effective implementation requires the active participation of all government agencies, which must understand the country's foreign policy direction and contribute to its effective implementation.

For instance, to effectively implement economic diplomacy, it requires the commitment, participation and contribution of all related agencies such as the Ministry of Commerce and the Council for Development of Cambodia, among others. Clearly, a coordinated and whole-of-government approach is essential to safeguarding national interests in a complex geopolitical landscape. Otherwise, the effectiveness of policy is low.

Enhancing Agency

In international relations (IR), agency refers to the capacity of actors to make choices and exert influence in the international system. It is about the ability of actors, like states, international organizations, or even non-state actors, to affect change and pursue their goals within the global political landscape (Braun et al. 2019).

To increase agency, Cambodia needs to leverage its niche diplomatic resources, expand international networks, and strengthen its strategic foresight and response capabilities. Data-driven decision-making is crucial in shaping effective foreign policy. We need to invest more in intelligence gathering, analysis, and scientific research on critical international issues that matter for Cambodia. More investment is needed to fund research projects critical to Cambodia's national interests.

Moreover, clear, consistent, and credible communication is the cornerstone of effective diplomacy. Strategic communication must be enhanced at all levels—state institutions, parliament, political parties, and think tanks. It is crucial to articulate foreign policy objectives with clarity and coherence to avoid misinterpretations.

By embracing adaptability, adopting a whole-of-government approach, leveraging niche diplomatic strengths, and investing in data-driven decision-making and strategic communication, Cambodia can effectively navigate the complexities of contemporary geopolitics (Chheang, 2025).

VII. Conclusion

Hun Manet's foreign policy represents a continuation of his predecessor Hun Sen's diplomatic legacy, but with greater nuance, strategic clarity, and rigor in communication and implementation. Cambodia's foreign policy remains firmly anchored in the principles enshrined in its Constitution, which emphasize independence, neutrality, peaceful coexistence, and non-interference. Building on these foundations, the Kingdom pursues six key strategic priorities: (1) deepening existing bilateral partnerships while fostering amicable relations with all nations; (2) advancing multilateralism and constructive global engagement; (3) upholding ASEAN's centrality as the cornerstone of regional peace and stability; (4) promoting economic and cultural diplomacy to support national development and soft power projection; (5) strengthening public diplomacy to enhance Cambodia's international image; and (6) reinforcing the institutional capacity, professionalism, and effectiveness of Cambodia's diplomatic service.

At the core of Cambodia's approach is a hedging strategy that emphasizes diversification of strategic and economic partnerships. This approach aims to maintain and reinforce the country's independence and strategic autonomy, while increasing its agency in regional and global affairs. By balancing diversification with sovereignty, Cambodia seeks to adapt flexibly to evolving geopolitical and economic environments.

Lastly, various forms of diplomacy—peace diplomacy, economic diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, parliamentary diplomacy, party diplomacy, and public diplomacy—are viewed as interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Each channel complements the others, collectively contributing to a more robust, multidimensional diplomatic framework. This integrated approach helps strengthen Cambodia's agency in international affairs.

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Chapter 2

Strategic Recalibration, Transition, and New Normal in Cambodia-Vietnam Relations

AUN Chhengpor

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- II. Historical Background
- III. Strategic Recalibration in Bilateral Relations
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I. Introduction

In an extensive speech to the nation on 16 May 2024, Hun Sen, who heads both the Cambodian People's Party and the Cambodian Senate, echoed his country's enduring view on the perceived threat posed by Vietnam. Anytime Hun Sen spoke critically about Vietnam, the speech would come into the spotlight due to his complex relationship with the eastern neighbour (Willemyns, 2018). His escape to Vietnam in 1977, followed by Vietnam's military intervention to oust the Khmer Rouge and occupy Cambodia in the 1980s, paved the way for his rise as a national figure and for the establishment of the Cambodian People's Party's regime and armed forces (Path & Nhem, 2021). In this speech, Hun Sen addressed Vietnam's concerns over the CPP government's Funan Techo Canal infrastructure project:

Some foreigners have started writing already on this concept, and I think they are right to say that once Cambodia has this canal ready, Vietnam's influence over Cambodia's (waterway goods transportation) would be reduced. It's true. When we rely on someone else for the breath, we are indebted to reconcile. [In case] they [ask] for a price, though it is not an irrational amount, we have to pay (Cambodia's Press and Quick Reaction Unit, 2024).

Hun Sen is the central figure in Cambodia's contemporary history for his roles in steering Cambodia through the 1980s civil war, peace process, and flawed democratisation, and, later, tilt toward authoritarianism, but also in managing relations with Hanoi (Chheang, 2024; Sao, 2017; Blake, 2019), Phnom Penh's most strategic and consequential partners.

However, the last 15 years saw discernible changes in bilateral relations with Vietnam: from Cambodia's 2012 and 2016 refusal of demands from a number of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states, including Vietnam, to include clauses related to the South China Sea in a joint statement, to overhaul of the immigration system that sent scores of ethnic Vietnamese and people with Vietnamese heritage in Cambodia into legal limbo (Bower, 2012; Mogato, Martina, & Blanchard, 2016). The Funan Techo Canal, discussed in the Cambodian senior leader's speech above, was not only another case in point, but also significantly symbolized a more confident CPP's endeavor to move on from its Vietnam-reliant past toward a more independent and autonomous state with increased agency in both domestic, regional, and global affairs.

This chapter examines the strategic recalibration and transition as well as a new normal in the bilateral relations between Cambodia and Vietnam that was influenced by domestic political developments in both countries, resulting from divergence in domestic statecraft in both capitals, the rise of China, and geostrategic realignment in the region, as well as the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter begins by reviewing the rocky and troubled historical foundations of the bilateral ties in the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial periods, culminating in the post-Cold War years. This is followed by a description of the notion of Cambodia-Vietnam strategic recalibration and transition, before exploring three explanatory variables that drive the recalibration in this context. The chapter concludes

with a presentation of the new normal, described through the current landscape and a future forecast of important forthcoming trends for Phnom Penh-Hanoi relations.

II. Historical Background

The contemporary Cambodia-Vietnam relations are built on a rocky historical foundation that has evolved in an ambivalent cycle between friendly alliance, frenemy, and outright antagonism (Kry & Chy, 2017). The relations in the pre-colonial period were described as Cambodia's struggle for survival as a nation against existential threats from both Siam (as Thailand was known before 1939, and between 1945 and 1949) and Vietnam, prompting the Khmer rulers to seek protection from external colonial power, France, in the form of protectorate, first, and later, colony (Kry & Chy, 2017; Leng, 2018). While Cambodia's statehood – or even nationhood – managed to survive due to the French intervention in the late 19th century, the European colonial power did not provide a conclusive answer to the Cambodia-Vietnam questions.

To this day, a number of ethnic Khmer Cambodians across generations still regard the Mekong Delta (referred to in Khmer as “Kampuchea Krom”) as a lost territory, including some groups, though regarded as “too weak,” still advocating for the return of the area to Cambodia (Vuving, 2017a, p. 101). The area was finally ceded to Vietnam by the French in 1949, amid the chaotic end of their colonial rule in Indochina (McHale, 2013). It has remained a highly sensitive issue that could easily provoke nationalistic sentiment in modern-day Cambodia. A series of major protests erupted in anger near the Vietnamese embassy in Phnom Penh in 2014 over a Vietnamese diplomat's alleged remarks about the territorial question (Khuon, 2014). At some point, the consensus of perception among both elite and population levels in Cambodia reached the point of viewing Vietnam as the country's “existential threat” (Po & Primiano, 2020, p. 455; Frewer, 2016).

Vietnam's military intervention, which overthrew the Khmer Rouge regime in January 1979, continued to be a polarizing topic in both Cambodian domestic and international discourse (Deth, 2009; Thun, 2021). For the CPP, the Democratic Kampuchea's retreat away from Phnom Penh as a result of Vietnamese army's assaults in January 1979 was a liberation of the country from a regime that was responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity that resulted in at least 1.7 million deaths (Deth, 2009; Thun, 2021; Gruspier & Pollanen, 2017; Mchale, 2013). For the hardline critics of the CPP, the intervention and the subsequent civil and military occupation (which lasted until as late as the 1989 withdrawal) were an invasion, an opinion shared by the US, China, and ASEAN at the time (Deth, 2009; Thun, 2021). The CPP's assertion of its then roles and agencies in the “liberation” serves as the foundation of its domestic legitimacy to project itself as a party that saved the country from the Khmer Rouge genocidal regime and rebuilt it from scratch. In 2019, two public statements on the subject by then-Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong of Singapore caused an uproar response from both Phnom Penh and Hanoi (Soeung & Khan, 2019). In both his condolence message on the passing of former Thai leader Prem Tinsulanonda and his remark to the famed Shangri-La Dialogue, Lee used the outright term of “invasion” to characterise Vietnam's

involvement at the time. That prompted the response from Hun Sen to recall his Cold War rhetoric, accusing Singapore of previously contributing to “the massacre of the Cambodian people” (Prak, 2019).

Following the Cold War, the bilateral relationship, which had been largely managed by the CPP and the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), had stabilized for over two decades. The two countries, along with Laos and Myanmar, joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in the 1990s to form the so-called ASEAN-10. The two countries signed the supplementary treaty in 2005 to supplement the 1985 land border treaty, paving the way for land border demarcation, which has reportedly achieved 84% of its mission (Vietnam News Agency, 2022).

III. Strategic Recalibration in Bilateral Relations

It was visibly evident that the status quo symptomatically shifted in 2012, when a rare public disagreement between the two allies came into the spotlight at the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) in Phnom Penh (Var, 2015). The Cambodian government, which rotationally chaired the regional grouping for the entire year, was accused of blocking statements criticizing Chinese claims in the South China Sea. Vietnam, a direct claimant state asserting overlapping sovereignty with that of China in the strategic waterway, publicly expressed disappointment with this fiasco under the Cambodian leadership of the bloc (Prak & Grudgings, 2012).

In a conversation with political scientist Sorpong Peou, one Cambodian government source described the AMM 2012 incident as follows:

2012 should be celebrated as the second independence for Cambodia (the first being independence from France in 1953). The country made a U-turn by moving away from Vietnam and closer to China. Cambodia has now become the best ally of China in Southeast Asia (Peou, 2020, p. 33).

Hun Sen, however, visited Vietnam in the midst of the internal crisis in Cambodia the following year, amid street protests led by the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), which called for his resignation (Mech, 2013). In an attempt to charm the Vietnamese, he delivered a speech in the Vietnamese language to former Vietnamese experts and advisers who had been deployed to Cambodia between 1979 and 1989, recalling their contributions to Cambodia’s nation-building (Leng, 2015). There has been no public record of his state visit to Vietnam for the following three years in December 2016, despite the notion that Hun Sen remained resolved to “deep personal ties and traditional friendship” with Hanoi as a way for a stabilized neighborhood enabling Cambodian development (Chheang, 2016).

In the 2013 national elections, the CPP experienced its worst electoral performance in two decades, largely due to the rise of the then newly merged opposition CNRP (Norén-Nilsson, 2016). The CNRP successfully rallied anti-Vietnam nationalism to challenge the CPP’s political legitimacy, based on its Vietnam-assisted rise to power and state-making in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s (Wallace & Neou, 2024). In addition to its stance on the

South China Sea dispute, which was not favorable to Vietnam's position, the CPP's response to the rise of anti-Vietnamese nationalism in the context of the 2013 election appeared to further demonstrate its deviance from its Vietnamese counterpart (Mech, 2014). Not only did it refuse to crack down on anti-Vietnam street protests in 2014, but the CPP also somewhat sympathized with the opposition CNRP's campaign to scrutinize the demarcation process in areas bordering Vietnam (Mech, 2014; Strangio, 2015).

The strategic recalibration also became increasingly apparent with Hun Sen's digital adoption of online activity as his new method of political communication. On the last day of July 2016, via a publication on his official Facebook page, Hun Sen surprisingly wrote: "You need to know that I place my loyalty only to my Khmer nation, my revered King of Cambodia, and my beloved wife. Vietnam is not my boss that I must be loyal to" (Sao, 2016). This comment was made in response to a Facebook user named Phạm Đức Hiển, who allegedly said, "Mr. Hun Sen betrayed Vietnam." (Sao, 2016). Hanoi tried to calm down the war of words, with the Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs' then-spokesperson Lê Hải Bình issuing a statement: "Comments made by a group of people, who are presumably Vietnamese, on social media are their personal opinions and do not reflect Vietnam's point of view" (Toan, 2016).

By that time, Hun Sen's two other decisions had put him at odds with Hanoi. Firstly, in response to the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party's electoral gain, attributed in part to its successful rallying of anti-Vietnamese nationalism, Hun Sen's CPP government decided to overhaul the immigration system, leaving some people with Vietnamese heritage living in Cambodia in a legal limbo. Secondly, in mid-2016, Cambodia allegedly repeated its 2012 stance on the South China Sea, seeking to avoid internationalization of the conflict, vetoing a joint statement of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations on the Permanent Court of Arbitration's non-binding ruling against Chinese claims in the disputed waterway. This anecdote marked the early days of a difficult decade of strategic transition and struggle (2016-2025) in the bilateral relations spearheaded by the two ruling parties with shared socialist and anti-colonial origins.

Subsequently, while a fierce power struggle was underway in Hanoi in the context of the CPV National Party Congress in 2016 (Vuving, 2017b; Le & Nguyen, 2024), Hun Sen and the CPP consolidated and cemented their political grip within Cambodia. The political opposition, the Cambodia National Rescue Party, a major force riding on both a pro-democracy and nationalistic agenda against Vietnamese influence, was dissolved a year later in 2017 (Pann, 2017; Holmes, 2017). However, the CNRP's demise had done little to improve Cambodia-Vietnam relations. Alan Parkhouse, the former Editor-in-Chief of Cambodia's newspaper Khmer Times, cited anonymous sources in an article published in Asia Times, claiming that a rift existed between Phnom Penh and Hanoi behind the scenes. Hun Sen, according to Parkhouse, was informed by an unnamed visiting Vietnamese senior official that Hanoi was dissatisfied with his domestic policies, which had moved Cambodia closer to China, and his government's unfavorable treatment of Vietnamese communities in Cambodia (Parkhouse, 2018).

Amid divergence in national interest and foreign policy direction between Hanoi and Phnom Penh, the confrontation also apparently emerged in cyberspace. In November 2020,

the Massachusetts-based cybersecurity company Recorded Future released a report stating that Cambodian government agencies had been targeted by a malware phishing campaign. The attacks reportedly originated from Vietnam's alleged state-sponsored threat group APT32, also known as OceanLotus (Wright, 2020). This group was also allegedly involved in an earlier cyberattack on the Cambodian newspaper Phnom Penh Post (Cochrane, 2018). It was flagged for similar activity by Meta, Facebook's parent company, as well (Gleicher & Dvilyanski, 2020).

Under cooperation with China, Cambodia accepted the Chinese People's Liberation Army's assistance to overhaul the Ream Naval Base, located in Preah Sihanouk Province, by expanding and modernizing its facilities (Phoung, 2023). Such engagement raised alarms among US policymakers about the PLA's possible long-term access and presence at the base – a suspicion repeatedly ruled out by the Cambodian government (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 2025).

But the US may not be the only one concerned by the Chinese role at the Cambodian base. In June 2021, Ream Naval Base's then-chief of staff Mey Dyna, who would later rise to become the base's current top commander, told the author in a media interview setting with blunt and rare criticism on Vietnam's alleged role in lobbying the United States to go after the Chinese-supported overhaul of the base:

Politically speaking, both Vietnam and the U.S. are lobbying each other to ensure that Cambodia gets nothing or that we cannot grow our naval forces. With our naval capabilities currently underdeveloped, we feel vulnerable too ... That's why [Vietnam] keeps inciting the U.S. to go after us because they know that the U.S. and China are rivals (Aun, 2021).

Despite no longer officially heading the executive branch, Hun Sen still largely oversees state affairs, as CPP President and Acting Head of State during King Sihamoni's routine medical stay in China and other trips abroad, thereby having a final say on Cambodia's foreign policy in general and its Vietnam policy in particular. His former assistant and trusted aide, Prak Sokhonn, followed Hun Sen to the Senate as the upper house's First Vice President before returning to the previous role as foreign minister and Deputy PM, taking over from his successor, Sok Chenda Sophea, in November 2024 (Khuon & Seoung, 2024).

The push to launch the Funan Techo Canal project and the exit from Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Development Triangle Area agreement took place amid the peak of Hun Sen's political power and control over his ruling CPP (Hutt, 2024) and Vietnam's political turmoil with an avalanche of downfalls of two figures in the top four pillars, then-State President Võ Văn Thưởng and then-National Assembly Chairman Vương Đình Huệ (Vuving, 2025), obviously weakening Hanoi's leadership role in its neighborhood.

The narratives of the Funan Techo Canal and the CLV-DTA appear to be contradictory. While the Funan Techo Canal project aims to assert Cambodia's greater sovereignty and autonomy from its eastern neighbor, its continued association with CLV-DTA seems to contradict that notion. This could be an explanation for the Cambodian government's

decision to exit the trilateral cooperation framework in late 2024, following visibly high public disapproval of the cooperation.

The timing also coincided with Nguyễn Phú Trọng's twilight before his death in July 2024. As a paramount leader, with unmatched power and influence since the introduction of *Đổi Mới*, Trọng's declining health and eventual death created a power vacuum, leaving room for the CPV's intra-party power struggle.

While Vietnam has consistently requested Cambodia's protection of communities with Vietnamese heritage in Cambodia, there has been an emergence of newfound courage from the CPP in publicly asking for Vietnam's preservation and respect for the ethnic Khmer communities residing in the Mekong Delta region. In his meeting with the visiting Vietnam National Assembly Chairman Trần Thanh Mẫn in November 2024, Hun Sen asked the Communist state's top legislator to "pay attention to preserving the traditions and religious beliefs of the people of Cambodian heritage who live in Vietnam" (Torn, 2024). A few days after making such a request to Trần Thanh Mẫn, Hun Sen received a delegation of Khmer Krom monks at his fortified residence in Ta Khmau, Kandal Province, alongside his wife Bun Rany, who led a *Kathina* procession earlier that month to Khmer Buddhist temples in Trà Vinh Province of Vietnam's Mekong Delta.

In a personal communication with political historian Steve Heder, former U.S. Central Intelligence Agency officer Merle Pribbenow, who was specialized in Vietnam affairs, said bluntly that Vietnam did have some influence on the Cambodian government and its military and security apparatus, but did not exercise meaningful control over Hun Sen, the CPP, or the Cambodian armed forces (Heder, 2018).

IV. Strategic Recalibration and Transition: The Three Explanatory Factors

1. The Domestic Political Dynamics in Hanoi and Phnom Penh

There had been emerging divergence in statecraft in Vietnam under Trọng and Cambodia under Hun Sen within the period 2016–2023. Rooted in Marxist–Leninist ideology as a political theorist, Trọng's priority was to clean up the party, reinforcing rules and discipline among the CPV ranks and files amid the threat of corruption that endangered the party's survival. Deeply rooted in pragmatism and described by some as even non-ideological, Hun Sen and the CPP employed a patronage–client approach in managing Cambodia's political economy ecosystem (Slocomb, 2006; Petersson, 2017). Trọng, in the meantime, projected himself as a modest Communist cadre with a moderate lifestyle, including, for example, living in a state-arranged housing estate (Nguyen & Guarascio, 2024). Between 2012 and 2022, Trọng's *đốt lò* anti-graft campaign saw the penalization of a total of 2,740 CPV organs and about 167,000 CPV members due to corruption (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2025).

The only similarity between the two statesmen is that both had a strong grip on their respective parties and countries, asserting strongman approaches to leadership (Mehta & Mehta, 2013; Huynh, 2024). However, a divergence was clear when Trọng consulted the CPP potentate Tea Banh in their 2015 meeting that, to recover from the shock of the Cambodian general election 2013, the CPP “would have to exercise more disciplined leadership,” inferred as Hanoi’s advice for its Cambodian comrades to reconsider their deviation from approaches. (Heder, 2018).

The dynamics within the CPP also changed, partially re-shaping its Vietnam policy in the process. Hun Sen’s power is unrivalled within the party and outside, openly calling the shots on a comprehensive list of state and party business, including overseeing Cambodia’s relations with Vietnam and CPP’s relations with CPV (Tilly, 2021; Huynh & Mai, 2024). After Hun Manet took over as prime minister in 2023 while a new, younger generation of CPP scions also followed him to succeed their parents as cabinet members, there is a notion that this transition could have effects on bilateral relations with Vietnam as well (“Cambodia’s Political Succession and the Next Government’s External Policies,” 2023; Boon & To, 2024).

Consistent with its broader endeavor to enhance the legitimacy of the new generation of leadership, the CPP appears to be challenging Vietnam’s traditional sphere of influence in the sub-region (Rim & Zeiner-Morrish, 2025). Actions such as overhauling the immigration system, as well as the eviction of fishing communities in Phnom Penh (many of whom were ethnic Vietnamese), were enabled by the CPP government’s increased state capacity, as well as through higher state revenue collected over the past decades (Luo & Un, 2022).

Phnom Penh also views Hanoi as a competitor on the economic front. Vietnam’s rise as a middle power, along with its geo-economic position, has made it an economic powerhouse, attracting foreign direct investment and emerging technologies, compelling Cambodia to catch up and avoid being overshadowed by Vietnam’s economic potential next door.

Now in his 70s, one of Hun Sen’s priorities appears to be cementing his legacy and shaping the official narratives about his decades-long leadership at the helm of Cambodia. While Vietnam provided assistance to his rise, an appearance – or even better, with substance – of complete autonomy and equal footing with Vietnam could be his desired legacy.

2. The China Factor and Geostategic Realignment

In 2016, Foreign Policy Magazine published an essay by writer Tanner Greer, explaining Cambodia’s tilt toward China through the lens of neighborhood bullies threatening Cambodia for centuries. China’s entry into this picture has provided answers to the CPP’s quest for international political support, a boon for Cambodia’s economic development, and security against its two stronger neighbors – a déjà vu of Cambodia’s past request for French intervention in the 19th century (Greer, 2017).

Given the fact of Sino-Vietnamese historical animosity, the growing Chinese influence in Cambodia has been perceived as a threat to Vietnam’s security, creating apparent divergent paths between Hanoi and Phnom Penh regarding China’s strategic intentions and objectives in Cambodia (Aun, 2020). However, from a Cambodian perspective, at both public

and elite levels, Chinese intervention has been crucial to Cambodian economic development, independence, and political sovereignty (Romdoul, 2021).

Vietnam's national defense white paper in 2019 cherished ties with Cambodia, but warned against attempts to draw a wedge between the two neighbors:

Viet Nam and Cambodia continue to negotiate for the resolution of issues with regard to land and maritime boundaries in the spirit of friendship, cooperation, and strict compliance with commitments and in conformity with international law and practices. Viet Nam opposes acts of interference and division of the bilateral relationship (Vietnam Ministry of National Defence, 2019, p. 31).

Even though the writing did not provide details about the nature of the interference and from whom, analysts were quick to point out that there was a possibility that Hanoi was warning against Beijing's involvement in Cambodia at the expense of Vietnam's influence (Aun, 2019).

As Cambodia's international relations scholar Vannarith Chheang noted in 2016:

Cambodia-Vietnam relations have been shaken in recent years by the rising power and influence of China in the region. Cambodia has pivoted to China for economic and security interests, putting Vietnam in a difficult position with Cambodia over the South China Sea issue. However, Vietnam remains optimistic that its relations with Cambodia will remain strong and firm regardless of geopolitical changes. One of Vietnam's core national interests is to ensure strong traditional ties with its two small immediate neighbors. The challenges posed by power rivalry between China and the US in Southeast Asia have forced small countries to stick together and hedge against major powers for their long-term survival (Chheang, 2016).

In the military domain, Chinese assistance and provision of Cambodia's access to its defense hardware gave a boost to Cambodia's military modernization, enhancing the country's defense capabilities, which have been translated into strength and greater autonomy in dealing with neighboring countries. It was evident in the country's response to the border conflict with Thailand in 2025 that Chinese military hardware played a crucial role in the Kingdom's defense posture (Wee, 2025). Chinese assistance to overhaul the Ream Naval Base can be explained as China's capacity and willingness to respond to the CPP government's needs, specifically upgrading its naval capabilities to mitigate its maritime defense disadvantage in the Gulf of Thailand (Yaacob, 2024).

On the economic aspect, China has played a gigantic role as Cambodia's main source of investment, foreign tourists, and infrastructure delivery, all of which have been instrumental to the CPP government's performance-based legitimacy (Harsono, 2025; Lim, 2024). Vietnam's economic might to maintain its influence in its neighborhood is also limited in comparison to China's larger economic resources, which seek to advance its interests in the region, especially in Cambodia and Laos (To, 2025).

However, as Murg (2023) pointed out in his study on the discourse of Cambodia's foreign policy toward China and Vietnam during the period of 2020–2021, Phnom Penh placed high importance on maintaining good relations between both Beijing and Hanoi. The primary objective of balancing between the two Asian Communist states was to serve Phnom Penh's best interests and to extract the greatest possible economic and political benefits essential to both national development and the CPP's regime security (Murg, 2023). This, however, was an uneasy balancing act given Beijing and Hanoi's own historical grievances and divergent geopolitical interests (Murg, 2023).

3. The Pandemic Factor

During the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, challenges emerged between Cambodia and Vietnam, resulting in disruptions in the mobility of trade and people. Hun Sen was visibly infuriated at Vietnam's unilateral decision to close the land border with Cambodia in March 2020 (Radio Nationale Khmère, 2020). Later that year, Cambodia issued a strong protest against Vietnam's actions to install tens of military tents along the un-demarcated area between the two countries under the pretext of patrolling against the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 (Cambodianess, 2020). After largely containing the outbreak of the virus in late 2021, Hun Sen launched an attack against Hoàng Xuân Chiến, the Vietnamese general who was later promoted to Deputy Defense Minister of Vietnam, for an alleged remark that Hun Sen found to be an insult to Cambodia. Hoàng Xuân Chiến was later revealed to be part of the inner circle of the rising CPV General Secretary Tô Lâm, as both men were from Hưng Yên Province (Thayer, 2025). Such incidents and clashes of words further reinforced the negative trend in high-level political relations between Hanoi and Phnom Penh, as well as people-to-people relations, which had already been challenged and disconnected by the border closure.

The fight against the spread of COVID-19 also had political implications in Vietnam, leading to purges of high-ranking officials under the CPV's *đốt lò* (burning furnace) anti-corruption machinery. The so-called *Việt Á* scandal, involving a private company bribing government officials to procure COVID-19 test kits at inflated rates, led to the dismissal and imprisonment of then-Minister of Health Nguyễn Thanh Long and then-Minister of Science and Technology Chu Ngọc Anh (Đỗ, 2024). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs was also implicated in a corruption scandal involving cases of bribery in the repatriation of Vietnamese nationals from abroad during the COVID-19 pandemic (Agence France-Presse, 2023). The two scandals led to the downfalls of Vietnam's State President Nguyễn Xuân Phúc and two Deputy Prime Ministers: Phạm Bình Minh and Vũ Đức Đam (Vu, 2023). Nguyễn Xuân Phúc's exit from the corridor of power in Hanoi was also a loss of a close interlocutor for Hun Sen. The two were so close dating back to Phúc's years as Vietnam's Prime Minister (2016–2021) that the Cambodian senior leader even hosted Phúc for a family breakfast at his fortified private residence in Ta Khmao during Phúc's state visit to Cambodia (Matoszko, 2021). Vietnam's then anti-graft czar and future leader Tô Lâm, who was then Minister of Public Security, was also seen at the breakfast session (Matoszko, 2021).

Another angle that is worth more exploration is that economic hardship created by the

COVID-19 pandemic has led many Vietnamese to be prone to being trafficked into multiple cyberscam compounds in some parts of Cambodia. Cyberscams have become another point of contention between Cambodia and Vietnam. An extraordinary action took place when the state-employed cyber specialist Ngô Minh Hiếu conducted a white-hat cyber offensive infiltration against alleged scam compounds holding Vietnamese nationals in Cambodia (Mech et al., 2022). When the new South Korean administration publicly confronted the Cambodian government to substantially combat cyberscam operations and facilities exploiting South Korean citizens (Kim, 2025), Hanoi's state media quoted the country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesperson Phạm Thu Hằng, who urged Phnom Penh to ensure security and safety for Vietnamese citizens allegedly lured into this illicit industry (VNS, 2025). Phạm Thu Hằng added that "amid the complex developments of fraudulent criminal activities and forced labor in Cambodia, countries including Việt Nam have engaged in vigorous action to protect and safeguard the rights and interests of their citizens" (VNS, 2025).

V. Transition and New Normal: Between Tô Lâm's CPV And Hun Sen's CPP

Tô Lâm is, as of the time of writing, the emerging strongman of Vietnam, consolidating power and allies to fill the power vacuum left by the death of the late CPV General Secretary Nguyễn Phú Trọng ahead of the upcoming 14th CPV National Party Congress in 2026. His signature Era of National Rise (kỷ nguyên vươn mình của dân tộc) doctrine and major CPV Politburo resolutions under his tenure as the new CPV General Secretary on a number of strategic issues, including "science, technology, innovation, and digital transformation." These, along with his other daring reforms to merge provinces and combine ministries, raise Tô Lâm's profile ahead of the party congress, where his term is expected to be renewed.

Hun Sen, in the meantime, remains the most powerful figure in Cambodian politics, despite handing over the premiership to his son, Gen. Hun Manet. His persistent dominance in the country's domestic and foreign policies was evident in his recent roles in the Cambodia's ongoing border conflict with Thailand, renewed after an armed exchange on May 28, 2025 that killed an RCAF trooper in the triangle intersection between Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos leading to a deadly exchange of artilleries between July 24, 2025, and July 28, 2025 (Ghoshal et al., 2025). From the senatorial chamber, Hun Sen gave political speeches and an ultimatum to the Thai government to normalize the border crossing. His release of the full conversation with Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra of Thailand, following the alleged leak of an excerpt of the dialogue, led to the Thai premier's dismissal as well as the collapse of her Pheu Thai Party-led cabinet (Baker, 2025).

Amid the Thailand tension, signs of a new normal with Vietnam surfaced. Cambodian Defense Minister Tea Seiha, himself an offspring of CPP factional potentate Tea Banh, praised the process of border negotiations with Vietnam and Laos in comparison to the challenging work with Thailand (Torn, 2025). Hun Sen had a cordial virtual summit on August 15, 2025,

with Tô Lâm, before making a rare personal appearance at Vietnam's 80th National Day reception in Phnom Penh a week later (Kim, 2025; Voice of Vietnam, 2025). He also attended the anniversary's grand celebration later in Hanoi back in early September 2025.

In his earlier meeting with Vietnam People's Army Chief of General Staff Gen. Nguyễn Tân Cương in early June 2025, Hun Sen was reportedly informed by the Vietnamese interlocutors that his pre-pandemic request to Hanoi to establish the Cambodia-Vietnam Friendship Monument within Vietnamese territory had been approved by the Vietnamese side (Fresh News, 2025). To establish such a monument inside Vietnam, according to Hun Sen, is to reflect the gesture of mutual gratitude between the two nations, which means "Cambodia did help Vietnam and Vietnam did also help Cambodia" (Fresh News, 2025).

At a trilateral summit in February 2025, the leadership of the three parties – CPP, LPRP, and CPV – displayed a shift in power balance. During Trọng's time as CPV General Secretary, three-way meetings were often held in Hanoi. By breaking with tradition, Tô Lâm, who was described as a "pragmatist who prioritises efficiency over ideology, preferring business deals to historical reminiscence," set up the summit in Hồ Chí Minh City (Nguyen, 2025). That may bode well for the CPP princeling generation of leadership, spearheaded by Hun Manet, whose education and professional careers before his rise to premiership do not overlap with Vietnam as intimately as those of his father.

Issues of nationalist sentiment toward Vietnam, as well as the public perception of the gratitude issue, are likely to persist as a challenge to developing bilateral ties. The two nations can be expected to be at odds with each other on environmental issues, especially regarding future water usage and sharing within the Mekong River basin. In addition to the Funan Techo Canal, Cambodia's recently-revealed plan for infrastructure to divert more water from the Mekong River to the Great Lake of Tonle Sap (Agence Kampuchea Press, 2025) is expected to clash with Vietnam's water and food security interests in the Mekong Delta, which has been forecasted to be at great risk of rising sea levels as well as saline invasion.

However, persistent border conflict with Thailand can be expected to be an incentivizing factor for Cambodia to establish a new normal for stable and friendly relations with Vietnam, thereby avoiding an undesired scenario of facing two-front tensions with both Thailand and Vietnam, which could push Cambodia's state and military capacities to the limit.

VI. Conclusion

Over the past decade, Cambodia-Vietnam relations have been shaped by historical legacies, shifting domestic political priorities, and evolving regional strategies. While both the CPP and CPV share an anti-colonial background that could foster cooperation, differences in leadership, governance, rising nationalism, and Cambodia's closer ties with China have led to recurring tensions between Phnom Penh and Hanoi.

Crucial issues such as Mekong River water management, border security, immigration, and economic links continue to define the bilateral agenda. Persistent tensions with Thailand

make it likely that Phnom Penh will seek a more stable relationship with Hanoi. This approach would likely help Cambodia avoid an undesired scenario of facing two-front pressure concurrently from both Vietnam and Thailand, thereby helping to safeguard Cambodia's state and national defense capacity from reaching its limits.

In the foreseeable future, Cambodia-Vietnam relations will face both opportunities and challenges amid shifts in global and regional orders. Leadership transitions in both Phnom Penh and Hanoi, the geoeconomics of critical infrastructure development, and the Sino-American great power competition will add more pressure on both countries to carefully balance their respective interests. The stability of bilateral ties rests on a balance between Cambodia's pursuit of strategic autonomy and Vietnam's safeguarding of its regional interests. A sustainable partnership relies on both nations reconciling domestic priorities with shared regional interests, turning potential points of dispute into mutually beneficial cooperation.

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Chapter 3

Lao-Cambodian Relations: From Fraternal Friendship to Strategic Partnership

Martin RATHIE

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I. Introduction

Since the late 1940s, bilateral relations between Laos and Cambodia have been shaped by a persistent challenge: the demarcation of their shared frontier. While the sensitivities surrounding this issue are numerous, they are comparatively modest when viewed against other regional disputes. As the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR) marks its 50th anniversary in 2025, there is cautious optimism that this long-standing border issue will finally be resolved. Yet, as one historical challenge nears closure, new pressures—such as trade barriers, sophisticated transnational crime networks, and underdeveloped or poorly executed infrastructure and agro-industry projects—threaten to unsettle the social and economic equilibrium of these Mekong neighbors.

Building on Jeldres's (2017) earlier contributions, this chapter analyzes the evolution of Lao–Cambodian relations across multiple dimensions: border and security cooperation, economic and development engagement, socio-cultural interaction, strategic convergence, and the key challenges and opportunities that will shape the trajectory of bilateral ties in the coming years. By examining both historical legacies and contemporary developments, the chapter provides a comprehensive assessment of how these two Mekong states are negotiating continuity, cooperation, and competition in an increasingly complex regional environment.

II. Historical Context of Border

The delineation of the Lao–Cambodian frontier during the French colonial period was both a fluid and erratic process, with surveys beginning in the late 19th century and boundaries shifting for administrative convenience until 1929. While natural features like the Xe Lamphao (Tonle Repou) River provided partial markers, the border remained a largely abstract construct with unresolved ambiguities. After World War II, aspirations for a “Greater Laos” and the brief Thai occupation of parts of northeastern Cambodia reignited territorial claims, and discussions at the Dalat meetings of 1946 and 1950 highlighted unresolved border issues that strained relations between the two emerging states (UK Foreign Office, 1959–1979).

During the First Indochina War, revolutionary forces—including the Pathet Lao and the People's Army of Vietnam—advanced into northeastern Cambodia, seizing several districts before being restrained by the 1954 Geneva Agreements. Formal diplomatic relations between the Royal Lao Government and the Royal Government of Cambodia were established in 1956, followed by a series of accords on trade, transit, and scientific and cultural cooperation. Yet bilateral relations remained a mixture of pragmatic cooperation and underlying tension, particularly as Cambodian nationalism and border disputes with neighboring Thailand and Vietnam complicated the treatment of ethnic Lao communities within Cambodia (Jeldres, 2017).

During the 1960s, the Lao–Cambodian frontier became strategically important in the Second Indochina War. Vietnamese revolutionary forces, in alliance with the Pathet Lao, used border regions as logistical bases, provoking friction with the Khmer Rouge and Cambodia’s neutralist policies under Sihanouk. Incidents included the arrest of Cambodian troops crossing into Lao territory and disputes over settlements such as Ta Ngao, reflecting how security and territorial concerns interwove with broader ideological conflicts (UK Foreign Office, 1959–1979; Rathie, 2019, 2024).

In the 1970s, relations were further shaped by ideological alignment and opportunism. As the Khmer Rouge advanced in 1975, the Royal Lao Government, guided by King Savang Vatthana’s insistence on neutrality, delayed recognition of the GRUNK until Cambodia’s capital was secured (Jeldres, 2017). During Democratic Kampuchea, bilateral relations operated through both official state channels and confidential party-to-party exchanges, with the latter often dictating diplomatic, political, and military decisions. Following the establishment of the People’s Republic of Kampuchea in 1979, Laos was quick to extend recognition and frequently acted as a diplomatic intermediary amid Vietnamese military influence in the region.

Subsequent decades saw cautious engagement, including Laos’ participation in the Paris Agreements (1991), the creation of the Joint Boundary Commission (1995), and incremental cooperation in trade, consular services, and infrastructure. Nonetheless, persistent challenges—ranging from Mekong River projects to border infrastructure and balancing relations with major powers such as China and Vietnam—ensured that the Lao–Cambodian frontier remained a sensitive and strategically significant space (Jeldres, 2017).

III. Recent Border Disputes Amidst Bilateral Engagement

In early 2017, tensions along the Lao–Cambodian frontier intensified after years of simmering unease linked to illegal logging, poaching and smuggling. The construction of a Lao People’s Army (LPA) outpost near the junction of the Xekong and Xe Pian Rivers had already strained relations, but matters escalated in February when Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF) engineers began building a road along the Xekong River towards the disputed Huay Ta Ngao area. Approximately 400 LPA soldiers entered Siempang district on 8 February to protest perceived Cambodian encroachment into the “white zone.” In April, forty Lao soldiers attempted to halt construction of a Cambodian border post in contested territory, prompting Champasak authorities to close the international crossing in protest. Both governments agreed to defer the issue until after the Buddhist New Year, yet Lao troops soon began erecting a parallel border post in the same area (Sek, 2017).

Diplomatic exchanges followed a pattern of de-escalation. On 1 September 2017, Lao Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith met Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen in Phnom Penh, agreeing that their foreign ministers would resume discussions, reactivate the Joint Boundary Commission (JBC), and seek technical assistance from France in the form of

colonial maps to clarify the boundary (KPL, 2017). French President Emmanuel Macron later affirmed France's willingness to provide archival materials. As of 2025, the border remains largely stable, with a few segments in Stung Treng and Attapeu awaiting final demarcation.

On 16 May 2018, Lao Foreign Minister Saleumxay Kommasith and his Cambodian counterpart Prak Sokhonn met in Vientiane to reestablish coordination on border issues. They agreed to create a joint departmental mechanism to sustain peace and promote cooperation. Cambodian officials confirmed that 121 of 145 border posts had been demarcated, though the Lao side had yet to formally respond to colonial-era maps provided by France.

Amidst the ongoing border tensions, the Xe Pian–Xe Nam Noy Hydropower Project on the Bolaven Plateau suffered a catastrophic saddle-dam collapse in July 2018, inundating southern Laos and downstream Cambodian districts. In Laos, twelve villages were flooded, displacing over 6,500 people with at least forty dead and 130 missing. In Cambodia, seventeen villages across four districts were flooded, forcing the evacuation of over 25,000 residents. Lao Ambassador Prasith Sayasith expressed sorrow and gratitude for Cambodian humanitarian aid, while Hun Sen commended bilateral cooperation and encouraged efforts to promote trade and recovery.

Renewed border diplomacy followed. At the 27th World Economic Forum on ASEAN in Hanoi on 13 September 2018, Hun Sen and Thongloun Sisoulith agreed upon a joint resolution structured around three principles: no military presence in the disputed area, no civilian settlement or business, and joint inspection patrols including drones (Vientiane Times, 2018). Hun Sen ordered RCAF withdrawal from Huay Ta Ngao and Huay Alay, while Thongloun emphasized the creation of a “friendship zone.” The JBC was instructed to conduct on-site assessments and report violations directly to provincial authorities.

On 5 December 2018, Thongloun welcomed Hun Sen in Vientiane. Both leaders reaffirmed the “traditional friendship, solidarity, and mutual assistance” between Laos and Cambodia, agreed to maintain the status quo in Huay Ta Ngao until demarcation was complete, and presided over the signing of MoUs covering culture, education, agriculture, and energy (The Laotian Times, 2018).

Despite these commitments, tensions resurfaced in August 2019 in Mum Bei, Preah Vihear, where RCAF and LPA troops confronted each other over disputed land and irrigation use. Direct intervention by both prime ministers on 24 August prevented escalation. That year also marked the passing of Seuy Kaev and Bou Thang, prominent figures in Lao–Cambodian relations since the revolutionary era. Bou Thang's role in military and political exchanges was succeeded by General Neang Phat in 2021 who took over the presidency of the Cambodia–Laos Friendship Association.

On 12 September 2019, Thongloun visited Phnom Penh at Hun Sen's invitation, witnessing the signing of six bilateral cooperation documents focused on energy and infrastructure. Both sides agreed to elevate relations to a Comprehensive and Long-Lasting Strategic Partnership and to expedite a treaty finalizing border demarcation where technical surveys were complete (KPL, 2019). Political coordination was also evident as Hun Sen requested that Thongloun prevent exiled Cambodian opposition leader Sam Rainsy from re-entering Cambodia via Lao

territory, which Thongloun accepted. Similarly, energy cooperation remained central. In January 2020, the USD 500 million Don Sahong Hydropower Project in Champasak began full commercial operation with a capacity of 260 MW, accompanied by plans for a 500-kV transmission line to Phnom Penh at an estimated cost of USD 228 million. A Vietnamese firm also began the Sekong 1A Hydropower Project in Attapeu near the disputed Ta Ngao area, proceeding quietly amid post-2018 recovery efforts.

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly influenced relations between 2020 and 2022. Cambodia recorded its first case in January 2020, halting cross-border trade and forcing the abandonment of a major sugarcane energy project in adjacent Preah Vihear Province. Laos closed informal crossings in March 2020 and confirmed its first cases shortly after. Both countries imposed strict border and flight closures by April, disrupting commerce through traditional, local and international crossings. Although domestic restrictions eased mid-2020, smuggling and illegal movement, including narcotics and livestock trade, increased. Informal cooperation persisted as Lao patients sought treatment at Cambodian clinics, and Cambodia provided equal or free healthcare to poor Lao patients (KPL, 2020).

Philanthropy became a key tool of bilateral engagement. In November 2020, Cambodia donated 2.1 million masks, ventilators, and medical supplies, personally delivered by Defense Minister Tea Banh to Thongloun (KPL, 2020). Further assistance followed in June 2021, as Preah Vihear gave medical supplies worth USD 2,000 to Champasak, then Stung Treng contributed another shipment worth over LAK 120 million to Champasak, and Cambodia provided vaccines, USD 14 million in aid, and refrigerated trucks for nationwide use (KPL, 2021; MFAIC, 2021).

Bilateral coordination expanded through late 2021. Hun Sen and Lao Prime Minister Phankham Viphavanh reaffirmed commitments to reopen borders and strengthen trade. Health ministers institutionalized pandemic cooperation, while security counterparts signed an MoU to curb trafficking and illegal crossings (MFAIC, 2021; KPL, 2021). Infrastructure projects also progressed as construction of Xekong 1A Hydropower resumed, and a 500-kV transmission line to the Cambodian border was completed (Flynn & Pry, 2022). Experiences with the Lao–China Railway highlighted the need for resilient logistics, influencing dialogue on a future Lao–Cambodian rail link.

By early 2022, Cambodia's ASEAN chairmanship coincided with renewed goodwill from Vientiane. Laos reopened to tourism, and both governments shifted toward recovery-focused cooperation. Yet, environmental strains persisted such as the death of the last Irrawaddy dolphin in the transboundary pool in February 2022, which highlighted ecological fragility (KPL, 2022a). Later that year, Cambodia donated vaccination vehicles and continued joint narcotics operations to combat renewed trafficking.

IV. Post-Covid Relations

By the summer of 2022, Laos and Cambodia began reopening and re-engaging after two years of pandemic-induced isolation. On 9 May 2022, Laos fully reopened its international borders to foreign tourists, followed by Cambodia on 12 May. Soon after, Cambodian Interior Minister Sar Kheng praised bilateral cooperation against drug trafficking and cross-border crime during the inauguration of a riverside complex in Kampong Sralao, Preah Vihear Province—a symbolic gesture marking the gradual normalization of border activities and the continuity of Lao-Cambodian fraternal relations (Lay, 2022).

During 6–8 July 2022, Lao Foreign Minister Saleumxay Kommasith led a delegation to Phnom Penh for the 14th Meeting of the Joint Committee on Bilateral Cooperation. Both sides reaffirmed collaboration in national defense and border management, particularly in curbing encroachment, illegal logging, and natural resource exploitation. They also discussed finalizing the Treaty on the Demarcation of the Border and accelerating unresolved surveys. Despite pandemic challenges, trade—especially electricity sales—remained strong, with discussions emphasizing connectivity through infrastructure, transportation, and new direct flight routes (MFAIC, 2022; KPL, 2022b). Laos expressed its full support for Cambodia's ASEAN chairmanship, while Phnom Penh backed Laos's hosting of the 13th CLV-DTA Joint Coordination Committee meeting.

Revitalizing People-to-People and Institutional Diplomacy

In the post-COVID era, Lao and Cambodian businesses, particularly banks, expanded online services developed during lockdowns. During the 13th multilateral meeting between the Bank of Laos and the National Bank of Cambodia in mid-August 2022, the first phase of a cross-border QR payment system was launched.

In September 2022, Cambodia's National Assembly President Heng Samrin visited Vientiane at the invitation of his Lao counterpart, Xaysomphone Phomvihane. Discussions centered on parliamentary cooperation and strengthening people-to-people diplomacy through the Laos–Cambodia Friendship Association (LCFA), which had established branches in two border provinces to facilitate cultural exchanges, festivals, and small-scale trade. The Cambodian delegation also met with President Thongloun Sisoulith and Prime Minister Phankham Viphavanh before touring major logistics facilities—the Thanaleng Dry Port, the Vientiane Logistics Park, and the Laos–Thailand Railway Station. Lao businessman Chanthone Sitthixay highlighted ambitions to develop a logistics hub near the Nong Nokkhiane–Trapeang Kriel international border checkpoint, signaling private-sector enthusiasm for connectivity projects (KPL, 2022c).

Despite these efforts, illicit activities persisted such as cross-border smuggling of cement, cigarettes, and livestock, and the illegal transit of Chinese nationals continued, while Sihanoukville-based scam centers reportedly trafficked people to Laos's Golden Triangle SEZ. Nonetheless, bilateral trade reached USD 106 million in 2022, including USD 100 million in electricity purchases (KPL, 2022c).

Infrastructure Expansion and Energy Diplomacy

Infrastructure cooperation also extended to environmental oversight. In early 2023, the Mekong River Commission launched a Transboundary Environmental Impact Assessment of the Sekong 1A Hydropower Project in response to concerns about potential cross-border impacts on Lower Mekong fisheries.

Deepening Strategic Partnership and Border Finalization

Hun Sen's official visit to Laos during 13–14 February 2023, at the invitation of Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone, marked a turning point in post-pandemic relations. The two leaders signed an Action Plan to Enhance the Comprehensive and Long-Lasting Strategic Partnership (2023–2027) and the long-anticipated Treaty on the Demarcation of the Border (MFAIC, 2023; KPL, 2023). Plans were discussed to connect Preah Vihear and Ratanakiri with Champasak and Attapeu provinces via land routes, facilitating trade, tourism, and regional integration. Hun Sen also met Cambodian students and business leaders in Vientiane, emphasizing continued engagement and economic cooperation.

During the visit, Hun Sen was awarded the Phoxai Lan Xang Medal by President Thongloun Sisoulith for contributions to bilateral friendship and development, while Prime Minister Sonexay decorated Cambodian business leaders who had supported Laos during the pandemic, reflecting mutual appreciation and economic interdependence (KPL, 2023).

Economic Ratification and Provincial Connectivity

The Treaty on Border Demarcation was ratified unanimously by the Cambodian National Assembly on 30 March 2023 and approved by the Senate on 10 April (Soth, 2023). Ratanakiri authorities announced plans to construct new road links from Ban Lung to the Lao border via Veunxai and Taveng, promoting energy corridor development while raising environmental concerns regarding the Virachey National Park (Construction & Property, 2023).

A Joint Border Committee (JBC) meeting on 21 April 2023 in Sihanoukville, co-chaired by Saleumxay Kommasith and Var Kimhong, resolved to complete remaining border markers and replace or renovate 387 existing ones. Saleumxay's subsequent visit to the Sihanouk Autonomous Port underscored Cambodia's effort to attract Lao trade and investment to its coastal gateway, reflecting broader regional competition influenced by China's Belt and Road initiatives.

Trade Expansion and Private-Sector Engagement

By mid-2023, bilateral economic ties were at their strongest in a decade. Lao Foreign Minister Saleumxay Kommasith awarded a Friendship Medal to Cambodian Ambassador Thong Sokuntheary for advancing trade and tourism cooperation. Cambodian investment

in Laos reached USD 127 million, dominated by the USD 110 million Dansavanh tourism and casino complex, highlighting private-sector entrepreneurship as a driver of sustained bilateral economic growth (KPL, 2023b). A major drawback of these investment windfalls was the circumspect provenance of their funding which suggested large scale money laundering.

V. New(ish) Leadership and Converging Strategic Alignment

As Laos and Cambodia emerged from the post-COVID recovery period, a new generation of leaders descended from the post-Democratic Kampuchea generation assumed responsibility for consolidating border management, deepening bilateral cooperation, and aligning strategic priorities. The period saw both nations pursuing infrastructural connectivity, security coordination, and economic integration, while addressing long-standing border issues and emerging challenges from illicit activity and regional investment dynamics.

On 7 August 2023, Hun Manet assumed office as Prime Minister of Cambodia, marking the rise of a new generation of political leadership. Concurrently, Sok Chenda Sophea replaced Prak Sokhonn as Foreign Minister, while Lam Chea, formerly Secretary of State in the Interior Ministry, was appointed Minister in Charge of the Border Affairs Committee, succeeding the aging Var Kimhong. This leadership renewal reflected Cambodia's commitment to strengthening governance, border management, and regional diplomacy.

On 3 October 2023, the 3rd Laos–Cambodia Conference on Strengthening Borders, Peace, and Friendship was held in Khong District. Both sides reviewed prior cooperation agreements (2019–2023), evaluated the implementation of the 2019 Declaration of the 2nd Joint Conference, and signed a joint statement committing to seven priority initiatives. Discussions emphasized unity, trade, and cultural exchanges along the border.

In January 2024, Laos assumed ASEAN chairmanship with Cambodia's full backing, promoting itself as the “Battery of Southeast Asia” along with a broader platform of connectivity (Meung, 2024). That month, Preah Vihear authorities arrested two men for smuggling one metric ton of methamphetamines from Laos, and eight Chinese nationals were apprehended after illegally crossing from Laos. In February, CLV officials convened in Attapeu Province to discuss UXO clearance, the prevention of human and drug trafficking, and illegal border crossings.

During 25–26 March, Hun Manet made his first official visit to Laos as Prime Minister. His meetings with Khambay Damlath, President of the Laos–Cambodia Friendship Association, and Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone focused on people-to-people engagement, cross-border infrastructure projects—including a bridge connecting Champasak and Preah Vihear and an expressway from Vientiane to Cambodia—and the ratification of the Cambodia–Laos Boundary Treaty. Three agreements and four MoUs were signed, Lao Airlines launched direct flights to Phnom Penh, and military and security cooperation along the border was strengthened. Additional discussions addressed education, sports, agriculture, and Hun Manet announced a USD 1 million package to assist Laos in hosting the ASEAN Summits (Khmer

Times, 2024). The following day, he met with President Thongloun Sisoulith, Cambodian students, and the Cambodian Business Club, further solidifying bilateral engagement (KPL, 2024a; Meung et al., 2024).

During 23–24 April, Thongloun visited Cambodia, reiterating commitments to peacefully resolve the remaining 14% of the border. Technical map discrepancies and terrain differences stemming from colonial-era documentation were cited as reasons for prior delays. During 28–31 May, Lao and Cambodian delegations inspected unresolved border points. On 29 May, Border Marker No. 034 was erected in Khong District, marking the start of permanent demarcation. On 3 June, Singapore, Laos, and Cambodia reached an agreement to improve cross-border electricity trade under the ASEAN Power Grid Vision (Ministry of Trade and Industry Singapore, 2024).

Border infrastructure and security remained central to bilateral coordination. On 13 July 2024, illegal Vietnamese loggers were arrested in the Dragon's Tail, raising concerns from Cambodian activists regarding Special Economic Zones under the CLV-DTA. Hun Sen addressed the matter in a televised speech reaffirming Cambodian sovereignty and announced plans for a 166-km road linking Ban Lung with the eastern tri-border point. On 22 August, Hun Manet highlighted that 179 km of border ring roads had been constructed with Laos during 2015–2022 and approved a 10-year plan for border demarcation, communication networks, and a fund to mobilize citizen participation in border infrastructure projects (Fresh News, 2024; Pisey, 2024; Office of the Council of Ministers, 2024).

Meanwhile, the Siphandone SEZ in Champasak experienced delays due to unpaid Chinese workers, while Chaleun Sekong Energy signed a power purchase agreement with Électricité du Cambodge in October to support Cambodia's growing electricity demand (Meung et al., 2024b). Drug seizures continued, including the arrest of a Lao national in Stung Treng with 300 kg of narcotics on 30 October, and another with over a million methamphetamine pills on 9 November.

From November to December 2024, key meetings and visits reinforced bilateral ties. The 10th Technical Joint Border Sub-Committee meeting planned additional border markers, Hun Manet reappointed Prak Sokhonn as Foreign Minister, and ASEAN Summits were hosted in Laos. Sonexay Siphandone visited Cambodia, signing MoUs on culture, arts, and agriculture, while discussions advanced plans for a new border checkpoint and a bridge over the Xe Lamphao. Border infrastructure and bilateral cooperation were further supported through a LAK 1 billion commodity fund and agreements between national veterans' associations. Bilateral trade reached USD 256 million in 2024 (Meung et al., 2024b).

In early 2025, working groups and joint committees focused on bridge construction and trade facilitation. Hun Sen visited Vientiane in February to advance energy and railway agreements, and a MoU on youth cooperation was signed for 2025–2027 (KPL, 2025; Chet, 2025).

March 2025 saw the Tri-Muk Pavilion in the western tri-border point burn down, and major drug arrests continue in Stung Treng. JBC meetings concentrated on border marker construction, emphasizing both technical precision and their joint responsibility to foster a

zone of peace along the shared frontier. Sar Sokha led a Cambodian delegation to Vientiane to strengthen security, prevent cross-border crimes—including human and drug trafficking—and promote trade and people-to-people exchanges. Approximately 45% of Cambodia's imported drugs continued to enter via the Lao–Cambodian border (Meung et al., 2025).

In April, upgrades to strategic roads in Stung Treng commenced to increase freight and passenger traffic. Hun Manet led a delegation to pay respects to Laos's late president Khamtai Siphandone, while judicial cooperation was enhanced through a Supreme Court MoU. Lao National Assembly visits strengthened parliamentary links. Meetings of the Laos–Cambodia Border Security Cooperation Committee in May improved coordination on transnational crime, and the first Mekong Dolphin Festival marked the launch of Cambodia's 'Green Season' tourism campaign. Princess Norodom Arunrasmey inaugurated a Documentation Center in Stung Treng to preserve the historical frontier legacy (Sreang, 2024).

Finally, hydropower developments—including the Lower Srepok 3 project and plans for the Lower Sesan 3 Dam—were announced for late 2025, with Chinese and Cambodian investments impacting old ethnic Lao settlements (Hobbs & Khuan, 2025).

VI. Conclusion

What lies ahead for Lao–Cambodian relations? In the wake of Donald Trump's tariff-led trade war, Laos and Cambodia have been forced to reconcile with Vietnam to secure their economic positions. The imposition of high tariffs on Laos and Cambodia would be devastating for the garment and footwear industries in both countries. Agricultural exports, such as coffee, will also be affected; however, the global demand for coffee may allow this sector to weather the storm. Lao efforts to attract investors from developed countries such as Japan and South Korea to its SEZs will face greater hurdles. In recent years, Japanese firms have struggled to justify investing in Laos except as a counterbalance to China's influence.

Environmental protections along the Lao–Cambodian frontier benefited from years of low-level industrial development. These safeguards have been removed in recent years, and the frontier region now risks severe impacts from intensive construction with limited regulation. Tourism in Laos has seen huge numbers, largely due to the Lao–China Railway. However, there is uncertainty about how many Chinese visitors will return for a second visit. The poor state of Route 13 in Laos has not encouraged Lao citizens to travel south. Consequently, the number of Lao visiting Cambodia has not experienced any dramatic increase. Laos has struggled to maintain momentum for its SEZs. Revived Cambodian nationalism has seen the number of visitors to Wat Phu, an Angkorian ruin in Champasak, increase given the convenience of the international border crossing to private cars and chartered tours.

The influx of unregistered migrants from China into Laos is having a trickle-down effect in Cambodia. The LCR and international flights from China to provincial centers in Laos are enabling criminal gangs to easily penetrate Laos and move into Cambodia. The low density of settlements along the porous Lao–Cambodian frontier makes surveillance of these human

traffickers a challenge. The flow of drugs from northern Laos to the Lao-Cambodian frontier has not been stemmed by police crackdowns. The quantities entering Laos are certainly massive compared to those intercepted by Cambodian security personnel. Nevertheless, their presence clearly demonstrates that sophisticated networks extend from the Golden Triangle down to the Cambodian coastline.

In conclusion, the evolution of Lao-Cambodian relations has completed its revolutionary cycle and is now well into a new capitalist phase, fueled by China's desire to exploit the natural resources of the Lower Mekong Basin. Both Cambodia and Laos will look to one another as they balance relations with China, Thailand, and Vietnam. It is clear that China has brought both countries into its economic orbit, but whether Laos and Cambodia truly desire to become satellites of the Chinese Communist Party remains uncertain.

Regarding the bilateral relationship, it has certainly warmed at the elite level. Sonexay and Manet's teams have built a solid network, ensuring the harmonious narrative of the ruling parties' friendship. However, in mainstream Cambodian and Lao society, the flourishing of relations and their economic benefits seems less evident. To most Lao, the economic relationship with South Korea appears more significant than that with their southern neighbor. The clearest pattern is that Laos is increasing energy sales to Cambodia to help repay debts owed to large Chinese corporations.

Several questions remain unanswered: Will a bridge between Champasak and Preah Vihear make a difference? Will new crossings between Ratanakiri and Attapeu result in the destruction of wilderness areas? Will a railway line be extended from Vientiane to Phnom Penh? Will casinos be allowed to operate in the Mekong Falls area? Laos needs to find its middle ground once more, as it lacks the international outlets that Cambodia has developed.

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Chapter 4

Cambodia-Thailand Relations in the Post-Pandemic Era: Strategic Partners in a Bitter- Sweet Relationship?

Dr. LEANG Sim Onn and KHAN Menghok

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I. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic shut down nearly every aspect of life and disrupted global trade, affecting the well-being of people worldwide. Cambodia and Thailand were no exceptions. The virus largely tested the cooperation and solidarity between the two neighboring countries, which share many cultural affinities but divergent historical memories. For Cambodia, the protection of Cambodian migrant workers in Thailand and the implementation of virus-prevention measures along the border were top priorities. To prevent the spread of the virus and ensure the safety of their populations, both countries collaborated by taking several urgent measures, including the closure of land border crossings. As a result, the number of illegal crossings of Cambodian migrants returning from Thailand surged (Chea & Khuon, 2021). Concurrently, Thailand also arrested individuals who entered the country illegally in an effort to curb the spread of the coronavirus. The Klong Luk–Poi Pet checkpoint is among the busiest; before the shutdown, more than 30,000 people and 400 trucks crossed the checkpoint daily (Phutpeng, 2020).

The early spread of the virus in March 2020 caused widespread fear among Cambodian migrant workers in Thailand, many of whom wished to return home to celebrate Khmer New Year with their families. However, the Cambodian Embassy in Thailand urged them to remain in the country and cooperate with Thai authorities to prevent the spread of COVID-19 (Sun, 2020). Before the recent border clashes and the ensuing tensions in late July 2025, which resulted in a significant influx of migrant returnees, more than one million Cambodian migrant workers—most undocumented—were residing in Thailand (Winrock International, 2024). According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), over 225,000 Cambodian workers returned home and received COVID-19 relief assistance provided by the EU and the ILO from 2020 to late 2021 (International Labour Organization, 2021).

The preventive measures imposed during this period came at a cost for both countries. Cambodia had to quarantine returnees from Thailand, converting many school buildings in provinces bordering Thailand into quarantine centers (Tith, 2021). Meanwhile, Thailand experienced a shortage of foreign labor, particularly from Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar. In 2022, Thai authorities cooperated with their Cambodian counterparts to allow Cambodian migrant workers to return to their jobs after an assessment indicated a need for approximately 2,000 employees to meet labor demand (United Nations Network on Migration, 2022). During this challenging period, Thailand donated USD 100,000 to support the well-being of Cambodian migrant workers in the border quarantine centers (Royal Thai Embassy, 2021).

By 2025, another influx of over 900,000 Cambodian migrant workers reportedly returned to Cambodia (Yatt, 2021). This time, however, the political dynamics differed markedly from those during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although Cambodia and Thailand are close neighbors with deep political, economic, and societal ties, as well as shared cultural practices, their relations have not always been free of challenges (Meyer, 2017). Thai historian Charnvit Kasetsiri describes Cambodian–Thai relations as a “love–hate” relationship (Kasetsiri, 2003). Over the past two decades, many studies on Cambodia–Thailand relations have focused on identity politics as the primary

framework for understanding bilateral dynamics. This emphasis stems from a few key incidents in recent history that made identity politics particularly salient, such as the 2003 anti-Thai riots in Phnom Penh, the 2008 dispute over ownership of the Preah Vihear Temple, and the border conflicts between 2008 and 2011, which brought relations to a nadir. From the perspective of identity politics, historical memories, cultural identities, and nationalism have been central themes in the literature on Cambodia-Thailand relations.

Cambodian scholar Sok Udom Deth in his book *A History of Cambodia-Thailand Diplomatic Relations, 1950–2020* (2020), challenges the notion that identity politics is the constant driving factor behind fluctuations in diplomatic relations over the past seven decades (Deth, 2020). While acknowledging the influence of identity politics, he emphasizes the competing interests among societal and political groups in both countries, which wield power and shape decision-making processes, thereby determining the trajectory of Cambodia-Thailand diplomatic relations (Deth, 2020).

In light of recent border clashes and the ensuing tensions, which have affected people-to-people interactions, this chapter examines the complexity of Cambodia-Thailand relations in the post-pandemic era. It explores political changes in both countries and border tensions that have undermined their strategic partnership. The chapter argues that historical memories, cultural identities, and nationalism continue to shape the mindsets of both peoples, significantly influencing the political behavior and attitudes of Cambodian and Thai societal and political actors, contributing to the deterioration of bilateral relations. Furthermore, while both nations share similar regime types, mutual strategic interests, and close personal ties among their ruling elites, these factors add another layer of complexity to an already fragile relationship.

II. National Elections in Cambodia and Thailand

The post-pandemic era marked a significant political turning point in both Cambodia and Thailand, as each country approached national elections in 2023. In July, Cambodia held its national election, in which the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) won a sweeping majority. One month later, Hun Sen's eldest son, Hun Manet, officially assumed the office of prime minister (Taing, 2023). In Thailand, however, the political landscape experienced a brief impasse, as it took three months after the May general election to form a new government. After nearly a decade under Prime Minister General Prayuth Chan-ocha's leadership, the 2023 election resulted in the progressive Move Forward Party (MFP) winning the most seats, followed by the Pheu Thai Party (PTP) and the Bhumjaithai Party. Both the MFP and PTP were known for opposing the military-backed establishment and were initially expected to form a coalition government, with the MFP publicly supporting such a move. Ultimately, however, the PTP entered into what many observers considered a "controversial" coalition with conservative parties—already unpopular among much of the Thai public—excluding the MFP (Ewe, 2023).

Prior to the Pheu Thai-led government in 2023, bilateral relations between Cambodia and Thailand were relatively positive, despite initial strains caused by the mass deportation

of Cambodian undocumented migrant workers from Thailand. As Deth (2017) notes, the “interdependence of economic development and political stability, as well as the need to foster regime legitimacy in both countries” prompted the two governments to recalibrate their positions, despite Hun Sen’s previously close ties to Thaksin (p. 39).

III. The Return of Thaksin and the Revival of Dynastic Politics

Thailand’s 2023 national election results, coupled with the return of Thaksin Shinawatra to the country, paved the way for the Shinawatra family to rule Thailand for the third time, with Thaksin and Hun Sen regarding each other as “godbrothers.” Prior to the announcement of Srettha Thavisin as Thailand’s prime minister, Thaksin, accompanied by his sister Yingluck Shinawatra, made a surprise visit to Cambodia to attend Hun Sen’s birthday celebration at his residence on 5 August 2023 (Soth & Son, 2023). Sixteen days later, Thaksin returned to Thailand after nearly two decades of living in exile.

Shortly thereafter, Thaksin was brought before the Thai court and sentenced to eight years in prison for abuse of power, which he claimed was politically motivated. His sentence was later reduced to one year under a royal pardon, during which he did not serve time in prison. Thaksin, however, was admitted to the Police General Hospital due to health issues, where he remained for six months (Strangio, 2024). In February 2024, he was discharged and regained his freedom, a crucial moment as he anticipated his daughter’s upcoming role as Pheu Thai leader and Thailand’s soon-to-be prime minister. Shortly after his discharge, Hun Sen visited Bangkok to see his “old friend” at Thaksin’s home. Both leaders claimed that they did not discuss politics and only reminisced about their 32-year friendship, although Hun Sen stated that he had invited Paetongtarn Shinawatra to visit Cambodia in March 2024 (Soth, 2024).

This longstanding friendship, however, fractured in June 2025 amid border tensions between Cambodia and Thailand. Hun Sen publicly announced that he was severing ties with the Shinawatra family after releasing a private phone conversation with Paetongtarn Shinawatra, accusing the family of betrayal. Hun Sen further claimed that Thaksin’s illness had been a deception (Khmer Times, 2025c) and stated that he had “never gained anything” from their 32-year friendship, blaming Paetongtarn for its rupture (Taing, 2025b). In response, Thaksin expressed disbelief over the leaked conversation and announced the end of their relationship (Thai PBS World, 2025c).

IV. Cordial Relations Before the Conflict Outbreak

After the 2023 general elections in both countries, high-level diplomacy between Cambodia and Thailand increased significantly, with frequent meetings among state leaders and at the ministerial level. Shortly after becoming Thailand’s prime minister, Srettha Thavisin conducted his first official state visit to Cambodia on 28 September 2023,

symbolizing the mutual commitment to strengthen ties as good neighbors. Not long afterward, Prime Minister Hun Manet paid an official visit to Thailand on 7 February 2024, during which both countries agreed to evaluate their relationship within the framework of the strategic partnership.

A key outcome of this visit was the agreement to establish a Cambodian Consulate-General in Songkhla and a Thai Consulate-General in Siem Reap to facilitate consular services for citizens (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Cambodia, 2024). During the visit, Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin assured his Cambodian counterpart that Thailand would not allow its territory to be used to interfere in Cambodia's domestic politics, a commitment for which Prime Minister Hun Manet expressed his gratitude (Seoung & Sovann, 2024).

Shortly after Hun Manet's visit to Thailand, Paetongtarn Shinawatra, as Pheu Thai Party leader, visited Cambodia in March 2024 and met with several senior Cambodian officials. This visit followed Hun Sen's personal invitation during his February 2024 visit to Thaksin's residence in Bangkok, marking the third official engagement between the two countries' leaders and ruling parties within a six-month period (Sereyath, 2024). In August 2024, Paetongtarn Shinawatra was elected by the Thai parliament as Thailand's prime minister, succeeding Srettha Thavisin after his removal from office (Regalado, 2024). At the invitation of Prime Minister Hun Manet, Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra made her second visit to Cambodia—and her first as Thailand's prime minister—on 23–24 April 2025, coinciding with the 75th anniversary of Cambodia-Thailand diplomatic relations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025a).

On the economic front, until the recent border conflict, Thailand was Cambodia's second-largest trading partner within ASEAN after Vietnam. As shown in the table below, bilateral trade between the two countries remained stable from 2022 to 2024, with Thailand's exports (worth over USD 3 billion) significantly exceeding its imports from Cambodia.

Table 1. Cambodia's Bilateral Trade with Thailand (Value in Thousand USD)

	Import	Export	Year
1.	3,832,503	831,772	2022
2.	2,895,426	859,781	2023
3.	3,443,321	844,900	2024

Source: Cambodia's General Department of Customs and Excise

According to the General Department of Customs and Excise of Cambodia (2025), Cambodia's main exports to Thailand included electrical machinery, iron and steel, cereals, and edible fruits, among other products. Conversely, Cambodia's key imports from Thailand consisted of mineral fuels and oil, vehicles other than railway or tramway rolling stock, beverages, and other goods. During the April 2025 meeting, both countries committed to achieving a bilateral trade target of USD 15 billion by 2027 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025a).

V. From Harmony to Hostility and Animosity

Despite, or perhaps because of, close cooperation at the governmental level led by Paetongtarn Shinawatra and Hun Manet, nationalist sentiment and domestic politics began to lurk in the background, particularly as Thai ultranationalists voiced concerns over a possible loss of Thai sovereignty over Koh Kood in the Overlapped Claim Area (OCA) through Thaksin's alleged secret deals with Hun Sen (Sanglee, 2025). As the Thai military reasserted its dominance in domestic politics and adopted a more hawkish stance on border affairs (Chambers, 2025; Ganjanakhundee, 2025), coupled with Thailand's "institutional turf wars," which result in "the absence of a clear chain of command of political authority" (Macan-Markar, 2025), relations between Cambodia and Thailand became increasingly fragile.

The first major border issue involved the reopening of access to the Preah Vihear temple complex via Si Sa Ket Province in Thailand, which had been closed since the 2008 conflict. Such a move was not unprecedented. In 2016, the Bangkok Post reported that former Cambodian Defense Minister Tea Banh had discussed reopening the temple access with Thai Defense Minister Prawit Wongsuwon. However, Cambodia's Defense Ministry later denied that such discussions had occurred (Vong, 2016). Nonetheless, the Thai side continued to pursue reopening the crossing, envisioning mutual benefits through enhanced tourism. In May 2023, Thailand made another request to Cambodia, and prior to his meeting with Prime Minister Hun Manet in Bangkok, Prime Minister Srettha Thavasin was urged by Pheu Thai MPs in Si Sa Ket to raise the matter with his Cambodian counterpart (Sattaburuth, 2024b). During the February 2024 meeting between Srettha Thavasin and Hun Manet, both sides reported that the temple access reopening was not discussed, with a Thai government source suggesting that Cambodia was concerned about Cambodian political activists in Thailand (Nanuam, 2024). While Thailand's goal was to boost tourism and trade, Cambodia's official response remained largely quiet.

Tensions also re-emerged at Prasat Ta Muen Thom. On 13 February 2025, a group of Cambodians, including soldiers, sang a Khmer patriotic song at the temple, which the Thai military described as "inappropriate behavior" (The Nation, 2025b). Following the incident, Uddar Meanchey provincial governor Mean Chanyada visited the temple, stating that the situation was normal and encouraging continued visits (Hong, 2025). On 19 February 2025, Prime Minister Hun Manet called on politicians and ultranationalist groups from both sides to refrain from interfering and to let border experts handle the issue (Bangkok Post, 2025), while Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra dismissed the tension as "nothing" (Bangprapa, 2025). Thailand also took steps to prevent escalation: on 9 March 2025, members of the New Alternative Party attempted to sing the Thai national anthem at the disputed temple area but were stopped by the Thai military and asked to relocate to avoid confrontation with the Cambodian side (The Nation, 2025c). To ease tensions, the two defense ministers met in Bangkok in May 2025. Thai media reported that both sides had agreed to withdraw troops from Prasat Ta Muen Thom. Cambodia's Defense Ministry, however, denied the removal and stated that both countries would maintain five troops at the temple (Torn, 2025). While both governments claimed a peaceful resolution, a series of hostilities, verbal exchanges, and

uncertainties in Thai domestic politics further intensified what might have otherwise been a simple border skirmish.

Maritime border tensions also resurfaced, centering on three main issues: (1) the 2001 MoU signed between the Thaksin-led government and Hun Sen administration, (2) the overlapping claims area (OCA), and (3) the ownership of Koh Kood. Like the land border disputes, the maritime conflict has roots in French colonial administration. The 1907 Franco-Siamese Treaty was interpreted differently by the two sides, resulting in the controversial OCA. To facilitate joint development of hydrocarbon resources and agree on mutually acceptable territorial sea delimitation, both countries signed the 2001 MoU (MoU44) concerning overlapping maritime claims on the continental shelf.

Although the February 2024 meeting did not address the reopening of access to the Preah Vihear temple, both sides discussed the possibility of joint resource extraction in the Overlapping Claims Area (OCA), motivated by the need to secure energy resources amid rising oil prices. The OCA issue stems from the 2001 MoU, which was intended to delineate overlapping maritime areas between Cambodia and Thailand. Complications arise because Cambodia's maritime claims extend from the mainland across half of Koh Kood Island, which Thailand also claims. Consequently, the OCA dispute evolved into a broader debate over the controversial ownership of Koh Kood Island.

In Thailand, the 2001 MoU became a subject of intense political debate, with some politicians questioning its constitutionality (Yonpiam, 2024). Members of the general public accused the Shinawatra administration of ceding Koh Kood to Cambodia (Sattaburuth, 2024c). To reassure the public, Thai Defense Minister Phumtham stated during a visit to Koh Kood that the administration would not revoke the 2001 MoU, emphasizing that it remained the only effective negotiation channel with Cambodia (Bangprapa, 2024). Both Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra and her father, Thaksin, publicly affirmed Thailand's rightful ownership of Koh Kood and explained that the 2001 MoU served as a framework for negotiating the OCA, cautioning against political actions that could harm bilateral relations (The Nation, 2024; Sattaburuth, 2024a).

In Cambodia, the OCA negotiations also sparked domestic controversy. Some opposition groups and political activists accused Prime Minister Hun Manet of acting as a "national traitor." Hun Manet emphasized the economic benefits of oil extraction in the OCA and assured the public that the government would not act against national interests (Chheng, 2024). Responding to criticism about the government's silence on the Koh Kood issue, Hun Manet stated: "Why is the government silent? The answer lies in two principles: political maturity and national responsibility. These principles guide the government's silence because speaking out would not reflect maturity." He further downplayed concerns about the island being ceded to Thailand: "One side claims their land is lost; the other says it isn't." He explained that the issue largely stemmed from Thailand's internal politics and added, "Why should we bring unnecessary fire into our home?" (Chheng, 2024). To calm public concern, Hun Manet stressed that negotiations were proceeding peacefully and attributed the controversy to "extremist groups" in both countries who sought to politicize the matter (Torn, 2024).

VI. A Prelude to the Latest Conflict

On 28 May 2025, a Cambodian soldier was killed following a brief exchange of gunfire in the Emerald Triangle area, where Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos converge (Mom Bei in Khmer; Chong Bok in Thai). Cambodia accused Thailand of opening fire on a trench that had long served as a Cambodian army base, while Thailand claimed it had merely “retaliated” after Cambodian troops initiated the use of weapons (Wongcha-um et al., 2025). Immediately after the incident, the Chiefs of the Royal Armed Forces and the Defense Ministers of both countries met to resolve the issue, even as both sides reportedly mobilized troops and weapons in preparation for a potential conflict.

The incident on 28 May quickly became heavily politicized, spilling over into other dimensions of bilateral relations, including trade and people-to-people ties, which were unrelated to the original military tension. It was eventually described as “ASEAN’s worst crisis” since the organization’s creation in 1967 (Pongsudhirak, 2025). In early June 2025, Thailand unilaterally adjusted the operating hours of border crossings with Cambodia and restricted cross-border movements, citing security concerns (Setboonsarng & Lach, 2025). Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra explained that the measures aimed to prevent Thai citizens from traveling to Cambodian casinos and allegedly becoming involved in scam operations (Saksornchai, 2025).

In response, Senate President Hun Sen stated on 16 June that Cambodia would refuse to negotiate over border restrictions as long as Thailand did not restore full border access, emphasizing that the Thai side had initiated the conflict (Khmer Times, 2025e). Prime Minister Hun Manet clarified that Cambodia had never intended to close the border and that the country would respond only in reaction to Thai actions (Press and Quick Reaction Unit, 2025). Later in June, when the Thai army requested the reopening of some gates to allow truck passage, Hun Manet stated that Thailand must first reopen the gates it had unilaterally closed, after which Cambodia would follow within five hours at most (Amarthalingam, 2025).

Thailand’s strategy of closing border crossings to exert economic pressure ultimately backfired. Cambodia responded by banning Thai films and imports of fruit, vegetables, and, critically, electricity and oil, following suggestions by a Thai opposition politician to halt sales (Teng, 2025b).

As tensions intensified, Cambodia submitted an official letter to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on 16 June 2025, requesting that the Court address disputes over the Mom Bei area and the Ta Moan Thom, Ta Moan Tauch, and Ta Krabei temples (Chheng, 2025). Thailand, however, reiterated that it has not recognized the ICJ’s jurisdiction since 1960 and preferred resolving disputes through existing bilateral mechanisms (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025b). Thailand’s refusal to accept ICJ jurisdiction was widely interpreted as an attempt to maintain leverage in negotiations with Cambodia, reflecting both its relatively stronger position and its sensitivity to past ICJ rulings on Preah Vihear in the 1960s and 2013.

Amid the turbulent border situation, the most critical factor shaping the conflict's trajectory was the leaked private phone conversation between Cambodian Senate President Hun Sen and Thai Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra (Chachavalpongpun, 2025). Initially, a Cambodian Facebook user—whom Hun Sen suggested was dissatisfied with Paetongtarn—posted a nine-minute excerpt of the conversation. After the video attracted significant public attention in both Cambodia and Thailand, Hun Sen released the full 17-minute conversation on 18 June, stating that the recording was intended solely for “transparency purposes” (Khmer Times, 2025b). Although some political analysts viewed the leak as an infringement on diplomatic norms (Ghosh, 2025; Lam, 2025), the conversation revealed the civil–military imbalance in Thailand's domestic politics.

During the conversation, Paetongtarn admitted that she faced “domestic pressure” and asked Hun Sen—whom she referred to as “uncle”—not to heed the advice of the second army commander. She added that the commander merely sought to “look cool” and that the army's actions were “things that are not useful to the nation, but in truth what we want is peace” (Thepgumpanat & Lach, 2025). The leak prompted outrage among the Thai public, leading Paetongtarn to clarify that she harbored no personal animosity toward the army and that the conversation was merely a negotiation tactic. As a consequence, the Bhumjaithai Party withdrew from her coalition government, Paetongtarn was suspended from her duties on 1 July, and she was subsequently dismissed from the prime ministership on 29 August by the Thai Constitutional Court. Thailand was then temporarily led by Acting Prime Minister Phumtham Wechayachai.

The leaked phone call generated a new “political storm” in Thai domestic politics, exacerbated the border crisis, and further complicated Cambodia–Thailand diplomatic relations. In late June, Hun Sen publicly stated that Cambodia was awaiting a new Thai Prime Minister with the genuine intent to resolve bilateral issues, citing the absence of legitimate leadership in Bangkok (Khmer Times, 2025d). In the weeks leading up to the outbreak of war, the Thai army reported that a dozen soldiers had stepped on landmines, which it claimed were recently planted by Cambodia. Cambodia consistently denied this allegation, asserting that the landmines dated back to the country's civil war. On 23 July, one day before hostilities began, Thailand recalled its ambassador and closed the border, which had already been partially shut since June. In response, Cambodia recalled all diplomatic staff from Bangkok, leaving only a Second Chargé d'affaires in place (Khmer Times, 2025a).

While a border conflict between Cambodia and Thailand was anticipated due to historical rivalries and the legacy of colonialism, the five-day war from 24 to 28 July 2025 took most observers by surprise (Karuppannan, 2025). Both sides accused each other of initiating hostilities and sought international sympathy. Militarily, it was the most intense conflict in the modern history of the two nations, involving heavy and modern weaponry, with Cambodia largely in a defensive posture. Thailand deployed American F-16 jets and Saab JAS 39 Gripen fighter jets, marking the first operational use of these aircraft in combat, while Cambodia possessed no fighter jets (Changpoo, 2025). Thailand also admitted to using cluster munitions, which are prohibited under international law, as well as white phosphorus, though it insisted the latter did not constitute chemical warfare (Parpart, 2025).

As a result of the five-day war, approximately 300,000 people were displaced, and at least several dozen were reportedly killed (Hogan, 2025). Infrastructure in the provinces along the border was heavily damaged, with Preah Vihear temple suffering severe destruction reportedly caused by Thai fighter jets (Seavmey, 2025; Head, 2025). Thailand, however, rejected claims that the temple had been damaged (Thai PBS World, 2025a). Approximately one million Cambodian migrant workers returned to Cambodia, exacerbating labor shortages in Thailand and increasing unemployment in Cambodia (Baliga & Phoung, 2025). Thai products faced severe boycotts in Cambodia, contributing to a steady decline in bilateral trade since June 2025 (Baliga & Phoung, 2025).

Immediately following the ceasefire agreement, Cambodia reported the kidnapping of 20 Cambodian soldiers, 18 of whom remained in captivity in Thailand (Reuters, 2025). In August, the Thai army evicted Cambodian villagers from their homes in Banteay Meanchey Province—far from the main conflict area—using barbed wire and car tires, prompting accusations from Cambodia that Thailand had violated the ceasefire agreement (Tostevin, 2025). Thailand, in turn, claimed that the villagers had encroached on Thai territory, which it said had once housed Cambodian refugees after the Khmer Rouge period (The Nation, 2025a). In support of its claims, the Thai army deployed tractors to Cambodian farmland and conducted demining operations within Cambodian territory.

Although both sides had agreed under the ceasefire to allow the ASEAN Interim Observer Team (IOT) to monitor the border situation, the Thai army continued to make bellicose statements regarding its military strength and expressed willingness to resume hostilities. Thai activists were reportedly allowed to provoke the conflict further by using large loudspeakers at night to intimidate Cambodian villagers. These actions received public support from some Thai citizens, who contributed funds to the effort. Thai politicians who criticized these aggressive measures faced severe backlash from nationalist groups. For instance, Thai Senator Angkhana Neelapaijit and her family received death threats for condemning the use of loudspeakers against Cambodian villagers, as ultra-nationalists viewed her statements as betrayal (Prachatai, 2025).

This sequence of events highlights how public nationalist sentiment in Thailand has influenced political behavior and shaped policy decisions. It reflects a broader unwillingness within Thai society to confront uncomfortable truths, coupled with a culture of fear surrounding accountability under the law.

As the conflict deepened, nationalist sentiment also surged in Cambodia. Thai products and businesses increasingly faced consumer boycotts (Delgado, 2025), and some Cambodian citizens adopted more hardline attitudes, openly criticizing those who did not actively participate. These differing stances prompted national leaders to call for restraint and unity. Speaking at a public discussion in late September during a three-day exhibition of local Khmer products in Phnom Penh, Deputy Prime Minister Hun Many, in his capacity as president of the Union of Youth Federations of Cambodia (UYFC), emphasized, “We must not allow decisions to boycott—or any form of expression—to turn into hostility against our own people. Differences should not create divisions” (Ou, 2025).

VII. From Battlefield to the Kuala Lumpur Peace Accords: ASEAN as a Battleground of Great Powers Rivalry?

Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, serving as Chair of ASEAN 2025, offered to mediate the conflict between Cambodia and Thailand. However, Malaysia's mediation efforts were initially unsuccessful after Thailand withdrew from its initial ceasefire agreement on the first day of fighting, 24 July 2025 (Teng, 2025a). Thailand consistently objected to the involvement of international law mechanisms, such as the ICJ, and to third-party mediation by ASEAN, China, or the United States, citing its longstanding preference for bilateral mechanisms. It was only after decisive intervention from U.S. President Donald Trump—who personally called Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet and Thailand's Acting Prime Minister Phumtham Wechayachai to press for an end to the war, contingent on halting negotiations over a trade deal between the two countries—that Malaysia was able to broker an initial ceasefire on 28 July in Kuala Lumpur, with joint observation by the United States and China. Although the ceasefire ended the brief war, it remained fragile, with both sides continuing to exchange accusations. Thailand emphasized its victimhood to the international community, while Cambodia accused Thailand of using victim narratives to justify violations of the ceasefire and attempted expansion of the conflict to 17 other border areas. Both sides resorted to diplomatic channels, including the United Nations General Assembly, to assert their positions (Taing, 2025a).

Despite ongoing accusations, Cambodia and Thailand signed the Kuala Lumpur Peace Accords in Malaysia on 26 October 2025, witnessed by Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and U.S. President Donald J. Trump. In the joint declaration, both countries agreed to establish the ASEAN Observer Team (AOT), remove heavy and destructive weapons from the border, combat transnational crimes, and ensure the release of Cambodian prisoners of war (The White House, 2025a). On the evening of the same day, both countries began withdrawing heavy weapons from the border as a symbolic demonstration under AOT supervision (Khuon & Lon, 2025). On 31 October 2025, the Special Thailand-Cambodia Regional Border Committee (RBC) Meeting for Removal of Heavy and Destructive Weapons was held at O'Smach, Oddar Meanchey Province, Cambodia, under AOT observation. During this meeting, both sides agreed to divide weapon removal into three phases, all to be monitored and verified by the AOT, with completion scheduled for 31 December 2025 (Fresh News, 2025).

The accord underscored the regional significance of ASEAN-led conflict resolution and demonstrated the organization's capacity to address inter-member state disputes without external intervention. Mohamad Hasan described the agreement as an "ASEAN-led success in conflict resolution," highlighting Malaysia's facilitation role. However, questions remain about the effectiveness of ASEAN's mechanisms, given that the initial ceasefire required U.S. pressure and China's observation. China's continued involvement was also noted; Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian reaffirmed China's constructive role in rebuilding trust, consolidating the ceasefire, and facilitating peaceful dispute resolution, despite reports that the United States requested Chinese officials be excluded from the Peace Deal signing in Kuala Lumpur (The Global Times, 17 October 2025).

Furthermore, a New York Times article in early October 2025 reported that China had supported Cambodia by transporting aircraft and delivering artillery shells, rockets, and mortars earlier in the year, prior to the five-day war. Thailand seized upon this report to portray China's role as biased, alleging that it had enabled Cambodia's provocative actions. China denied the allegations, claiming no weapons were transferred for combat and attributing Cambodia's arsenal to prior cooperation. In a bilateral meeting with U.S. President Donald J. Trump in South Korea on 30 October 2025, Chinese President Xi Jinping stated that "China has been helping in our own way" while acknowledging Trump's contribution to the Joint Declaration (The White House, 2025b).

These developments have raised questions about ASEAN centrality and the broader geopolitical implications of the conflict. Observers are left to ask whether the Cambodia-Thailand dispute is being shaped by a great-power rivalry or containment strategies and whether ASEAN, weakened internally, has become a stage for competing geopolitical interests.

As prospects for peace began to take shape, nationalist sentiment among the public remained an obstacle to achieving normalcy. A few hours before signing the peace agreement, Thai Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul reassured citizens via a Facebook livestream that the deal would not place Thailand at a disadvantage (Thai PBS World, 2025b). Thai nationalist groups continued to call for the cancellation of the 2000 and 2001 border MoUs with Cambodia, and Prime Minister Anutin suggested that the government might allow citizens to vote on the matter (Connor, 2025). Similarly, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet, although facing less domestic pressure, publicly emphasized that the peace deal did not involve any territorial concessions (Strangio, 2025).

VIII. Conclusion

The empirical evidence from the post-pandemic era of Cambodia-Thailand relations reinforces the argument that historical memories, cultural identities, and nationalism have continued to shape the mindset of both peoples, profoundly influencing the political behaviors and attitudes of Cambodian and Thai political and societal groups. These factors have contributed to the repeated deterioration of bilateral relations. At the same time, while both nations share similar regime types, ideologies, mutual strategic interests, and close personal ties among their ruling elites, these connections add further complexity to an already fragile relationship, producing fluctuations in diplomacy over time.

This suggests that the perspective of identity politics, which emphasizes historical memory and nationalism, cannot be overlooked, while the social conflict model, which focuses on competing interests among powerful societal and political actors, also remains relevant. One might conceptualize identity politics as the "object" and societal actors as the "subject": without actors to manipulate these historical and cultural narratives, the ideas themselves cannot drive diplomatic fluctuations. The evidence presented in this paper demonstrates that it is the interplay between the subject (human agency) and the object (ideational factors) that has shaped Cambodia-Thailand relations, particularly in the post-pandemic era. Human

subjects—political actors in both countries—have been historically constituted and co-shaped with these ideational forces, highlighting why politics in Cambodia and Thailand remains tethered to their past. In Thailand especially, popular nationalist sentiment rooted in conflicting historical memories and cultural identities has consistently constrained political groups, shaping their behavior and decisions.

The strategic partnership announced in February 2024 can thus be seen only as a temporary milestone under the shadow of the “love-hate” dynamic. The enduring power of divergent historical memories, nationalistic antagonism, and contestations over cultural heritage persists, even when governments share ideology, strategic interests, or personal ties among elites. Dissident groups in both countries retain a resilience that allows them to invoke politicized nationalism, perpetuating cycles of tension. Recent conflicts, such as disputes over Preah Vihear Temple, illustrate a relapse into historical patterns, underscoring the difficulty of breaking the cycle of mistrust and repeated contestation.

True normalization of Cambodia-Thailand relations will require more than economic and political diplomacy. While shared strategic and economic interests provide a foundation for cooperation, addressing divergent historical memories, ultranationalism, and cultural disputes is essential. Political elites on both sides must refrain from invoking past rhetoric or highly sensitive issues that risk reactivating historical grievances. Cultural diplomacy and education—both formal and informal—should complement political and economic efforts. Revitalizing the Cambodia-Thailand Cultural Commission, established after the 2003 anti-Thai riots, could facilitate joint work on history, cultural studies, and peace education, free from political interference. The goal is to cultivate new generations with historical awareness, cultural sensitivity, and mutual respect. Achieving this will require time, patience, and sustained commitment, but it represents the only path toward a durable and truly normalized bilateral relationship.

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Chapter 5

The Historical Foundations and Modern Implications of Cambodia–Myanmar Relations

Swe Zin Linn PHYU

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I. Introduction

Relations between Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) and Cambodia have a long history. Cambodia and Myanmar, while not immediate neighbors, have maintained a subtle yet meaningful relationship throughout both historical and contemporary periods. During the 11th century, the political developments in the Bagan Empire (Burma/Myanmar) and the Khmer Empire (Cambodia) illustrate a significant, though indirect, historical association shaped by regional power competition and territorial consolidation (Chandler, 2008). The Mon people are known to have established one of the earliest kingdoms in Southeast Asia called Dvaravati, which thrived until around 1000 C.E. (Behrendt, 2007). After the Khmer Empire took control of their capital, many Mon people moved westward to present-day Lower Burma, where they founded new kingdoms. The Bagan Kingdom under King Anawrahta expanded its influence southward into Lower Burma by conquering the Mon city-state of Thaton in 1057 (Topich & Leitich, 2013). This conquest secured control over a key trade corridor and marked a strategic shift in mainland Southeast Asian geopolitics. The Khmer Empire, centered at Angkor, had been expanding its influence along the Tenasserim coast/Taninthary Region, a coastal region between modern Myanmar and Thailand that offered access to maritime trade routes (Hall, 2019). Anawrahta's occupation of Lower Burma and the Tenasserim region effectively blocked further Khmer advances westward along the coast. In this way, Pagan's military success served as a geopolitical counterbalance to the Khmer Empire's territorial expansions, bringing the two kingdoms into indirect competition over control of strategic borderlands and trade routes.

This chapter explores the Cambodia–Myanmar relations by tracing their historical foundations, divergent experiences under colonial rule, alignments during the Cold War, and eventual cooperation within the ASEAN framework. While direct diplomatic interactions between the two states have been relatively infrequent, broader regional dynamics have consistently shaped their bilateral relationship. These include the mediating role of Mon politics, the parallel but distinct trajectories of Buddhist reformations, and the adoption of modern diplomatic norms such as sovereignty and non-interference. Rather than viewing their relationship as marginal, it becomes clear that Cambodia and Myanmar have engaged in a form of indirect regional dialogue, embedded within shared cultural legacies and strategic interests. This raises several key questions: To what extent do historical patterns of indirect interaction continue to shape present-day diplomacy between the two countries? How has their non-interference commitment influenced ASEAN's capacity to respond to internal crises among member states? By addressing these questions, the paper seeks to uncover the deeper continuities and adaptive strategies that characterize Cambodia–Myanmar relations within the broader context of mainland Southeast Asia.

II. Early Historical Background

During the Angkor period in Cambodia and the Bagan period in Myanmar, both civilizations experienced significant cultural and religious development influenced by Indian traditions, particularly Hinduism and Buddhism. Although there is no clear evidence of direct political or military interaction between the two kingdoms, they shared similar patterns of transformation during this era. The Khmer Empire of Cambodia (802–1431) became a dominant Hindu–Buddhist state centered in Angkor, known for its monumental architecture and religious syncretism (Lowman, 2011). In Myanmar, the Bagan Kingdom (849–1297) played a key role in unifying Upper Burma and officially adopted Theravāda Buddhism under King Anawrahta in the 11th century (Win, 2022). Despite the lack of direct contact, cultural and religious exchanges were likely facilitated through intermediary regions, such as the Mon kingdoms, and maritime trade networks that connected much of Southeast Asia within the broader Indianized cultural sphere.

Historical scholarship has long debated the origins and cultural affiliations of the Mon people in mainland Southeast Asia. While the Mon are most commonly associated with Lower Burma (present-day Myanmar) and parts of Thailand (Revire, 2009), evidence suggests a close historical and cultural connection between the early Mon polities and the Khmer civilization of Cambodia (Hla, 1991). Archaeological and linguistic studies indicate that Mon culture emerged in the broader region of mainland Southeast Asia, with significant early development in areas that were under or near the cultural influence of the Khmer Empire (Galloway, 2010). In particular, Dvāravatī, a Mon-speaking civilization centered in present-day central Thailand from the 6th to the 9th century, shares artistic, architectural, and religious features with early Khmer sites (Lowman, 2011). These similarities point to shared cultural exchanges or possible Khmer influence on early Mon political organization, Buddhist practices, and urban development.

Although there is limited evidence of direct warfare or diplomatic relations between Bagan and the Khmer Empire during this period, the overlap in their zones of influence, particularly in the Tenasserim/Tanintharyi region which is also known as a narrow coastal area in southeastern Myanmar, along the border with Thailand, suggests a broader regional dynamic of strategic rivalry (Bankston, et al., 2022). Furthermore, both empires were undergoing religious and cultural transformations, heavily influenced by Indian traditions. While Bagan adopted Theravāda Buddhism and formed religious ties with Sri Lanka, the Khmer Empire practiced a syncretic form of Hinduism and Mahāyāna Buddhism before gradually shifting to Theravāda in later centuries (Murphy, 2016). These differing religious orientations reflected not only distinct cultural paths but also differing sources of foreign influence, which reinforced their separate political identities. Nevertheless, the expansion of Bagan into coastal areas traditionally influenced or desired by the Khmer Empire shows that Myanmar and Cambodia were not isolated states, but rather engaged, often indirectly, in shaping the political geography of mainland Southeast Asia. The relationship between the two states can thus be understood through the lens of regional power projection, contested borderlands, and parallel state-building processes.

The Mon should not be viewed solely as a distinct ethnic group migrating into Lower Burma, but rather as part of a broader, interconnected cultural and political landscape in early Southeast Asia (Walton, 2008). Their presence in Lower Burma between the 9th and 11th centuries likely stemmed from earlier movements from Dvāravatī or Khmer-influenced regions in mainland Southeast Asia (Dokras, 2024). This reflects a pattern of civilizational exchange, where Mon, Khmer, and other regional groups shaped one another's identities through trade, religion, and power dynamics. In particular, both the Mon and the Khmer absorbed and transmitted Indianized cultural practices—including Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism, Sanskrit-based scripts, and temple architecture (Stark, 2008). Archaeological and artistic evidence, such as similarities in epigraphy and urban planning, suggest that early Mon polities in Lower Burma were influenced by Khmer and Dvāravatī traditions (Revire, 2016). During the 11th century, King Anawrahta of Pagan expanded into Mon territories, indirectly curbing Khmer influence along the Tenasserim coast. While direct conflict between Pagan and the Khmer Empire is not clearly recorded, their overlapping strategic interests reveal broader regional patterns of competition and cultural interaction.

The Khmer Empire, which was expanding across the Mekong basin and into what is now northeastern Thailand and Laos during the 9th to 13th centuries, likely had sustained contact with Mon communities (Thel, 2022). Inscriptions from both Khmer and Mon sources suggest a degree of mutual interaction, including the movement of people, the spread of Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism, and possibly intermarriage among ruling elites. Mon polities such as Thaton and Pegu may have drawn cultural and administrative models from Khmer (Lowman, 2011), especially through contact along trade and pilgrimage routes linking the Indian Ocean to the Mekong basin (Hall, 2019). While the Mon later developed distinctive political identities, particularly in Lower Burma, their early cultural formation appears to have been shaped, at least in part, by influences from the Khmer world.

III. Colonial Period and Diverging Historical Trajectories

In the 19th century, Cambodia and Myanmar experienced colonization by two different European powers, which led to distinct political, social, and economic developments. Cambodia became a French protectorate in 1863 and was later incorporated into French Indochina (Chandler, 2008; Topich & Leitich, 2013). Under French colonial rule, Cambodia retained its monarchy but had limited political autonomy (Thaijongrak, 2023). The French focused on preserving traditional institutions while introducing some modern infrastructure and education (Thomas, 1995), mainly for administrative purposes. However, they did not invest heavily in economic development, leaving Cambodia relatively underdeveloped when it gained independence.

In contrast, Myanmar was colonized by Britain after a series of Anglo-Burmese wars, culminating in full annexation in 1885 (Nilsson, 2020). The British abolished the Burmese monarchy and implemented direct colonial rule (Topich & Leitich, 2013). They reorganized the administrative system, expanded transportation networks, and opened the country to international trade, especially in rice exports (Hall, 2019). However, British rule also led to

significant social disruption, including the weakening of Buddhist institutions and increased ethnic tensions due to the use of Indian labor and administrators (Lieberman, 1978).

Cambodia and Myanmar experienced colonial rule in different ways, which led to distinct outcomes after independence. In Cambodia, the French maintained the monarchy and made few changes to the traditional structure. As a result, Cambodia remained relatively unified but saw limited modernization. In contrast, the British abolished the monarchy in Myanmar and introduced more significant reforms, including economic development. However, these changes also deepened social divisions, particularly among ethnic groups. Their foreign policies also diverged: Cambodia often adopted a neutral or shifting stance, whereas Myanmar pursued a policy of isolation.

IV. Post-Independence Diplomatic Foundations (1950s–1990s)

Both Cambodia and Myanmar achieved independence in the post-World War II decolonization, Myanmar in 1948 and Cambodia in 1953 (Chandler, 2008; Topich & Leitich, 2013). Following their independence from colonial rule, Myanmar and Cambodia began to establish their positions in the international community. The two states established formal diplomatic relations in 1955, reflecting shared postcolonial objectives, including national sovereignty, development, and non-alignment (Tarling, 2016). Each became an early member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), advocating for neutralism amid Cold War bipolarities.

This development occurred in the context of the emerging Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which sought to provide a neutral political space for newly independent states during the Cold War (Myat, 2022). Both Myanmar and Cambodia became early participants in this movement, aligning themselves with its principles of neutrality, non-interference, and peaceful coexistence.

However, despite this formal diplomatic connection and shared membership in the NAM, the bilateral relationship between Myanmar and Cambodia remained limited for several decades (Alexandra and Mantong, 2022). The main reason for this was the intense internal instability that both countries faced during the Cold War period. Cambodia endured significant political turmoil, including a civil war in the early 1970s, the brutal rule of the Khmer Rouge regime from 1975 to 1979, and a subsequent Vietnamese military occupation that lasted into the late 1980s (Chandler, 2008). These events devastated Cambodia's institutions, population, and economy, making sustained foreign relations difficult.

Meanwhile, Myanmar also experienced prolonged periods of internal conflict and authoritarian rule. After a military coup in 1962, Myanmar was governed by a series of military-led regimes that isolated the country from much of the international community (Win, 2024). Additionally, long-standing armed conflicts with various ethnic minority groups contributed to ongoing instability and hindered national integration and economic development (Maizland, 2022).

Between the 1950s and the 1990s, both Cambodia and Myanmar devoted considerable attention to addressing pressing domestic priorities, which played a central role in shaping their unique paths toward modernization and development (Alexandra and Mantong, 2022). During this period, their focus on national stability and internal transformation laid important groundwork for future regional engagement (Moller, 1998). While their immediate efforts were directed inward, these foundational developments ultimately positioned both countries to contribute more meaningfully to regional cooperation and international diplomacy in the years that followed.

These domestic upheavals precluded consistent bilateral diplomacy. Both nations were consumed with internal consolidation and faced significant international scrutiny. During this period, Cambodia and Myanmar functioned more as parallel cases of postcolonial state fragility rather than active regional partners. Nonetheless, their shared preference for non-interference and resistance to foreign intervention formed a latent basis for future diplomatic convergence.

V. Cambodia and Myanmar in ASEAN: Strategic Alignment and Shared Norms

The inclusion of Myanmar into ASEAN in 1997, followed by Cambodia in 1999, marked a significant shift in the regional positioning of both countries. Within ASEAN (ASEAN, 2015, 2025), both states found an institutional platform that reinforced their core foreign policy principles: non-interference in domestic affairs, respect for sovereignty, and consensus-based decision-making (Mahlangu, 2025). These norms allowed both Cambodia and Myanmar to resist external pressure, particularly regarding governance, human rights, and democratization. However, the extent and nature of this resistance differed. After 1993, Cambodia reopened to the international community, accepted large-scale foreign aid and investment, and initiated economic liberalization following its post-conflict settlement. Since the 1991 Paris Peace Agreements, Cambodia has received significant official development assistance (ODA), peaking at USD 808 million in 2013 (Open Development Cambodia, 2015). In contrast, Myanmar remained largely isolated. During the 1990s, it received less than USD 1 per person in foreign aid, faced the suspension of multilateral financing, and was subject to broad sanctions by the United States and other Western donors, which limited its engagement with international financial institutions (ICG, 2002).

ASEAN membership also facilitated increased cultural and economic cooperation. Cambodia and Myanmar have jointly participated in regional forums on Buddhist cultural heritage preservation, counter-human trafficking efforts, and economic connectivity through initiatives like the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) (ERIA, 2017; Alexandra and Mantong, 2022). Their similar political structures, characterized by hybrid or authoritarian regimes, have often resulted in aligned positions within ASEAN, especially when responding to Western criticism (Alexandra and Mantong, 2022).

Since the latest military takeover in Myanmar in 2021, which led to the removal of the elected government, ASEAN has made efforts to support peace and stability in the country. In response to the crisis, ASEAN agreed on a Five-Point Consensus aimed at encouraging dialogue, reducing violence, and promoting a return to normalcy and democratic processes (Kamal, 2021). During its 2022 chairmanship, Cambodia, under the leadership of the then Prime Minister Hun Sen, emphasized a policy of engagement with Myanmar's authorities (Alexandra and Mantong, 2022). This approach focused on dialogue and practical diplomacy, based on the belief that open communication could lead to more constructive outcomes than isolation. By looking at this, ASEAN tried to help Myanmar return to democracy after a military coup in 2021. Cambodia, as the ASEAN chair in 2022, chose to engage directly with Myanmar's military leadership rather than isolating them, believing that open dialogue might be more effective in resolving the crisis (Ministry of Foreign Affairs & International Cooperation, 2022). As part of this approach, Cambodian former Prime Minister Hun Sen appointed his Foreign Minister, Prak Sokhonn, as the ASEAN Special Envoy to Myanmar. Prak Sokhonn made multiple visits to Myanmar in an effort to build trust with the junta and encourage progress on ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus, which called for an end to violence and inclusive dialogue (Strangio, 2022).

Although this engagement strategy was controversial and criticized by some ASEAN members and international observers, Cambodia maintained that dialogue was necessary to pave the way for peace and eventual democratization. However, the approach ultimately faltered, as the Myanmar junta refused to cooperate, continued violent crackdowns, and used negotiations to deflect international pressure (Strangio, 2022).

Both Cambodia and Myanmar have resisted ASEAN reforms aimed at strengthening human rights and democratic enforcement, viewing such measures as threats to sovereignty and regime stability. Nonetheless, Cambodia's stance is more flexible in specific contexts. For instance, during its border conflict with Thailand, Cambodia welcomed ASEAN's involvement and even encouraged greater international engagement. This suggests that Cambodia supports ASEAN intervention when dealing with external disputes but remains cautious when it comes to domestic politics.

Looking ahead, the trajectory of Cambodia–Myanmar relations will likely continue to depend on domestic political developments, China's evolving regional role, and ASEAN's ability to reform. Historical patterns indicate that pragmatic engagement, cultural diplomacy, and adherence to shared principles will remain central to their bilateral relations.

VI. Beyond Bilateral Diplomacy: Subregional and Societal Ties

Subregional Cooperation through the GMS

Beyond bilateral diplomatic relations, Cambodia and Myanmar are both active participants in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) program, which aims to enhance regional economic

integration and infrastructure development across mainland Southeast Asia (ADB, 2024). Although direct trade between them remains modest, both benefit from GMS-led initiatives in transport connectivity, energy cooperation, and environmental management. Since its inception, the GMS Program has mobilized over USD 21 billion in investments region-wide, with Cambodia and Myanmar actively engaged in road upgrades and cross-border transport facilitation (ADB, 2024; GMS, 2019).

Historically, both countries experienced relative isolation due to internal political challenges. However, their ASEAN accession, Myanmar in 1997 and Cambodia in 1999, marked a turning point, enabling deeper integration with regional frameworks like the GMS and fostering greater economic collaboration and connectivity (Than, 2015).

Their cooperation extends beyond economics to include health security and transnational crime prevention (Kunmakara, 2025). This reflects a pragmatic approach to leveraging multilateral frameworks for mutual development and regional stability. Recently, bilateral cooperation against transnational crimes, especially cyber scams and online fraud, has intensified. In August 2025, both governments held high-level discussions focused on information sharing, joint investigations, and repatriation, highlighting a growing commitment to collaborative law enforcement (MOFA, 2025; Kunmakara, 2025).

Emerging Economic Relations

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has played a central role in supporting the GMS program, with a focus on enhancing connectivity, facilitating trade, and promoting investment (ADB, 2024). Within this framework, Myanmar and Cambodia have been able to explore new economic opportunities, particularly in infrastructure and cross-border trade.

Despite Myanmar's political turmoil following the 2021 coup, it has continued engaging with regional partners, including Cambodia (Yang, 2023). Western sanctions have restricted Myanmar's access to global markets but simultaneously encouraged stronger intra-ASEAN trade. As a result, bilateral trade with Cambodia has grown steadily. In 2024, Myanmar's exports to Cambodia reached USD 41.36 million, mainly comprising tobacco and substitutes (USD 28.88 million in 2023), cotton (USD 1.71 million), and smaller volumes of man-made fibers, plastics, and manufactured goods. Meanwhile, Cambodia's exports to Myanmar totaled approximately USD 1.23 million in 2023, including textiles, rubber, footwear, machinery, and paper products (Trading Economics, 2025). Sectors such as agriculture, construction materials, and light manufacturing show promise for further cooperation, given the shared interests and economic complementarities of both countries. Cambodia's sustained political stability and Myanmar's ongoing economic restructuring have created new opportunities for investment and cross-border collaboration, particularly when supported by GMS infrastructure projects (Trading Economics, 2025).

This modest growth reflects a positive trend in trade diversification and the integration of regional supply chains under the GMS and ASEAN frameworks.

Societal and Religious Connections

In addition to growing economic engagement through regional initiatives such as the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) program, Cambodia and Myanmar share deep-rooted cultural and religious ties that continue to shape their bilateral relationship. While formal trade and infrastructure connectivity remain modest, people-to-people exchanges—particularly within the Buddhist monastic community—provide a meaningful layer of soft diplomacy. Cambodian monks have long traveled to Myanmar for advanced Pali studies and monastic training, drawn by the country’s well-established Theravāda Buddhist tradition and its highly respected monastic institutions (Thun, 2025). These spiritual exchanges foster mutual respect and a shared cultural identity that transcends national borders.

This relationship was most recently demonstrated by a humanitarian visit to Shan State by a Cambodian monastic delegation led by senior clergy, including His Royal Highness Prince Aaryavong, Dr. Yon Seng Yeat, and His Royal Highness Prince Som Sokha. Representing Cambodia’s Supreme Patriarch, the delegation provided aid to communities affected by recent natural disasters in Myanmar (Koh Santepheap, 2025). In a situation where thousands have been killed or displaced, this act of compassion not only demonstrated solidarity but also reaffirmed a key Buddhist principle: that the Dhamma, and the values of compassion and mercy, transcend borders (Siri, 2025). This example of spiritual diplomacy highlights how shared religious and cultural heritage can strengthen bilateral ties, especially during times of crisis. It complements more visible economic and political cooperation, reinforcing a multidimensional relationship rooted in both practical interests and moral values.

While formal diplomatic relations provide a foundational framework, the two countries’ engagement within the GMS further underscores the importance of subregional cooperation in advancing economic integration and infrastructure development. Although direct bilateral trade remains limited, both Cambodia and Myanmar benefit from collaborative efforts in transportation, energy, and cross-border trade facilitation. Meanwhile, cultural and religious exchanges, especially the movement of Cambodian monks to Myanmar for study, demonstrate enduring societal bonds rooted in shared Theravāda Buddhist traditions. Together, these layers of cooperation—economic, infrastructural, and cultural—reflect a broader relationship that extends beyond formal diplomacy, pointing toward a future of deeper connectivity, mutual benefit, and regional solidarity.

VII. Conclusion

The relationship between Cambodia and Myanmar, although often understated in political discussions, represents a distinctive form of regional diplomacy marked by indirect engagement, shared cultural heritage, and strategic pragmatism. Both countries trace their roots back to early Indianized kingdoms such as Pagan and Angkor, which laid the foundation for enduring cultural and religious ties—most notably through Theravāda Buddhism. Over centuries, Cambodia and Myanmar have navigated complex regional dynamics with a remarkable degree of adaptation and resilience.

Colonial rule disrupted their historical trajectories, leaving different institutional legacies in each country. This divergence, coupled with the isolating effects of the Cold War, limited direct bilateral ties for much of the 20th century. However, their membership in ASEAN brought them into closer alignment, emphasizing common diplomatic principles such as respect for national sovereignty, the principle of non-interference, and consensus-based decision-making. These shared values continue to guide their engagement today.

Contemporary relations, especially Cambodia's involvement in Myanmar's ongoing political crisis, cannot be fully understood without acknowledging this deep historical and cultural context. While much attention is often focused on ASEAN as a collective body or on the internal politics of each country, the bilateral ties between Cambodia and Myanmar tell a richer story of continuity and mutual influence. Their relationship illustrates how longstanding cultural connections and pragmatic diplomacy coexist amid periods of political turbulence and change.

As both nations face uncertain futures, their partnership offers valuable lessons in resilience, adaptability, and the importance of maintaining regional unity. Cambodia and Myanmar's experiences highlight how Southeast Asian countries balance respect for sovereignty with the need for cooperative engagement, even in times of crisis.

The Cambodia–Myanmar relationship provides important insights into how Southeast Asian states sustain meaningful bilateral relations while responding to broader regional transformations. It underscores the enduring influence of historical legacies, cultural affinity, and institutional frameworks in shaping the patterns of diplomacy within mainland Southeast Asia. Understanding this relationship deepens our appreciation of the complexities and subtleties that define regional politics today.

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Chapter 6

Cambodia and Maritime Southeast Asia: Political–Security and Economic Relations

LUY Ung Techhong and Dr. PO Sovinda

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- III. Cambodia–Indonesia Relations**
- IV. Cambodia–Malaysia Relations**
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- VI. Cambodia–Singapore Relations**
- VII. Cambodia–Timor–Leste**
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I. Introduction

As a mainland country in Southeast Asia, Cambodia shares land borders with Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam, and has long-standing historical interactions with these neighboring nations. Nonetheless, Cambodia's cultural exchanges and maritime trade relations with Maritime Southeast Asia date back centuries—long before the emergence of modern post-colonial nation-states. Building on Alvin Cheng-Hin Lim's chapter in the previous edition (Lim, 2017), this chapter extends the discussion by examining Cambodia's evolving relationship with the maritime Southeast Asian nations in contemporary times.

This chapter examines Cambodia's relation with maritime Southeast Asian nations in two domains: economic and security. The study covers the period from 2016 to 2025. We focus on this timeframe for two reasons. First, we aim to build on Lim's chapter, "Cambodia and Maritime Southeast Asia," which primarily discusses the historical foundations and developments of Cambodia's bilateral relations with the region. Our contribution, therefore, is to expand upon his analysis by providing systematic documentation and assessment of political-security and economic cooperation between Cambodia and the maritime Southeast Asian nations—areas not comprehensively addressed in the previous edition.

Diplomatic relations between Cambodia and maritime Southeast Asian nations have experienced trials and tribulations since independence from France. As shown in Table 1, three out of six maritime Southeast Asian nations suspended diplomatic ties with Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge regime and the subsequent civil war. The 1990s marked the wave of renewed diplomatic engagement, beginning with Malaysia in 1991, followed by the Philippines and Singapore in 1995. Indonesia and Brunei were the outliers: the former celebrated 65 years of uninterrupted diplomatic relations in 2024, while the latter only formalized ties with Cambodia in 1992. Timor-Leste—newly admitted member of ASEAN—was the last among the maritime Southeast Asian nations to establish diplomatic relations with Cambodia in 2002.

Table 1. Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between Cambodia and the Maritime Southeast Asian Nations

Country	Year of Establishment	Notes	
Indonesia	1957	Longest uninterrupted diplomatic relations between Cambodia and the maritime ASEAN nations.	
Malaysia	1957 / 1991	Relations were interrupted during the Khmer Rouge regime and civil war.	Re-established in Nov 1991
Philippines	1957 / 1995		Re-established in Nov 1995
Singapore	1965 / 1995		Re-established in Nov 1995
Brunei	1992	Established following Brunei's independence in 1984 and the signing of the 1991 Paris Peace Agreements.	
Timor-Leste	2002	Most recently established among the six maritime Southeast Asian nations.	

As shown in Table 2, former PM Hun Sen visited Malaysia, Timor-Leste, Brunei, and Indonesia over a period of three years (2016–2019), prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and Cambodia's leadership transition in 2023 from Hun Sen to Hun Manet. The limited foreign engagement during that time may be attributed to Cambodia's tumultuous socio-political environment. In contrast, within less than a year in office, Prime Minister Hun Manet has shown a more proactive approach to foreign engagement with maritime Southeast Asian nations—visiting Malaysia first, followed by Singapore, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

Table 2. High-Level Visits of Cambodian Leaders to Maritime Southeast Asian Nations

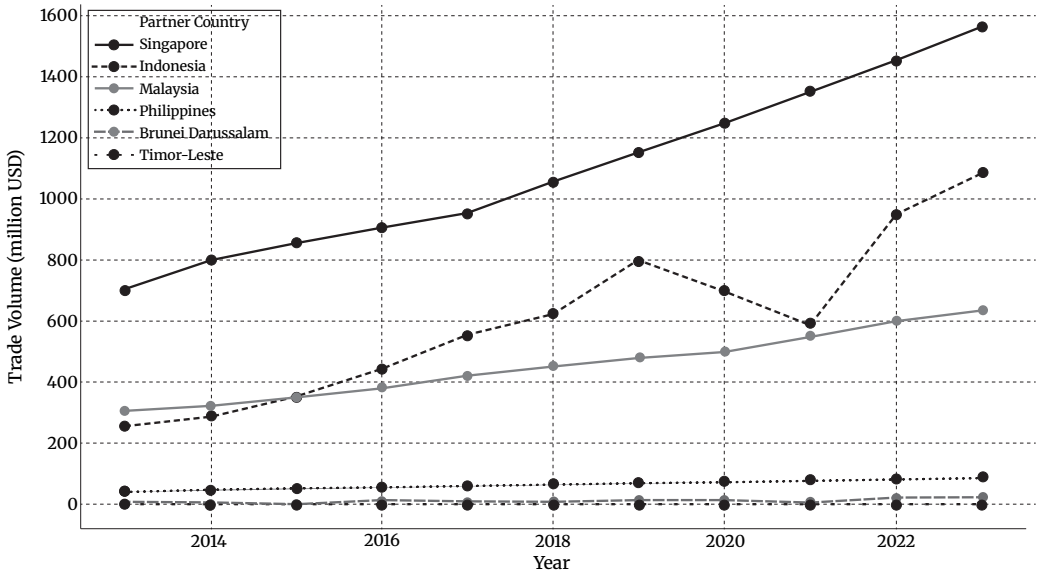
Date	Cambodian Leader	Country	Purpose / Occasion
3-4 Jun 2016	Hun Sen	Malaysia	Official Visit: Met with PM Najib Razak to explore areas of cooperation in trade and investment, youth, tourism, information/broadcasting, as well as the halal sector (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Cambodia, 2016a).
19-20 Aug 2016		Timor-Leste	Official Visit: Met with PM Rui Maria de Araújo and attended the 41 st anniversary of FALINTIL Day; signed agreements on economic cooperation, visa exemption, and labor. PM Hun Sen also pledged scholarships, proposed rice exports, and reaffirmed Cambodia's support for Timor-Leste's ASEAN and WTO accession (Government of Timor-Leste, 2016).
5-7 Oct 2017		Brunei	State Visit: Attended the Sultan's 50 th Anniversary Jubilee celebrations at the invitation of Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah (Office of the Council of Ministers of Cambodia, 2017).
20 Oct 2019		Indonesia	Official Visit: Attended President Joko Widodo's second-term inauguration ceremony in Jakarta; paid a courtesy call on President Widodo (Office of the Council of Ministers of Cambodia, 2019).

27 Feb 2024	Hun Manet	Malaysia	Official Visit: Conducted a one-day visit to Kuala Lumpur at the invitation of PM Anwar Ibrahim (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Malaysia, 2024).
18-19 Jun 2024		Singapore	Official Visit: Held bilateral talks with PM Lawrence Wong and witnessed the signing of the MOU on Cooperation on Digital Government (Prime Minister's Office of Singapore, 2025).
20 Oct 2024		Indonesia	Official Visit: Attended the swearing-in ceremony of President Prabowo Subianto in Jakarta (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Cambodia, 2024a).
10-11 Feb 2025		Philippines	State Visit: Met with President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. in Manila to bolster bilateral cooperation, resulting in the signing of eight agreements (Khmer Times, 2025).
5-7 May 2025	Hun Sen	Indonesia	Working Visit: (as Senate President): Led a high-level delegation to Jakarta for bilateral discussions and regional cooperation meetings (Cabinet Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia, 2025).
7-9 May 2025	Hun Sen	Timor-Leste	Official Visit: (as Senate President) - Met with the President, Prime Minister, and National Parliament Speaker to reaffirm the commitment to further strengthening Cambodia-Timor-Leste relations in trade, economic development, tourism, and investment. Also delivered a special lecture at the Presidential Palace and addressed the plenary session of the National Parliament (Government of Timor-Leste, 2025a).

Graph 1 shows that Singapore ranks first in terms of bilateral trade volume with Cambodia, followed by Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Brunei, and Timor-Leste. From 2013 to 2023, bilateral trade with Singapore expanded steadily, reaching approximately USD 1.56 billion in 2023, underscoring Singapore's position as Cambodia's principal trade partner in maritime Southeast Asia. Indonesia and Malaysia switched positions in 2016 when Indonesia surpassed Malaysia and, by 2023, became the second country—after

Singapore—to exceed USD 1 billion in bilateral trade with Cambodia. In contrast, trade with the Philippines, Brunei, and Timor-Leste has remained relatively modest and largely stagnant over the same period, with 2023 volumes recorded at around USD 90 million, USD 24.6 million, and USD 6,000, respectively.

Graph 1. Cambodia’s Bilateral Trade with Maritime Southeast Asian Nations (2014 – 2023, in million USD)



Source: Author’s Calculation Based on UN Comtrade Database

II. Cambodia-Brunei Relations

Cambodia and Brunei established diplomatic relations in 1992. It is important to note that Brunei’s foreign policy is generally low-key, characterized by a careful balance between major powers to protect its national interests. As one of the claimant states in the South China Sea, Brunei has maintained a non-confrontational stance—the only claimant without a military presence in the SCS)—while simultaneously deepening trade relations with China (Siu, 2024). The sultanate’s relatively small GDP compared with other ASEAN members further reinforces its focus on economic development. Among the six maritime Southeast Asian countries, Cambodia’s bilateral relations with Brunei demonstrate one of the lowest levels of engagement in both economic and political-security domains. Nevertheless, it is widely known that Senate President and former Prime Minister Hun Sen and His Majesty Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah share a close personal relationship, with the ex-PM referring to the Sultan as his godbrother (Torn, 2024a).

Political-Security Relations

As the longest-serving prime minister in Southeast Asia prior to the 2023 power transition, and with Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah being the longest-reigning monarch in the region, the relationship between the two leaders has long been grounded in mutual respect. During his tenure as prime minister, Hun Sen attended the Golden Jubilee celebration marking the Sultan’s 50th anniversary of accession to the throne (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Cambodia, 2017). The two families also appear intent on maintaining this tradition of close ties into the next generation, as evidenced by their meetings on various occasions. In 2024, for instance, the Sultan and his son made a private stop in Phnom Penh for a brief “family breakfast,” joined by Hun Sen’s three sons (Khmer Times, 2024a). Such personal friendships between the two leaders have played a significant role in sustaining Cambodia-Brunei relations, fostering continuity and goodwill at the leadership level despite the otherwise limited depth of institutional and economic engagement between the two nations.

In terms of security cooperation, Cambodia and Brunei share few overlapping strategic interests, resulting in limited cooperation in this domain. This divergence largely stems from their differing security priorities. For Cambodia, the focus remains on the modernization of ground forces and land-based defense capabilities, while Brunei prioritizes the acquisition of maritime assets to defend its territorial waters and exclusive economic zone. Since 2010, more than half of Brunei’s total arms transfer have been patrol boats and corvettes, all of which are acquired from Germany, the kingdom’s largest arms supplier (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, n.d.). These differing orientations have constrained the scope for direct bilateral cooperation, though both countries continue to engage within multilateral frameworks such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting (ADMM) and ADMM-Plus, where shared commitments to regional peace and stability provide a platform for limited but constructive security dialogue.

Table 3 summarizes key events of Cambodia and Brunei’s security cooperation.

Table 3. Military Exchanges Between Cambodia and Brunei

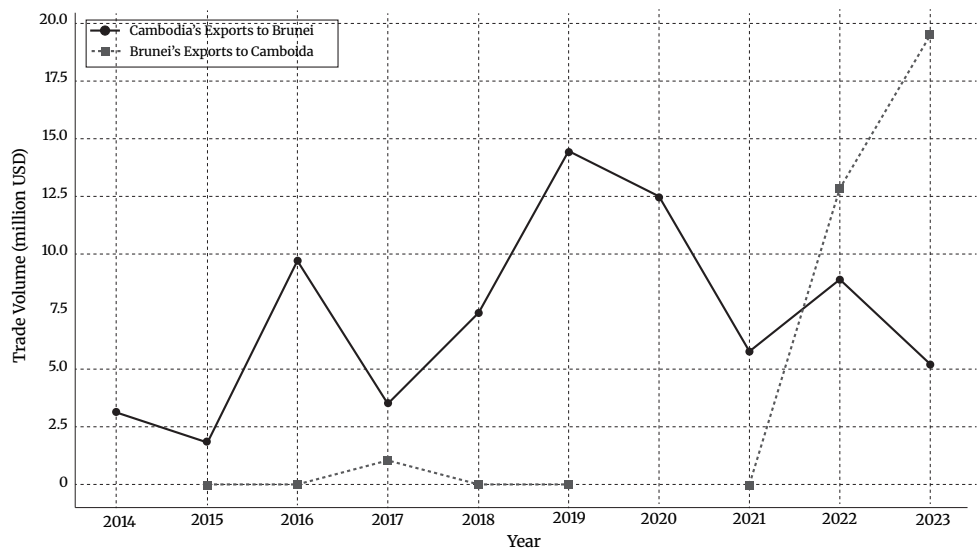
Date	Cooperation Activity	Outcome / Agreements
23-26 Jul 2019	Introductory visit of RCAF Deputy Commander-in-Chief / Army Chief Lt. Gen. Hun Manet to Brunei	Discussed defense cooperation and matters of mutual interest; toured Brunei’s military institutions (Mathew, 2022a).
4 Jan 2022	Video conference between RCAF Commander-in-Chief Gen. Vong Pisen and RBAF Commander Maj. Gen. Haszaimi	Reaffirmed bilateral ties and invited Brunei’s commander to attend the ASEAN Chiefs Meeting in Phnom Penh in March 2022 (Ministry of Information of Cambodia, 2021).

18–20 Sep 2025	Maj. Gen. Dato Paduka Seri Haji Muhammad Haszaimi bin Bol Hassan, Commander of RBAF made his first official visit to the Kingdom of Cambodia	Met with Gen. Vong Pisen, Commander-in-Chief of the RCAF, and reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening bilateral defence ties and expanding collaborative opportunities to promote regional peace and stability. Also paid courtesy calls on Senate President Hun Sen, President of the Senate, PM Hun Manet, and Gen. Yun Min of the Ministry of Defense (Ministry of Defense of Brunei Darussalam, 2025).

Economic Relations

Graph 2 illustrates bilateral trade between Cambodia and Brunei between 2014 and 2023. Notably, trade between the two countries was largely one-sided prior to 2022. In that year Brunei exported tens of millions of dollars’ worth of fertilizers’ and natural gas’ to Cambodia—a significant increase compared to the previous years. This shift likely reflects Cambodia’s growing demand for energy and agricultural inputs amid its expanding industrial and agricultural sectors. On the other hand, Cambodia’s exports to Brunei have fluctuated over the last decade, though rice has consistently remained the dominant export commodity, with a cumulative value of nearly USD 100 million between 2014 and 2023. Despite Brunei’s small market size, Cambodia has sustained a relatively stable trade relationship with the sultanate, suggesting that economic engagement—while limited in scope—remains mutually beneficial and responsive to sectoral needs in both economies.

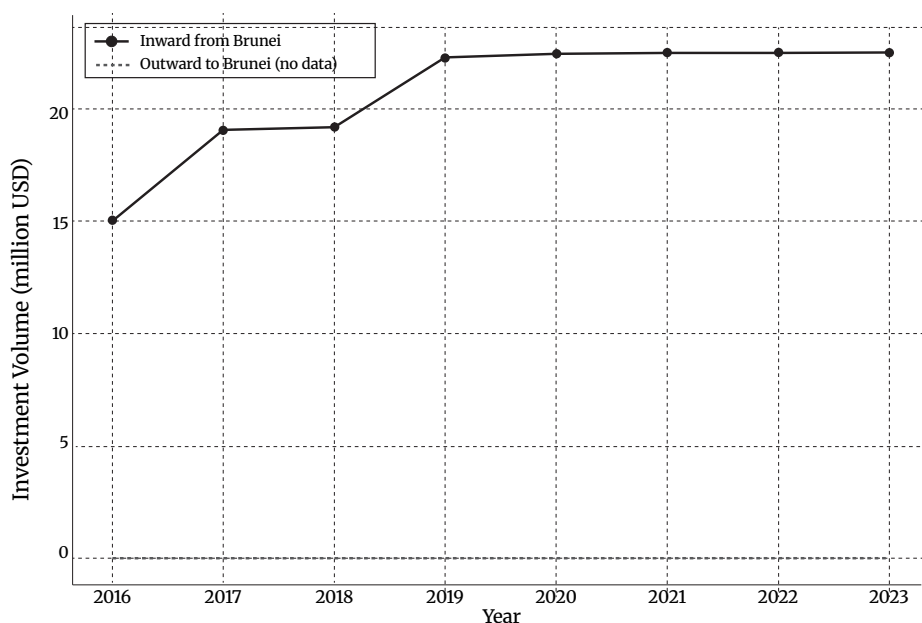
Graph 2. Cambodia–Brunei’s Bilateral Trade (2014–2023)



Source: Author’s Calculation Based on UN Comtrade Database

Graph 3 shows the bilateral investment flows between Cambodia and Brunei. Brunei's investment in Cambodia increased from approximately USD 15 million in 2016 to USD 25 million in 2023 but has remained stagnant over the past 5 years. Data on Cambodian investment in the sultanate are unavailable in this dataset, likely indicating minimal activity. This pattern reflects broader structural factors: both countries are developing economies and primarily act as recipients, rather than sources, of foreign direct investment (FDI).

Graph 3. Cambodia–Brunei Direct Investment (2016–2023)



Source: Author's calculation based on IMF's *Direct Investment Positions by Counterpart Economy* dataset (formerly *Coordinated Direct Investment Survey*, or CDIS).

Note: No available database available for Cambodia's outward investment to Brunei.

III. Cambodia–Indonesia Relations

Cambodia and Indonesia have enjoyed an amicable relationship over the past decade. Similar to other maritime Southeast Asian nations, the two countries regularly engage in dialogues on the sidelines of ASEAN summits and related forums. Former PM Hun Sen attended President Joko Widodo's second inauguration—a tradition that has continued under PM Hun Manet. The Cambodia–Indonesia Joint Commission (JCBC) on bilateral cooperation has also been periodically convened to explore new areas of partnership, with the fifth one held in August 2024 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Cambodia, 2024b).

Political-Security Relations

In early 2022, then-Prime Minister Hun Sen of Cambodia, serving as ASEAN Chair, became the first foreign leader to visit Myanmar following the military coup. While this move was seen as a bold diplomatic gesture, Indonesian President Joko Widodo expressed caution, emphasizing that ASEAN's approach should strictly adhere to the Five-Point Consensus and avoid signaling support for the Myanmar military (Seah, 2022). He also highlighted that recent actions by the junta, including the extension of Aung San Suu Kyi's sentence shortly after Hun Sen's visit, undermined ASEAN's collective efforts to resolve the crisis (Cabinet Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia, 2022). Despite these differences in approach to Myanmar, Cambodia and Indonesia maintained a steady diplomatic engagement, laying the groundwork for deeper cooperation under the next Indonesian administration.

Since President Prabowo Subianto assumed office in 2024, Cambodia-Indonesia bilateral relations have warmed considerably. The two countries have ratified the Indonesia-Cambodia Defense Cooperation and Hun Sen has paid an official visit to Indonesia, where he received a state-level reception described by Cambodian Senate spokesperson as "equivalent to that given to a head of state and far exceeding the protocol of a routine working visit" (Fresh News, 2025). The three-day visit featured discussions on cooperation in sectors such as food and energy security, trade, and tourism, as well as joint efforts to address cross-border crime.

The increase in cooperation between the two countries has also been evident in their efforts to combat transnational human trafficking and cybercrime. In the first half of 2025 alone, the Ministry of Indonesian Migrant Workers Protection identified more than 80,000 illegal migrants working in Cambodia and successfully repatriated around 500 Indonesians who were trapped in online gambling operations (ANTARA News, 2025). Data from the Indonesian embassy in Cambodia indicate that there were approximately 2500 cases involving Indonesian citizens in online scams in 2024, with around 2000 additional cases already recorded in the first half 2025 alone, the number of scam-related cases has already reached around 2000 cases (Voice of Indonesia, 2025). The urgency of these issues is expected to lead to the signing of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) between the two countries in the near future.

In terms of security cooperation, Cambodia maintains its most active military engagement with Indonesia compared to the other maritime Southeast Asian nations. Collaboration extends beyond traditional military exchanges to include information sharing on terrorism and transnational crime, senior-level defense personnel exchanges, and capacity-building projects. In terms of security cooperation, Cambodia maintains its most active military engagement with Indonesia compared to other maritime Southeast Asian nations. Collaboration extends beyond traditional military exchanges to include information sharing on terrorism and transnational crime, senior-level defense personnel exchanges, and capacity-building projects. Notably, Indonesia is the only nation in the region that has provided training assistance to the Cambodian Air Force, the Special Forces Command, and

the Bodyguard Headquarters (BHQ), benefiting more than 6,000 personnel (ANTARA News, 2015). Furthermore, no other maritime Southeast Asian country has contributed military equipment to Cambodia, highlighting Indonesia's unique role in strengthening Cambodian defense capabilities.

Notably, Indonesia is the only nation in the region that has provided training assistance to the Cambodian Air Force, the Special Forces Command, and the Bodyguard Headquarters (BHQ), benefitting more than 6,000 personnel (ANTARA News, 2015). Furthermore, no other maritime Southeast Asian country other than Indonesia has contributed military equipment to Cambodia.

Table 4. Military Exchanges Between Cambodia and Indonesia

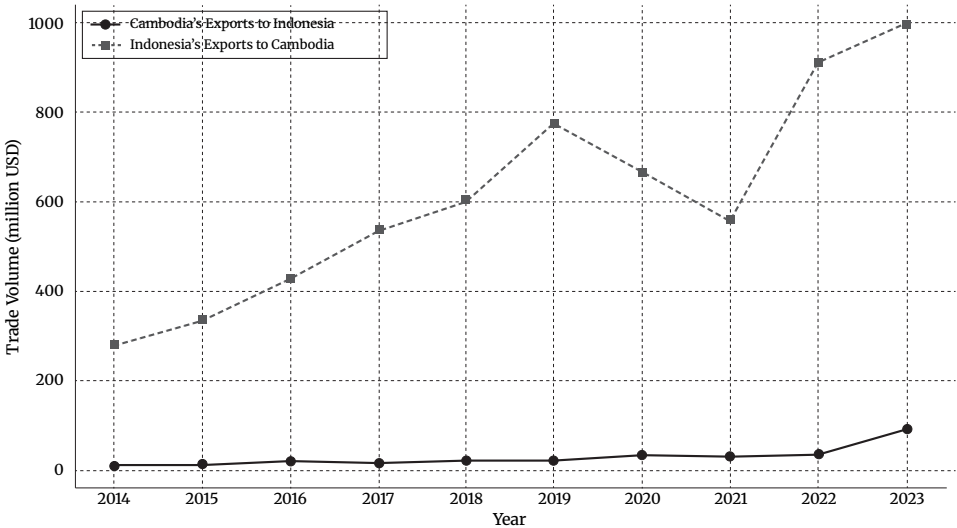
Date (Year)	Cooperation Activity	Outcome / Agreements
11 Aug 2016	Official visit of Indonesian Defence Minister Ryamizard Ryacudu to Cambodia	Agreed to pursue a memorandum of understanding covering all sectors of defence; MOU signed in the same year (Khmer Times, 2016).
21 Aug 2024	6th Joint Commission meeting (Phnom Penh) co-chaired by Indonesian FM Retno Marsudi and Cambodian Deputy PM Sok Chenda Sophea	Cambodia expressed interest in purchasing Indonesian military equipment (helicopters, weapons); Indonesia invited Cambodia to visit defense industry facilities and the Indo Defense Expo 2024 (Khmer Times, 2024b).
29 Aug 2024	Handover of Indonesian military aid to Cambodia	Donation of firearms and ammunition worth half a million USD delivered to the RCAF, marking 65 years of bilateral ties and reaffirming close military cooperation (The Jakarta Post, 2024).
28 Oct 2024	Official signing of Law No. 70 on Indonesia-Cambodia Defense Cooperation	President Prabowo Subianto ratified a defense cooperation law with Cambodia as part of efforts to strengthen Indonesia's defense capabilities through international partnerships. The law aims to enhance dialogue, knowledge exchange, and defense technology collaboration between Indonesia and Cambodia, contributing to regional security and creating opportunities for Indonesian arms exports to Cambodia (ANTARA News, 2024).

Economic Relations

Graph 4 shows bilateral trade between Cambodia and Indonesia from 2014 to 2023. Indonesia ranks second in exports to Cambodia, after Singapore. In 2023, Cambodia imported nearly USD 1 billion worth of Indonesian goods, roughly ten times the value of Cambodia’s exports to Indonesia, which stood at around USD 90 million. Indonesia’s exports to Cambodia are highly concentrated: coal⁵ and cigarettes⁶ alone accounted for about 65% of total imports, or over USD 600 million (The Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2025a). The coal imported is most likely used primarily for steel production to support the kingdom’s construction sector and generate energy through coal-fired plants that supply approximately 40% of Cambodia’s electricity (Mathew, 2022b). Tobacco imports meet the consumption needs of roughly 10% of the population and sustain a multimillion-dollar industry (The Tobacco Atlas, 2025). Additionally, Indonesia’s fuel⁷ represented about 9% of Cambodia’s total fuel imports and is expected to continue rising. Although a ceasefire agreement and a peace deal between Cambodia and Thailand were reached following the July border clashes, consumer sentiment toward Thai products in general has shifted drastically. Even if the ban on Thai fuel imports is lifted, many Cambodians will likely continue to boycott the country’s largest Thai-owned gas station chain. A group of Cambodian franchise owners have even rebranded their outlets to distance themselves from the boycott (Lon, 2025).

Cambodia’s exports to Indonesia are more diversified but significantly smaller in volume. Mechanical parts, including semiconductor devices,⁸ constitute about 25% of exports, while garment products—both knitted and non-knitted clothing⁹—account for roughly 30%. Rice, a traditional Cambodian export, makes up only around 7.5% of total exports to Indonesia (The Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2025b). Despite this relatively small share, Indonesia has committed to purchasing 250,000 tonnes of Cambodian milled rice annually, ensuring a stable market for this key export (Hin, 2024).

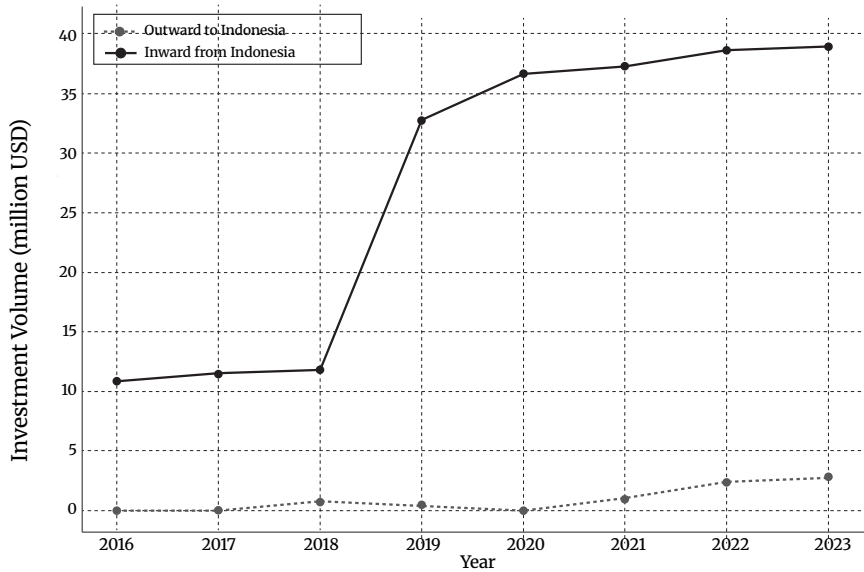
Graph 4. Cambodia-Indonesia Bilateral Trade (2014–2023)



Source: Author’s Calculation Based on UN Comtrade Database

Graph 5 shows direct investment flows between Cambodia and Indonesia. Despite Indonesia's trillion-dollar economy, its investment in Cambodia remains relatively low. Over the past decade, total Indonesian investment in Cambodia has amounted to less than USD 30 million. However, there is significant potential for growth, particularly in Cambodia's emerging halal market, where Malaysia has already taken the lead in establishing a dedicated halal association in Cambodia. Meanwhile, Cambodia's outward foreign direct investment is extremely low in general, and its investment in Indonesia is no exception.

Graph 5. Cambodia-Indonesia Direct Investment (2014–2023)



Source: Author's calculation based on IMF's Direct Investment Positions by Counterpart Economy dataset (formerly Coordinated Direct Investment Survey, or CDIS).

IV. Cambodia-Malaysia Relations

Malaysia was among the first ASEAN member states to re-engage Cambodia in the 1990s, and over the past decade, the partnership has expanded across diplomatic, trade, and investment domains. Prominent Malaysian companies have invested in Cambodia's finance, media and entertainment, real estate, and energy sectors. Although Cambodia is a Buddhist-majority country, the presence of an ethnic Cham Muslim minority in Cambodia provides a religious and cultural bridge between the two societies. Reflecting this connection, the Cambodian government appointed a Senior Minister in charge of Islamic Affairs. Malaysia was also the first maritime Southeast Asian nation that PM Hun Manet visited after taking office in 2023. Further deepening this relationship, PM Anwar announced at the end of 2024 that he had appointed former Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen as his "advisor" and would consult with him as an "elder statesman" (Azmi, 2024). Despite these positive developments, certain sensitive issues have periodically complicated bilateral relations.

Political-Security Relations

Among the maritime Southeast Asian nations, Malaysia appears to be the most politically entangled with Cambodia, with instances over the past decade having direct implications for Cambodia's domestic politics. Citing ASEAN's principle of non-interference, successive Malaysian governments—under both PM Mahathir Mohamad and PM Anwar Ibrahim—have on two occasions unilaterally expelled Cambodian exiled opposition politicians, first in 2019 and again as recently as 2023, effectively preventing their supposed transit to Cambodia (Strangio, 2023). While these actions drew criticism and controversy, the Malaysian government has consistently maintained that it would not allow foreign opposition movements to use Malaysia as a platform for political activities (Khmer Times, 2023a). Nonetheless, three Malaysian non-executive MPs met with the exiled politician, and such instances will continue to complicate Cambodia-Malaysia relations in the foreseeable future (Benar News, 2023).

However, both governments have continued to cooperate on the basis of non-interference. In 2024, the Malaysian government extradited a Cambodian migrant worker at the request of its Cambodian counterpart (Lau, 2024). In an exclusive interview with Al Jazeera (2025), Malaysian PM Anwar Ibrahim was pressed on this particular case and spent much of the discussion explaining why he could not take a risk that would affect bilateral relations with Cambodia. This is a clear signal that Putrajaya will continue to work with Phnom Penh to navigate these highly sensitive issues.

The Cambodia-Thailand border clashes during Malaysia's 2025 ASEAN Chairmanship marked a defining moment in contemporary Cambodia-Malaysia relations. With the support of the United States, PM Anwar Ibrahim successfully brokered a ceasefire agreement between Cambodia and Thailand to end a bloody five-day conflict that had claimed dozens of lives and displaced hundreds of thousands of Cambodian and Thai civilians along the border. Thanks partially to the diplomatic and economic pressures from external powers, the two kingdoms managed to resolve their dispute, at least temporarily, within the ASEAN framework, thereby reinforcing ASEAN centrality and contributing to regional stability (Muhammad, 2025). Cambodian PM Hun Manet commended PM Anwar's mediation efforts in facilitating the ceasefire (Mohamad Yusof & Khao, 2025). The ceasefire was further solidified by the Joint Declaration signed in Kuala Lumpur on 26 October 2025 by Cambodian PM Hun Manet and Thai PM Anutin Charnvirakul, witnessed by Malaysian PM Anwar Ibrahim and U.S. President Donald J. Trump. During the ceremony, Hun Manet once again expressed its appreciation for Malaysia's mediation role as the current ASEAN Chair.

Similar to the case of Indonesia, the repatriation of Malaysians who fell victim to job scam syndicates operating as illegal casinos and scam call centers in Cambodia has been on the rise (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Malaysia, 2025). Efforts to rescue and repatriate Malaysian nationals have been reported since 2022, as both governments collaborate to share intelligence on online scam activities, create preventive measures, and expedite the repatriation process (Som, 2025).

High-level defense officials from both sides have exchanged visits in recent years. The two nations are expected to continue to cooperate on capacity-building through the Malaysian Defence Cooperation Programme (MDCP) and to explore other areas of cooperation, including Army-to-Army Staff Talk, Subject Matter Expert Exchange (SMEE), junior officers exchanges, and bilateral or multilateral joint Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) exercises. As part of Malaysia's commitment to the Cambodia-Thailand ceasefire agreements, the 2025 ASEAN Chair has deployed an Augmented Interim Observer Team (IOT) to Cambodia to monitor the implementation of the ceasefire. This temporary arrangement, led by Brigadier General Dato' Pahlawan Asri bin Shukor (Malaysia Military Times, 2025), is expected to be replaced by the formal ASEAN Observer Team in line with the Joint Declaration signed in Kuala Lumpur.

Table 5. Military Exchanges Between Cambodia and Malaysia

Date (Year)	Cooperation Activity	Outcome / Agreements
23 Feb 2015	Official visit of Malaysian Defence Minister Hishammuddin to Phnom Penh	Cambodia agreed to support an ASEAN peacekeeping force; a Letter of Intent on bilateral defense cooperation was signed (The Star, 2015).
3 Mar 2022	Official visit of Malaysian Army Chief Gen. Zamrose Mohd Zain to Cambodia	Noted improved friendship and cooperation; agreed to expand army-to-army ties (including human resource development and cybersecurity) and considered launching Army Staff Talks (Fresh News, 2022).
9 Oct 2023	Meeting in Phnom Penh between RCAF Commander-in-Chief Gen. Vong Pisen and Malaysia's Defence Attaché Col. Nazlee Abdul Rahim	Acknowledged over 66 years of ties and committed to continuing joint drills, personnel training, peacekeeping and anti-trafficking cooperation (Som, 2025).
22 Apr 2025	Official visit by Gen. Tan Sri Dato' Wira Muhammad Hafizuddeain Jantan, Commander of the Malaysian Army, to Gen. Vong Pisen, Gen. Mao Sophan, and PM Hun Manet	Vowed to strengthen cooperation in professional military education and exchange programs, bilateral training opportunities, information sharing and strategic dialogue, capacity building and technical cooperation; an MOU to be signed in near future (Phuong, 2025).

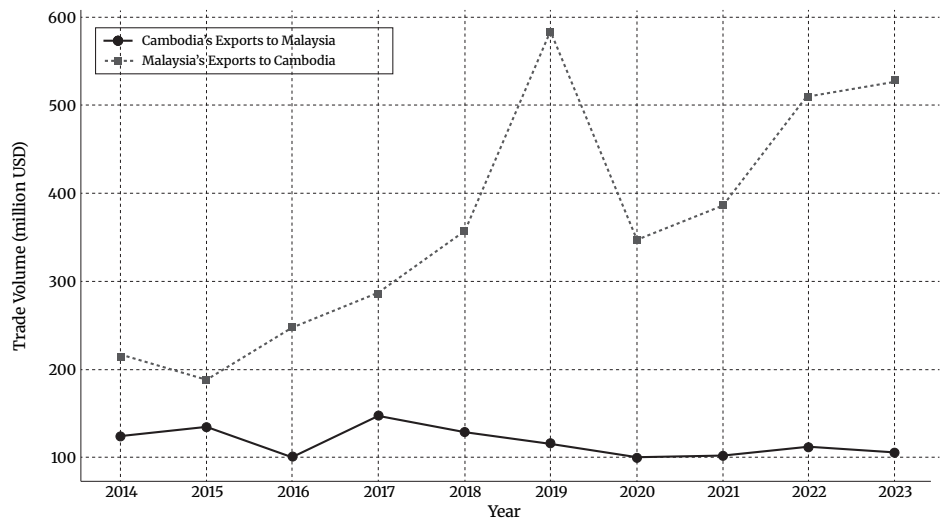
Economic Relations

Similar to other maritime Southeast Asian countries, Graph 6 indicates that Cambodia maintains a substantial trade deficit with Malaysia. Malaysian exports to Cambodia increased steadily for four consecutive years (2015–2019) prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and have since returned to pre-pandemic levels. The most recent data indicate that approximately 35 percent of Malaysia’s exports to Cambodia consist of petroleum and liquefied natural gas (LNG), 15 percent are fabrics, and 10 percent are aluminum wires.

Prior to the border skirmishes with Thailand, a reciprocal ban between the two kingdoms restricted many Thai products, most notably fuel (Al Jazeera, 2025). In 2023, Cambodia imported around USD 1.8 billion worth of fuel, equivalent to approximately 40 percent of its total fuel requirements from Thailand, highlighting the need to secure alternative sources. Among the three maritime Southeast Asian nations supplying fuel to Cambodia, Malaysia ranks third with around 5 percent of total fuel imports, behind Singapore at approximately 13 percent and Indonesia at approximately 9 percent (The Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2025c). Collectively, these three nations supplied roughly 27 percent of Cambodia’s fuel needs in 2023 and could potentially increase their share if tensions with Thailand persist.

While Cambodia depends on Malaysia and other neighbors for key imports such as fuel, its exports to Malaysia remain an important component of bilateral trade. Cambodian exports are dominated by GTF (garment, travel goods, and footwear) products, accounting for around 60 percent, and rice, representing approximately 20 percent of total exports. Both categories are expected to continue growing as Cambodia maintains competitiveness in these markets (The Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2025d). Furthermore, both countries are in discussions to establish the Malaysia–Cambodia Joint Trade Committee (JTC), which would serve as a formal platform to promote trade and investment opportunities (Bernama, 2025).

Graph 6. Cambodia–Malaysia Bilateral Trade (2014–2023)



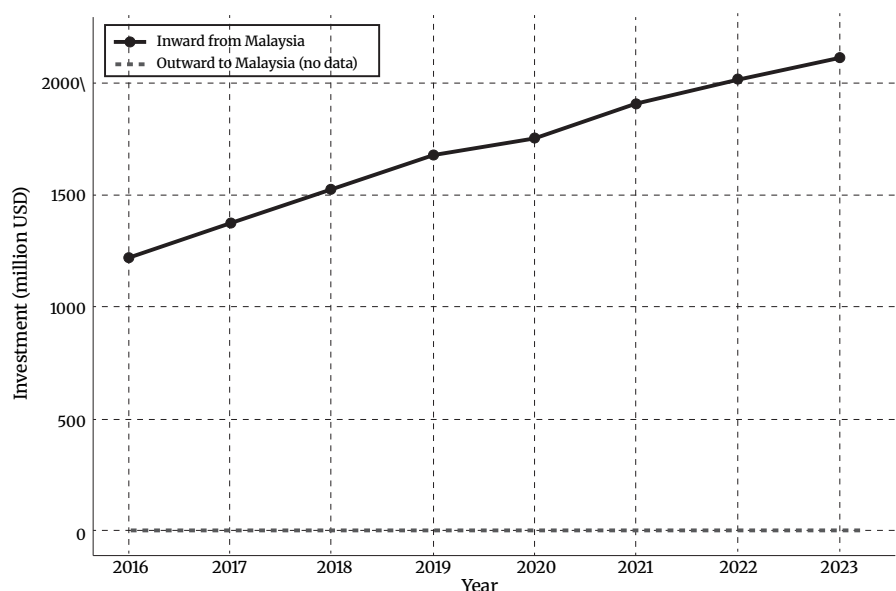
Source: Author’s Calculation Based on UN Comtrade Database

Graph 7 indicates that Malaysia, alongside Singapore, remains among the top ten largest investors in Cambodia (National Bank of Cambodia, 2024). Data on Cambodian investment in Malaysia are not available; this absence may suggest that outward Cambodian investment in Malaysia is minimal. Over the past decade, prominent Malaysian companies have invested approximately USD 2.1 billion in Cambodia's economy, up from USD 1.2 billion in 2016, representing an increase of around 75 percent.

Key investors include major financial institutions such as Maybank, RHB, CIMB, and Campu; the telecommunications company Smart Axiata; Malaysian-owned media outlets including Khmer Times and the Phnom Penh Post; and NagaWorld, a major casino-hotel complex in Phnom Penh, which generated USD 562.5 million in revenue in 2024, remaining the city's only integrated casino-hotel facility (GGRAsia, 2025).

Malaysia has also identified Cambodia's untapped halal industry as a potential avenue for investment. Senior Malaysian officials have publicly supported the establishment of a halal association in Cambodia, aiming to provide local producers with a clear regulatory framework and enable the export of halal-certified goods to Muslim-majority countries in the region and beyond (Sum, 2025). Construction is currently underway for Cambodia's first halal-focused special economic zone (SEZ) in Kandal Province, which is expected to integrate the country into the global trillion-dollar halal economy and diversify its trade profile (Whitehead, 2024).

Graph 7. Cambodia–Malaysia Direct Investment (2016–2023)



Source: Author's calculation based on IMF's Direct Investment Positions by Counterpart Economy dataset (formerly Coordinated Direct Investment Survey, or CDIS).

Note: No available database available for Cambodia's outward investment to Brunei.

V. Cambodia-Philippines Relations

The new-generation leaders, Prime Minister Hun Manet and President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., met during the latter's official visit to the Philippines in early 2025 (Taing, 2025). In anticipation of their nations' 70th anniversary of diplomatic relations, eight agreements were signed covering areas such as agriculture, tourism, vocational training, taxation, information technology, and digital government services. The leaders met again during President Marcos Jr.'s state visit to Cambodia in September 2025, demonstrating a shared commitment to exploring untapped opportunities to strengthen bilateral relations.

During the recent visit, additional agreements were concluded on police cooperation, higher education, and air services. Although the Filipino community in Cambodia is relatively small, numbering approximately 7,000 individuals primarily employed in education and healthcare, an increasing number of Filipinos have migrated to Cambodia in search of high-paying jobs and have subsequently fallen victim to trafficking in scam-related operations. Reported cases of scam-related victimization increased by around 125 percent compared to 2024; the memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the Philippine National Police and the Cambodian National Police aims to enhance cooperation in combating human trafficking and transnational crime (Nop, 2025).

Furthermore, one of the agreements pertained to air services. Currently, only a single direct route exists between Phnom Penh and Manila, operated by Philippine Airlines. A previous direct route from Siem Reap to Manila, operated by Cebu Pacific, was suspended in 2019 due to low demand (Senase, 2019). The renewed focus on air connectivity indicates both governments' intention to facilitate tourism and strengthen people-to-people exchanges. Collectively, these developments reflect a deepening of bilateral relations across multiple sectors, signaling a new era of partnership grounded in mutual respect and shared interests.

Political-Security Relations

From a broader regional perspective, and in the context of ASEAN and the disputed territories in the West Philippine Sea (South China Sea), the Philippines has previously expressed frustration with Cambodia's position, particularly during its ASEAN Chairmanship in 2012 and the subsequent reluctance to endorse a common stance on the Permanent Court of Arbitration's ruling in 2016 (BBC, 2012). As Manila recalibrated its foreign policy toward closer ties with China under Duterte, bilateral relations appeared more amicable. President Duterte's state visit to Cambodia in 2016 concluded with several agreements, including an MOU on transnational crime, memoranda of agreement on sports and labor cooperation, and a tourism cooperation agreement aimed at promoting direct flights and exchange programs (Ranada, 2016).

The Philippine Army has supported the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF) through training programs covering command, infantry, and parachute operations. Both militaries are expected to continue collaboration on human and drug trafficking intelligence, cybersecurity, counter-terrorism, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and joint exercises (Khmer Times, 2024c). In 2024, the RCAF and the Philippine Armed Forces conducted their

first joint training course on “combat research and counter-terrorism skills,” through a joint exercise designated Operation Kouprey (Buth, 2024). In July 2025, both armies conducted a three-week joint training on urban infantry operations and combat tracking, involving special forces units from both countries (Philippine News Agency, 2025).

Table 6. Military Exchanges Between Cambodia and the Philippines

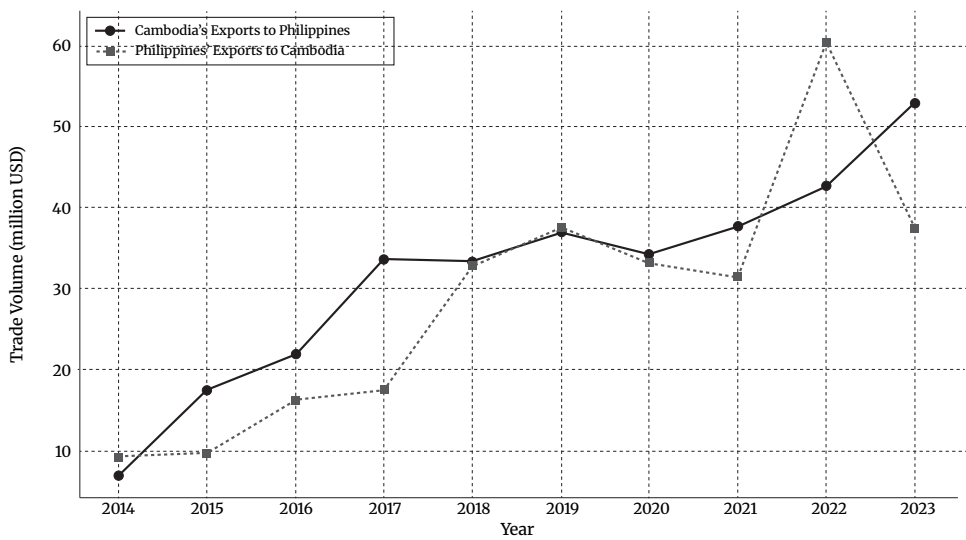
Date (Year)	Cooperation Activity	Outcome/Agreements
Dec 2017	Memorandum of Understanding on Defense Cooperation (between defense ministries) – signed	Established a framework for defense and security cooperation, including training and exchanges. Both sides expressed strong interest in expanding security and defense collaboration to address non-traditional threats, such as cybercrime (Khmer Times, 2023b).
19 Jan 2023	Army-to-Army cooperation Memorandum of Understanding – signed via video conference	Cambodian Army Commander Hun Manet and Philippine Army Commander Lt. Gen. Romeo Brawner Jr. signed an MoU to strengthen and expand army cooperation (Philippine Army, 2023).
26–29 Jul 2024	Official visit of Philippine Army Commanding General Lt. Gen. Roy M. Galido to Cambodia, including bilateral Army talks and training events	Galido and RCA Commander Gen. Mao Sophan held talks to sustain exchanges and joint exercises (CT, HADR, peacekeeping). A Philippine Army team conducted an Infantry Urban Operations & Tracking course for Cambodian troops (1–26 June 2024), capped by a joint exercise and closing ceremony. Galido was also received by PM Hun Manet, who encouraged cooperation in cybersecurity and other non-traditional security areas (Department of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of the Philippines, 2024).

8 Sep 2024	Visit of Gen. Romeo Brawner Jr., Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, to Cambodia, including bilateral talks with Gen. Vong Pisen and PM Hun Manet.	Gen. Vong Pisen thanked the Philippine Army for its support in training RCAF personnel and for recent assistance in urban combat skills. He also requested cooperation in joint training, intelligence sharing, and combating transnational crimes such as trafficking, cybercrime, and terrorism, as well as in humanitarian and disaster relief efforts (Khmer Times, 2024d).

Economic Relations

In a bid to increase bilateral trade and streamline investment mechanisms, Cambodia and the Philippines signed a Double Taxation Agreement, further strengthening economic ties. Bilateral trade between the two countries has risen steadily over the past decade. Graph 8 indicates that imports from the Philippines peaked in 2022 at around USD 60 million, with coal—most likely used for industrial processes—accounting for approximately one-third of total imports. In the most recent data, garments constitute around one-third of Cambodia’s exports to the Philippines, whereas electronics represent more than half of the Philippines’ exports to Cambodia (The Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2025e). These developments complement ongoing initiatives in defense, security, and human resource collaboration, reflecting a broadening and deepening of bilateral relations across economic, military, and social sectors.

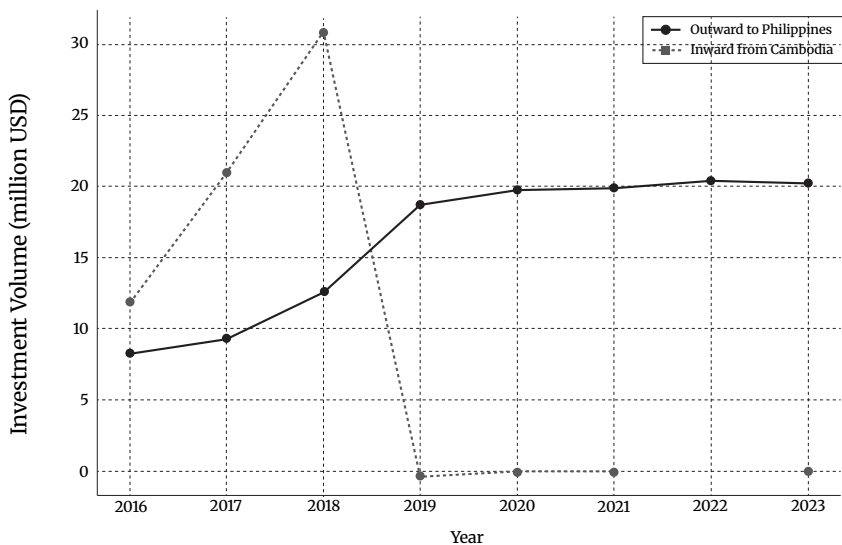
Graph 8. Cambodia-Philippines Bilateral Trade (2014-2023)



Source: Author’s Calculation Based on UN Comtrade Database

Graph 9 illustrates that Cambodian investments in the Philippines increased from approximately USD 10 million in 2016 to over USD 30 million in 2018, before experiencing a sharp decline, remaining at negligible levels thereafter. Conversely, Filipino investments in Cambodia rose consistently from 2016 to 2019 but have stagnated since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In an effort to reverse this trend, PM Hun Manet emphasized Cambodia's business-friendly environment, participation in various regional trade agreements, and commitment to sustainable energy as key selling points during the Cambodia–Philippines Business Forum in Manila in early 2025. In a reciprocal gesture, during President Marcos Jr.'s visit to Phnom Penh in July 2025, five business agreements were signed. The President also encouraged leading business figures from both countries to build on the growing economic momentum during the CEO B2B Networking Roundtable (The Manila Times, 2025).

Graph 9. Cambodia–Philippines Direct Investment (2016–2023)



Source: Author's calculation based on IMF's *Direct Investment Positions by Counterpart Economy* dataset (formerly *Coordinated Direct Investment Survey*, or CDIS).

VI. Cambodia–Singapore Relations

During the late Lee Kuan Yew's visit to "The Pearl of Asia" in 1967, he reportedly told the late King Sihanouk, "I hope, one day, my city will look like this." Although this quote is not verifiable through official sources, according to the National Archives of Singapore's record of his speech at the state dinner with King Sihanouk on December 7, 1967 (National Archives of Singapore, n.d.), Lee was clearly impressed by Cambodia's development:

While I rested in Phnom Penh, my more energetic children went around and described to me the things they saw—the new shops, new offices, new schools, the Sangkum University, the National Theatre, National Assembly and the Sports Stadium. [...] Having visited Angkor, their impressions of

Phnom Penh became the more vivid. The new Phnom Penh they saw had the architectural style, in steel and concrete, of what Angkor had in sandstone and laterite. I leave conscious that it is not just Angkor that a visitor must see. For the buildings in Phnom Penh, although the more functional, are no less monuments to Khmer creativity. It was a lesson of what is possible, given a united people, led by a patriot of great verve and vitality. [...]

The year 2025 marks the 60th anniversary of Cambodia–Singapore diplomatic relations. Prime Minister Lawrence Wong visited Cambodia, held a royal audience with the King, and met with Prime Minister Hun Manet and Senate President Hun Sen to commemorate the occasion, during which both sides agreed to deepen bilateral cooperation in areas such as trade and investment, people-to-people exchanges, human capital development, renewable energy, carbon credits, agri-food cooperation, and the development of the ASEAN power grid (Ng, 2025). Cooperation between the two countries spans multiple sectors, including human capital development. A notable example is the Cambodia–Singapore Cooperation Centre (CSCC), which has trained tens of thousands of Cambodian government officials under the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) framework. The Singaporean educational system is highly regarded in Cambodia; many Cambodian government officials have studied at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, while parents have entrusted various international schools in Phnom Penh to educate their children according to the Singaporean curriculum. Further discussions between the Cambodian and Singaporean education ministers highlight the increasing significance and value of Singaporean education within Cambodian society.

Political–Security Relations

In the zeitgeist of modern Cambodia, a casual conversation with a government official or an ordinary citizen often reveals a widespread admiration for Singapore’s socioeconomic development. From the Jewel Changi Airport to the Housing Development Board (HDB) scheme, and drawing from iconic quotes of Lee Kuan Yew regarding Cambodia in the 1960s, Singapore has become emblematic of what Cambodia might have achieved had it not experienced decades of conflict.

In 2019, a public dispute arose between the two former prime ministers of Cambodia and Singapore. In a condolence letter to the late Prime Minister of Thailand, General Prem Tinsulanonda, then-Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong of Singapore referred to Vietnam’s liberation efforts during the Khmer Rouge period as a “Vietnamese occupation” and “a military invasion.” Then-PM Hun Sen strongly rebutted these remarks, asserting that Singapore had supported the genocidal regime and played a role in the massacre of Cambodians (Cheang, 2019). Shortly thereafter, Singapore’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement affirming that “Singapore had no sympathy for the Khmer Rouge, and did not want to see the Khmer Rouge return to Cambodia” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Singapore, 2019). The two former prime ministers subsequently met on the sidelines of the 2019 ASEAN Summit in Bangkok to discuss the “brief hiccup” in Cambodia–Singapore relations and agreed to move forward (Cambodianess, 2019).

Two major issues have further complicated bilateral relations in the past decade, drawing international attention. According to UN Comtrade data reported by Singapore, Cambodia generated USD 752 million from sand^s exports to Singapore from 2007 to 2016 (Taing 2016). Prior to the permanent ban on sand exports in 2017, reports alleged that Singapore had imported illegal and environmentally harmful Cambodian sand for land reclamation projects. Both governments rejected these allegations, with a Cambodian spokesperson describing them as “an attack on the Cambodian Government to try and bring political benefit to one of the smaller opposition parties” and the Singaporean government asserting its commitment to “the protection of the global environment, and we do not condone the illegal export or smuggling of sand, or any extraction of sand that is in breach of the source countries’ laws and rules on environmental protection” (Abdullah & Goh, 2010).

In August 2023, Singapore conducted its largest anti-money-laundering operation, valued at USD 2.2 billion, resulting in the conviction of ten individuals. Although the convicted persons were Chinese nationals (with China not recognizing multiple citizenships), nine of them held Cambodian citizenship. In collaboration with the Cambodian government, the Singaporean Ministries of State for Home Affairs and for Social and Family Development efficiently deported eight individuals to Cambodia after the completion of their prison sentences (Jumadi, 2024; Lam, 2024). While both countries have regarded the incident as resolved, the negative media coverage highlights the sensitivity of transnational issues; if mishandled, such events can damage public perception and bilateral relations.

On the sidelines of the 21st Shangri-La Dialogue, Cambodian Defense Minister Tea Seiha met with his Singaporean counterpart, Minister Ng Eng Hen, to reaffirm their commitment to fostering friendly bilateral defense relations and to cooperate closely through the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meetings (ADMM) and related forums (Ministry of Defense of Singapore, 2024).

Table 7. Military Exchanges Between Cambodia and Singapore

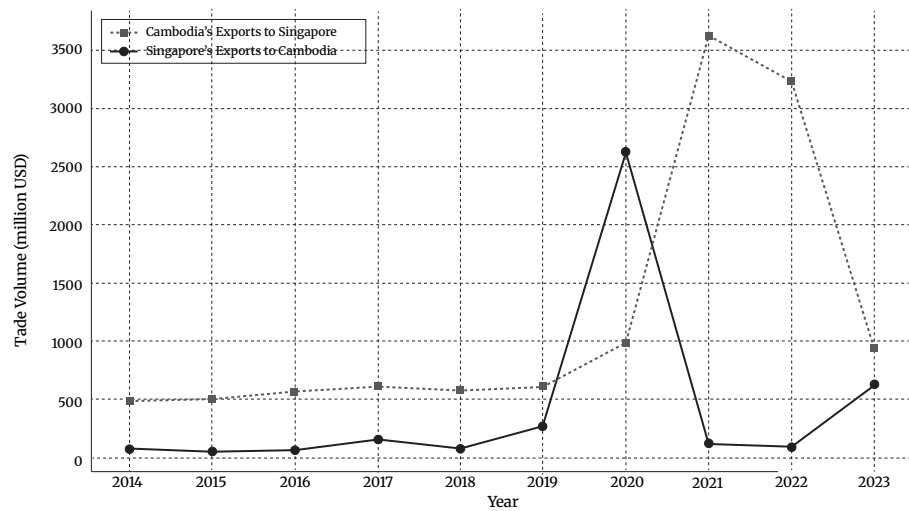
Date (Year)	Partner Country	Cooperation Activity	Outcome/Agreements
11-13 Jun 2019	Singapore	Introductory visit of Cambodian Army Commander (Hun Manet) to Singapore	Met with Chief of Defense Force Melvyn Ong, Chief of Army Goh Si Hou, and Defense Minister Ng Eng Hen; reaffirmed defense ties and discussed regional and international security issues of mutual interest (Parameswaran, 2019).
20 Jan 2020	Singapore	Official visit of Singapore’s Army Chief (Maj. Gen. Goh Si Hou) to Cambodia	Met with Lt. Gen. Hun Manet and agreed to increase exchanges, conduct joint training, and share experiences between the two armies (Khuon, 2020).

4 Jan 2022	Video Conference	Bilateral meeting between RCAF Commander-in-Chief Gen. Vong Pisen and SAF Commander-in-Chief Lt. Gen. Melvin Ong	Discussed achievements in the fight against COVID-19 by both armies and explored ways to further strengthen cooperation (Khmer Times, 2022).
20 Feb 2024	Singapore	Bilateral meeting between RCAF Commander-in-Chief Gen. Vong Pisen and Singapore's Chief of Defence Force VADM Aaron Beng (on the sideline of Singapore Airshow)	Agreed to advance cooperation on human resource training, counter-terrorism, information sharing, and humanitarian/disaster relief operations (Khmer Times, 2024e)

Economic Relations

Graph 10 shows that Singapore is Cambodia’s largest trading partner in terms of bilateral trade volume among the six maritime Southeast Asian nations over the past decade, indicating that its trade relations with Cambodia warrant careful examination.

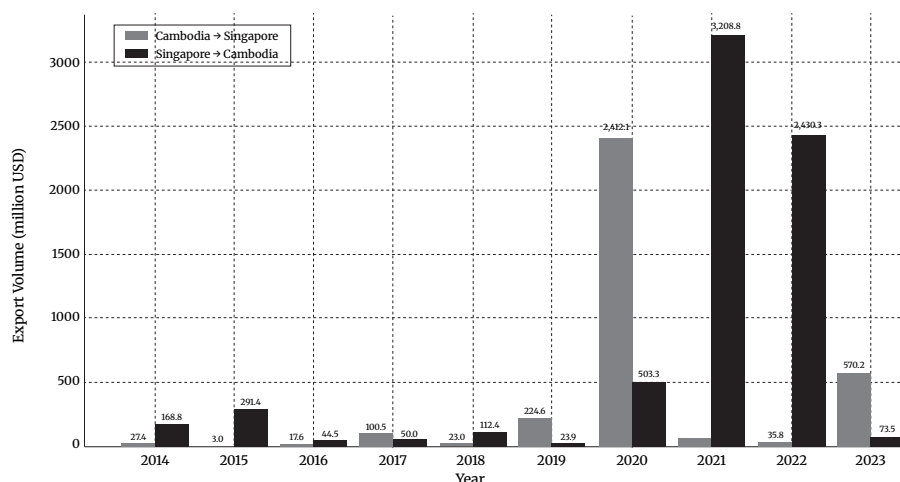
Graph 10. Cambodia–Singapore Bilateral Trade (2014–2023)



Source: Author’s Calculation Based on UN Comtrade Database

Graph 11 shows that both countries have consistently traded billions of U.S. dollars' worth of gold since the COVID-19 pandemic, as investors sought gold⁹ as a more stable store of value than cash during periods of uncertainty. Notably, Cambodia exported approximately USD 2.41 billion worth of gold to Singapore in 2021, while it imported around USD 3.2 billion in 2022 and approximately USD 2.43 billion in 2023. These figures underscore Singapore's sustained demand for gold, which is unsurprising given that its gold reserves are the largest among maritime Southeast Asian nations and the second-largest within ASEAN (Silver Bullion, 2023).

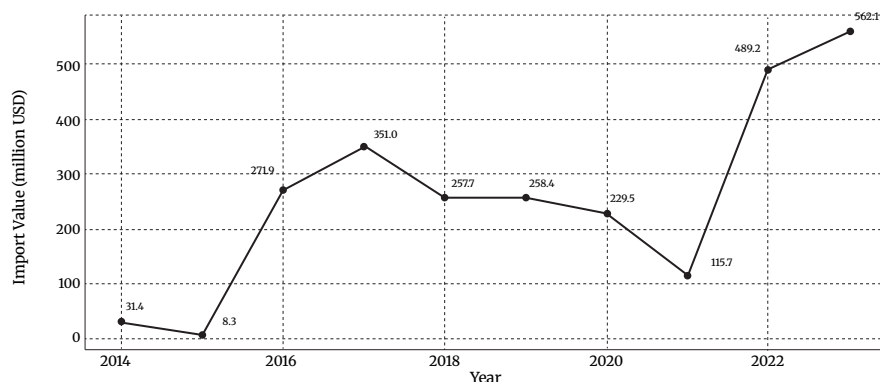
Graph 11. Cambodia-Singapore Gold Trade Flows (2014-2023, in million USD)



Source: Author's Calculation Based on UN Comtrade Database

Beyond the lucrative gold trade, Graph 12 indicates that Cambodia has also imported a substantial amount of fuel from Singapore over the past decade. Fuel imports peaked in 2023, reaching approximately USD 562.1 million, and demand is expected to rise further if the Thai fuel ban remains in effect in the coming years.

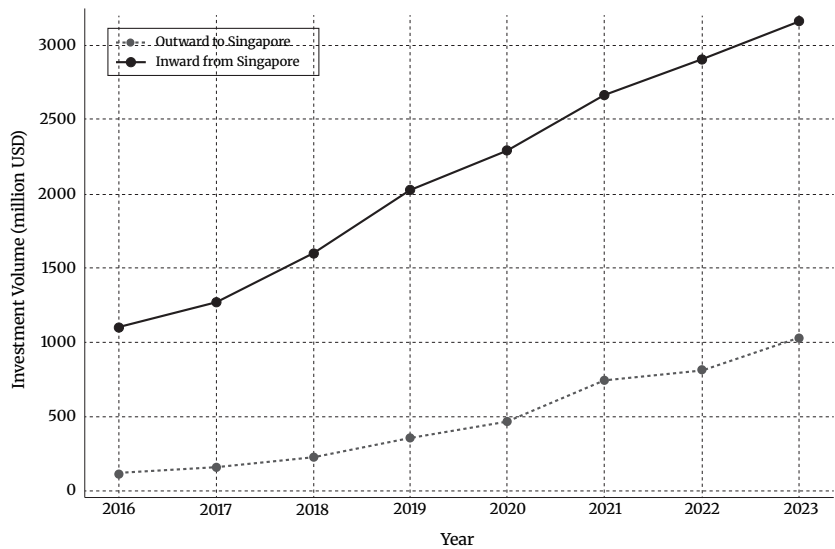
Graph 12. Cambodia's Import of Fuel from Singapore (2014-2023, in million USD)



Source: Author's Calculation Based on UN Comtrade Database

Singapore has been among the top ten investors in Cambodia over the past decade, even surpassing China as Cambodia’s leading FDI source in 2021—a feat unprecedented since the early 2010s (Mathew, 2022c). Graph 13 illustrates that Singapore has invested approximately USD 3 billion in Cambodia over the past decade. According to the Council for the Development of Cambodia (CDC), Singaporean companies such as Keppel Infrastructure, Changi Airport International, and well-known brands including Charles & Keith, Ya Kun, and 800super, have collectively invested more than USD 400 million in Cambodia’s manufacturing, real estate, and hospitality sectors (Cambodia Constructors Association, 2024). Building on the MOU on Energy Cooperation signed between Cambodia and Singapore in 2022, Singapore’s Keppel Energy is set to import 1 gigawatt of clean energy from Cambodia as part of Singapore’s decarbonization efforts (Energy Market Authority of Singapore, 2023). Cambodia’s clean energy exports are expected to generate between USD 100 and 200 million, depending on whether the supply is sourced from solar or hydro power. This initiative represents a significant opportunity for Cambodia to diversify its trade with Singapore, secure its energy needs sustainably, and contribute as a key component of the ASEAN Power Grid.

Graph 13. Cambodia-Singapore Direct Investment (2016-2023)



Source: Author’s calculation based on IMF’s Direct Investment Positions by Counterpart Economy dataset (formerly Coordinated Direct Investment Survey, or CDIS).

VII. Cambodia—Timor-Leste Relations

Cambodia and Timor-Leste established official diplomatic relations in 2002, shortly after Timor-Leste’s independence. As two post-conflict nations, they found common ground in their shared experiences of war and nation-building. Cambodia promptly recognized Timor-Leste’s sovereignty on 29 July 2002, and the two countries soon established embassies in each other’s capitals. By the 2010s, Cambodia–Timor-Leste relations began to deepen. For

example, Timor-Leste's aspiration to join ASEAN was discussed during Cambodia's 2012 ASEAN Chairmanship. While some member states expressed concerns regarding Timor-Leste's stability and preparedness, Cambodia consistently maintained a welcoming stance toward its accession. Timor-Leste appointed its first resident ambassador in 2016, and Cambodia established its first resident ambassador to Timor-Leste in 2025. High-level visits between the two nations were frequent throughout the ensuing two decades.

Table 8. Official Diplomatic Visits Between Cambodia and Timor-Leste

Date (Year)	Cooperation Activity	Outcome / Agreements
30 Mar 2011	President José Ramos-Horta's visit to Cambodia	Held a royal audience with the King and paid courtesy calls to the Prime Minister, Senate President, and National Assembly President; Cambodia pledged support for Timor-Leste's ASEAN membership (Khmerization, 2011).
5 Sep 2013	PM Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão conducted four-day official visit to Cambodia	Met with the Cambodian PM and signed an MOU on Economic, Commercial and Technical Cooperation (Government of Timor-Leste, 2013)
19 Aug 2016	PM Hun Sen paid official visit to Timor-Leste	Attended the 41st anniversary of the founding of the liberation forces (FALINTIL Day) at the invitation of Prime Minister Rui Maria de Araújo, and signed MOUs on the Framework Agreement on Technical and Economic Cooperation, the Agreement on Visa Exemption for Holders of Diplomatic and Service Passports, and Cooperation in the Field of Labour (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Cambodia, 2016b).
19 Oct 2022	President José Ramos-Horta conducted a three-day state visit to Cambodia	Held a royal audience with the King; paid courtesy calls to the Prime Minister, Senate President, National Assembly President, and Deputy Commander of the RCAF; signed an MOU on air services and rice trade (Ky, 2022).

7 May 2025	Senate President Hun Sen conducted a three-day official visit to Timor-Leste	Met with the President, the Prime Minister, and the Speaker of the National Parliament to reaffirm Cambodia–Timor-Leste commitments to strengthening trade, economic development, tourism, and investment. Additionally, delivered a special lecture at the Presidential Palace and addressed the plenary session of the Timor-Leste National Parliament (Government of Timor-Leste, 2025b).

Political-Security Relations

One of the defining features of Cambodia–Timor-Leste relations has been Phnom Penh’s strong and vocal advocacy for Dili’s accession as the 11th ASEAN member state. Then-PM Hun Sen placed Timor-Leste’s ASEAN membership on the agenda of the 2012 ASEAN Summit and reiterated this support in 2022, when all member states agreed in principle to admit Timor-Leste and grant it observer status. Senate President Hun Sen has been, and continues to be, the most outspoken advocate for Timor-Leste’s inclusion, stating that “Cambodia has fully supported Timor-Leste’s full membership in ASEAN from the beginning and has worked hard to promote ASEAN consensus on the Timorese proposal” (Government of Timor-Leste, 2025c). On 26 October 2025, Timor-Leste was officially admitted as the 11th Member State of ASEAN at the 46th ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur.

Beyond formal diplomatic relations, a personal rapport has developed over the past two decades between Cambodian and Timorese leaders. Both leaders pride themselves on being the founding fathers of their respective nations; they share mutual respect, common historical experiences, and a shared vision for their countries’ futures. A notable example occurred during Senate President Hun Sen’s official visit to Dili, when President Ramos-Horta personally greeted him at the airport and drove his “best friend” to the hotel (Torn, 2025a).

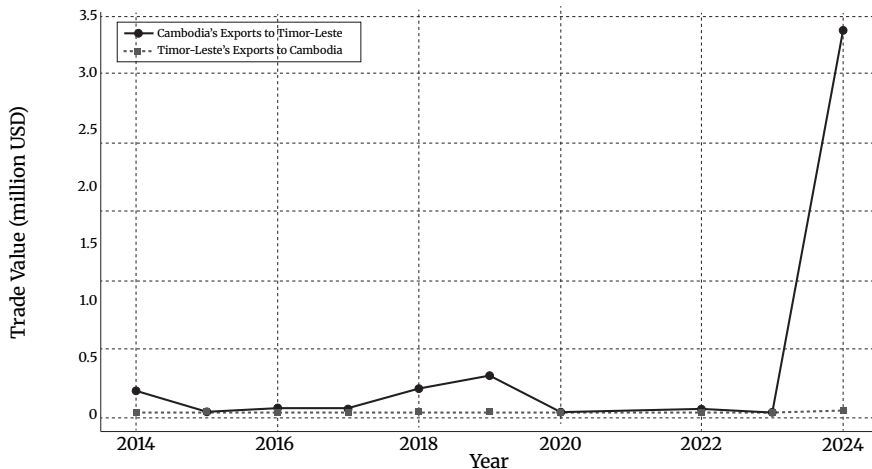
President Ramos-Horta has frequently emphasized that “We have a similar history of struggle and suffering, and Cambodia understands very well the circumstances of Timor-Leste.” He further honored Senate President Hun Sen with the Grand Collar of the Order of Timor-Leste, the country’s highest national award, in recognition of his “significant contributions to enhancing bilateral ties and continued support for Timor-Leste’s ASEAN accession” (Torn, 2025b).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Cambodia provided medical assistance to Timor-Leste, including face masks (Khann, 2020). In 2024, the education ministries of both countries signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) on higher education to promote science and cultural education while offering scholarships to Timorese students to study in Cambodia (Torn, 2024b). In the same year, Interior Minister Sar Sokha proposed that both countries develop an MOU on bilateral security cooperation, facilitating security exchange programs between their respective police forces (Soth, 2024).

Economic Relations

Graph 14 indicates that both Cambodia and Timor-Leste are relatively small economies, with limited bilateral trade at present. Under the memorandum of understanding (MOU) on rice trade, Cambodia exported approximately USD 2.8 million worth of rice³⁰ to Timor-Leste in 2024 (Chea, 2024). Senate President Hun Sen suggested that Timor-Leste could consider investing in Cambodia's rice production to enhance its national food security. Conversely, Timor-Leste has yet to export any significant volume of goods to Cambodia over the past decade, with exports peaking at only approximately USD 18,000 in 2024.

Graph 14. Cambodia–Timor-Leste's Bilateral Trade (2014–2024)



Source: Author's Calculation Based on UN Comtrade Database

VIII. Conclusion

This chapter offers a comprehensive analysis of Cambodia's evolving relationships with maritime Southeast Asian nations from 2016 to 2025, with an emphasis on political-security and economic cooperation. The implications of this analysis are multifaceted and significant. Firstly, it illuminates the intricate diplomatic web that Cambodia has woven within a region characterized by historical complexities, geopolitical rivalries, and evolving security dynamics. A nuanced understanding of these relationships is imperative for policymakers seeking to navigate the often-turbulent landscape of regional diplomacy and security.

The findings underscore the pressing need for Cambodia and its maritime neighbors to deepen their collaborative efforts across various sectors. To elevate their cooperation, both parties should prioritize establishing robust communication mechanisms that facilitate dialogue on critical security issues, including transnational crime, human trafficking, and regional stability. Regular high-level visits and joint military exercises can serve as catalysts for trust-building and mutual understanding, thereby enhancing existing security frameworks. Such measures not only bolster confidence among states but also cultivate a collaborative environment conducive to addressing shared challenges more effectively.

Economically, leveraging Cambodia's strategic position within the ASEAN framework to enhance trade agreements and investment opportunities is of paramount importance. The analysis reveals that while Cambodia has achieved notable progress in trade relations with nations such as Singapore and Indonesia, substantial untapped potential remains in other bilateral relationships. Initiatives aimed at establishing joint trade committees and promoting sector-specific investments—particularly in renewable energy, agriculture, and technology—could yield significant mutual benefits. Encouraging investment in Cambodia's halal industry, alongside its burgeoning tourism sector, stands to further strengthen economic ties and foster a more interconnected regional economy.

Furthermore, enhancing people-to-people exchanges—including educational partnerships, cultural initiatives, and collaborative programs—can significantly solidify these relationships. Such exchanges serve as foundational pillars for fostering mutual understanding and trust between Cambodia and its maritime neighbors. Educational partnerships, for instance, can facilitate the mobility of students and scholars across the region, promoting cross-cultural learning and knowledge sharing. Programs such as student exchange initiatives, joint research projects, and collaborative academic conferences can enrich the educational landscape and cultivate a new generation of leaders equipped to navigate regional complexities.

All in all, a sustained commitment to cooperative frameworks will be crucial for navigating the complexities of the 21st century geopolitical landscape. By focusing on these collaborative strategies, Cambodia and maritime Southeast Asia can not only reinforce their bilateral ties but also contribute to the establishment of a more integrated and resilient regional community. As they advance, embracing a collaborative approach that prioritizes mutual respect, trust, and shared interests will be vital for achieving enduring peace and prosperity within the region. This study establishes a foundation for future research and dialogue, underscoring the significance of ongoing engagement and partnership in fostering a stable and prosperous maritime Southeast Asia.

Endnotes

- 1 Harmonized System (HS) code 31 under the UN Comtrade Database, which classifies as fertilizers. It includes a wide range of products, such as animal or vegetable fertilizers, mineral or chemical fertilizers containing nitrogen, phosphorus, or potassium, and other fertilizers in various forms and packages.
- 2 Harmonized System (HS) code 2711 under the UN Comtrade Database, which classifies as petroleum gases and other gaseous hydrocarbons. It includes liquefied natural gas, propane, butanes, ethylene, propylene, butylene, and butadiene.
- 3 Harmonized System (HS) code 2701 under the UN Comtrade Database, which classifies as coal. It includes briquettes and similar fuels made from coal.
- 4 Harmonized System (HS) code 2402.20 under the UN Comtrade Database, which classifies cigarettes as containing tobacco.
- 5 Harmonized System (HS) code 27 under the UN Comtrade Database, which classifies as mineral fuels. It includes mineral oils and products of their distillations; bituminous substances; mineral waxes.
- 6 Harmonized System (HS) code 8541 under the UN Comtrade Database, which classifies as semiconductor devices. It includes diodes, transistors, and similar semiconductor devices; photosensitive semiconductor devices, including photovoltaic cells whether or not assembled in modules or made up into panels; light-emitting diodes (LED), whether or not assembled in modules; mounted piezo-electric crystals.
- 7 Harmonized System (HS) code 60 & 62 under the UN Comtrade Database, which classifies as knitted or crocheted fabrics and non-knitted articles of apparel. It includes pile fabrics, warp knit fabrics, overcoats, suits, ensembles, jackets, and trousers, baby clothing items.
- 8 Harmonized System (HS) code 2505 under the UN Comtrade Database, which classifies as natural sands of all kinds, whether or not colored, other than metal-bearing sands.
- 9 Harmonized System (HS) code 7108 under the UN Comtrade Database, which classifies as gold (including gold plated with platinum) unwrought or in semi-manufactured forms, or in powder form.
- 10 Harmonized System (HS) code 1006 under the UN Comtrade Database, which classifies as rice. It includes various subcategories for different types of rice, such as rice in the husk (paddy), husked or milled rice, and broken rice.

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Chapter 7

Cambodia and ASEAN: Navigating Regionalism in a Contested Era

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I. Introduction

As a small state located at the heart of mainland Southeast Asia, Cambodia has long viewed the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as a cornerstone of its foreign policy and regional engagement. Since joining ASEAN in 1999, Phnom Penh has regarded the organization not only as a vehicle for economic integration and political cooperation but also as a vital platform for amplifying its diplomatic visibility and safeguarding national interests within a multilateral framework.

This chapter examines Cambodia's evolving relationship with ASEAN in the post-COVID-19 and post-leadership transition era. It begins with a concise overview of ASEAN's historical evolution and Cambodia's path to membership, situating the country's engagement within the broader trajectory of regional institutional development. The discussion then turns to the shifting geopolitical landscape shaped by Hun Manet's succession, renewed U.S.–China rivalry, the enduring crisis in Myanmar, maritime disputes in the South China Sea, the repercussions of Russia's war in Ukraine, the return of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency, and the 2025 Cambodia–Thailand border conflict.

These dynamics are analyzed through political-security, economic, and socio-cultural lenses, with particular attention to how Cambodia's omni-directional diplomacy interacts with ASEAN's evolving mechanisms and norms. Building upon Sam Ath and Oum's (2017) assessment of ASEAN's political-security, economic, and socio-cultural dimensions in Cambodia prior to COVID-19, this chapter extends the discussion into an era defined by volatility, strategic recalibration, and institutional adaptation. It concludes by assessing the future prospects and challenges that will shape the trajectory of ASEAN–Cambodia relations in an increasingly contested regional order.

II. ASEAN's Evolution and Cambodia's Integration

ASEAN was co-founded in 1967 by Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and the Philippines amid Cold War tensions and concerns over the spread of communism and regional instability. Through the Bangkok Conference, these five founding Member States created a platform to foster economic growth, social advancement, and cultural enrichment on the one hand, and to ensure regional peace and stability on the other, as stipulated in the Bangkok Declaration of 1967 (the ASEAN Declaration, also known as the 'Bangkok Declaration, 1967').

Unlike rules-based Western regional organizations such as the European Union, ASEAN was established to be non-confrontational and to safeguard the sovereignty of its individual member states. To achieve this, ASEAN adopts a *modus operandi* emphasizing full respect for national sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs, commonly known as the "ASEAN Way." This approach also encompasses decision-making by consensus, strengthening national and regional resilience, renouncing threats or the use of force, and peacefully settling disputes (The ASEAN Charter, 2007, Article 2). Even before these principles were formally codified in the ASEAN Charter in 2007, they had long guided inter-state

relations within the organization. The primary aim of the ASEAN Way is to accommodate Southeast Asia's diverse interests and perspectives, ensuring that no member state is overlooked (Feraru, 2016). Under this framework, ASEAN can adopt collective decisions or positions only with the consent of all its members.

Cambodia officially became the tenth member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1999, thirty-two years after the organization's establishment. This delay stemmed from Cambodia's turbulent post–World War II history, which was marked by protracted civil wars and armed conflicts involving multiple domestic and external factions. These factions— comprising the Khmer Rouge, FUNCINPEC, and the Khmer People's National Liberation Front—formed the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK), which was supported by ASEAN, China, and the United States in opposition to the Vietnamese-backed People's Republic of Kampuchea, itself supported by the Soviet Union (Sam Ath & Oum, 2017, p. 315). Despite the signing of the Paris Peace Agreements in 1991, which led to a UN-sponsored election in 1993, political instability persisted throughout much of the decade until a general election was held in 1998. The 1998 election resulted in the formation of a new government led by the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) under the leadership of Samdech Techo Hun Sen (Widyono, 2008). With political stability restored, the CPP successfully persuaded ASEAN to admit Cambodia, a process formalized in 1999 (Sam Ath & Oum, 2017, p. 316).

ASEAN provided precisely that platform. As noted in the previous edition, Cambodia benefits politically from its membership through existing treaties and accords, such as the Declaration on a Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, which bind all signatories—including non-ASEAN members—to the principles of the ASEAN Way (Sam Ath & Oum, 2017, pp. 316–317). Economically, ASEAN membership affords Cambodia access to preferential trade agreements that have facilitated increased trade and investment among the ten member states and with external partners. Culturally, Cambodia has leveraged its membership to promote its rich history and heritage, including measures such as eliminating visas for tourists from other ASEAN countries. Such achievements would have been considerably more difficult to realize outside the ASEAN framework.

Building on the previous edition published prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, this chapter examines several key developments in the regional and international landscape in the post-COVID-19 era. Five ongoing developments are considered to have direct implications for the relationship between ASEAN and Cambodia: the leadership of Cambodia under Prime Minister Hun Manet, the intensifying rivalry between the United States and China, the ongoing crisis in Myanmar, disputes in the South China Sea, and the legacy of President Donald Trump's administration. Each of these developments will be analyzed separately in the following sections.

III. Cambodia's Foreign Policy Under Hun Manet

In 2023, Cambodia experienced its first peaceful transfer of power in nearly four decades, as long-standing Prime Minister Hun Sen was succeeded by his eldest son, Hun Manet, following that year's national election (The Guardian, 2023). Prime Minister Hun Manet's educational background contrasts sharply with his father's military-centered trajectory; he holds a B.A. from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, an M.A. in Economics from New York University, and a PhD in Economics from the University of Bristol in the United Kingdom. This unprecedented transition has attracted considerable domestic and international attention, prompting a key question: how, if at all, will the new Prime Minister's accession reshape Cambodia's role within ASEAN? Will Phnom Penh continue the strategic orientations established over the past forty years, or pursue a markedly different course?

Prime Minister Hun Manet made his first appearance in regional diplomacy at the 43rd ASEAN Summit in Jakarta (5–7 September 2023), an event closely observed by scholars and policy analysts eager to gauge how Cambodia might adjust its external strategy under new leadership. Addressing the plenary, he reaffirmed Cambodia's "steadfast commitment" to ASEAN centrality and to the organization's long-standing ASEAN Way, grounded in the twin principles of consultation and consensus—language that echoed almost verbatim the rhetoric of his predecessor's tenure (Ry, 2023). Beyond this familiar emphasis on institutional norms, Prime Minister Hun Manet reiterated Cambodia's support for an open, rules-based multilateral trading system that is "free, inclusive, fair and transparent" for all member states and external partners. To operationalize this vision, he called on ASEAN to leverage emerging growth sectors—particularly the digital economy, the green transition, the blue economy, and resilient regional supply chains—as platforms for deeper economic integration and crisis-resistant development (Sok, 2024).

These positions suggest a deliberate strategy of continuity rather than rupture. Prime Minister Hun Manet appears intent on signaling predictable stewardship of Cambodia's ASEAN portfolio, maintaining the normative and economic priorities that have shaped the Kingdom's regional engagement over the past four decades, while simultaneously highlighting newer thematic agendas such as digitalization and sustainability within that well-established framework.

IV. The U.S.–China Rivalry and Its Regional Reverberations

Cambodia's external strategy is increasingly shaped by broader regional dynamics, particularly the intensifying rivalry between the United States and China. This systemic, wide-ranging competition affects nearly every dimension of international politics, from trade and technology to security governance and ideology (Friedberg, 2022). While both powers carefully avoid direct military confrontation, each increasingly seeks to limit the other's influence by cultivating alliances with third parties and, where possible, encouraging

them to take sides. As a result, strategic competition has extended into multilateral arenas. This trend is especially pronounced in Southeast Asia, where Cambodia's diplomacy and ASEAN cohesion face significant pressure.

ASEAN's consensus rule ensures that each member has an equal voice in joint positions; however, great-power courtship intensifies intra-bloc divisions. The South China Sea negotiations exemplify this effect: claimant states such as the Philippines and Vietnam demand a legally binding Code of Conduct, while Cambodia and Laos oppose language that might offend China, a key partner to the former, halting progress (Nadarajah, Iskandar, Lee, & San, 2024). Frustrated by this deadlock, Manila and other claimants have strengthened bilateral security ties with outside actors, notably through the 2023 expansion of the U.S.–Philippines Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement and the December 2024 ratification of a Reciprocal Access Agreement with Japan, thereby externalizing maritime security to coalitions outside ASEAN and diminishing the bloc's centrality (U.S. Department of Defense, 2023).

Economic statecraft further intensifies these divisions. Washington has combined traditional alliance management with regional initiatives such as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) and the Partners in the Blue Pacific, both promoted as rules-based alternatives to economic coercion (Office of the United States Trade Representative, n.d.). Beijing has responded with Belt and Road infrastructure projects, including the flagship China–Laos Railway, which anchors mainland Southeast Asian supply chains. Additionally, China promotes the ASEAN-centered Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) alongside its Global Security Initiative, presenting both as “Asian solutions” that avoid formal alliances (Global Times, 2025; Chen, 2025; Kao, 2023). The China–Laos Railway exemplifies regional cooperation and shared prosperity.

Because maritime ASEAN members prize sovereignty, while land-linked states—most notably Cambodia and Laos—rely on Chinese capital for connectivity megaprojects, the strategies of the two superpowers resonate unevenly across the region. The resulting mosaic sees Manila gravitating toward Washington, Phnom Penh leaning toward Beijing, and several other states hedging between the two, thereby complicating collective diplomacy and weakening ASEAN's much-vaunted unity. In this way, the region has become another arena of U.S.–China strategic rivalry. How this great-power competition evolves will undoubtedly shape Cambodia's foreign policy toward its fellow ASEAN members and neighbors.

V. ASEAN's Stress Test: The Myanmar Crisis

The 1 February 2021 military coup in Myanmar presented ASEAN with its most acute political-security crisis since Cambodia's accession in 1999. At stake was the notion of ASEAN centrality. The coup challenged the bloc's convening authority and moral stewardship in three interrelated ways.

First, the crisis exposed deep cracks in ASEAN's long-standing operating principles of consensus and non-interference. The April 2021 Five-Point Consensus (5PC) promised

dialogue among “all parties,” an immediate cessation of violence, and unhindered humanitarian access (ASEAN, 2021). Yet implementation stalled, prompting ASEAN leaders at their October 2024 Vientiane review to describe progress as “substantially inadequate” and to maintain Myanmar’s exclusion from high-level meetings until tangible movement occurred (ASEAN, 2024). The inability to enforce the 5PC underscores the limits of persuasion in the absence of a compliance mechanism, eroding confidence among external partners that ASEAN can manage hard security contingencies. As Jones (2025) bluntly put it, “Myanmar shows ASEAN centrality is weakening.”

Second, the junta’s intransigence has encouraged extra-regional actors to pursue ad hoc or “mini-lateral” arrangements, such as the U.S.–Philippines–Japan trilateral or Quad-plus forums, to address Indo-Pacific challenges stemming from Myanmar, notably cross-border crime and refugee flows. This drift of substantive decision-making away from ASEAN mechanisms dilutes the bloc’s convening power and narrative control (Sathirathai, 2025). The resulting perception gap is critical: centrality is as much a reputational asset as an institutional one, and reputations, once lost, are difficult to regain.

Third, the Myanmar dossier has accentuated intra-ASEAN contestation over normative leadership. Maritime claimants and reform-minded members, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, advocate a tougher line, whereas Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam prefer quiet diplomacy; Cambodia occupies a distinct—and at times controversial—middle ground. These divergent threat perceptions complicate joint positions and reinforce the narrative that ASEAN’s famed unity is more of a façade than a fact.

Cambodia’s engagement with ASEAN since the coup illustrates both the agency of small states and the structural limits they confront. Phnom Penh has long regarded ASEAN membership as a diplomatic “insurance policy” after decades of international isolation, and its economic strategy hinges on access to the ASEAN Economic Community and initiatives such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. Yet, Cambodia’s record as the rotating ASEAN Chair in 2022 reveals a pattern of activism that at times undercuts regional cohesion. Within days of assuming the gavel, Prime Minister Hun Sen became the first foreign leader to visit Naypyidaw post-coup, meeting General Min Aung Hlaing and signaling a willingness to readmit the junta to ASEAN deliberations (Hossain, 2022). From Phnom Penh’s perspective, this “proactive engagement” sought to demonstrate the effectiveness of the chairmanship and preserve ASEAN unity by “bringing Myanmar back into the fold.” From the vantage point of several other capitals, however, the unilateral initiative breached the informal rule that the chair should not compromise previous collective decisions, namely the October 2021 bar on the junta’s political participation. The ensuing backlash forced the postponement of the January 2022 Foreign Ministers’ Retreat and reinforced perceptions of ASEAN disarray (Hossain, 2022). Throughout 2022, Cambodia recalibrated, eventually endorsing a policy of seating only non-political representatives from Myanmar. It also appointed a Special Envoy—Deputy Prime Minister Prak Sokhonn—who shuttled among stakeholders but reported little substantive progress, as acknowledged in ASEAN’s own October 2023 assessment (ASEAN, 2024). Cambodia’s experience illustrates the predicament of small states that champion centrality: they may exercise outsized influence as chair, yet missteps quickly reverberate through a consensus-based system.

The Myanmar crisis has not eliminated ASEAN centrality but has rendered it conditional. Centrality now hinges less on rhetorical claims than on demonstrable problem-solving capacity. For Cambodia, the lesson is twofold. First, active diplomacy must be synchronized with, not detached from, collective ASEAN mandates; otherwise, engagement risks deepening rather than bridging intra-bloc divides. Second, Cambodia's credibility within ASEAN—already tested by perceptions of alignment with Beijing—will increasingly be measured by its willingness to invest political capital in upholding regional public goods, whether in Myanmar or the South China Sea. In short, Myanmar represents a pivotal stress test: the extent to which ASEAN and its individual members, notably Cambodia, can reconcile national calculations with regional responsibility will determine whether centrality remains a living principle or slides into diplomatic nostalgia.

VI. Trump's Return and the Shifting External Environment

The inauguration of President Donald Trump's second term on 20 January 2025 quickly ushered in a wave of disruptive economic policies for Southeast Asia. On 2 April, the White House announced the so-called "*Liberation Day*" tariffs, imposing "reciprocal" duties ranging from 32% to 49% on six ASEAN member states, with Cambodia facing the highest rate at 49%. Although the tariff on Cambodian goods was later reduced to 19%, the impact remained significant: approximately 37.9% of Cambodia's exports—valued at nearly USD 10 billion—are destined for the United States, with garments and footwear forming the backbone of the country's industrial base (Petty, 2025; Strangio, 2025a). This policy shock not only threatened Cambodia's export competitiveness but also prompted a recalibration of its diplomatic strategy within ASEAN, as Phnom Penh sought to hedge against U.S. economic pressure through deeper intra-ASEAN and China-oriented engagement.

The magnitude of the tariff shock prompted Cambodian officials to prioritize regional solidarity. Although Phnom Penh immediately began bilateral talks in Washington, it simultaneously endorsed Malaysia's call, in its capacity as 2025 ASEAN chair, for a unified ASEAN–U.S. tariff summit (Azhar, 2025; Strangio, 2025b; Reuters, 2025). The logic is pragmatic: negotiating as part of a USD-680-million-strong market yields more leverage than acting alone. In practice, this has encouraged Cambodia to coordinate its trade messaging with Bangkok, Hanoi, and Jakarta, rather than relying solely on Chinese economic buffers or ad hoc concessions from Washington. Such collective bargaining represents a modest shift from the "bilateralization" that characterized Phnom Penh's strategy during Trump's first term.

The tariff campaign is only one facet of a broader hawkish turn toward China in Washington's first 100 days, described by analysts as "an effective trade embargo between the world's two largest economies" (Hale, 2025). In this period, Trump's stance on China reached new heights (Al Jazeera, 2025). In response, Beijing redoubled its outreach: President Xi Jinping's April 2025 tour of Vietnam, Malaysia, and Cambodia produced lucrative infrastructure and

technology packages designed to demonstrate that Chinese capital remains available even as access to the U.S. market narrows (Khmer Times, 2025a; Li, Le, Ngeow, & Neak, 2025).

For Cambodia, already hosting a Chinese-financed expansion of Ream Naval Base, a deeper entanglement with Beijing provides a financial safety net but heightens suspicion among other ASEAN members, who view Ream as a potential PLA outpost (Sevastopulo, 2024). Trump's combative posture thus tightens Cambodia's economic dependence on China and sharpens intra-ASEAN concerns over Phnom Penh's strategic alignment.

Trump's episodic engagement with multilateral forums has created an institutional vacuum reminiscent of his first term. Whereas President Joe Biden courted ASEAN through the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, Trump skipped the February 2025 special summit in Jakarta and dispatched only a Deputy Secretary to the May Foreign Ministers' Meeting. This reduced U.S. presence highlights the importance of ASEAN-led mechanisms for smaller states seeking diplomatic support. Phnom Penh's 2025 foreign-policy review, therefore, re-emphasizes ASEAN centrality as a shield against great-power rivalry and as an entry point for diversified partnerships beyond China and the U.S. (Ho et al., 2025; Bland, 2025). However, expectations of solidarity also raise the costs for Cambodia if it again blocks consensus on South China Sea language or Myanmar issues, as it did in 2012 and 2016.

By late October 2025, Washington's stance towards Phnom Penh had visibly softened. The across-the-board "Liberation Day" tariff on Cambodian goods was pared back to 19 per cent, easing pressure on export-oriented manufacturers and opening space for calibrated compromise (Setboonsarng et al., 2025). At the same time, Cambodia agreed to eliminate tariffs on U.S. goods, covering the full range of U.S. exports, further de-escalating trade friction (Office of the United States Trade Representative, 2025). On the security and diplomatic fronts, both governments agreed to resume the Angkor Sentinel exercise and expand slots for Cambodian officers at U.S. professional military education institutions, reopening channels that had atrophied over the years (Khmer Times, 2025b).

Trump's second term has produced a more nuanced equilibrium for Cambodia's ties with ASEAN. While punitive tariffs and erratic summitry initially pushed Phnom Penh toward intra-ASEAN coordination, the 19 percent U.S. tariff ceiling, Cambodia's elimination of duties on U.S. imports, and the late-October agreements to revive Angkor Sentinel and expand access to military education have reopened diplomatic and security channels. These steps have softened the immediate economic shock and provide Cambodia with marginal room to hedge without leaning exclusively on China, even as the Ream base and the broader U.S.-China rivalry continue to color regional perceptions. Whether this détente endures will hinge on the durability of the tariff relief, follow-through on security transparency, and Phnom Penh's consistency in supporting ASEAN consensus on sensitive issues.

VII. The Cambodia–Thailand Border Conflict and ASEAN’s Role in Conflict Management

For over a century, dating back to the French colonial era when parts of the Cambodian–Thai boundary were first marked, Cambodia and Thailand have experienced sporadic disputes at several undefined points along their 817-kilometre land border (Deth, 2020). The most recent escalation began on 28 May 2025, when a Cambodian soldier was killed in a skirmish with Thai troops, an incident each side blamed on the other, prompting troop reinforcements and heightened public rhetoric (Reuters, 2025a). Tensions rose further on 16–17 July, when a Thai soldier was injured by a PMN–2 antipersonnel mine, sparking five days of artillery exchanges and mass displacement; Thailand claimed the mines were newly laid, which Cambodia denied (Wongcha-um & Ghoshal, 2025b).

In response, Malaysia, as the 2025 ASEAN chair, first marshaled both sides into shuttle talks, which helped broker an unconditional ceasefire that took effect at midnight on 28 July (Wongcha-um & Ghoshal, 2025a). ASEAN then strengthened implementation by hosting follow-up meetings in early August and securing agreements to deploy an ASEAN Interim Observer Team to contested sectors to verify the truce, improve army-to-army communications, and organize rolling talks (Reuters, 2025b). Until late October, friction persisted, with reports of brief incidents and civilian protests near contested wires, yet the ceasefire remained fragile while ASEAN maintained dialogue and established technical working groups on demining and the withdrawal of heavy weapons. In October, the dispute intensified again around narrative warfare and questions of accountability.

On 26 October 2025, Cambodia and Thailand signed a *Joint Declaration* (also referred to as the “KL Peace Accord”), witnessed by ASEAN Chair and Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and U.S. President Donald Trump. The agreement, signed by the Cambodian Prime

Minister Hun Manet and Thai Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul on the sidelines of the 47th ASEAN Summit, committed both countries to cease all hostilities and foster neighborly relations. Among its provisions, ASEAN pledged to deploy formal observers to contested border sectors to verify compliance with the ceasefire, monitor demining efforts, and facilitate the withdrawal of heavy artillery. By successfully averting a broader military escalation along the 817-kilometre Cambodian–Thai border and safeguarding thousands of civilians, ASEAN has demonstrated its continued relevance as a platform through which smaller states, such as Cambodia, can secure security, legitimacy, and cooperative solutions amid complex regional challenges (Wei, 2025).

While gradual and imperfect, the peace deal exemplifies ASEAN’s modus operandi of consensus-based decision-making, facilitation, and de-escalation rather than coercive mediation. The accord lowers tensions and creates space for political bargaining, even as the limits of both ASEAN as an institution and the “ASEAN Way” remain apparent—constraints that the ASEAN Charter nonetheless anticipates in favor of a rules-based, dialogue-driven process. The peace deal also marks a milestone in ASEAN’s regional diplomacy, reflecting the

bloc's commitment to conflict prevention, stability, and cooperation, and reinforcing ASEAN's role as a central platform for regional conflict resolution.

VIII. Future Prospects and Challenges

Phnom Penh's contemporary position within ASEAN is shaped by both domestic transitions and external turbulence, resulting in a strategic landscape where vulnerability and agency coexist. Domestically, the succession of Prime Minister Hun Manet has injected a rhetoric of "omni-directional diplomacy" that emphasizes digital transformation, green growth, and human-capital upgrading while maintaining Cambodia's long-standing pragmatic tilt toward Beijing. His assurance that the enlarged, Chinese-financed Ream Naval Base will remain "open to all navies," combined with high-profile visits to more than a dozen capitals, is designed to simultaneously reassure skeptical neighbors and safeguard Chinese economic and security dividends. Yet structural constraints persist: nearly 38 per cent of Cambodia's exports remain dependent on U.S. markets, now subject to President Trump's reciprocal tariffs—albeit at a reduced rate—and public debt to Chinese lenders exceeds 34 per cent of GDP. Consequently, Cambodia may wield a more prominent voice in ASEAN deliberations without enjoying full strategic autonomy.

At the regional level, ASEAN faces renewed stress tests that both expose institutional vulnerabilities and encourage adaptive innovation. The May 2025 Kuala Lumpur Summit produced an unprecedented consensus that bilateral tariff arrangements with Washington must not harm other members and called for an expanded ceasefire in Myanmar. These outcomes illustrate ASEAN's reflex for damage control and its increasingly reactive posture. Malaysia's follow-on initiative for an ASEAN-US tariff summit, actively championed by Phnom Penh, signals a tentative turn toward "mini-lateral" economic bargaining within the organization. Successful implementation could reinforce ASEAN centrality without altering the consensus rule; failure, however, would likely encourage proposals for flexible coalitions beyond the bloc's remit.

Three unresolved flashpoints will shape Cambodia's role in ASEAN and the bloc's institutional evolution. First, the ongoing deadlock over Myanmar's Five-Point Consensus (5PC) has prompted discussions on a permanent three-year envoy supporting a rotating troika, whose credibility depends on collective enforcement—a responsibility Cambodia has historically resisted when unity conflicts with bilateral interests. Second, the Philippines' call to expedite a legally binding South China Sea Code of Conduct, coupled with Manila's anticipated ASEAN chairmanship in 2026, will intensify scrutiny of any Cambodian efforts to soften maritime language. Third, the Cambodia–Thailand border dispute, recently addressed through the 26 October 2025 KL Peace Accord, will remain a critical test of ASEAN's capacity to foster conflict resolution and demonstrate institutional resilience.

Overlaying these diplomatic stresses are geo-economic headwinds that amplify post-pandemic fragilities. U.S. tariffs intersect with the inflationary effects of Russia's war in Ukraine, creating volatility in energy and fertilizer markets and heightening Cambodia's exposure, given its diesel-powered manufacturing base and narrow export basket. Regional

mitigants exist—including the ASEAN Catalytic Green Finance Facility, decarbonization funds from Singapore, and a cross-border digital economy corridor championed by Hun Manet—but all require financing, governance, and standard-setting that ASEAN has yet to fully mobilize.

A new development that could reshape this landscape is the upgraded ASEAN–China Free Trade Area (ACFTA 3.0), signed on 28 October 2025 in Kuala Lumpur. The agreement expands the framework to cover digital trade, green economy cooperation, and supply-chain connectivity, reflecting China’s deepening integration with Southeast Asia (Latiff & Azhar, 2025). For Cambodia, the accord provides both opportunity and constraint. It promises broader market access and investment inflows that may offset the potential effects of U.S. tariffs while reinforcing the country’s role in manufacturing and logistics within the regional production network. Yet it also risks entrenching asymmetric dependence on Chinese capital and markets, potentially complicating Phnom Penh’s aspiration for a more balanced, multi-vector foreign policy within ASEAN.

The horizon presents conditional opportunities. By leveraging intra-ASEAN supply chains (still only 22 per cent of regional trade), co-chairing issue-specific coalitions on digital governance and sustainable finance, institutionalizing transparency at Ream, piloting transnational upskilling programs to narrow the region’s digital divide, and capitalizing on successes such as the KL Peace Accord, Cambodia could transform volatility into reputational capital. Conversely, stagnation on critical issues such as tariffs, Myanmar, or the South China Sea may reinforce perceptions that Phnom Penh benefits from rather than mitigates regional insecurity. Decisions made before the Philippines assumes the ASEAN gavel in 2026 will be decisive in determining whether the “Cambodian factor” strengthens or complicates ASEAN’s quest for strategic autonomy amid contested multipolarity.

IX. Conclusion

Cambodia’s evolving role in ASEAN illustrates the delicate balance small states must maintain between agency and constraint. The domestic transition under Prime Minister Hun Manet, combined with structural dependencies on major powers and the pressures of regional flashpoints, frames Phnom Penh’s engagement in a landscape of conditional opportunity. ASEAN’s institutional resilience—its ability to facilitate dialogue, enforce consensus, and adapt to crises—remains critical for preserving regional stability, yet persistent challenges highlight the limits of multilateral governance.

The past and ongoing crises—from trade disputes to Myanmar and the Cambodia–Thailand border—demonstrate that Cambodia can exercise outsized influence in shaping regional outcomes, particularly when ASEAN platforms actively support conflict resolution, as in the KL Peace Accord. The Accord illustrates how consensus-based multilateralism can yield tangible security and humanitarian outcomes, allowing smaller states to protect sovereignty while contributing to regional stability. Cambodia’s success in leveraging ASEAN platforms for economic, security, and diplomatic advantage will depend on pragmatic leadership, cooperative engagement with neighboring states, and judicious balancing between U.S. and

Chinese strategic pressures. Ultimately, Cambodia's trajectory within ASEAN is emblematic of the broader dilemmas confronting smaller states in a contested multipolar region: the potential to shape collective outcomes exists, but realization depends on strategic foresight, careful diplomacy, and the capacity to transform institutional opportunities into durable gains.

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Chapter 8

Cambodia-China Relations (2023-2025): A Partnership in Weal and Woe

Dr. Shihlun Allen CHEN

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I. Introduction

The longstanding traditional friendship between China and Cambodia has endured the test of a changing international environment since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1958. Bilateral ties have been consistently guided by the principles of “mutual respect, equality, mutual benefit, and win-win cooperation.” In 2013, the two countries formally established a *Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership*, elevating their relationship to a new level.

Discussions in international media and academic research on Cambodia–China relations under the Belt and Road Initiative have predominantly focused on bilateral economic cooperation and dependency, particularly issues related to aid, assistance projects, direct investment, and trade deficits. Both Cheunboran (2017, 2021) and Chen (2018) address the issue of strategic initiative within bilateral economic dependency. However, they represent two distinct logics: Chen focuses more on the impact of the current account deficit on Cambodia’s policy formation, institutional transformation, and social development, while Cheunboran emphasizes the overall influence of such deficits on Cambodia’s foreign relations.

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, scholars began to observe that the downturn in public health and the suspension of international travel simultaneously reduced Cambodia’s potential for economic and regional policy dependence, as well as the diversity of its decision-making (Luo & Un, 2022; Hing, 2023).

The year 2023 marked the 65th anniversary of diplomatic relations and the 10th anniversary of the *Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership*, opening new historical opportunities for cooperation. Against this backdrop, China–Cambodia relations have been characterized by their “comprehensive, high-level, and institutionalized” nature across political, economic, security, and cultural domains. The bilateral “all-weather, all-round comprehensive strategic partnership” aptly reflects the depth, pragmatism, and strategic importance of the relationship.

Overall, Cambodia’s policy toward China under the Hun Sen administration exhibited a pattern of “high dependence,” with ties often described as an “ironclad relationship.” In August 2023, Hun Manet succeeded his father Hun Sen as prime minister of Cambodia, initiating a new political era with a full cabinet transition. While generally continuing his father’s China-friendly policy orientation, the Hun Manet government has introduced certain adjustments, particularly in the areas of economic diversification, social governance, and regional multilateral cooperation.

Upon taking office, the new administration promptly engaged with China to ensure the continuity and stability of bilateral cooperation projects. In November 2023, Hun Manet held talks with the Chinese president on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting, during which both sides reaffirmed their strategic posture of “no interference from third parties” (Xinhua News Agency, 2023a). Cambodia has also continued to play a coordinating role in regional affairs, such as promoting green transformation and digital

economic cooperation within the *Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC)* framework, reflecting a strategy of “active embeddedness” in regional governance.

While largely sustaining this policy direction, the Hun Manet government has recalibrated the scope and modalities of cooperation. The new administration emphasizes diversification and sustainability in economic cooperation, facilitating a shift in Cambodia–China relations from a “project-driven” to a “system-driven” model. Moreover, while continuing to support China’s core interests in international forums, the government has adopted more balanced diplomatic rhetoric to mitigate Western pressure.

Amid intensifying strategic competition between China and the United States, Cambodia has sought to maintain cooperative relations with both through a “flexible regional strategy,” avoiding being forced to choose sides. However, with the advancement of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy and China’s growing influence in the Mekong subregion, Cambodia’s strategic space has become increasingly constrained. Cambodia has deepened security cooperation with China through joint military exercises and equipment modernization, while maintaining dialogue with the U.S. in lower-sensitivity areas such as demining training and maritime law enforcement exchanges. At the regional level, Cambodia actively participates in ASEAN-led multilateral mechanisms, attempting to balance Chinese and American influence within the ASEAN framework and preserve regional unity.

Drawing on public policy documents, government statistics, authoritative media reports, and relevant academic research, this study conducts a multidimensional analysis of the development of China–Cambodia relations since 2023, aiming to provide a reference for understanding the implications and significance of bilateral relations in the new era.

II. Cambodia–China Relations in the New Era

Current academic research on China–Cambodia relations exhibits two predominant tendencies: either a realist analysis focusing on overall bilateral cooperation or a discussion situated within the broader frameworks of China–ASEAN relations or major power competition in the Mekong region, often with particular emphasis on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Since the new cabinet took office in 2023, Cambodia–China relations have systematically advanced, linking cooperation mechanisms across the four dimensions of politics, economy, security, and culture.

Concurrently, against the backdrop of the post-pandemic global economic downturn, intense Sino–U.S. competition, and multifaceted regional conflicts, Cambodia has actively sought greater economic autonomy, reduced security risks, and worked to enhance its social cohesion, human capital quality, and political stability. Within this context, Cambodia–China relations have formally entered a “deep-water period,” characterized by a shift from the Hun Sen era’s focus on “pragmatic diplomacy, economic development, and enhanced regional influence through cooperative relations” to the Hun Manet cabinet’s emphasis on a “Cambodia–China cooperation model centered on economic deepening, risk management, and national strength enhancement” (Calabrese et al., 2022).

The following sections provide a comprehensive analysis of Cambodia–China relations across the four domains of political mutual trust, economic and trade cooperation, cultural and educational exchanges, and security cooperation since the new cabinet assumed power.

Political Mutual Trust: The Cornerstone of Cambodia–China Relations

Political mutual trust has consistently served as the “ballast stone” of China–Cambodia relations. Since 2023, the two countries have further consolidated the strategic foundation of their “ironclad friendship” through frequent high-level visits, policy coordination across various fields, and collaboration in international affairs, forming a mutual trust transmission mechanism encompassing “top-level design, mid-level coordination, and grassroots implementation.” Cambodia has continued to solidify political trust with China through high-frequency, high-level interactions and institutionalized dialogue mechanisms. Since 2023, the frequency of high-level exchanges has reached a record high, setting the tone for bilateral relations.

In February 2023, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen paid an official visit to China at the invitation of the Chinese Premier. The two countries issued the *Joint Statement of the People’s Republic of China and the Kingdom of Cambodia*, explicitly elevating the Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership to the level of a “China–Cambodia Community with a Shared Future in the New Era” and outlining ten cooperation consensuses covering political, economic, and cultural spheres (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2023). In November of the same year, the Chinese President held talks with Prime Minister Hun Sen during the 29th APEC Leaders’ Informal Meeting, again emphasizing the strategic cooperation principle of “not targeting any third party and not being interfered with by any third party” (Xinhua News Agency, 2023a).

In March 2024, Cambodian King Norodom Sihamoni paid a state visit to China, which included inspections of Chinese cultural heritage protection projects, further strengthening the unique cooperative bond of “royal diplomacy” between the two countries (Chinanews.com, 2024). According to statistics from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, between January 2023 and June 2024, Chinese and Cambodian officials at the ministerial level and above exchanged visits 28 times—a 47% increase compared with the same period in 2021–2022 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2024a). This high-frequency interaction provides direct political assurance for bilateral cooperation and is regarded by scholars as a typical manifestation of the deepening relations between small and medium-sized states and their specific partners within the context of major-power competition (Chheang, 2023).

Table 1. Key High-Level Exchange Visits between Cambodia and China, 2023-2025, and Their Strategic Significance

Time	Visit/Event	Main Outcomes (for Cambodia)	Strategic Significance
Since 2023	Mutual Support in International Affairs	Cambodia publicly supported China's position on issues concerning its core interests 12 times.	Reflects the depth and reliability of strategic cooperation.
October 2023	Regional Cooperation Initiatives	Jointly proposed the "ASEAN Digital Infrastructure Interconnection Initiative," gaining recognition.	Jointly shaping the regional cooperation agenda.
February 2023	Prime Minister Hun Sen visits China	Issued joint statement elevating relations to a "China-Cambodia Community with a Shared Future in the New Era"; reached 10 cooperation agreements.	Set the tone for post-pandemic bilateral relations, demonstrated political support, and secured Chinese commitments for future cooperation.
November 2023	Hun Manet talks with Chinese President during APEC	Reiterated the strategic cooperation principle of "not targeting third parties and not being interfered with by third parties."	Confirmed the independence and resilience of bilateral relations under Western pressure, alleviating domestic concerns about over-dependence.
March 2024	King Sihamoni visits China	Strengthened traditional "royal diplomacy" ties; visited Chinese cultural heritage protection projects.	Leveraged the monarchy's transcendent status to consolidate friendship historically and emotionally, complementing the utilitarian nature of state-to-state exchanges.

September 2024	King Sihamoni state visit to China	Signed the Joint Statement on Deepening the All-Weather Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, formally upgrading the relationship orientation.	Elevated bilateral relations from "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" to "All-Weather Comprehensive Strategic Partnership," injecting new momentum.
May 2025	Prime Minister Hun Manet visits China	Reaffirmed continuity of China policy, ensuring stability in bilateral relations.	Swift engagement by the new government dispelled speculation about potential shifts in Cambodia's China policy.

Furthermore, the two countries signed a *Memorandum of Understanding on the Establishment of a Foreign Policy Consultation Mechanism* in January 2024, deciding to hold annual strategic dialogues at the vice-ministerial level covering regional security, global governance, and development cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2024a). Cambodia also actively supports China's Global Development Initiative (GDI) and Global Security Initiative (GSI), maintaining policy coordination with China in multilateral forums such as the United Nations and ASEAN (Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Secretariat, 2024). China and Cambodia have consistently maintained aligned positions in international and regional affairs, forming a cooperative pattern of "mutual support and empowerment."

At the UN level, since 2023, Cambodia has publicly expressed support for China's stance on issues pertaining to its core interests, including Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Xinjiang, and opposed external interference in China's internal affairs (Embassy of the Kingdom of Cambodia, 2024). China provided technical support and experience sharing for Cambodia's applications to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the Digital Economy Partnership Agreement (DEPA), assisting Cambodia in completing 23 compliance reforms (Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation, 2023).

Regionally, China and Cambodia jointly promoted the negotiation process for Version 3.0 of the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area. In October 2023, they co-proposed the *ASEAN Digital Infrastructure Interconnection Initiative*, which was unanimously approved by all ten ASEAN members. The initiative aims to increase cross-border optical fiber network coverage between China and ASEAN countries to 95% by 2025, prioritizing the Cambodian section (China-ASEAN Expo Secretariat, 2023). This deep policy coordination reflects the maturity and strategic nature of the China-Cambodia *Comprehensive Strategic Partnership* (Chheang, 2023).

Economic and Trade Cooperation and Development: The Pursuit of a Shared Destiny and Prosperity

Economic cooperation has consistently been the “engine” of Cambodia–China bilateral relations. Since 2013, the two countries have achieved breakthroughs in infrastructure construction, trade and investment, and agricultural cooperation, leveraging the synergy between China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Cambodia’s *Rectangular Strategy*. Relevant projects and data underscore the “mutual benefit and win-win” essence of this cooperation. For a considerable period, Chinese investment has been the most critical resource for Cambodia’s development, serving as a cornerstone for its economic progress.

According to the latest data from the Council for the Development of Cambodia (CDC), from January to September 2025, Cambodia attracted USD 7.8 billion in fixed-asset investment, a 47% year-on-year increase, reaching a record high. Chinese investment constituted 52.96% of this total, maintaining China’s position as Cambodia’s largest source of investment (Council for the Development of Cambodia, 2025a). This growth trend was evident early in 2025: in January–February, Cambodia approved 112 investment projects with a contractual value exceeding USD 1 billion, nearly 80% of which originated from China. By the first five months of 2025, China’s share remained at 62%. Notably, in May alone, China’s investment share peaked at 84.8% (Council for the Development of Cambodia, 2025b).

As of 2025, Chinese investment in Cambodia has diversified beyond traditional garment processing and construction into manufacturing, new energy, infrastructure, and other sectors. Within manufacturing, metal processing and high-end production have emerged as new growth areas. In February 2025, Kampot Province approved a metal processing plant with an agreed investment of USD 31 million. Similarly, tire manufacturing has become a major focus, with a USD 2.42 billion tire plant approved in Sihanoukville Province in April 2025 (Hin, 2025).

In the new energy sector, green energy project investments have increased significantly. Since 2023 Chinese state firms and private groups have become major players in Cambodia’s renewable-energy agenda, with high-visibility pledges (notably a reported USD 600 million commitment by China Datang to solar/wind) and project activity in solar, some wind and hydropower-related work. Cooperation and policy engagement in Cambodia’s green-energy transition by Chinese stakeholders since 2023 can be best characterised as multi-channel: (1) corporate project pledges and IPP activity (e.g., Datang’s USD 600m pledge), (2) EPC contracting by Chinese SOEs (transmission, PV farms), and (3) state-level MOUs/BRI frameworks that create enabling political cover for projects. These channels differ in transparency and in budgetary implications for Cambodia (corporate equity vs. sovereign loans).

Crucially, China’s long-term investment and assistance in landmark “connectivity” projects have been vital for Cambodia’s sustained robust economic growth in the post-conflict era of peaceful development. The China–Cambodia Railway (Phnom Penh–Sihanoukville Port), a flagship BRI project co-constructed by both nations, officially commenced operations in October 2023. Spanning 402 kilometers with a total investment of approximately USD 2.5

billion, it is Cambodia's first standard-gauge electrified railway, jointly operated by China Railway Group and the Royal Railway of Cambodia (China Railway Group Corporation, 2023). The railway reduced cargo transport time from Phnom Penh to Sihanoukville Port from 5–6 hours to 2 hours, while freight costs decreased by 30%. In Q1 2024, cumulative freight volume reached 1.2 million tons, contributing to a 28% year-on-year increase in the import–export volume of the Sihanoukville Port Special Economic Zone (National Bank of Cambodia, 2024).

Additionally, Chinese-aided projects such as the new National Stadium of Cambodia (operational March 2023) and Phnom Penh's Third Ring Road (opened January 2024) created over 50,000 local jobs and directly contributed 1.2 percentage points to the GDP growth of Cambodia's construction sector (General Administration of Customs of China, 2024). The success of these projects is regarded as a significant achievement of the BRI's implementation in Southeast Asia, with their operational effects serving as a model for regional connectivity (ASEAN Studies Centre, 2025; World Bank, 2023).

Moreover, the continuous expansion and structural optimization of trade and investment volumes between China and Cambodia have facilitated Cambodia's integration into regional economic development and global production systems. In 2023, bilateral trade reached USD 16.02 billion, an 11.5% year-on-year increase. Chinese exports to Cambodia amounted to USD 13.28 billion, primarily comprising machinery, equipment, electronic components, and building materials. Cambodian exports to China totaled USD 2.74 billion, mainly consisting of rice, rubber, cashews, and other agricultural products, with agricultural exports growing 23% year-on-year. This reflects a shift in the bilateral trade structure from a pattern of "China exporting industrial manufactured goods" toward "two-way complementarity" (General Administration of Customs of China, 2024).

In investment, China's foreign direct investment (FDI) flow to Cambodia reached USD 1.83 billion in 2023, accounting for 34% of Cambodia's total FDI that year. Investment sectors expanded from traditional real estate and manufacturing to emerging areas such as the digital economy and new energy. For instance, the first 5G Industrial Park in Cambodia, invested by Chinese enterprises, plans to attract 50 digital companies by 2025 and is expected to create 12,000 high-tech jobs (Khmer Times, 2025). Some studies note that while the diversification of Chinese investment helps Cambodia reduce reliance on traditional industries, it also presents challenges related to local industrial support and capacity building (Khieng, 2024; Un, 2023).

Regarding traditional sectors, China–Cambodia agricultural cooperation exemplifies South–South cooperation, having evolved from early agricultural infrastructure assistance to industrial collaboration aimed at upgrading Cambodia's economy and enhancing its production capacity. Since 2023, the two countries have transitioned from traditional aid models toward a framework of "technology export + capacity co-construction." The Chinese Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs and Cambodia's Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries jointly launched the *Upgrading Project for China–Cambodia Agricultural Technology Demonstration Centers*, establishing two modern agricultural demonstration bases in Battambang and Kampong Cham provinces to promote hybrid rice, high-yield rubber, and other improved crop varieties (Khmer Times, 2025).

In 2023, the per-mu yield of hybrid rice in these demonstration bases reached 680 kilograms, a 40% increase compared with local traditional varieties. Additionally, the Cambodian Cashew Nut Deep Processing Industrial Park, a USD 300 million investment by Chinese enterprises that began operations in February 2024, has an annual processing capacity of 100,000 tons, generating higher incomes for about 20,000 local farmers and tripling the export value-added of Cambodian cashews (Ravindran, 2025).

Such agricultural cooperation projects are viewed as exemplifying the transformation of China's foreign aid model from traditional assistance to sustainable development cooperation (Khieng, 2024).

Table 2. Major Economic Cooperation Areas and Achievements between China and Cambodia since 2023

Areas of Cooperation	Key Items/Data	Main Effects and Impacts
Investment Scale	Jan-Sep 2025, Chinese investment share: 52.96%	Maintains China's position as Cambodia's largest investment source.
Industrial Distribution	Metal processing plant (USD 31 million), Tire plant (USD 242 million)	Promotes upgrading and diversification of Cambodia's manufacturing sector.
New Energy	Wind power plant (USD 210 million), Solar plant (USD 33 million)	Advances Cambodia's energy structure transformation.
Infrastructure	China-Cambodia Railway (Phnom Penh-Sihanoukville Port) opened	Transport time reduced to 2 hours, freight costs down 30%; Q1 2024 freight: 1.2 million tons.
Infrastructure	National Stadium, Ring Road construction	Created over 50,000 jobs; contributed 1.2 percentage points to construction sector GDP growth.
Trade & Investment	Bilateral trade USD 160.2 billion (+11.5%)	Cambodian agricultural exports to China up 23%; trade structure optimized.
Trade & Investment	China's FDI in Cambodia USD 18.3 billion (34% of total)	Investment expands to the digital economy (5G park), new energy, etc.

Agricultural Cooperation	Agricultural Tech Demo Center Upgrade	Hybrid rice yield: 680 kg/mu, +40% increase.
Agricultural Cooperation	Cashew Deep Processing Industrial Park operational	Annual processing 100,000 tons; benefits 20,000 households; export value-added increased threefold.

Comprehensive Cultural and Educational Exchanges: Promoting Mutual Understanding and People-to-People Bonds

Since the new cabinet took office, bilateral educational and cultural exchanges have been regarded as the “bridge of hearts” in China–Cambodia relations. Since 2023, the two countries have promoted “Sino–Cambodian friendship” from the governmental to the people-to-people level through cultural events, educational cooperation, higher education collaboration, and media linkages, forming a “multi-level, broad-coverage” pattern of cultural exchange. However, academic research also suggests that the expansion of cultural influence is a long-term and complex process, potentially accompanied by local societal considerations regarding cultural adaptability and autonomy.

The two sides designated 2023 as the “Year of China–Cambodia Cultural Exchange,” hosting over 50 cultural activities, including the *Chinese Intangible Cultural Heritage Exhibition*, *Angkor Art Exhibition from Cambodia*, and *China–Cambodia Youth Music Festival*. The *Chinese Intangible Cultural Heritage Exhibition* in Phnom Penh (September 2023) attracted over 100,000 visitors, showcasing 30 intangible heritage items such as paper-cutting, shadow puppetry, and embroidery. During the event, a Memorandum of Cooperation on Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection was signed, outlining plans for joint protection of two Cambodian intangible heritage projects over the next three years (Ministry of Culture and Tourism of China, 2024). In February 2024, the *Joint Celebration of the Chinese–Cambodian Spring Festival* was held simultaneously in ten Cambodian provinces and cities, marking the first inclusion of the Chinese Spring Festival in Cambodia’s “National Cultural Activities Calendar.” This reflects the depth of cultural integration and represents a significant socio-cultural indicator of the close bilateral relationship.

The new cabinet places greater emphasis on enhancing the quality of Cambodia’s human capital and technological capacity through educational exchanges with China, facilitating the upgrading and optimization of Cambodia’s industrialization and industrial structure. Since 2023, educational cooperation has shifted from “scholarship support” toward “joint education.” According to China’s Ministry of Education, in the 2023–2024 academic year, the number of Cambodian students in China reached 12,000, a 15% increase from 2022. China provided 500 government scholarships to Cambodia, focusing on agriculture, engineering, medicine, and other specialized fields (Department of International Cooperation and Exchange, Ministry of Education of China, 2024).

In joint education, Yunnan University and the Royal University of Agriculture of Cambodia

jointly established the *China–Cambodia Joint Agricultural College* (opened September 2023), enrolling its first cohort of 200 undergraduates under a “2+2” model (two years in Cambodia, two years in China), aiming to train 1,000 agricultural professionals over five years (Yunnan University, 2023). Furthermore, China has established five Confucius Institutes and twelve Confucius Classrooms in Cambodia, training over 30,000 Chinese language learners in 2023, making Chinese the second most studied foreign language in Cambodia (Center for Language Education and Cooperation, Ministry of Education of China, 2025). Scholars observe that educational cooperation plays a long-term and profound role in cultivating pro-China elites and professional technical personnel, constituting a social foundation for bilateral relations (Chheang, 2023; Un, 2023).

Since 2023, China–Cambodia higher education cooperation has evolved from traditional personnel exchanges to institutional co-construction, deep resource integration, and two-way talent cultivation, forming a multidimensional pattern of “university–university cooperation, university–enterprise collaboration, and government–enterprise support.” This transformation addresses the urgent need for high-quality human resources driven by Cambodia’s industrial upgrading and represents an important practice of the China–Cambodia Community with a Shared Future in the educational domain.

Table 3. Representative Projects and Agreements on Higher Education Cooperation between China and Cambodia since 2023

Area of Cooperation	Cooperation Project/ Agreement	Major Participating Institutions	Core Content and Objectives	Year
Inter-school Cooperation & Co-construction	MoU on Cooperation between Chinese and Cambodian Schools	Qiannan Normal University for Nationalities & Royal University of Phnom Penh	Teacher-student exchange, Chinese language teaching, student practice, joint training.	2025
Inter-school Cooperation & Co-construction	China-Cambodia Intelligent Construction Joint Innovation Center	Guangxi Construction Vocational College & Institute of Technology Cambodia	Cooperative R&D in smart construction and AI technology application.	2025

Vocational Education & Training	Ben Mo College	Shandong University of Engineering and Technology & Asia-Europe University, Cambodia	Annual training of 5,000 person-times; export of vocational education standards; mutual credential recognition.	2025
Vocational Education & Training	Chinese + Vocational Skills Training Base	Guangxi Construction Vocational College & Cambodia Chinese School	"Chinese + Skills" training focused on construction and related fields.	2025
Teacher Training & Chinese Education	MoU on Joint Training of Local Chinese Language Teachers	CLEC, Ministry of Education of China & MoEYS, Cambodia	Systematically train and supply local Chinese language teachers for Cambodia.	2025
International Student Exchange & Scholarship	1000 Overseas Study Program	Qiannan Normal University for Nationalities & Multiple Cambodian Universities	Expand Cambodian student numbers to 200 within three years.	2024-2025
University-Enterprise Collaboration & Industry-Education Integration	Tripartite Collaborative Education and Training	Guangxi Institute of Architecture + Cambodian University + Hualan Group/China Construction Fourth Engineering Bureau	Meet talent needs of Chinese enterprises in Cambodia; jointly train local talents.	2025

In media cooperation, the co-produced documentary *China–Cambodia Railway: Friendship Across Time and Space* aired on mainstream television stations in both countries in December 2023, achieving the highest monthly ratings on Cambodia's TVK and reaching over 5 million viewers (Ministry of Culture and Tourism of China, 2024).

In the tourism sector, following China's resumption of outbound group travel to Cambodia in January 2023, Chinese tourist arrivals to Cambodia reached 850,000, a 320% year-on-year increase, constituting 28% of total foreign tourists in Cambodia. Cambodian tourist arrivals to China reached 120,000, a 180% year-on-year increase (General Administration of Customs of China, 2024). To further facilitate personnel exchanges, China and Cambodia implemented a mutual visa exemption policy starting in March 2023. By June 2024, over 2 million people had utilized the visa-free policy, significantly boosting people-to-people exchanges (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2024a). The facilitation and scale of such exchanges foster mutual understanding at the societal level and serve as a social glue for bilateral relations (Chheang, 2023).

Table 4. Main Fields and Data of Cultural Exchanges between China and Cambodia since 2023

Exchange Field	Main Activities/Projects	Scale and Impact
Cultural Activities	"China-Cambodia Year of Cultural Exchange" series	Over 50 events were held; "Chinese Intangible Cultural Heritage Exhibition" attracted over 100,000 attendees.
Cultural Activities	Joint China-Cambodia Spring Festival Celebration	Included for the first time in Cambodia's "National Cultural Activities Calendar"; held simultaneously in 10 provinces/cities.
Education Cooperation	Cambodian Students in China	12,000 students (+15%); 500 Chinese government scholarships.
Education Cooperation	China-Cambodia Joint Agricultural College	First cohort: 200 students; "2+2" model; plan to train 1,000 personnel over 5 years.
Education Cooperation	Confucius Institutes/Classrooms	5 Institutes, 12 Classrooms; annual training of Chinese language learners exceeds 30,000 person-times.
Higher Education Cooperation	MoU on Inter-school Cooperation	Covers teacher-student exchange, joint training, and other fields.
Higher Education Cooperation	Ben Mo College	Annual training of 5,000 technical and skilled personnel.
Higher Education Cooperation	Local Chinese Teacher Training	Systematic training and supply of local Chinese teachers.
Media & Tourism	Joint Documentary "China-Cambodia Railway"	Reached over 5 million viewers; topped monthly ratings on Cambodia's TVK.
Media & Tourism	Personnel Exchanges	850,000 Chinese tourists to Cambodia (+320%); 120,000 Cambodian tourists to China (+180%).
Media & Tourism	Visa Waiver Policy	As of June 2024, over 2 million people utilized visa-free travel.

Security Communication and Cooperation: Risk Perception and Management

Security cooperation serves as the “stabilizer” of China-Cambodia relations. Since 2023, the two countries have deepened collaboration in both traditional security (military cooperation) and non-traditional security (counter-terrorism, narcotics control, and public health), forming a three-dimensional cooperation system comprising “dialogue mechanisms + joint actions + capacity building.” Notably, since 2025, amidst changes in the Cambodia-Thailand border situation, China has played a constructive role in regional security affairs while building important consensus with Cambodia and other ASEAN countries on the South China Sea issue and jointly promoting the construction of regional peace and stability mechanisms. Especially after the border conflict between Cambodia and Thailand escalated into armed confrontation, China sought to encourage dialogue and peaceful negotiations within a framework respecting the sovereignty of the two involved nations and ASEAN, avoiding direct involvement or interference in the sovereignty of neighboring states. This approach emphasized diplomatic dialogue, exemplified by the Shanghai “tea talk” on Asia’s dialogue culture, rather than seeking personal recognition such as “chairing the signing ceremony” for the Ceasefire Agreement and Border Peace Agreement Talks.

Long-standing bilateral military exchanges between Cambodia and China have also seen more in-depth and comprehensive interaction, partly influenced by the new Prime Minister’s military background. In May 2023, the *Golden Dragon-2023* China-Cambodia joint military exercise was held in Kampong Chhnang Province, involving 1,200 personnel and covering counter-terrorism, humanitarian relief, and jungle operations, marking the largest joint exercise between the two countries to date (Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China, 2023a). Regarding equipment support, China delivered two batches of modern equipment to the Cambodian military, including 120 armored vehicles, three Z-9 helicopters, and a batch of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), significantly enhancing Cambodia’s counter-terrorism and border control capabilities (Xinhua News Agency, 2023b). Additionally, China and Cambodia established an “annual defense ministers’ dialogue.” The first dialogue in December 2023 reached a consensus to conduct five joint training sessions in 2024–2025 and establish a “China-Cambodia Military Technology Training Centre” in Cambodia to train 500 Cambodian military technicians annually (Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China, 2023b). This deepening defense cooperation is a significant indicator of heightened political mutual trust and has attracted attention from both within and outside the region.

Another area of considerable attention is bilateral cooperation in non-traditional security, particularly in “counter-terrorism, narcotics control, crime prevention, public health, and combating fraudulent industries.” In counter-terrorism, Chinese and Cambodian police jointly launched *Operation Thunderbolt 2023* in August 2023, apprehending 12 suspects and seizing three explosive devices at Sihanoukville Port, marking the first joint counter-terrorism operation conducted by the two countries within Cambodia (Ministry of Public Security of the People’s Republic of China, 2023). In narcotics control, leveraging the “Law Enforcement and Security Cooperation along the Mekong River involving China,

Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand” mechanism, China and Cambodia jointly cracked 47 drug cases in 2023, seizing 1.2 tons of methamphetamine and 300 kg of opium, representing a 28% decrease in case numbers compared to 2022 (Office of the National Narcotics Control Commission of China, 2024).

In public health, China continued supporting Cambodia’s COVID-19 response, donating 1 million vaccine doses in 2023 and establishing the *China-Cambodia Public Health Emergency Cooperation Center* in Phnom Penh to assist in improving Cambodia’s infectious disease surveillance system, which improved the timeliness of infectious disease reporting in Cambodia by 40% in 2023 (National Health Commission of the People’s Republic of China, 2024). Such non-traditional security cooperation reflects the breadth and pragmatism of the China-Cambodia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (Burgos & Ear, 2024).

A particularly critical issue in recent years has been cyber and telecommunications fraud, along with related organized crime and human trafficking. Since 2017, China and Cambodia have addressed the escalating problem of telecommunications fraud through bilateral police and judicial cooperation, including joint law enforcement operations and cross-border investigative collaboration.

III. The Political Legacy Inherited by the New Cabinet and the Adjustment and Optimization of China Policy

The enduring close partnership between China and Cambodia is founded on a shared pursuit of economic development, social stability, and policy continuity and sustainability. Shared values between the ruling parties of both countries have long facilitated comprehensive cooperation and the deepening of economic, trade, investment, and aid relations. Cambodia’s emphasis on economic development, peace, stability, and sovereignty also drives it to actively attract more economic resources and international capital through multilateral relations. This pragmatic approach shapes Cambodia’s foreign policy choices, even though such choices are often interpreted as favoring China. However, as the previous cabinet completed initial tasks of national reunification, economic reconstruction, and fostering prosperity, the new cabinet’s policy considerations are distinctly different. The following analysis examines the management of Cambodia-China relations and China policy since the new cabinet took office, focusing on five key points.

Optimization of Economic Development Resources, Construction of Social Governance Stability, and Strengthening of Security and Multilateral Hedging

The Hun Manet government, while continuing the main thrust of economic cooperation with China from the Hun Sen era, places greater emphasis on resource optimization and sustainable development. The new administration promotes a shift in China-Cambodia cooperation from “hard infrastructure” to “soft connectivity,” emphasizing the digital

economy, green finance, and human resource development (Sun, 2025). For instance, in June 2024, the two countries signed the *Framework Agreement on Digital Economic Cooperation*, with China pledging to support Cambodia in building five “digital hubs” over the next three years and assisting in formulating national digital payment standards (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2024b). In social governance, Cambodia enhances the sustainability of national governance through Sino-Cambodian cooperation aimed at improving public service capacity, such as public health emergency centers and local teacher training projects. In security, the new government continues deepening defense cooperation with China while cautiously maintaining low-sensitivity cooperation with the U.S. to balance various interests.

Assessment of the Impact of the Trump Administration’s Tariff Policy on Cambodia–China Relations

The tariff policies against China and the “friendly offshore outsourcing” strategy initiated during the Trump administration pose potential threats to Cambodia’s export-oriented economy. As a significant base for global apparel and footwear production, Cambodia faces pressure from rules of origin and tariff barriers when its products, processed through Chinese supply chains, are exported to the U.S. (World Bank, 2025a). In response, Cambodia has strengthened cooperation with China in industrial chain upgrading and compliance reform, such as applying to join the CPTPP and DEPA, relying on Chinese technical support to complete 23 domestic compliance reforms (Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation, Ministry of Commerce, 2023). Furthermore, projects like the China–Cambodia Cashew Deep Processing Industrial Park enhance local value-added production and reduce dependence on entrepot trade.

Head-of-State Diplomacy, High-Level Close Contacts, and Close Interaction

Head-of-state diplomacy and state visits play an irreplaceable symbolic and substantive role in Cambodia–China relations. In September 2024, Cambodian King Norodom Sihamoni paid a state visit to China at the invitation of the Chinese president. During the visit, the two sides signed the *Joint Statement on Deepening the All-Weather Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between China and Cambodia*, formally upgrading bilateral relations to an “All-Weather Comprehensive Strategic Partnership” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2024b).

From a functional perspective, Cambodia–China summit diplomacy since 2023 has visibly deepened bilateral relations through three main tracks: political declarations, the signing of numerous cooperation agreements, and substantive security exchanges. These state visits not only reaffirm the continuity of traditional bilateral ties but also demonstrate both sides’ heightened commitment to advancing cooperation in economic and trade relations, security exchanges, development collaboration, and regional political dialogue.

Notably, King Norodom Sihamoni and Prime Minister Hun Manet have each made multiple visits to China, while Cambodia remains among the few countries that President Xi Jinping has personally visited since 2020. These interactions underscore that Cambodia's new administration not only continues the foreign policy orientation established by the previous government but also actively advances new initiatives in cultural, economic, industrial, and security cooperation.

The Significance and Impact of Canal Construction and Cambodia's Withdrawal from the Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Development Triangle Area (CLV-DTA)

The development and construction of the Funan Techo Canal, a core target of China-Cambodia co-construction, has emerged as a central project since the new cabinet took office. However, the canal's development involves complex issues concerning Mekong River hydrology, environmental ecology, operational efficiency, and financial responsibilities, which have become focal points of international attention and regional politics. Bilateral cooperation between China and Cambodia regarding the canal's construction, development planning, operation, and ecological protection has progressed gradually under close collaboration. Nevertheless, the canal's potential functions and efficiency have raised external concerns. In early 2024, Cambodia announced its withdrawal from the Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Development Triangle Area (CLV-DTA) cooperation, established in 1999 to promote economic cooperation and poverty reduction in the border areas of the three countries. This move is considered a cost associated with prioritizing the canal's development over economic integration within the Lower Mekong sub-region. Post-withdrawal, Cambodia's resources and attention shifted toward alignment with China-led mechanisms like the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) and BRI projects (Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Secretariat, 2024). This reflects an adjustment in Cambodia's foreign cooperation priorities: from traditional sub-regional cooperation toward bilateral and multilateral mechanisms perceived to offer greater financial and technological advantages (Un, 2023). Although Vietnam and Laos expressed regret over Cambodia's withdrawal, Cambodia secured more direct infrastructure investment and development resources by strengthening bilateral ties with China, such as through the China-Cambodia Railway and Digital Hub projects. Cambodia-Vietnam relations recovered and deepened rapidly after a brief period of fluctuation following the withdrawal.

Cambodia-China Relations and China's Role since the Outbreak of the Cambodian-Thai Military Conflict

In May 2025, a military conflict erupted on the Cambodian-Thai border, resulting in casualties and evacuations. Cambodia promptly informed China of the situation and sought support. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi repeatedly emphasized "China's firm support for Cambodia's efforts to safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity" and actively coordinated mediation processes within the ASEAN framework. During the conflict's escalation, China provided Cambodia with real-time intelligence sharing and technical support for border monitoring, aiding Cambodian defense deployments.

As the border conflict intensified, China consistently advocated for a calm resolution through peaceful dialogue from the early stages. However, with the exposure of the Phethongthong phone call audio and the subsequent escalation of military clashes between Cambodia and Thailand, China's efforts to bring both sides to the peace table seemed insufficient to ease emotional responses on both sides, while Cambodia shifted its early two-pronged strategy of ICJ appeals and border commission negotiations, and Thailand moved toward a military-led hardline approach.

Following the reduced likelihood of International Court of Justice (ICJ) arbitration and a sharp decline in tensions after a special session of the bilateral border committee, China continued to emphasize that the conflict should be resolved by both parties within the ASEAN framework. Throughout this period, China played an active mediating role—participating in and witnessing a special ASEAN meeting between Cambodia and Thailand hosted by Malaysia, and facilitating trilateral talks among China, Cambodia, and Thailand on 14 August 2025. These discussions produced proposals for demining the border, reconstructing conflict-affected areas, and establishing post-conflict reconstruction and long-term stability mechanisms, aiming to secure sustained security and economic assistance while consolidating bilateral border stability.

At the China–Cambodia–Thailand trilateral meeting in August 2025, China's foreign minister proposed initiatives to rebuild trust, reopen border crossings, and jointly combat cross-border crime. China also provided assistance to communities affected by the Cambodia–Thailand border conflict; for instance, in September 2025, reports indicated that China pledged approximately USD 28 million to Cambodia to support families impacted by the clashes. Bilateral cooperation between Cambodia and China has also advanced substantive collaboration in border management (Khuon, 2025), including joint efforts to combat cross-border crime, provide border-related assistance, mediate in border disputes, and facilitate cross-border logistics channels.

These cooperative efforts lean more toward “safeguarding Cambodia's sovereignty practices and enhancing its border stability and openness” than toward “traditional joint management of border defenses, internationalization of border security, or escalation of border issues.”

Just as the cross-strait issue and the One-China principle represent China's unassailable bottom line, the demarcation of the Cambodian–Thai border and sovereignty over existing territory are critical issues requiring calm handling. Nevertheless, the ongoing uncertainties of the border conflict directly impact regional prosperity, development, national image, and the tourism industry, adding new variables to regional integration.

IV. Conclusion: Possibilities and Challenges of a Comprehensive Partnership

Grounded in the developmental needs of shared economic growth, social stability, and policy sustainability, Cambodia-China relations remain interdependent and mutually demanding. Cambodia seeks to acquire additional investment resources for its development while safeguarding sovereign independence, sustainable industrial growth, and social stability. China, in turn, requires stable relations with all neighbors, with its partnership with Cambodia serving as a demonstration of successful neighborhood diplomacy and ensuring the protection of its overseas interests and capital amid competition with the United States. Bilateral relations have entered a “deep-water area,” shaped by the complex interplay of major power rivalry, regional politics, and domestic needs that influence the bilateral agenda. Despite the apparent closeness of the relationship, challenges remain and require careful assessment.

Deepening of Mutual Trust: The primary challenge in assessing and managing Cambodia’s current China policy lies in strategic independence. While Cambodia has reaped significant development dividends from cooperation with China, it also faces risks associated with asymmetric dependence. Chinese investment constitutes over half of Cambodia’s total foreign direct investment (FDI) and is concentrated in strategic sectors such as infrastructure and energy. A withdrawal of Chinese capital or a downturn in relations could expose Cambodia’s economy to systemic risks (World Bank, 2025a). Furthermore, the high degree of integration between Cambodia’s military equipment system and China’s, while enhancing combat capability, potentially entangles Cambodia in Sino-U.S. military tensions (Thon, 2025). To manage these risks, the Cambodian government is promoting a shift from a “project-driven” to a “system-driven” cooperation model, aiming to reduce uncertainty through institutionalized rule-building (Po & Chan, 2023). Concurrently, Cambodia seeks to alleviate public concerns about corruption by enhancing domestic governance transparency, including audits of Chinese-aided projects.

Risk and Cost Management of Bilateral Relations: Cambodia pursues multilateral balancing and risk management within the context of Sino-U.S. regional competition. However, as the principle of “equidistance implies equal distance” suggests, the trust basis of close relations tends to be exclusive and mutually reinforcing in practice. Cambodia attempts to maintain “equidistant diplomacy” between China and the United States, but its actions demonstrate a clearer inclination toward China. Although the United States remains an important trade partner and security interlocutor, Cambodia acknowledges the U.S. “Indo-Pacific Strategy” as containing clear containment undertones directed at China. Thus, the intensifying and decoupling competition between the United States and China makes it clear that the U.S.-China-Cambodia triangular relationship cannot be an equilateral triangle. Cambodia clearly needs to seek greater strategic flexibility and maximize its national interests within this triangular relationship. Cambodia understandably maintains bilateral relations with the United States through low-sensitivity cooperation, such as demining training and education exchange, to avoid excessively provoking China in security and geo-

politics. Nonetheless, as Sino-U.S. competition intensifies, Cambodia's principle of "not choosing sides" faces continuous testing, and its strategic flexibility becomes increasingly constrained.

The Tone and Bottom Lines of Bilateral Interaction: Cambodia and China share fundamental attitudes regarding sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity, relations with relevant neighboring countries, the South China Sea, and the One-China policy. Cambodia upholds the principle of "sovereign equality and non-interference in internal affairs" in its relations with neighbors while clearly supporting China's positions on specific issues. Regarding the South China Sea, Cambodia opposes the internationalization of disputes and advocates for resolution through bilateral negotiations. On issues central to China's core interests, such as Taiwan, Xinjiang, and Hong Kong, Cambodia has publicly supported China's stance on 12 international occasions (China-ASEAN Expo Secretariat, 2023). These statements consolidate political mutual trust and enhance Cambodia's pivotal role within China's regional strategy. The foundation of bilateral cooperation in regional policy rests on the alignment of these issues with the mutual interests of both nations. However, any shift in these core governing values or positions regarding regional interests could challenge the current collaborative framework and mutual trust.

Relational yet Reasonable Hedging of External Influences: Analogous to the Thucydides Trap hypothesis, Sino-U.S. relations are often viewed through the lens of strategic competition driven by national development needs. The logic of major power rivalry may prompt policymakers in neighboring countries to conceptualize their national security and foreign policy strategies through Cold War-style bloc confrontation thinking. The most dangerous aspect of this "Cold War logic" is mistakenly equating China with the Soviet Union, projecting Cold War-era ideological and political bloc confrontation onto contemporary Sino-American competition. This perspective overlooks that the current Sino-American competition is primarily a global contest of economic strength and national power. Unlike the Soviet Union, which collapsed internally, the outcome of Sino-American competition will depend on which nation demonstrates superior resilience, sustainable development, and depth of economic and technological capacity.

For neighboring countries like Cambodia, the core issue is not merely avoiding entanglement in bilateral conflicts or global competition over technology and production chains. Rather, it is discerning which country—China or the United States—can serve as a reliable partner capable of providing development resources, social stability, and political security in the Asia-Pacific region. Such a partnership, built on equality and mutual respect, can genuinely assist regional nations in optimizing prosperity and enhancing competitiveness while maintaining sovereign independence and territorial integrity. Cambodia seeks to mitigate concerns about regional confrontation and strategic maneuvering by embedding its bilateral cooperation with China within broader frameworks, such as ASEAN-China mechanisms or the Sino-American strategic dynamic. For example, at the ASEAN-China Informal Defense Ministers' Meeting, Cambodia launched the Mekong Sub-regional Security Cooperation Initiative to multilateralize bilateral security cooperation and reduce its sensitivity (Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Secretariat, 2024).

Much like the leadership and political legacies of King Sihanouk and H.E. Hun Sen, Cambodia's risk-averse and leverage strategies represent rational and calculated choices. The critical question remains whether Cambodia's assessment of global dynamics is constrained by Cold War-era thinking on institutional rivalry or whether it recognizes the current era's competition as one defined by economic and technological advancement.

Looking Ahead: A critical test of Cambodia's political wisdom will be its ability to maintain a delicate balance between fully leveraging opportunities presented by Chinese cooperation and effectively safeguarding its national strategic autonomy.

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Chapter 9

US-Cambodia Relations: Managed Mistrust in a Competitive Indo-Pacific

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I. Introduction

This chapter examines the evolution of US–Cambodia relations from 2018 through 2025 in the wider setting of mainland Southeast Asia’s political economy and security order. The period began following a decisive contraction of political competition inside Cambodia and coincided with a regional environment characterized by intensifying strategic competition; surging Chinese finance and security cooperation; and renewed American efforts to define an Indo–Pacific strategy that links maritime access, supply chain governance, and democratic values. For a small state with limited fiscal resources but considerable regime durability, Cambodia’s external relations have been shaped by the search for reliable patrons and by a pragmatic calculus about the costs of alienating major powers. For the United States, the Cambodian case engages older concerns about democratic regression and corruption while intersecting with newer concerns about strategic foreclosure in maritime Southeast Asia and the Gulf of Thailand. These concerns have been filtered through evolving American regional strategies and through transatlantic instruments such as the European Union’s partial withdrawal of Everything But Arms (EBA) preferences in 2020, which gave economic texture to political conditionality without closing doors to cooperation in specific sectors such as mine action and public health (European Commission, 2020; U.S. Department of State, 2019).

A general framing helps before turning to the periodization that anchors the argument. Since the 1991 Paris Peace Agreements and the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), the external presence in Cambodia has been unusually dense relative to the size of the economy and the capacity of the state. Western donors funded elections, demining, and institution building, while regional investors led successive waves of garment and construction growth. Chinese finance became increasingly salient after the global financial crisis, supporting transport, energy, tourism, and later security infrastructure, often with few political strings but with strategic implications for maritime access and for the consolidation of political authority in Phnom Penh. The literature on small state strategies would describe Cambodia’s external posture as one of calibrated hedging, a pattern that relies on inviting multiple partnerships while keeping regime security as the organizing domestic principle. In such a setting, great power shifts are not simply external shocks; they are opportunities and constraints that directly condition the distribution of rents inside the ruling coalition and, by extension, the country’s diplomatic posture.

Within this regional and domestic context, the years from 2018 to 2025 are marked by three cross cutting developments that a reader should keep in view as the chapter proceeds. First, the United States redefined its approach to Southeast Asia through two strategic frames, the Free and Open Indo–Pacific (FOIP) narrative published by the Department of State in 2019 and the Indo–Pacific Strategy in 2022. These documents prioritize resilient supply chains, maritime security, and alliances, while maintaining a rhetorical and programmatic commitment to democratic norms. They also treat mainland Southeast Asia not as a peripheral arena but as a consequential strategic corridor that links the Gulf of Thailand, the South China Sea, and the Greater Mekong Subregion (U.S. Department of State, 2019; White House, 2022). Second, Cambodia deepened its economic and security ties with China while seeking to preserve diplomatic space with the United States, Japan, and others. The result

—visible in defense, trade, and development cooperation—is a pattern of engagement that mixes access seeking by outside powers with regime centered control of the terms of access. Third, the leadership transition from Hun Sen to Hun Manet in 2023 altered the atmospherics of diplomacy and created space for renewed high level exchanges, without generating rapid change in the underlying distribution of domestic power or in the hierarchy of external partners as measured by finance and security presence (Petty, 2023).

The central empirical hinge that connects these strands is the modernization of Ream Naval Base and the question of perceived privileged Chinese access. This is not merely a bilateral irritant. It is a focal point for how Washington defines strategic denial, for how Phnom Penh signals non-exclusivity, and for how other regional actors such as Japan and Vietnam calibrate their own engagements. High resolution imagery and maritime reporting from 2024 and 2025 document sustained Chinese involvement in construction and basing support, alongside carefully managed signals of openness, including a December 2024 port call by a United States vessel at Sihanoukville and an April 2025 visit to Ream by the Japan Maritime Self Defense Force. These moves changed the optics of access but did not by themselves resolve questions about operational control over key facilities or future usage of the longest pier at the base (CSIS AMTI, 2024).

A second structuring element is the use of economic and legal instruments by Western actors and their interaction with Cambodia's political economy. The European Commission's decision to partially withdraw Everything But Arms (EBA) preferences in 2020, citing serious and systematic violations of human rights, was a rare case of graduated trade coercion toward a least developed country. It affected a core export sector while leaving space for partial recovery and garment reorientation. The United States maintained targeted visa restrictions and Global Magnitsky sanctions, while also preserving and later renewing cooperation in areas such as unexploded ordnance removal. These mixed signals reflected the dual logic of American policy in the period, which combined punitive tools aimed at governance and rights with selective positive engagement in sectors that demonstrate tangible benefits to ordinary Cambodians and that build a minimal foundation for future security dialogue (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2024; The Asia Foundation, 2024).

A third element is methodological. Understanding U.S.-Cambodia relations in this period requires linking the granular to the general. This chapter therefore draws on geospatial and port visit evidence, on policy documents and congressional research, on think tank assessments, and on regional journalism with attention to dates, sequences, and institutional sources. Geospatial work by CSIS's Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI) is valuable for establishing the timing and character of construction at Ream, while official strategies clarify the evolution of American objectives and instruments in the Indo-Pacific.

Complementing Bulut's (2017) historical discussion of U.S.-Cambodia relations in the previous edition, the contribution of the chapter is twofold. First, it reconceptualizes the bilateral relationship as an interaction between strategic denial by a system shaping power and performative hedging by a small state that prioritizes regime security. Empirically, it assembles a timeline that links base infrastructure, naval visits, sanctions and trade measures, and leadership change to show how and why the relationship remained brittle even as selective cooperation resumed.

II. Post-Conflict Legacies

Any account of contemporary U.S.-Cambodia relations must begin with the institutional and material legacies set in motion by the 1991 Paris Peace Agreements and UNTAC. The agreements ended the civil war, created an external framework for elections and human rights monitoring, and ushered in an international assistance presence that was unusually dense for a country of Cambodia's size. The United Nations documentation makes clear that the settlement delegated extraordinary administrative authority to the mission and embedded external actors inside core state functions, which in turn shaped later expectations about donor roles and conditionality in areas ranging from governance to security sector reform. In this environment, the United States and European partners supported electoral administration, judicial reform, and civil society programming throughout the 1990s and 2000s, while multilateral lenders financed infrastructure and public financial management. These funds created institutional networks and habits of coordination that endured, even as political contestation inside Cambodia became more tightly managed after the mid 2000s.

Demining and management of explosive remnants of war formed a second and distinctive legacy that linked the United States and Cambodia in an area of practical cooperation insulated from political cycles. The scale of explosive contamination made mine action both a humanitarian imperative and a platform for technical cooperation. United States conventional weapons destruction programming began in 1993 and had surpassed one hundred million dollars by the mid 2010s, later rising further, with activities that combined survey, clearance, risk education, and capacity building for the Cambodian Mine Action Centre and its partners (U.S. Department of State, 2016). The persistence of this portfolio established a channel through which the two governments could work together even when other areas of the relationship were strained. It also created a community of practice that included international NGOs and subnational authorities, and that is important for understanding why mine action remained a cooperative lane during the more contentious years after 2018.

The third legacy concerns the structure of the Cambodian economy and the external trade regime that supported it. Beginning in the late 1990s and consolidating in the 2000s, Cambodia's growth model combined garment exports, construction, and tourism. The garment sector became the dominant formal employer and the anchor of foreign exchange earnings, supported by preferential market access and by production systems that connected Chinese and other Asian inputs to assembly in Cambodian factories. World Bank analysis in the mid-2010s underscored the centrality of garments to export-led growth and to poverty reduction, while also pointing to logistics and value chain vulnerabilities (World Bank, 2014). Special economic zones became a policy instrument for attracting foreign direct investment and improving logistics. The Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone, launched in 2008 and developed with strong Chinese participation, grew into the largest zone in the country and a symbol of deepening Chinese commercial presence, while a Japanese-supported port special economic zone underscored the presence of other Asian partners in trade facilitation and industrial services (Open Development Cambodia, 2015; Asian Development Bank, 2015). The

European Union's EBA scheme was an important pillar of market access in this period and set the background for the later partial withdrawal in 2020 that became a focal point of Western economic conditionality debates.

Chinese finance and commercial activity expanded significantly in the decade before 2018 and provides essential context for later strategic debates. Sihanoukville and adjacent areas saw marked increases in investment, tourism, and construction from Chinese firms, with the special economic zone serving as a platform for manufacturing and the broader province experiencing a casino and property boom after 2015. Analytical and investigative reporting portrays mixed outcomes for local governance and labor markets, but the more important point for this chapter is that the density of Chinese lending, contracting, and enterprise activity built social and political links that would later lower the transactions costs of defense- and port-related cooperation after 2018 (Global Initiative, 2022). In short, the material base of the relationship between Phnom Penh and Beijing was constructed well before the specific controversies that dominated headlines after 2019.

A fourth legacy is diplomatic and concerns Cambodia's role inside the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). During its 2012 chairmanship, Cambodia presided over the first failure in ASEAN history to issue a ministerial joint communiqué, a breakdown widely linked to disagreements over how to reference South China Sea disputes and to pressure on the chair to avoid language that would be read in Beijing as adversarial. Contemporary analyses by policy institutes and media outlets at the time emphasized the significance of the episode for ASEAN cohesion and for external perceptions of Chinese influence over mainland member states. The episode was not determinative of later choices, but it signaled the costs that Phnom Penh was willing to accept to preserve flexibility in relations with Beijing, and it revealed to Washington the limits of multilateral venues for constraining Cambodian alignments when maritime issues are at stake (Bower, 2012).

Military-to-military ties between the United States and Cambodia were real but episodic, and their trajectory before 2018 was neither linear nor deep. The Angkor Sentinel exercises and professional military education created practical channels of engagement, particularly in humanitarian assistance and disaster response, medical services, and peacekeeping support. Those channels narrowed when Cambodia cancelled Angkor Sentinel in 2017, an episode that coincided with a broader tightening of political control ahead of local and national elections and that pointed to the political vulnerability of security cooperation when regime maintenance is prioritized. The cancellation was announced publicly and attributed to domestic scheduling and resource considerations, but it had the strategic effect of signalling that United States defense engagement could be interrupted without unacceptable costs to Phnom Penh. It also pushed Washington toward instruments that did not rely on cooperative defense activities, a shift that set the stage for the sanctions and visa restrictions that would follow in 2018 and for the later contest over access and transparency at Ream.

These legacies taken together produced a bilateral relationship that was structurally asymmetrical and segmented. The United States had comparatively deep institutional links in assistance and mine action, and reputational capital in support for electoral processes and civil society, but a modest investment footprint. China by contrast combined large scale

finance and commerce with the ability to support security infrastructure and training, and with a political approach that did not center governance conditionality. ASEAN processes offered neither a reliable constraint on Cambodian choices nor a reliable multiplier for United States influence when maritime issues were salient. This configuration does not determine later outcomes, but it helps explain why, when the bilateral relationship entered a more contentious phase after 2018, cooperation persisted in areas with path dependent institutional depth such as demining, while contention became sharper in areas where the material base and political alignments favored Beijing. It also clarifies why trade preferences and special economic zones figure so prominently in assessments of leverage and why the cancellation of defense exercises in 2017 mattered beyond its immediate operational effect. The pattern that emerges is one in which regime security, external finance, and the regional diplomatic setting interacted to channel U.S.-Cambodia relations into specific lanes and to raise the political costs of expanding cooperation in security affairs.

III. The 2018 Inflection, Democratic Retrenchment, and Conditionality

The July 2018 general election, conducted after the November 2017 dissolution of the principal opposition party, marked a decisive inflection in the external political economy of Cambodia. The United States shifted from a posture of engagement under political conditionality to a calibrated coercive strategy that combined visa restrictions, targeted financial sanctions under the Global Magnitsky framework, and sustained rhetorical pressure, while preserving cooperation in low politics domains such as mine action. The Department of State's December 2017 announcement of visa restrictions on individuals responsible for undermining Cambodian democracy signaled a willingness to personalize costs while avoiding a wholesale aid rupture, and those restrictions were reaffirmed and extended around the July 2018 contest as Washington publicly assessed the poll as neither free nor fair. The legal and normative message was clear. The United States would raise the price of repression for decision makers and their entourages without immediately severing functional cooperation that delivered visible public goods to Cambodians, an approach designed to preserve policy flexibility while sustaining a public line on democratic procedures and civil liberties.

Financial coercion followed. On 9 December 2019 the Treasury Department designated former Joint Chief of Staff Kun Kim under Global Magnitsky authorities, and on 15 September 2020 it designated Union Development Group, a Chinese state owned developer of the Dara Sakor project, for corruption and human rights abuses tied to land seizures in Koh Kong Province. The public rationale linked corruption to broader governance failures and, in the case of Union Development Group, pointed to the strategic context surrounding a large coastal development with dual use potential. This was notable because it embedded the Cambodian case inside an American effort to police the interface between illicit finance, human rights, and strategic infrastructure associated with external actors, especially Chinese firms. It also

indicated that Washington would reach beyond Cambodian nationals to sanction foreign corporate entities whose conduct in Cambodia had human rights and security salience. In effect, Treasury made Cambodia a test of the extraterritorial reach of Global Magnitsky authorities into third country firms that shape the country's political economy and alter its coastal geography (Bismonte, 2020).

The European Union supplied a complementary economic instrument that affected a core tradable sector. In February 2020 the Commission decided to withdraw in part the EBA preferences for Cambodia, citing serious and systematic violations of human rights principles enshrined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, with legal effect on August 12, 2020. The design of the partial withdrawal struck a balance between raising costs and preserving a pathway to restoration. For an economy where garments and related manufactures remained central to employment and foreign exchange, this was a significant but not catastrophic sanction that required supply chain adjustments and encouraged diversification, including further deepening of export links to non-European markets. The policy mattered for two reasons. It gave economic texture to political conditionality in a way that was legible to Cambodian firms and workers, and it signaled transatlantic convergence on the diagnosis of democratic regression even as both Brussels and Washington left room for compartmentalized cooperation in development programming and sectoral initiatives (European Commission, 2020).

The domestic political effect of these instruments was limited in the short run, but they reshaped the external bargaining environment. By raising reputational and financial costs in Western markets and legal jurisdictions, the measures increased the relative attractiveness of Chinese finance and security cooperation for Phnom Penh. The cancellation in early 2017 of Angkor Sentinel, the aforementioned US-Cambodia military exercise, foreshadowed how quickly defense cooperation could be paused when regime maintenance became paramount, and it nudged Washington toward tools that did not require assent from security institutions. This interaction between domestic regime priorities and external toolkits helps explain why sanctions and visa restrictions became more prominent after 2018, while functional cooperation persisted in mine action and public health where institutional depth and humanitarian logic insulated programs from political swings. The result was a segmented bilateral relationship in which contestation rose in security and governance, and continuity persisted in legacy cooperation lanes.

A final dimension of the 2018 inflection concerns signaling to third parties and to domestic coalitions. For third parties, especially Japan and some ASEAN members, the US-EU mix of targeted measures and partial trade withdrawal demonstrated both resolve and restraint, and it kept open the possibility that enhanced transparency and access in the security domain could blunt sanctions logic in Washington. For domestic coalitions, the measures altered the pattern of rent distribution across export oriented sectors and provincial elites, raising the political value of those external patrons who could deliver alternative markets, finance, and protection. The implication is not that sanctions produced authoritarian consolidation, which had domestic roots, but rather that they altered the external menu of choices available to Cambodian decision makers and shifted attention toward partners who could help manage

the costs of Western opprobrium. This created a permissive environment for the next phase of the relationship, in which maritime infrastructure and basing questions at Ream Naval Base would eclipse other issues as the chief focus of bilateral contention and leverage.

IV. Ream Naval Base, Strategic Denial and Performative Hedging

The modernization of Ream Naval Base in Preah Sihanouk Province and the question of privileged Chinese access became the central empirical hinge of US-Cambodia relations from 2019 onward. What began as a dispute over infrastructure ownership and transparency hardened into a contest over strategic denial in the Gulf of Thailand and the optics of alignment in mainland Southeast Asia. The factual baseline is well documented. In late 2020 satellite imagery published by the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI) showed that a U.S.-funded facility at Ream had been demolished, with Cambodian officials explaining that demolition was part of relocation plans and that no secret agreement existed to grant Chinese military basing rights. A second U.S.-funded facility was subsequently removed. These events occurred amid broader Chinese-funded works at the base, including the construction of a much larger pier and associated support infrastructure. For Washington, the demolition signaled an erosion of trust in defense cooperation and raised suspicions that new infrastructure would serve Chinese operational needs in ways that exceeded Cambodian capacities. For Phnom Penh, public messaging stressed sovereignty and modernization, while denying any exclusive basing arrangement and pointing to the constitutional prohibition on foreign bases (AMTI, 2020).

By 2023 and early 2024, AMTI's analysis recorded the sustained presence of two Chinese navy vessels at Ream, the first and only ships to use the new Chinese-funded pier during its initial months. The persistence of Chinese visits, together with the geometry of the new pier and supporting facilities, led analysts to infer that at least some parts of the base were optimized for Chinese use and possibly be subject to de facto exclusive control. Cambodian authorities publicly described the ships as part of training and preparation for joint exercises and reiterated that Cambodia welcomed friendly navies under certain conditions. The strategic point for the United States was not simply who visited or trained, but who could predictably access, service, and control the most capable pier and associated logistics at Ream. In that sense the problem of exclusivity was about patterns of usage and the political economy of construction, not only about formal legal arrangements. The implication was that transparency over access protocols, not just invitations for occasional port calls, would be the standard by which Washington would assess the trajectory of the base and, by extension, the prospects for a broader improvement in bilateral defense relations (Polling, 2024)

A notable shift occurred in late 2024 and the first half of 2025. First, the United States Navy littoral combat ship USS Savannah made a December 2024 port call at Sihanoukville, the first U.S. naval visit in eight years. Cambodian statements highlighted that the program included a working meeting with the commander of the Ream Naval Base and activities with

provincial officials. The visit did not take place at Ream, but it created a diplomatic opening for renewed defense dialogue and indicated that Phnom Penh was prepared to improve atmospherics with Washington even as construction and usage at Ream raised questions in the American policy community. Second, Cambodia hosted Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force minesweepers at Ream in April 2025 for a four-day visit. Shortly thereafter, a Vietnamese patrol ship made a port call at the modernized base. These visits were widely read as part of a Cambodian effort to validate claims of non-exclusivity and to invite regional partners to create facts on the water that would complicate a narrative of Chinese control. For Japan, the visit also allowed practical engagement on mine countermeasure cooperation and a visible demonstration of support for maritime transparency norms. For the United States, Japanese and Vietnamese access corroborated that diplomacy could pry open a space for limited third party presence, even if key questions remained about control over the longest pier and about the scope of Chinese support facilities and air defense investments in the area (Rahmat, 2025; AMTI, 2025).

AMTI's May 2025 assessment offered the most granular synthesis of this period. It argued that, despite high-profile foreign visits, the physical layout and observable usage patterns suggested that China maintained exclusive access to some facilities, including the largest pier, and it documented progress at a nearby air defense site that raised further questions about the extent of Chinese military presence. The analysis thus framed the problem in operational rather than declaratory terms. Invitations for short port calls are not the same as codified, verifiable access protocols for multiple partners at the most capable infrastructure. For Phnom Penh, the strategy can be read as performative hedging, using the base to host carefully curated visits that rebalance optics without eroding the material advantages and embedded presence associated with the Chinese-funded upgrade. For Washington, the strategy is one of strategic denial, keeping the issue on the agenda through public imagery, demarches, and an insistence on transparency and verifiability as the price of deeper defense cooperation. These logics are not symmetrical, and their interaction explains why Ream remained the hard core of bilateral contention even as leaders exchanged visits and a United States ship reappeared in a Cambodian port. The structure of the base, the funding and construction chain, and the locus of predictable control mattered more than the number of photo opportunities with visiting crews. This is why, by mid-2025, U.S. assessments continued to treat Ream as a live strategic problem even as diplomatic tone improved in the wake of the leadership transition in Phnom Penh.

The security externalities of Ream for the wider region also matter. For Vietnam, the precedent of Chinese privileged access to a Gulf of Thailand base would shift naval planning considerations and heighten sensitivity to the western flank of the South China Sea. Hanoi's decision to send a patrol ship to the base after Japan's visit reflected a desire to read the ground truth and to signal that access openings would not be monopolized by any single partner. For Thailand, Ream sits near sea lanes and maritime spaces important for its own naval posture. For the United States, the combination of regional engagements at Ream, continued Chinese presence, and Cambodian claims of neutrality underscored the need to define minimal standards for access transparency that could anchor a resumption of training and humanitarian assistance and disaster response activities without implying acceptance

of a closed or privileged arrangement for Chinese forces. Whether such standards can be codified and verified will shape the ceiling on defense cooperation for the remainder of the decade.

Finally, as noted previously, Ream linked the security debate to the political economy of foreign construction and to the credibility of Cambodian assurances. Because the modernization program was financed and built by Chinese actors, and because Union Development Group and other firms featured in sanctions discourse, the base became a test case of whether Cambodia's sovereign modernization narrative could overcome a material structure that embedded Chinese preferences. It also became a test of whether limited openings to trusted third parties could shift Washington's assessment from suspicion to conditional cooperation. The evidence through October 2025 points to partial success in optics and access demonstrations, but not yet to the kind of verifiable, routine non-exclusive access that would dissolve strategic denial concerns in the U.S. In that sense, Ream is both a concrete place and a proxy for the larger question that animates this chapter, namely whether a small state can practice calibrated hedging under conditions of great power rivalry when the material base of security infrastructure is configured to favor one external partner.

United States Regional Frames: FOIP to IPS and Beyond

The evolution of U.S.-Cambodia relations during 2018 to 2025 cannot be understood without situating Phnom Penh within the broader context of shifting American regional strategies. Two documents frame the period. The State Department's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) report of November 2019 presented a narrative in which regional order rests on sovereignty, freedom of navigation, market-based economics, and transparent investment. The White House Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) of February 2022 reaffirmed those principles, formalized a whole-of-government approach, and placed new emphasis on supply chain resilience, digital connectivity, and allied coordination. Both documents insist on ASEAN centrality while recognizing that mainland Southeast Asia, including Cambodia, is not a peripheral theater but a strategic corridor linking the Gulf of Thailand to the South China Sea and to Mekong subregional connectivity. The practical implication is that Cambodia enters United States strategic thinking not only as a democracy and human rights case but also as a problem of strategic denial and economic statecraft, where the prevention of privileged access by a rival power and the governance of cross border production networks matter as much as procedural liberalization. The shift in emphasis does not erase normative commitments, but it does reorder priorities and toolkits in ways that directly conditioned policy toward Phnom Penh after 2018 (U.S. Department of State, 2019; White House, 2022).

The Free and Open Indo-Pacific text was issued at the tail end of a decade in which Chinese finance expanded dramatically in mainland Southeast Asia. The FOIP articulated a critique of opaque infrastructure lending and of coercive economic practices, and it encouraged partners to adopt transparent procurement and debt sustainability standards. Although the document did not single out Cambodia, the country was clearly implicated in the critique given the scale of Chinese construction and tourism in Sihanoukville, the role of Chinese developers in coastal projects, and the emerging questions surrounding Ream. As a policy frame, FOIP

encouraged American agencies to seek opportunities to support maritime transparency, to use due diligence and sanctions tools more aggressively against corruption and illicit finance, and to cultivate third country partnerships that might widen access and dilute privileged influence at sensitive sites. In institutional terms, FOIP also valorized freedom of navigation and maritime domain awareness as public goods, which had the indirect effect of elevating the salience of access to the Gulf of Thailand in U. S. discussions of Cambodia during the period in question (U.S. Department of State, 2019).

The Indo-Pacific Strategy under the Biden administration did not reverse these themes; it deepened them and expanded the agenda into economic security and technology. The IPS lays out five objectives, including building connections within and beyond the region, driving Indo-Pacific prosperity, and bolstering Indo-Pacific resilience; moreover, it calls for an integrated effort to strengthen supply chains and critical infrastructure with trusted partners. In Southeast Asia this translated into a renewed rhetorical commitment to ASEAN centrality, an explicit place for the Mekong subregion in United States programming, and an effort to bring together diplomatic, economic, and security instruments so that allies see a positive offering alongside coercive tools. In practical terms, the IPS created space for two strands of policy toward Cambodia. One strand preserved targeted sanctions and visa restrictions for corruption and rights abuses and kept Ream on the agenda as a problem of access and transparency. The other strand sought to expand low politics cooperation in areas such as demining, health security, humanitarian assistance, and civil aviation safety, in addition to exploring opportunities for selective defense engagement that did not require immediate resolution of Ream. The result was an intentionally compartmentalized approach that linked any deeper security cooperation to demonstrable transparency at Ream while allowing visible cooperation that benefited ordinary Cambodians to proceed. This is why mine action and medical readiness activities reappeared on the bilateral agenda in 2024 and 2025 even as Ream remained a contested issue (White House, 2022; The Asia Foundation, 2024).

A second adjustment concerns the Mekong. The United States rebranded and expanded its engagement with mainland Southeast Asia through the Mekong-United States Partnership (MUSP), building on the earlier Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) but with larger programming envelopes, new lines of effort on transboundary water data and energy connectivity, and a more explicit linking of environmental security to regional order. For Cambodia, the MUSP created an additional venue for functional cooperation that could operate even when bilateral politics were strained. The initiative's emphasis on early warning for drought and flood, on wildlife trafficking and public health, and on power market integration speaks to basic state capacity challenges where American technical agencies and universities have comparative advantages. The Mekong channel also gave Washington a way to demonstrate respect for subregional priorities without forcing everything through a Ream-centric lens. In a political economy sense, the Mekong emphasis connected American strategy to provincial administrations, energy planners, and line ministries that are less directly implicated in the politics of regime maintenance, thereby lowering the threshold for cooperation during years of political tension.

A third adjustment after 2022 concerns economic statecraft and supply chains. The IPS advanced a regional prosperity agenda that included efforts to diversify sourcing and to raise standards in digital trade, customs, and labor. Cambodia is not a core member of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, but the IPS frame and associated trade enforcement actions shaped the environment in which Cambodian export strategies and foreign investor behavior evolved. The partial withdrawal of European Union EBA preferences in 2020 had already demonstrated that market access was contingent on governance performance. By the mid-2020s, U.S. agencies complemented this with more rigorous customs scrutiny of re-exports and origin rules and with a political push for firms to reduce overdependence on single country supply chains. For Cambodian policy makers and factory owners, the message was that future durable access to Western markets would require more predictable compliance practices and more diverse sourcing of inputs, and that the search for new bilateral trade arrangements would be filtered through Washington's project of supply chain resilience and China risk management. This is not a formal bilateral trade policy with Cambodia; it is a regional political economy logic that conditioned bilateral choices and informed the calculus of investors operating in special economic zones and export platforms around Sihanoukville and Phnom Penh. In this sense, the IPS affected Cambodia even without a bespoke trade instrument by altering the incentives of the firms and logistics providers that mediate the country's integration into global markets.

A fourth element is allied and partner coordination. Both FOIP and IPS emphasize coalition building with Japan, Australia, India, and European partners. In mainland Southeast Asia, this translated into practical cooperation in demining, maritime training, coast guard capacity building, and infrastructure standard setting. Japan's long standing role in port management and special economic zones and its April 2025 visit to Ream fit squarely within this approach, providing a trusted third party that could engage Cambodia on maritime capacity while reinforcing norms of transparency and non-exclusivity. Australia's engagement on demining and maritime law and Singapore's capacity building programs in policing and port security further diversified the menu of partners available to Phnom Penh. For Washington, such partner activity is a feature rather than a bug, because it multiplies the channels through which desired practices can diffuse and it reduces the bilateral visibility of frictions while addressing shared functional problems. The diplomatic corollary is that American demarches on Ream can be nested inside a broader conversation with allies about what counts as acceptable transparency and access, thereby reducing the reputational costs of insisting on standards that Phnom Penh sometimes portrays as unreasonable or politically motivated. The United States objective is not to monopolize access but to prevent strategic foreclosure, and the allied presence at Ream and in Cambodian maritime training generally is an operationalization of that logic. The April 2025 Japanese port call is therefore analytically important beyond its symbolic value because it makes visible the coalition politics built into IPS implementation in the subregion.

Finally, IPS implementation during 2023 to 2025 featured a set of mid-course corrections that matter for small states. Public fact sheets released in 2024 emphasized practical deliverables, including infrastructure financing standards, cybersecurity cooperation, and expanded health programs, and highlighted that the administration would judge progress

by outcomes rather than by new frameworks alone. That pivot toward measurability favored relationships where there were mature program lines that could absorb funds quickly. Cambodia's demining institutions, its public health networks developed during the pandemic, and its civil aviation and port authorities were able to receive and use assistance in ways that produced visible results within annual budget cycles. The broader lesson for understanding US-Cambodia relations under the IPS is that deliverables logic and coalition logic reinforced each other. The more the United States tied its strategy to outcomes on clearance, training, and inspections, the more it relied on partners and technical agencies rather than large footprint bilateral initiatives, and the more room Cambodia had to calibrate engagement to preserve regime security while benefiting from functional cooperation. This is not a recipe for resolving the hard problems symbolized by Ream, but it is a plausible path for managing relations in a period when strategic rivalry is unlikely to abate and when small states seek to extract benefits from multiple patrons while minimizing irreversible commitments. The IPS frame, properly understood, is an attempt to structure that game in ways that limit exclusivity and reward transparency without forcing binary choices that are politically untenable in Phnom Penh. Whether that balance can be sustained will depend on verifiable access arrangements at Ream, on the credibility of American and allied economic offerings, and on the capacity of Cambodian institutions to deliver compliance and transparency at scale in the coming years.

The leadership transition from Hun Sen to Hun Manet beginning in 2023 unfolded as a managed succession within a dominant party system. It combined generational renewal in the cabinet with continuity in the underlying distribution of power inside the Cambodian People's Party. The July 2023 election produced an overwhelming parliamentary majority for the ruling party, followed by the formal transfer of the premiership to Hun Manet in August. Hun Sen retained control of the party and subsequently assumed the presidency of the Senate in early 2024, a configuration that preserved his influence over legislative and party affairs while enabling a new prime minister to occupy executive office. The result was a dual center of authority anchored in party organs, family networks, and the bureaucracy, rather than a clean handoff to an autonomous successor. Analysts in the scholarly and policy literatures consequently interpreted the transition less as a change of regime and more as a recalibration of leadership within an entrenched political order that prizes cohesion, discipline, and regime security above programmatic competition (Petty, 2023).

The new cabinet signaled a modernization agenda in economic policy and administration. Hun Manet and his economic team advanced the Pentagonal Strategy Phase 1 in August 2023, a platform that emphasized macroeconomic stability, diversification beyond garments, logistics and infrastructure upgrades, human capital, and state effectiveness. The policy language framed reform as a requirement for moving Cambodia into upper middle-income status within a decade and as a hedge against external shocks to tourism and manufacturing. The government highlighted investments in expressways, port expansion at Sihanoukville, digital government, and technical and vocational education as near term priorities, while signaling continued openness to foreign direct investment from Asian partners and an interest in moving up value chains in electronics and automotive parts. These priorities built on existing initiatives and on long running special economic zone policies rather than

replacing them. They also reflected the political economic realities of a small, open economy that must attract mobile capital into tradable sectors while maintaining domestic fiscal space. The government's reform narrative drew cautious interest from business associations and development partners, even as rights organizations and opposition figures pointed to the absence of parallel political liberalization as a constraint on inclusive growth and institutional accountability.

Political continuity remained clear. In March 2023, before the election, a Phnom Penh court convicted Kem Sokha on treason charges and imposed a prison sentence that underscored the limits of political competition. In February 2023 the online outlet VOD was shuttered following a public dispute with officials. In the run up to the July 2023 polls, the National Election Committee declined to register the Candlelight Party due to documentation issues, effectively removing the largest remaining opposition formation from contention. After the succession, civil society organizations reported continued pressure on independent media and on local political activists. The persistence of these practices limited the scope for a political detente with the United States even as diplomatic engagements multiplied. For Washington, the domestic environment validated the continued use of targeted visa restrictions and Global Magnitsky tools when specific corruption and rights cases reached evidentiary thresholds. For Phnom Penh, the centrality of regime security implied that any improvement in ties with Western partners would have to be achieved without an immediate opening in the political sphere, relying instead on functional cooperation and calibrated signaling in security affairs.

The foreign policy posture of the new government emphasized balance, sovereignty, and non-alignment. Official statements affirmed that Cambodia would welcome defense cooperation, training, and exercises with multiple partners while denying any exclusive foreign basing arrangements on Cambodian soil. The government pointed to constitutional provisions that prohibit foreign military bases and framed the modernization of Ream Naval Base as a sovereign upgrade intended to support national defense and humanitarian assistance. In practice, the new administration pursued a two-track approach. On one track, it maintained and deepened ties with China for finance, trade, and security capacity, with Ream as the most salient symbol of that cooperation. On the other track, it sought to widen diplomatic and security engagements with trusted partners, including Japan, Vietnam, Australia, and the United States, in order to validate claims of openness and to avoid reputational costs associated with perceptions of strategic exclusivity. This approach was consistent with longstanding Cambodian preferences for calibrated hedging in external relations and with the political imperative of preserving maneuvering room among major powers (AMTI, 2025; Rahmat, 2025).

American policy makers treated the transition as an opportunity to test whether access could expand without requiring immediate political liberalization. The most visible expression of this came in defense diplomacy. In June 2024 the United States Secretary of Defense met Cambodian leaders in Phnom Penh to discuss the resumption of practical cooperation in humanitarian assistance and disaster response, peacekeeping, medical readiness, and

demining, and to seek greater transparency regarding access and usage at Ream Naval Base. The engagement was notable in tone and agenda. It moved beyond denunciation to explore compartmentalized activities that would produce measurable public goods while keeping hard security questions in view. The December 2024 port call by the USS Savannah made the shift visible to domestic and regional audiences and was widely read as a confidence building step and a signal that the United States was prepared to rebuild working relationships if transparency at Ream improved. The April 2025 visit by two Japan Maritime Self Defense Force vessels to Ream itself, followed by a visit by a Vietnamese patrol ship, strengthened the claim that the base was not closed to partners and provided additional channels for maritime capacity building. For Washington, these visits were evidence that diplomacy and allied coordination could widen access optics, but they did not answer the central operational questions regarding control of the longest pier, logistics, and the predictability of access for non Chinese forces. That is why Ream continued to anchor United States assessments of the relationship despite improvements in rhetoric and tempo of engagement after the transition (AMTI, 2025).

Economic instruments also featured in the transition period. The government's reform agenda required reliable export markets and continued investment inflows. The partial withdrawal of the EU's EBA preferences in 2020 had already introduced uncertainty into the garment sector's European exposure. By 2024 and 2025, United States agencies increased scrutiny of re-exports and origin claims in light manufacturing categories, consistent with an Indo-Pacific Strategy emphasis on supply chain resilience and enforcement. Cambodian officials and business associations pursued diversification efforts within special economic zones and sought to attract additional investment from Japan, South Korea, and regional firms in electronics and automotive parts. The practical message for Phnom Penh was that stronger ties with the United States would depend on credible improvements in customs compliance, labor standards, and investment screening, not only on diplomatic outreach. This interaction between reform commitments and market access incentives shaped elite expectations about the returns to a limited reset with Washington, especially in sectors where U.S. agencies could deliver technical assistance and market intelligence that complemented the Pentagon's objectives.

The leadership transition therefore delivered access rather than alignment. It improved atmospherics, created channels for defense and development cooperation, and provided a setting in which allied partners could engage Cambodia on maritime and demining capacity. It did not, however, alter the core features of Cambodia's political economy or external alignment. The Cambodian People's Party retained command over the state, civil liberties remained circumscribed, and Chinese finance and security cooperation preserved their structural advantages at Ream and in key infrastructure corridors. The logic of regime security continued to dominate decision making, which limited the plausible speed and scope of any rapprochement with Washington. United States policy consequently remained dual track, maintaining targeted sanctions and rights messaging while investing in visible cooperative projects and pushing for verifiable transparency at Ream as the price of deeper security ties. The transition thus confirmed the chapter's central claim that the bilateral

relationship in this period is best understood as managed mistrust. Diplomacy can increase access and diversify engagements, but absent codified, verifiable arrangements at the base and sustained improvements in domestic openness, it does not produce alignment.

V. Issue Areas: Security, Economics, Development, and Rights

This section considers the principal domains in which the relationship was contested or advanced during 2018 to 2025. The analysis proceeds from defense and security to trade and investment, then to development and mine action, and finally to democracy and civil society. The purpose is to show how domain specific instruments and institutions generated different forms of leverage, and how their interaction produced a segmented relationship that could function in some lanes even when contention persisted in others.

Security and Defense

United States Cambodia defense ties contracted and then partially reopened over the period, with Ream Naval Base serving as the focal point for both mistrust and renewed signaling. The cancellation in 2017 of the Angkor Sentinel exercise eliminated the most visible channel for practical cooperation and pushed Washington toward tools that did not rely on Royal Cambodian Armed Forces consent, including visa restrictions and Magnitsky designations directed at specific actors and networks. By 2019 the Ream modernization had transformed defense relations into a question of strategic denial and access transparency rather than a question of professional military education or episodic training.

After the leadership transition in 2023, both governments tested a limited re-opening. The U.S. Secretary of Defense explored a menu of activities with relatively low political salience and high humanitarian payoff, including medical readiness, peacekeeping support, and humanitarian assistance and disaster response. The December 2024 visit of the USS Savannah to Sihanoukville, demonstrated that port calls and professional exchanges could resume without immediate resolution of the hard questions at Ream. The April 2025 visit by Japan Maritime Self Defense Force vessels to Ream itself, followed by a Vietnamese patrol ship, allowed Phnom Penh to claim that the base was open to partners and allowed allied governments to conduct their own assessments while engaging in practical training. From an operational perspective the core problem remained. Occasional visits demonstrate political openness but do not create a predictable regime of access to the most capable infrastructure, which in this case was designed, financed, and serviced with Chinese support. The consequence was a compartmentalized defense relationship in which a narrow band of cooperation could proceed while the central issue of access to specific facilities remained unresolved. That structure is consistent with the broader logics set out in the United States Indo-Pacific Strategy, which accepts allied coalition activity as a means to thicken access and norms, and treats strategic foreclosure rather than formal basing as the problem to be avoided in mainland Southeast Asia.

Economics and Trade

The economic relationship is characterized by asymmetry and by the interplay of European and American instruments. The European Commission's decision in 2020 to withdraw in part EBA preferences introduced an economic cost into the garment and travel goods sectors and signaled that market access would be contingent on human rights performance. The measure did not collapse exports, but it forced adjustments in product composition and destination mix, and it increased the perceived value of non-European demand, especially in North America and Asia. The U.S. did not adopt a formal preference withdrawal during the period, but agencies intensified enforcement against illicit finance, corruption, and misleading claims of origin that might conceal problematic sourcing. These steps converged with the Indo-Pacific Strategy's emphasis on supply chain resilience and standards. The policy effect was to increase the salience of compliance and of reputational risk management for firms operating in special economic zones, and to make the search for diversified investment beyond garments a priority in Phnom Penh's Pentagonal Strategy. Japanese and Korean investors featured in plans for electronics and automotive parts, and EuroCham guidance stressed logistics, compliance, and alternative manufacturing options inside the zone system. The overall pattern is cautionary. Without a positive trade instrument, such as a clear preference regime or a reciprocal agreement, U.S. leverage operated mainly through enforcement and reputational channels rather than through market enlargement, while China, Japan, and regional investors provided the principal new fixed investment in infrastructure and factories through the period. This difference in instruments and timelines shaped expectations about the returns to a limited reset with Washington after 2023 and kept economic diversification objectives tethered to Asian capital even as U.S. agencies offered technical assistance on customs, standards, and investment screening.

Development, Health, and Demining

Development cooperation provided the most resilient lane in the relationship, anchored by a mature mine action ecosystem. American support for conventional weapons destruction had achieved a high level of institutionalization by the mid-2010s, with a mix of survey and clearance, risk education, and capacity building. This portfolio persisted through political cycles because it addressed a humanitarian problem with direct public benefits, because it could be measured in cleared land and reduced casualties, and because it involved international and local nongovernmental organizations with strong operational reputations. In recent years, the U.S. renewed and expanded demining support, even as governance and defense ties were contested, and Cambodian authorities consistently highlighted mine action as a domain of constructive partnership. Health security and disaster response programming, which had expanded during the pandemic, also provided visible public goods and access to provincial administrations. These activities created a floor under the relationship that allowed diplomatic contacts and technical work to continue even when rhetoric escalated in other domains. The lesson for both sides was that sustained delivery of concrete benefits at scale creates constituencies for cooperation that endure beyond electoral or cabinet cycles and that can be leveraged for confidence building in more sensitive areas when political

conditions permit. The Mekong–United States Partnership added complementary channels in water data, energy, and environmental security that linked the relationship to subregional priorities and to technical agencies with limited political exposure.

Democracy, Rights, and Civil Society

The democratic retrenchment that preceded the 2018 election persisted through 2025, limiting the scope for an overt political reset with Washington. The conviction of Kem Sokha in 2023, the decision not to register the Candlelight Party for the 2023 election, and continued pressure on independent media and advocacy groups confirmed to Western observers that domestic space remained constrained. Rights organizations and media advocacy groups documented arrests, intimidation, and legal actions against critics, which sustained the case for conditionality in American and European debates. The net effect on the bilateral relationship was twofold. First, it limited congressional and civil society support in the United States for any rapid normalization absent clear steps on political prisoners, media access, and party competition. Second, it encouraged the executive branch to pursue compartmentalized cooperation and allied coordination rather than to seek sweeping agreements that would be vulnerable to domestic criticism in both countries. This environment kept the rights agenda present but secondary to security and economic statecraft in the main line of policy making, even as the State Department and European institutions continued to publish human rights reports and to track individual cases with an eye to future leverage (Human Rights Watch, 2023; Reporters Without Borders, 2023; European Commission, 2020).

VI. Cambodia’s Strategic Logic: Calibrated Hedging Not Bandwagoning

Cambodia’s external strategy from 2018 to 2025 is best interpreted as calibrated hedging rather than simple bandwagoning. The state sought to extract economic and security benefits from multiple patrons while avoiding irreversible commitments that would foreclose diplomatic room for maneuver. The observable pattern is consistent across issue areas. In security affairs, Phnom Penh deepened ties with China in the form of base modernization, training, and equipment support, while inviting high profile visits from Japan, Vietnam, and the United States to validate claims of non-exclusivity. In trade and investment, the government preserved a China-centered pipeline for construction finance and factory platforms, while seeking complementary investment from Japan and Korea and while adjusting to European and American compliance demands. In development it continued to welcome Western technical assistance in mine action and public health because these programs delivered public goods without direct political costs. The logic that connects these choices is regime security. By maintaining multiple relationships, the leadership reduced exposure to any single patron’s conditionality, while allowing the consolidation of domestic authority to proceed without external vetoes. The leadership transition in 2023 reinforced this logic rather than altering it, since the new leadership needed to deliver

growth and infrastructure quickly without relaxing political control, a task that advantaged Chinese finance while leaving space for selective cooperation with others when reputational or technical benefits were large (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2023; AMTI, 2024).

Hedging of this kind is performative and material. It requires public acts that demonstrate openness, such as port calls, joint statements, and working groups, and it requires a material base of infrastructure and finance that can accommodate multiple users. The challenge for Cambodia is that the material base at Ream and in some coastal economic corridors has been provided by Chinese entities, which gives Beijing a structural advantage that cannot be neutralized by periodic visits alone. This creates an inherent tension in Phnom Penh's strategy. The more that trusted third parties are invited to Ream to validate non-exclusivity, the more visible the asymmetry becomes if those partners do not receive predictable access to the largest pier and associated logistics. That visibility is now a central feature of U.S. and allied assessments, which explains why imagery analysis and detailed reporting have played such a large role in the discourse. The government's answer has been to widen the scope of activities with Japan, Vietnam, Australia, and the United States in fields like mine countermeasures, medical readiness, and disaster response, and to place these activities at or near Ream when possible. Whether this strategy can satisfy the verifiability standard that Washington now insists on will determine the ceiling of security cooperation over the remainder of the decade. If it does not, hedging will remain largely performative in security affairs and materially deeper in the economic domain where Chinese finance continues to dominate fixed investment and construction.

The calibrated hedging frame also clarifies why sanctions and trade conditionality had limited immediate effect on domestic political reform. These instruments raised costs but did not eliminate alternative sources of finance, markets, and security assistance. They may have altered preferences at the margin by encouraging diversification toward Japanese and Korean capital and by reinforcing compliance cultures in export platforms, but they did not shift the fundamental calculus of regime security. For the United States and European partners the implication is that leverage will be greatest where instruments can affect the predictability of access to strategic infrastructure, the credibility of compliance in supply chains, and the delivery of widely visible public goods. For Cambodia the implication is that a durable relationship with Washington will require codified, verifiable practices that reduce suspicion at sensitive sites and that insulate functional cooperation from political shocks. The record through October 2025 shows progress on atmospherics and on functional cooperation, but not yet on the codification of access regimes at Ream that would move the relationship from managed mistrust to a more stable configuration of limited partnership. That outcome is consistent with a small state strategy in a competitive regional order, and it underscores the chapter's broader claim that the structure of incentives, institutions, and infrastructure in mainland Southeast Asia favors hedging rather than alignment under current conditions (White House 2022; RSIS, 2022; Stimson Center, 2021; AMTI 2025).

VII. Late 2025 Developments: Thailand, Scam Compounds, and Tariffs

Late 2025 saw a remarkable cluster of events: an ASEAN witnessed peace accord with Thailand, a reciprocal trade agreement with the United States, and coordinated sanctions and indictments against large scale scam compound networks. Each development targets a different layer of the same problem set: territorial security on the western frontier; the integrity of cross-border flows of people, goods, and money; and the credibility of Cambodia's commitment to transparent market access and financial governance. Taken together, they alter incentives for state agencies, provincial authorities, and export-oriented elites, and they add new conditions to calibrated hedging by raising the costs of opacity and enclave exceptionalism.

The Kuala Lumpur Peace Accord commits Cambodia and Thailand to remove heavy weapons from border areas, to stand up an ASEAN Observer Team, and to release detainees from the summer clashes. Its most important feature for the political economy of security is verification. Third-party monitors create information that is legible to outside patrons and to markets, not only to the two governments, and they give neighboring states a channel to flag abnormal movements, including the circulation of armed guards and traffickers who have sheltered along the frontier under the cover of casino zones and loosely regulated industrial estates. A credible drawdown reduces the value of militarized protection for illicit compounds, and the presence of ASEAN observers makes collusion between local commanders and compound operators more visible and therefore more costly. In this sense, the accord is not only a ceasefire instrument, it is a disciplining device for borderland rent circuits that have linked private security firms, corrupt officials, and cross-border scam operations since 2019 (White House, 2025a).

The reciprocal trade agreement with the United States translates those security externalities into structured economic incentives. By setting a baseline tariff near one fifth for most exports, by carving out products conditional on verified compliance, and by hard wiring disciplines on rules of origin, customs transparency, labor, and illicit finance, the agreement re-prices opacity for firms that sell to the United States market. In practical terms, Cambodian exporters that source inputs and payments through opaque channels associated with the scam economy now face a higher and more predictable penalty. Agents who can demonstrate clean inputs, auditable payrolls, and compliance with financial due diligence gain a lower tariff and a reputational premium with banks and buyers. This is the first time since the 2020 European measure that a major external actor has built a positive market access instrument around enforceable standards, rather than relying solely on punitive tools. It gives the Ministry of Economy and Finance, customs, and special economic zone administrations a reason to invest in verification capacity, and it allows Phnom Penh to signal to non-Chinese investors that compliant zones in Sihanoukville and Phnom Penh can serve as platforms for diversification into electronics and auto parts under a stable tariff regime (USTR, 2025a, 2025b).

The coordinated U.S. and U.K. actions against Huione and Prince Bank, along with earlier sanctions against casino properties push the financial system in the same direction. Sanctions sever designated nodes from dollar clearing and correspondent relationships, and they trigger risk reviews by banks that touch related clients. The legal posture matters. Sanctions and indictments are allegations and administrative determinations, not final court findings, but they immediately tighten compliance thresholds for any institution that wishes to maintain access to United States and United Kingdom financial infrastructure. For Cambodian authorities, the combined effect is to raise the regulatory cost of tolerating protected enclaves and to align domestic interests with the removal of systemic risks that jeopardize the new trade instrument. In political economy terms, the scam crackdown becomes a necessary complement to the peace accord and the trade agreement. Without it, border verification would displace rather than dismantle criminal networks, and tariff preferences would be undercut by payments opacity and rules of origin fraud that invite snapback and reputational damage for the entire export platform (Reuters, 2025).

These moves interact with earlier compliance milestones. Cambodia's removal from the Financial Action Task Force grey list in early 2023 signaled progress on anti-money-laundering frameworks, but it did not by itself change incentives in high rent coastal and border enclaves where local protection and cash businesses had been profitable. The late 2025 enforcement wave raises the expected penalty for non-compliant casinos and compounds and for financial intermediaries that service them. When combined with the ASEAN Observer Team, the expected probability of detection on the frontier increases, and with the new trade instrument, the payoff to clean supply chains increases for export-oriented firms. The state's challenge is execution: converting episodic raids into institutional routines for victim identification and protection, coordinated prosecutions, inspections of labor and housing at high-risk sites, and consistent supervision of casinos, real estate, and payment platforms. Without that, banks will continue to de-risk exposures in ways that penalize compliant firms along with bad actors, undermining the reform narrative at the heart of the Pentagon Strategy.

There are also material and distributional implications. On the material side, the peace accord reduces demand for private coercion around compounds and frees up security resources for customs and migration control. On the distributional side, the trade agreement and sanctions compress the rents available to enclave operators and raise returns to compliance intensive manufacturing. Provincial coalitions in Preah Sihanouk and Koh Kong that have balanced tourism, construction, and enclave gambling will need to pivot toward logistics and standards driven manufacturing if they want to keep market access and bank services. That pivot rewards zone administrators and governors who can deliver verifiable systems, and it weakens brokers whose business model depended on political protection and weak oversight. The national center can amplify this shift by tying transfers and promotion to verifiable delivery on inspections, prosecutions, and customs modernization. This is how an external shock becomes a domestic rebalancing of incentives.

Seen from Washington, the three tracks produce a single message. If Cambodia operationalizes verification at the border, prosecutes compound operators and complicit officials, protects victims, and implements the trade agreement's compliance architecture,

then the case for selective engagement strengthens and the argument for broad sanctions loses force. Seen from Phnom Penh, the package shows that calibrated hedging can include ASEAN monitored security cooperation and rules-based market access with the United States so long as the government is willing to internalize the costs of financial and labor compliance. This does not displace Chinese finance and security cooperation, but it reduces the risk that association with Chinese-funded enclaves will contaminate Cambodia's standing with Western markets and banks. It is precisely the sort of diversification move a small state makes when the regional order is competitive but not yet polarized.

The risks are clear. Partial implementation will revive skepticism. If independent imagery continues to show *de facto* exclusive operational control by Chinese forces at the most capable pier at Ream, if ASEAN observers cannot verify heavy weapons withdrawal and the release of detainees on the Thai border, or if customs, labor, and banking data reveal circumvention of origin and anti-money-laundering standards, the political economy logic will shift back toward managed mistrust. The new trade instrument contains review and snapback mechanisms. Failure to meet them would penalize compliant firms and strengthen voices in Washington that favor coercion without an economic offer. Conversely, transparent delivery on all three fronts would change expectations inside both capitals and lock in a limited partnership anchored in verification and measurable outcomes.

VIII. Conclusion

The evolution of United States-Cambodia relations in the last decade is best explained as the interaction of strategic denial by a system shaping power with calibrated hedging by a small state that prioritizes regime security and growth. Democratic retrenchment after 2017 prompted Western instruments that personalized costs and conditioned market access while preserving cooperation in mine action and other humanitarian lanes. The modernization of Ream Naval Base transformed a largely normative dispute into a concrete problem of access, logistics, and verifiability. The 2023 leadership transition opened channels for defense and development engagement but did not alter the underlying distribution of power at home or the hierarchy of external patrons. Throughout, a segmented relationship persisted in which cooperation expanded where institutions produced tangible public goods and verifiable outcomes, while mistrust endured where control over strategic infrastructure remained opaque.

The late 2025 cluster of developments ties these strands together and shifts the political economy of incentives rather than the rhetoric alone. The Kuala Lumpur Peace Accord inserts third party verification into a borderland where rents from casinos and enclave economies had flourished, reducing the value of militarized protection and raising the visibility of collusion between local coercive actors and illicit operators. The reciprocal trade agreement with the United States prices opacity into the tariff schedule and rewards clean inputs, auditable payrolls, and transparent payments with market access that is predictable and reviewable. The coordinated sanctions and indictments against large scale scam networks

convert reputational critiques into immediate compliance thresholds for banks and investors that wish to retain access to Western financial infrastructure. Taken together, the accord, the trade instrument, and the enforcement wave form a single disciplining package. They lower the expected returns to protected enclaves and raise the returns to compliance intensive manufacturing and logistics inside special economic zones. They also align the interests of central agencies and reform oriented provincial authorities with the delivery of verifiable practices at the border, at the pier, and in the factory.

This package, and recent positive gestures including the U.S. removal of the arms embargo on Cambodia, resumption of the ANGKOR SENTINEL defense exercise, and a promised increase of seats for Cambodian officers at U.S. military colleges such as West Point and Air Force Academy, do not resolve the hard core of mistrust. The decisive test remains codified and verifiable non-exclusivity at the most capable pier and associated logistics at Ream. Without routine and documented access protocols for multiple partners, accompanied by transparent servicing arrangements, gestures of openness will continue to register as performative rather than structural. A second test is execution on the trade instrument. Rules of origin, labor, and anti-money laundering provisions must translate into inspections, audits, and predictable remediation rather than episodic crackdowns that punish victims and allow systemic risks to persist. A third test is whether the peace accord's observer mission generates timely, public information that deters the reconstitution of compound networks in the frontier and that allows investors and donors to condition their engagements accordingly.

The most likely near-term equilibrium remains structured segmentation. Cooperation should deepen where outcomes are measurable and verifiable: demining, health security, humanitarian assistance and disaster response, customs modernization, and selected defense activities with clear transparency provisions. The ceiling of security cooperation will be set by access and logistics at Ream, and the ceiling of economic cooperation will be set by the credibility of compliance under the new tariff framework. The chapter's central claim follows. In a competitive regional order where infrastructure, institutions, and information matter as much as declarations, U.S.-Cambodia relations move toward a limited partnership only when verification reduces the rents of opacity relative to the benefits of transparency. The late 2025 package begins to do that by linking border security, financial integrity, and market access in mutually reinforcing ways. If Cambodia delivers on these verifiable standards and if the United States scales the positive offer in proportion to demonstrated compliance, managed mistrust can give way to a stable, though bounded, cooperation. If either side falls short, the structure that has governed the relationship since 2018 will reassert itself, and calibrated hedging will remain performative in security affairs and materially deeper where Chinese finance continues to dominate fixed investment.

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Chapter 10

Cambodia-Japan Relations: From Strategic Partnership to Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and the Road Ahead

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I. Introduction

Overview of Cambodia-Japan Relations

The diplomatic relations between Cambodia and Japan are characterized by a long, yet dynamic history that spans over several decades, marked by both challenges and significant milestones. Cambodia and Japan first established formal diplomatic relations on January 09, 1953, just before the country gained independence from France (Neang, 2023). During the more than twenty years of political instability and civil war in Cambodia, diplomatic relations between the two nations were put on hold. However, as the Paris Peace Agreements were being negotiated in the lead-up to October 23, 1991, Japan took an active role in facilitating dialogue among the warring factions and promoting reconciliation. Furthermore, Japan became one of the key contributors to Cambodia's post-conflict recovery.

The relationship between the two nations is built upon a foundation of mutual respect, cultural exchange, and developmental cooperation. Over the past few decades, Japan has supported Cambodia through its development initiatives, with Japan's Official Development Assistance (ODA) playing a pivotal role in Cambodia's infrastructure, education, and health sectors. In return, Cambodia has maintained strong ties with Japan as a strategic partner and later upgraded to a comprehensive strategic partner covering many spheres from economy to security.

Significance of the Partnership

The partnership between Cambodia and Japan is of substantial significance for both nations. For Cambodia, Japan represents a crucial development partner, offering much-needed financial assistance, technological expertise, and educational support that have contributed significantly to the country's reconstruction following decades of conflict. Japan's assistance, particularly through ODA, has been integral in helping Cambodia rebuild its physical infrastructure and foster human resource development, which has driven much of the nation's economic progress since the 1990s.

For Japan, Cambodia is not only an important partner in Southeast Asia, but also a key member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). With its increasing strategic importance in the region, Cambodia offers Japan a vital conduit for advancing its political and economic goals. Cambodia's geographical position, its involvement in ASEAN, and its role in the Mekong region have made it an essential ally for Japan in navigating Southeast Asia's complex political and economic dynamics, especially as Japan seeks to balance the growing influence of China.

As both nations work together to address shared challenges, including regional security concerns, economic development, and global issues such as climate change, the partnership holds substantial promise for future cooperation. Moreover, Cambodia's growing political stability and economic potential make it an increasingly important partner in Japan's foreign policy vision for a peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific region.

This book chapter aims to explore the evolution of Cambodia-Japan relations, from the initial stages of diplomatic engagement to the establishment of a strategic partnership, and ultimately to the comprehensive strategic partnership that defines their current relationship. It will examine key developments in the bilateral ties between the two nations, analyze the drivers behind the evolution of their partnership, and assess the future prospects for Cambodia-Japan relations in light of emerging regional and global dynamics.

II. Historical Context and Early Bilateral Ties

Post-WWII Diplomatic Relations

Following World War II and the subsequent independence of Cambodia in 1953, Japan and Cambodia established formal diplomatic relations. Japan was one of the first countries to recognize Cambodia's independence (Chandler, 1986). However, the relationship remained relatively low-key during the early decades. Japan, having been in recovery after its defeat in the war, was focused on rebuilding its own economy and securing its place in the international community. Cambodia, meanwhile, was navigating the challenges of independence from French colonial rule, and its foreign policy during the early years was largely centered around maintaining neutrality and establishing connections with other nations (Pradhan, 1979).

In this period, Cambodia's external relations were characterized by attempts to balance its position within the broader context of Cold War politics, while Japan's international presence was just beginning to expand. Japan was primarily focused on rebuilding its economy and its international standing, and thus Cambodia did not initially emerge as a significant priority in Japanese foreign policy. Nonetheless, both nations maintained cordial diplomatic relations, with exchanges on trade and cultural issues (Leang, 2017).

Japan's Role in Cambodia's Post-Khmer Rouge Recovery

The true significance of Japan's role in Cambodia emerged after the Khmer Rouge regime, which left Cambodia devastated both physically and economically. The fall of the Khmer Rouge in 1979 marked the beginning of a long recovery process, with Japan subsequently becoming a signatory nation of the Paris Peace Agreements (PPA) that ended the civil war in Cambodia in 1991.

Japan's involvement became more structured and impactful after the signing of the PPA. In 1992, the Japanese national legislature passed a law that authorized the deployment of Japanese military personnel to participate in U.N. peacekeeping operations in Cambodia (Reid, 1992), marking the first overseas dispatch of Japanese troops since World War II. Japan's diplomatic engagement was pivotal in supporting Cambodia's transition to a constitutional monarchy under King Norodom Sihanouk, and Japan played a leading role in the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), which was responsible for overseeing the nation's first post-Khmer Rouge elections in 1993.

Japan's assistance to Cambodia also included the reconstruction of essential infrastructure, such as roads, bridges, and irrigation systems, which were critical for the country's economic recovery. Japan's efforts in promoting education and healthcare were also significant, with scholarships for Cambodian students to study in Japan and technical training programs that helped build local expertise.

Moreover, Japan's role in Cambodia's political recovery should not be understated. Japan supported Cambodia's efforts to join international organizations, including the United Nations, and provided technical assistance for governance reforms (Heang, 2024). Japan's non-interfering approach, coupled with its focus on human development and infrastructure, provided Cambodia with a model for nation-building in a post-conflict context. Japan has played a vital role in ensuring Cambodia's political stability. After the deadly clashes in Phnom Penh in July 1997, Japan helped mediate an agreement between the ruling Cambodian People's Party and the FUNCINPEC Party, allowing Prince Norodom Rannariddh and other opposition leaders to return to Cambodia and take part in the July 1998 elections (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 1999). Japan has consistently supported political peace and stability in Cambodia, urging all factions to resolve their conflicts peacefully following the 2013 elections (Phoak, 2015).

III. Strategic Partnership Era

The Cambodia-Japan Strategic Partnership, officially established in December 2013, marked a significant evolution in bilateral relations, with both countries seeking to deepen their cooperation across a range of sectors. Economically, the partnership became a critical diplomatic tool for Cambodia, enabling the country to receive continued development assistance from Japan without interruption. This assistance was crucial in Cambodia's ongoing efforts to diversify its economic relations and reduce over-reliance on China, which had been a major source of financial aid. Japan's support, exemplified by a USD 2.4 million grant for the 'Project for Improvement of the National Road No.1 Urban Section' (Japan International Cooperation Agency, 2020) and a USD 55 million loan to improve National Road No. 5, not only symbolized Japan's commitment to Cambodia's infrastructure development but also highlighted its strategic role in helping Cambodia diversify its economic partnerships.

Before the 2013 Strategic Partnership, Cambodia and Japan had already established a framework known as the "New Partnership" in 2007 under the leadership of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Prime Minister Hun Sen. This partnership focused on shared values such as democracy, human rights, and economic development, though it lacked a concrete action plan until the strategic partnership was formalized in 2013. When Prime Minister Abe returned to office in 2012, he visited Cambodia and met with Prime Minister Hun Sen in November 2013, just prior to the signing of the strategic partnership agreement. This meeting culminated in a joint statement that aimed to strengthen bilateral ties, including new areas of cooperation in politics, security, and defense.

This, as a result, allowed Japan's investment in Cambodia to deepen, with over 210 projects totaling USD 3.1 billion (Narayan, 2024). The 2013 Strategic Partnership significantly

expanded Japan's role in Cambodia's development. Japan's official development assistance (ODA) to Cambodia saw a remarkable increase. The substantial rise in ODA can be attributed to Japan's strategic partnership with Cambodia, formalized in December 2013, which led to enhanced cooperation and increased development assistance. For instance, between 2016 and 2018, Japan signed ODA agreements worth USD 550 million with Cambodia, encompassing both grant aid and concessional loans (Fresh News Asia, 2019). This shift in Japan's aid to Cambodia highlights the tangible benefits of the Strategic Partnership in promoting long-term economic cooperation. Japan's increased support for Cambodia's infrastructure projects and technical assistance provided significant benefits in terms of modernizing Cambodia's economy and public sector.

In the health sector, the Government of Japan contributed 1.3 million COVID-19 vaccine doses to Cambodia through the COVAX initiative and provided a total of USD 416 million in grants and loans to support the country's post-pandemic recovery (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, 2023). The purpose of the program loan is to curb the spread of the virus, safeguard vulnerable populations, support businesses with relief measures, sustain and stimulate economic activities, and enhance resilience against future economic disruptions through budgetary assistance. Moreover, Japan later provided additional 300,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccines to Cambodia in order to fight against COVID-19 (Embassy of Japan in the Kingdom of Cambodia, 2021). As part of this effort, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) signed a loan agreement with the Royal Government of Cambodia in Phnom Penh to extend a Japanese ODA loan of up to 20 billion yen under the COVID-19 Crisis Response Emergency Support Loan (Japan International Cooperation Agency, 2022).

Overall, the Strategic Partnership between Cambodia and Japan has proven to be an essential tool for Cambodia's economic diversification, regional stability, and development. The shift from the "New Partnership" to a more comprehensive and action-oriented agreement in 2013 underscored Japan's growing role in Cambodia's development trajectory, while providing Cambodia with an important alternative to China's substantial financial support.

IV. From Strategic Partnership to Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

Under Prime Minister Hun Manet, Cambodia's foreign policy reflects both continuity and strategic adjustment. While he retains elements of Hun Sen's legacy, Hun Manet has pursued a more Western-leaning and outward-looking approach, signaling a pivot toward diversified partnerships (Kelliher, 2024). Domestically, the smooth transition of power has provided political stability, enabling Hun Manet to balance legacy relationships with new Western-oriented engagements. This is exemplified by the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with Japan, signed after Hun Manet took office in 2023, illustrating how domestic political continuity underpins Cambodia's ability to pursue a nuanced and diversified foreign

policy. Cambodia's proactive engagement with Japan is not new; it was the first Southeast Asian nation to endorse Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy, a stance initially articulated by former Prime Minister Hun Sen during his visit to Tokyo in 2017.

As a result, it marks a shift to become a more strategic collaboration. Japan's defense engagement, including a Maritime Self-Defense Force visit to Ream Naval Base (Niem, 2025b), demonstrated its emerging security role in Cambodia, notably marked by a Japanese ship becoming the first to dock following the base's official launch (Strangio, 2025). Viewed in this light, Japan can be considered both an economic and security partner, which aligns with Cambodia's strategy of diversifying foreign partnerships. Moreover, the partnership facilitated continued discussions on regional security, particularly with regard to the situation in the South China Sea. Through strengthened defense cooperation and the commitment to uphold international law, Japan and Cambodia worked together to ensure peace and stability in the region, providing a diplomatic counterbalance to China's increasing influence (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Cambodia, 2022). Consequently, this establishes Japan as one of Cambodia's trusted partners, with a trust level of 61.9% (ISEAS Survey, 2024).

V. Key Areas of Cooperation Under the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

In this analysis, four key areas will be examined regarding Cambodia and Japan's CSP, which are economic cooperation, security collaboration, digital development, and cultural exchange.

Economic Relations

Economic cooperation is still foundational between the Cambodia-Japan relations. For instance, bilateral trade between the two nations has grown to USD 2.2 billion in 2024 (Khorn, 2025), which is a notable increase from USD 1.4 billion in 2017; this places Japan as Cambodia's fifth-largest trading partner (Hin, 2024c). In the trade relations, Cambodia is benefiting from Japan through accessing its market and technological expertise, while in return, it enables Japan to find new investment opportunities in Cambodia's growing economy.

In terms of FDI, Japan invested about USD 40 million in real estate, industry, electronics, logistics as well as SEZ in Cambodia in the first ten months of 2024, which places Tokyo as the country's seventh-largest investor (Construction & Property News, 2024). Specifically, in the same period, over 90 Japanese companies registered in Cambodia, which is a 20.55% increase from 2023. The Thailand+1 strategy, promoted by the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO), has been instrumental in attracting Japanese firms looking for regional diversification. This model allows Japan to look for destinations with low operational cost in the region.

Infrastructure development, a crucial pillar of Japan's engagement, has also seen significant progress. Japan has supported the USD 60 million investment in National Road No. 5, with the aim of enhancing logistic and economic connectivity (Nhean, 2024). Moreover, Japan also granted Cambodia USD 30.6 million, specifically to Svay Rieng Province, to expand its capacity for a water supply system (Khmer Times, 2024a). Additionally, Japan's aid contributions for water reservoirs and bridges, is another contribution to its commitment for Cambodia social development.

In 2025, the Japanese government has provided USD 440,000 in grants for three key projects in Cambodia: a water reservoir in Takeo and new bridges in Kampong Thom and Siem Reap (Niem, 2025a). These projects are key in enhancing Cambodia's logistical capacity, contribute to rural development, improve agricultural sustainability and regional connectivity. The infrastructure support, which comes in the form of Official Development Assistance (ODA), reinforces Tokyo's soft power strategy. As a result, it supports Cambodia's socio-economic stability as well as balancing China's infrastructural influence in the region.

Security Cooperation

Under the CSP, the defense sector is also evolving between Japan and Cambodia. At first step, it signals a balanced approach from Phnom Penh's traditionally China-centric security ties. The visit of a Japanese warship to the newly expanded Ream Naval Base, has not entirely settled this past concern of these bases. However, the visit was a historic and symbolic gesture of openness, it did not eliminate ongoing fears about the base's strategic use and China's influence.

Beyond naval diplomacy, Cambodia and Japan's defense cooperation is expanding through military attaché exchanges and training initiatives (Mao, 2024). This step will be pivotal for Cambodia to progressively reduce dependence on China. Moreover, this security partnership expands toward the non-military sector. This cooperation is also evident in the Cambodia-Japan Capacity Building Project on Peacekeeping Operations (PKO), which aims to strengthen Cambodia's capabilities in humanitarian response and technical military support (Khmer Times, 2024b). This means while Cambodia's contributions to international peacekeeping rise, Japan can also strengthen its non-combat security footprint. Additionally, Japan's USD 1.3 million demining assistance is another broader approach of security that comes in form through development, contrasting from China's infrastructure-heavy investments (Ben, 2025b). Overall, it is beneficial for Cambodia by allowing diversification in Phnom Penh security engagement. In essence, while China remains a dominant force, Japan's meaningful and growing role in Cambodia's security landscape will also form in Cambodia's security diplomacy.

Both Japan and Cambodia share common interests in the evolving security dynamics of the Indo-Pacific, an increasingly critical region for both economic and strategic reasons (Royal Government Spokesperson Unit, 2019). Japan's broader Indo-Pacific strategy emphasizes a free and open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), which seeks to promote peace, stability, and prosperity through respect for the rule of law, freedom of navigation, and international cooperation. Cambodia being the first country to endorse Japan's FOIP highlights a diplomatic gesture

showing alignment or support for Japan's regional vision which contributes to stronger bilateral ties (Pich et al., 2021). Cambodia, as an ASEAN member, has increasingly recognized the importance of regional security and stability, especially in light of rising tensions in the South China Sea and growing competition among major powers. Japan's engagement with Cambodia is not only based on bilateral interests but also reflects a shared commitment to a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific, where countries can pursue their development free from coercion (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Cambodia, 2022).

Cambodia's growing role in ASEAN enhances its strategic significance in the region. As ASEAN continues to be a central actor in the Indo-Pacific's multilateral security architecture, Cambodia is positioning itself as an increasingly active player in promoting regional stability. Both nations share concerns about the stability of the South China Sea, where competing territorial claims have raised tensions (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Cambodia, 2022). Japan's support for Cambodia's efforts in peacekeeping, disaster relief, and capacity-building complements Cambodia's desire to play a constructive role within ASEAN's dialogue on regional security. Japan and Cambodia's cooperation contribute to a broader vision of regional security that is inclusive, cooperative, and promotes peaceful resolutions to disputes.

By partnering with Cambodia, Japan is not only strengthening bilateral defense ties but also contributing to ASEAN's collective security architecture, ensuring that smaller states in the region can assert their interests without undue influence from major powers. This shared vision of a stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific is crucial for both Japan's strategic goals and Cambodia's growing role within ASEAN. With the ongoing security challenges in Ukraine, Cambodia also supports the reform of the UN Security Council with Japan to be included as a permanent member (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Cambodia, 2022).

Digital Development

Japan's involvement with Cambodia is also crucial in Cambodia's digital transformation. Japan has pledged grant aid of up to 2.3 billion yen (approximately USD 16 million) to support Cambodia's National Data Center and its broader government digitalization efforts (Butler, 2023). This funding is earmarked for necessary equipment and construction to establish the Center, which serves as a pivotal infrastructure for digitizing Cambodia's government administrative services. The National Data Center is under construction in Phnom Penh, with groundbreaking in July 2023, and it is expected to be fully operational by 2025. The total estimated cost of the Center is around USD 30 million (Asian Telecom, n.d.).

Another pivotal development is the unified QR code-based payment system. From the effort through an agreement between the National Bank of Cambodia (NBC) and Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry (May, 2023), this cross-border payment framework will smoothen transactions, boosting tourism and trade between the two nations. At the current stage, Cambodia is leading in digital payment in ASEAN, which it will stand to benefit from Japan's technological expertise in fintech (Visa, 2024). For instance, Cambodia's standardized QR code payment system, KHQR, recorded 601.3 million transactions in 2023—a

28.7% year-over-year increase. The total transaction value reached approximately USD 75.8 billion, up 18% year over year (FinTech News, 2025). Furthermore, Japan has also pledged USD 5.4 million to modernize Cambodia's voter information system, aiming to ensure electoral integrity through improved cybersecurity (Ben, 2025a). In this effort, Japan will enhance the credibility of democratic processes through reinforcing its soft power influence in governance reforms.

Cultural and People-to-People Ties

Japan's engagement with Cambodia also extends to culture and people-to-people. In the field of education, JICA granted aid for 26 Cambodian officials to study in Japan (Nhean, 2024), while the Japan MEXT scholarship awarded 34 outstanding Cambodian students in 2024 and 2025 respectively (Ben, 2025c). This shows how Japan's provision of scholarships to Cambodian students has been part of Cambodia's human capital development.

Japan's Kusanone program further enhances cultural diplomacy in the role of preserving Cambodian heritage sites. Tokyo has committed USD 900,000 for the Bayon Temple Preservation and Restoration Project (2025-2028) (Sen, 2024) and USD 300,000 for Sambor Prei Kuk back in 2023 (Nop, 2023). Through these efforts, Japan is helping to preserve Cambodia's cultural heritage and also deepen historical and cultural ties between the two nations.

The role of cultural diplomacy in Cambodia-Japan relations cannot be understated. Unlike engagement with China which is often conducted mainly through economic partnership, Japan's involvement in cultural and educational initiatives builds long-term goodwill. These efforts continue to strengthen Japan's soft power, that is beyond government-level engagements.

Tourism plays a significant role in enhancing the cultural and people-to-people ties between Japan and Cambodia. Over the years, Japan has increasingly become a popular tourist destination for Cambodians, while Japan has also supported the growth of Cambodia's tourism sector. As of June 2024, there were 25,384 Cambodian nationals residing in Japan, a significant number that reflects the strong migration and labor ties between the two countries. As of October 2024, there were 3,012 Japanese nationals residing in Cambodia, contributing to the deepening of cultural, educational, and business connections between the two countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2025a). Japanese tourists are ranked among the top 10 nationalities visiting Cambodia. In 2019, when the number of international tourists in Cambodia peaked at 6.6 million, Japanese tourists made up over 3% of that total (Hin, 2024b). During the Japan Tourism Expo and the accompanying Ministerial Roundtable, held from 24 to 26 September 2025, Cambodia and Japan pledged to enhance bilateral tourism as part of their commitment to strengthening diplomatic relations, which have endured for more than 72 years. During the first seven months of 2025, Cambodia welcomed over 60,000 Japanese tourists (Hin, 2025).

Cultural exchanges through tourism go beyond just travel and education. In Phnom Penh, Kizuna Festival is held annually to promote Japanese culture. Similarly, in Japan, Cambodia

Expo is held every year to attract more Japanese visitors to Cambodia. The 2024 event drew more than 80,000 participants, including Japanese, Cambodian, and international attendees (Hin, 2024a). It showcased traditional Khmer dance performances, Cambodian cuisine, and cultural exhibitions, offering a vibrant celebration of Cambodia's rich heritage. These events foster mutual understanding and respect while allowing Cambodians to experience Japanese culture firsthand and vice-versa.

Through these tourism initiatives and exchanges, Japan and Cambodia have fostered a deeper mutual understanding, creating long-lasting relationships between the people of both countries while simultaneously promoting tourism as a vital economic pillar for both nations. As travel and tourism continue to grow, so too does the foundation for strengthened people-to-people connections.

In addition, Japanese non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have played a vital role in Cambodia's socio-economic development, complementing Japan's official development assistance (ODA) efforts (Japan International Cooperation Agency, 2025). Since 2002, Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has provided substantial financial support to Japanese international aid NGOs via its Grant Assistance for Japanese NGO Projects program (Kimura & Umezawa, 2024). These NGOs focus on grassroots initiatives in areas such as healthcare, education, water sanitation, and community empowerment, thereby fostering sustainable development and strengthening people-to-people ties between the two countries. Their work aligns with Japan's broader development philosophy emphasizing human security and inclusive growth, which has been widely recognized as a cornerstone of Japan's engagement in Southeast Asia. Through direct community involvement and capacity-building programs, Japanese NGOs not only contribute to Cambodia's development but also promote mutual understanding and cultural exchange, reinforcing the foundation of Cambodia-Japan relations beyond government-to-government interactions.

VI. Challenges Along the Road

Despite the shift toward the CSP status, there are challenges along the road. First, Cambodia might face mounting challenges in balancing its relationships amid intensifying Sino-U.S. rivalry. Japan views China as an "unprecedented strategic challenge," (Miki, 2022) while Cambodia and China Beijing continue to emphasize the importance of "ironclad friendship" (Jin, 2024). The divergence in threat perception complicates Phnom Penh's ability to fully embrace Japan's strategic commitments, without risking friction with China. On the other side, with both China and Japan now holding CSP with Cambodia, there could be a potential for competition in their influence over Phnom Penh, which can challenge Cambodia to capitalize this dynamic.

Secondly, Cambodia's support of the "One China policy," further underscores its alignment with Beijing. This contrasts with Japan's more cautious stance on Taiwan. Tokyo's recent congratulatory message to Taiwan's president-elect drew Beijing's anger (Reuters,

2024). This means on an external and geopolitical level, Japan's balancing act can still trigger geopolitical tensions. With this complexity, maintaining strong ties with Japan without upsetting Beijing will require careful maneuvering from Phnom Penh.

Thirdly, as Japan continues to assert its influence in the region, especially through the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) strategy, Cambodia finds itself caught between two competing powers—China, which has a vested interest in Cambodia's economic development, and Japan, which seeks to promote a regional order based on transparency, rule of law, and freedom of navigation.

Cambodia's alignment with China, particularly regarding its stance on the South China Sea, has the potential to strain its relations with Japan. If Japan perceives Cambodia as being too closely aligned with China on critical issues like the South China Sea, it may limit the scope for deeper security cooperation. In contrast, Cambodia has maintained a neutral position on the East China Sea, consistently advocating for peaceful dialogue and negotiation among the parties involved (VietnamPlus, 2016). Consequently, Cambodia should carefully navigate this complex dynamic to balance its growing economic and strategic partnership with China while preserving and strengthening its diplomatic relations with Japan.

Fourthly, as both China and Japan increasingly deepen their strategic relationships with Cambodia, there is the potential for competition between these two powers over influence in Phnom Penh. Cambodia's positioning as a partner for both countries will be critical in managing this dynamic. The ongoing competition between China and Japan in Southeast Asia could exert pressure on Cambodia to align more closely with one side, particularly as regional security concerns continue to escalate. Cambodia's proximity to the South China Sea and its strategic location in ASEAN make it an important player in the broader regional balance of power. With China and Japan both vying for influence, Cambodia may face difficult choices in managing its relations with both countries without risking diplomatic isolation or tension.

Lastly, Donald Trump's return to office in his second term might introduce new unpredictability. His criticism of Japan's security burden-sharing might push Japan to increase its defense spending (Kyodo News, 2025) and could shift Tokyo's focus inward. Potentially, it could slow down the momentum of CSP with Cambodia. If Japan reallocates resources toward its own defense, Cambodia may receive less security and economic engagement than expected.

VII. Long Road Ahead: Future Prospects and Opportunities

The presence of challenges demand Cambodia's proactivity, if it wants to capitalize opportunities. Economically, under the partnership, Japan remains committed to mobilizing investment from its companies into Cambodia, as reflected in the announcement of the *Japan-Cambodia Economic Co-Creation Package*, which promotes cooperation through improving Cambodia's business environment, supporting Japanese companies, establishing public-

private partnership projects, and advancing telecommunications networks to enhance industry and supply chain resilience (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2025d). This is potentially essential for economic growth and human capital development. Additionally, an agreement on labor mobility signed between Cambodia and Japan's Miyagi Prefecture (Miyagi Prefecture, 2024) will facilitate skill development for Cambodian workers. Potentially, it will enhance their employability both domestically and abroad.

In terms of security, Japan continues to support Cambodian forces, particularly in training and infrastructure development. The planned collaboration in landmine clearance in Ukraine (The Japan News, 2024) highlights how Japan helps build on Cambodia's expertise in humanitarian efforts, which could elevate Cambodia's diplomatic standing on the global stage. Furthermore, Japan's focus on cybersecurity and digital economy development (Ravindran, 2025) will reinforce Cambodia's ambitions to modernize its technological infrastructure.

Looking ahead, it appears Cambodia is stuck in a position between Japan and China, two key partners, with diverging interests, which requires Phnom Penh's careful navigation. The ongoing Sino-U.S. rivalry continues to amplify the challenge where the two Cambodia CSP partner states are contrasting with each other on a geopolitical front. In this sense, despite complicating Cambodia's foreign policy, increasing strategic engagement with Japan will reinforce diversification strategy. If Phnom Penh can effectively manage its relations with both powers, Cambodia will be able to strengthen its economic growth and technological advancement, while being a neutral actor in global affairs.

In terms of people-to-people connections, expanding educational and research collaboration between Cambodia and Japan holds immense potential to elevate Cambodia's education sector and support its development goals. Japan is globally recognized for its excellence in academic research, particularly in fields such as engineering, technology, agriculture, and environmental sustainability. By deepening educational exchanges and fostering research partnerships, Cambodia can tap into Japan's knowledge and innovation to address its domestic challenges. Educational exchange programs can allow Cambodian students to gain advanced expertise in critical sectors, equipping them with the skills necessary to drive Cambodia's modernization and technological advancement. Furthermore, joint research initiatives between universities and research institutions in both countries could tackle pressing issues such as sustainable agriculture, infrastructure development, and digital transformation, areas that are key to Cambodia's economic growth.

Japan enjoys high levels of trust in both Thailand (65.1%) and Cambodia (61.9%), according to an ISEAS Survey (2024). This makes the country well-positioned to act as a credible facilitator in efforts to promote peace, particularly in the context of the recent Cambodia-Thailand border tensions. At the same time, Japan has significant economic interests in the Cambodia-Thailand supply chain (Nakabayashi, 2018), which further motivates its active engagement in fostering stability and cooperation in the region. Acting as a neutral and trusted partner, Japan has played a constructive mediation role, with Ambassador SUZUKI Hideo conducting high-level consultations in both countries to encourage the steady implementation of the ceasefire agreement (Ministry of Foreign

Affairs of Japan, 2025c). Japan's diplomatic efforts are complemented by its provision of an Emergency Grant of approximately USD 1.8 million to address humanitarian needs in the affected border areas (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2025b). This aid, delivered through international organizations such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and UNICEF, reflects Japan's commitment to promoting peace and stability in the region. Japanese soft power continues to play a significant role in the region, particularly in the realms of economic and security cooperation. This influence has provided considerable support to smaller states, most notably Cambodia, even in the face of ongoing challenges, such as tensions and incursions from Thailand. Building on this momentum, Cambodia stands to benefit from Japan's sustained engagement in conflict resolution and its broader commitment to regional stability.

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Chapter 11

The Kingdom and the Two Koreas: Cambodia's Cooperation and Strategic Diplomacy with the Korean Peninsula

EK Bunly

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I. Introduction

Since relations re-establishment in the 1990s, both the Republic of Korea (ROK, also known as South Korea) and the Kingdom of Cambodia have continued to be partners through various trade, investment, and people-to-people connections with self-determination and mutual respect. At the same time, Cambodia is still maintaining ties with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, also known as North Korea). However, following the ebbs and flows of history during and after the Cold War (Bin, 2017), relations between Cambodia and the two Koreas seem to have experienced a divergence of direction, as will be discussed below.

The former ROK President Moon Jae-in (2017–2022) set the groundwork for Seoul's diplomatic diversification with Southeast Asia and India through two major regional strategies: the New Southern Policy (NSP) and, subsequently, the New Southern Policy Plus. The goal was to elevate India and ASEAN members to the same level as South Korea's four major partners, such as the United States, China, Japan, and Russia (Choi, 2023). The ties between the two countries also showed comparable continuity during the former ROK President Yoon Suk-yeol (2022–2025) with the Korea–ASEAN Solidarity Initiative (KASI), which was a part of Yoon's broader Indo-Pacific Strategy.

From the Moon to the Yoon administrations, former Prime Minister Hun Sen of Cambodia sustained Phnom Penh's approach toward the ROK, emphasizing diversification of partnerships without compromising national sovereignty or self-determination. Hun Sen's son, Hun Manet, became the leader of Cambodia in 2023, while Hun Sen became the President of the Senate. The transition was the first time since the late 1990s, marking a new era of leadership for the Kingdom.

The DPRK–Cambodia relations generally are not experiencing any major government-to-government setbacks either. The Kingdom is still hosting Pyongyang's embassy despite North Korea's pursuit of its missile and weapons tests, regardless of international criticism. Undeterred by that, Pyongyang and Phnom Penh opted to preserve the historical ties established since the aftermath of the Korean War while showing few signs of deepening ties. Given the asymmetry in Cambodia's relations with the two Koreas, it is worth examining the contemporary and political factors that have shaped this momentum.

This chapter seeks to analyze and examine Cambodia's engagement with both the ROK and the DPRK. This will also highlight the comparison and contrast between Cambodia–ROK and Cambodia–DPRK relations, which provides insights into broader dynamics that explain these bilateral ties.

II. The Policy Directions of Cambodia and the Republic of Korea (ROK)

The Republic of Korea: From 2017 to 2025

The former ROK President Moon Jae-in (2017–2022) and his administration set goals to expand the ROK’s strategic footprint southwards to cover Southeast Asia and India, the regions that offer a good environment for South Korean investors due to the favorable cost of production, human capital, and major routes that connect the Pacific to the Indian Ocean. Moon Jae-in unveiled the ROK’s two main strategies, the New Southern Policy (NSP) in 2017 and later on the New Southern Policy Plus in 2020.

The goal of the NSP was to strengthen South Korea’s cooperation with Southeast Asia and India. The NSP was introduced to focus on three main pillars: People, Prosperity, and Peace. The policy was upgraded to the NPS Plus in 2020 to prioritize coordination between the target countries with the ROK to ensure the COVID-19 pandemic would not hinder the progress of connectivity and disrupt the supply chain (Kwon & Yoon, 2022).

The two policies differentiated Moon from his predecessors when it comes to Seoul’s engagement with Southeast Asia. The NSP and NSP Plus both positioned ASEAN as a co-equal. Moon visited all the ASEAN countries within the first two years of his presidency and extended the ROK engagement beyond trade to normalize leader-level engagement, such as via the Mekong–ROK Summit and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. However, during the ROK former leader Lee Myung-bak’s (2008–2013) tenure, South Korea looked to Southeast Asia more as a market, rather than a partner, with his signature “New Asia Initiative” (Howe & Park, 2019). Similarly, the Park Geun-hye administration (2013–2017) focused on sustaining Lee’s policies rather than launching any ASEAN-specific initiative. The Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI) was the signature regional policy of the Park administration. Despite that, the blueprint aimed more towards Eurasia and Northeast Asia rather than Southeast Asia. Moreover, the NAPCI posited more concepts towards sustaining trust with Asia, as a whole, rather than focusing on pragmatism in elevating the ROK–ASEAN relations (Oh & Orta, 2024).

Cambodia showed its support for the ROK’s New Southern Policy blueprints. The approval was exemplified during Hun Sen’s meeting with Moon Jae-in in 2019. Cambodia was hopeful that the relations between Phnom Penh and Seoul, as well as ASEAN–South Korea, would continue to prosper under the new strategy (Byun, 2019). Various dialogue-driven developments have emerged that contributed to strengthening Phnom Penh–Seoul relations after the announcement of the New Southern Policy.

First, the visit to Cambodia by Moon Jae-in in 2019 resulted in many agreements on loans, education, as well as kick-started the bilateral free trade talks between Phnom Penh and Seoul to expand economic cooperation (Kang, 2020). Second, one of the most noticeable

initiatives established after the officialization of the NSP was the Mekong–Republic of Korea Summit in November 2019. The summit was proposed by Hun Sen to the Korean leader, which marked the first time for South Korea that such a meeting was convened (Cheong Wa Dae, 2019). The meeting also officially introduced South Korea to a new era of Mekong–ROK relations, which included having a dialogue–led strategic and developmental role on par with the existing developmental powers in the Mekong, such as Japan, China, and the United States.

Continuity persisted into the Yoon administration. The former ROK leader, Yoon Suk-yeol (2022 – 2025), built on the NSP and NSP plus legacy and sustained the economic engagement with ASEAN and the broader region. At the same time, his administration also introduced policies with distinctive measures to elevate South Korea’s strategic presence and global image (Tan, 2024). During the 2022 ASEAN Summit in Cambodia, Yoon unveiled the “Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region”, also known as the ROK’s Indo-Pacific Strategy, to address the challenges of the regional order, including geopolitical competition and regional security issues.

The ROK strategy recognized the importance of the Indo-Pacific as a major gateway to the world’s economy and stability. President Yoon’s Indo-Pacific blueprint centered on three key visions such as Freedom, Peace, and Prosperity, with the fundamental cooperative principle of inclusiveness, trust, and reciprocity (Yun & Galas, 2023). The framework also included an ASEAN-specific initiative, known as the “Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative (KASI) to build on the existing cooperation to a more comprehensive partnership between the ROK and Southeast Asia. KASI consisted of three key visions – Freedom, Peace, and Prosperity – with eight core lines of effort focusing on upgrading the ASEAN-ROK partnership and strengthening ROK ties with ASEAN member states (Kwak, 2023).

There are three main areas that differentiate Yoon’s Indo-Pacific Strategy from the Moon’s NSP. First, while the NSP placed its priority on people-to-people relations, the ROK Indo-Pacific Strategy placed emphasis on strengthening security cooperation and dialogue regularization between Southeast Asia and the Republic of Korea (Korea Times, 2022). Second, while the NSP outlined Moon’s strategic ambiguity that sought to move away from siding with the U.S. or China, Yoon’s Indo-Pacific Strategy displays a close alignment with the United States’ Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIP). Washington’s blueprints, both under Presidents Trump and Biden, focused on security cooperation and were centralized in maintaining the status quo and checking China’s rising influence in the region (Kim, 2023). The similarity between the ROK and the U.S. Indo-Pacific framework could be interpreted by Seoul’s partners in the region as the ROK converging with Washington to counter the rise of China, leaving behind its strategic ambiguity pursued by the Moon administration. Third, Yoon’s Indo-Pacific Strategy offered a more direct and focused mechanism toward security cooperation than Moon’s NSP. Under the Indo-Pacific flagship framework, the South Korean leader pledged more active participation by the ROK in joint military exercises and annual security dialogue with ASEAN while also working with the regional grouping to alleviate the rising threats, including cybersecurity and transnational crime (Teo, 2024).

The Kingdom of Cambodia: From 2017 to 2025

Under the former Prime Minister Hun Sen, Cambodia has shown its support for the ROK's NSP. During his meeting with Moon Jae-in in 2019, Hun Sen expressed his hope for good bilateral relations under the Moon's NSP:

I would like to congratulate the Republic of Korea...on becoming the host of the first-ever Mekong-Korea Summit and the 30th anniversary of ASEAN-ROK Dialogue Partnership. I believe the visit of H.E. Moon Jae-in to Cambodia will bolster the Cambodia-Republic of Korea relations to be more fruitful and robust, leading to further cooperation that aligns with the Republic of Korea's New Southern Policy in the effort to strengthen people-to-people relations and regional sustainable peace. (Hun Sen, 2019)

Cambodia's support for the NSP coincided with Phnom Penh's five-year national socio-economic development strategy adopted in 2018, known as the Rectangular Strategy Phase Four (RS Phase IV). This strategy outlined Cambodia's goal of becoming a high-income economy with opportunities for the nation through areas such as economic diversification, financial infrastructure development, and technological advancement (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, 2018).

Moreover, the Royal Government of Cambodia's (RGC) aspiration to detach the Kingdom from major powers' rivalry resonated in the ROK's attempt, during the Moon Administration, to avoid becoming entrenched with the ongoing geopolitical competition by major powers. In Cambodia's foreign policy outlook, Phnom Penh's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MOFAIC)'s "Stability and Development First" outlined the Kingdom's emphasis on being the outlier of major power competition while seeking to diversify cooperation with other external partners (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, 2018a). Both Cambodia and the Republic of Korea looked to broaden ties with non-Great Power partners to exclude themselves from the intensifying geopolitical competition to ensure that the rivalry does not deter their development progress, which explains the positive relationship between Hun Sen's government and the Moon administration.

Hun Sen stepped down from his premiership in 2023, after winning a landslide national election, and became the Senate President in the same year. His son, Hun Manet, became the Prime Minister of Cambodia and launched the grand national development strategy, known as the Pentagonal Strategy Phase One (PS Phase I), which is a five-year plan built on the legacy of the RS Phase IV to develop Cambodia towards a high-income country by 2050.

Under Hun Manet, Cambodia articulated a more cautious stance towards the ROK's broader Indo-Pacific Strategy. While Hun Sen demonstrated clear and open support for Moon Jae-in's New Southern Policy, Hun Manet's government has taken a measured position towards Yoon's Indo-Pacific framework and expressed greater alignment with the KASI, which was more consistent with the regional priorities and ASEAN-centric approach. However, the RGC acknowledged Seoul's dedication to ensuring the Indo-Pacific will be peaceful, prosperous, and free while "noted" that the ROK's Indo-Pacific strategy contains

core values that would bring about peace in the region. Despite that, the enthusiasm the RGC evinced towards the NSP was not replicated for Yoon’s Indo-Pacific framework (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, 2024).

This can be explained by looking at Seoul’s Indo-Pacific strategy and KASI. While Seoul’s Indo-Pacific blueprint covered a broad geographic spectrum as well as avoided zero-sum game rhetoric, KASI prioritizes a Southeast Asia-centered approach, which allows the ROK to have a clear and concentrated framework from the broader strategic discourse. By doing so, the ROK was able to categorize its focus and narrow its goal of engagement for a more pragmatic and practical engagement with Southeast Asia. Therefore, by doubling support for KASI, the Cambodian and South Korean governments stand to bring about the actualization of their cooperation.

Cambodia-ROK’s bilateral relations were upgraded to a “Strategic Partnership” during Hun Manet’s visit to Seoul in 2024. In the joint statement, Cambodia welcomed Seoul’s navy for its first port call in the country – signaling the elevation of bilateral defense ties. Moreover, both sides also reaffirmed their commitment to security cooperation via education and training, enhancement of counter-terrorism collaboration, conducting joint exercises, and strengthening ties between officials to coordinate responses to the rising transnational crimes, such as drug and human trafficking, cybercrime, and scam operations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, 2024).

Therefore, the transition from Hun Sen to Hun Manet underscored policy continuity with caution towards Seoul’s regional blueprint development. Despite Phnom Penh aligning strongly with Moon Jae-in’s ASEAN-focused initiative, its preference for the KASI framework over the overall Yoon Suk-yeol’s Indo-Pacific strategy reflects Cambodia’s consistent priority of avoiding entanglement in great power rivalry. At the same time, the elevation of relations to a Strategic Partnership in 2024 and the expansion of defense and security cooperation reveal that the bilateral relationship continues to deepen, which demonstrates that, despite the shifts in leadership and strategy, the two states remain committed to shaping a partnership that balances economic development with geopolitical prudence.

III. Cambodia and the ROK Cooperation

Trade, Investment, Banking and Finance

The Cambodia–Republic of Korea Free Trade Agreement (CKFTA) came into force in December 2022 with the aim of boosting bilateral trade between the ROK and Cambodia within the existing regional trade frameworks, such as the ASEAN-Korea Free Trade Agreement (AKFTA) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) (Kang, 2022). Under the CKFTA agreement, Cambodia’s tariffs of over 89 percent were lifted while the ROK opened its market with over 95 percent of the tariffs eliminated, thereby easing the flow of Cambodia’s exported goods to enter South Korea even further (Bor, 2022).

Table 1: Overview of Cambodia–South Korea overall trade volume from 2017 to 2024

Year	Cambodia’s Export Value to South Korea (Unit: USD Million)	Cambodia’s Import Value from South Korea (Unit: USD Million)	Total
2017	166	489	655
2018	199	563	762
2019	211	670	881
2020	185	549	734
2021	194	581	775
2022	233	545	778
2023	281	470	751
2024	319	521	840

Source: General Department of Customs and Excise, International Merchandise Trade Statistics

In bilateral trade, Cambodia mainly exports garments such as footwear, clothing, and other apparel to South Korea. It also sends a range of other products, including beverages, electrical components, rubber, pharmaceuticals, agricultural goods, and other travel-related items. On the other hand, South Korea exports vehicles, machinery, electronic appliances, beverages, pharmaceuticals, and other finished products to Cambodia (Chea, 2023).

In mainland Southeast Asia, Vietnam retains its position as South Korea’s top investment destination with a total of over USD 80 billion in 2023. The ROK’s total investment in Cambodia and Thailand is at a similar value, standing at around USD 5 billion, while Seoul’s investment in Laos stood at a little over USD 1 billion by 2023 (VietnamNet News, 2023 & Bank of Thailand, 2023 & Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). With the huge investment from tech giant companies, such as Samsung, Vietnam is a country that has the strongest investment ties with the ROK compared to the other Southeast Asian mainland, as Samsung alone accounted for USD 22 billion in 2023, focusing on manufacturing electronics products such as phones, components, computers, and machinery (Jones, 2025). This is due to the fact that Hanoi has rolled out policy architectures that attract foreign investment and reduce barriers, such as free trade agreements, investment incentives policies, and stable economic growth (Nhan Dan, 2024). Vietnam has created an ecosystem that induces an export-led development model with very large electronics export volumes, such as special economic zones, strong trade regulations, logistics links, and stable policies (RBA, 2024).

In Cambodia, over 200 South Korean companies invested in sectors such as the automobile industry, agriculture, consumer-based industry, and others (Khmer Times, 2023). As such, South Korea becomes Cambodia’s second largest foreign direct investor, after China, contributing 11.8 percent of the overall FDI in Cambodia (Chamrong, 2024 & Friel, 2024). To attract foreign investments, a new law on investment in 2021 was promulgated, which aims to provide an attractive investment environment for its investors by creating an open, transparent, predictable, and favorable legal blueprint with investment incentives and

guarantees of protective measures – including non-discrimination, arbitrary expropriation, freedom of fund transfers, intellectual property protection (Council for Development of Cambodia, 2021).

In the area of banking and finance, the National Bank of Cambodia (NBC) and Jeonbuk Bank (JBB) launched a new cross-border payments system through the Bakong (KHQR) code to enable cross-border transactions, which aimed to promote bilateral trade activities, smoothen tourism, and pave the ways for a new milestone for financial ties between the two countries (Chamrong, 2024a). Apart from JBB, KB Financial Group also signed a memorandum of understanding with the National Bank of Cambodia to establish a QR code-based transaction system to enhance the bilateral exchanges between the ROK and Cambodia by allowing access to comprehensive financial services through KB Financial.

Official Development Assistance, Education, and Labor

Seoul’s effort in supporting the Kingdom through assistance under the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) is noteworthy. In the past decade, the ROK has maintained its contribution to Phnom Penh, which focused on reducing poverty, economic and social infrastructure (Lowy Institute, 2024). Since the 1990s, Seoul has provided over USD 431 million in grant assistance to Cambodia. Many of the official development assistance (ODA) projects included the construction/ renovation of the Kingdom’s national roads and bridges (Saboeun, 2023).

Table Two: KOICA’s Official Development Assistance to Cambodia

Year	Amount Supported by KOICA (USD in million)
2017	21
2018	21
2019	18
2020	17
2021	18
2022	28
2023	30
2024	35

Source: KOICA Open Data Portal

KOICA assistance to Cambodia also extended to the education sector. To date, the ROK has remained one of the destinations for Cambodian students to embark on their higher education. An example of this can be found through initiatives such as the Global Korea Scholarship (GKS) program, which is an extensive educational program that supports international students for higher education in Korea. Thus far, there are more than 300 Cambodian GKS program recipients, many of whom are now contributing to the Kingdom’s business, universities, NGOs, and government (Khmer Times, 2023a).

In addition, the ROK remains one of the most preferred destinations for Cambodian workers for job opportunities due to the nation's protective labor law and competitive salaries among the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. South Korea's Labor Standard Act stands as the foundation for Cambodian workers to ensure their salary, well-being, and treatment are up to par with the standard system of the international labor framework (Korea Legislation Research Institute, 2025).

By 2024, the number of Cambodian migrant workers in South Korea was reported to be more than 50,000, with an average remittance worth around USD 500-600 million annually, while the total remittance from Cambodian migrant workers globally is about USD 1.2 billion (EAC News, 2023). Cambodian workers in South Korea are mainly employed in the agriculture and construction sectors, as well as the small-and medium-sized enterprises. Therefore, employment opportunities in South Korea offer tremendous economic advantages for workers who seek to upgrade their skills in a highly developed society while earning competitive salaries.

However, challenges for Cambodian workers in South Korea continue to require policy attention. According to a study, the majority of Khmer migrant workers change their specialization after relocation. Furthermore, many young Cambodians forgo educational and entrepreneurial opportunities at home to pursue higher-paid employment in the ROK. This shift often compels them to undertake entirely new skill sets, creating a skill gap that does not align with the demands of the South Korean labor market. Moreover, language barriers remain one of the most prominent challenges, particularly for workers in the agricultural sector or in small businesses. These difficulties often discourage workers from seeking counseling or assistance from authorities when needed (Chan & Lak, 2020).

Cambodian workers have also fallen victim to fraudulent recruitment schemes promising high-paying jobs abroad. A report by the Center for Alliance of Labor and Human Rights (2025) indicates that scammers frequently use the names of developed countries, especially South Korea, to deceive Cambodian workers into paying up to USD 4,000 for fake employment opportunities. More than 300 individuals were defrauded, totaling nearly USD 750,000, with none successfully employed or compensated. This pattern has made many Cambodian workers cautious and distrustful of legitimate job announcements related to Korea. In response, Cambodian authorities have intensified public education efforts, emphasizing that only government-to-government recruitment channels are genuine (Yatt, 2025). Nevertheless, stronger cooperation is still required. Expanding awareness campaigns and ensuring that South Korean companies strictly adhere to official recruitment frameworks are essential to maintain trust and safeguard Korea's reputation as a desirable destination for Cambodian workers.

IV. Cambodia–Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) Relations

In September 2017, North Korea conducted its sixth and most powerful nuclear test, causing an artificial earthquake measuring 6.3 on the Richter scale. The explosion was estimated to have a yield of 50 – 140 kilotons of TNT. The test drew widespread condemnation from the United Nations and countries around the world, including ASEAN member states. As part of the international community supporting a peaceful resolution on the Korean Peninsula, Cambodia also issued a statement concerning the nuclear test:

Cambodia regrets and expresses its grave concern over the nuclear test conducted by the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK)...This sixth nuclear test is a repeated violation of the relevant United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolutions and poses a serious threat to peace, security, and stability in the Korean Peninsula, and in this region as a whole, and will further deteriorate the already tense situation in the Korean Peninsula (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, 2017).

Although Cambodia and North Korea maintained close ties during the Cold War, contemporary relations have cooled down remarkably in recent decades. Key factors that once shaped their bilateral relations, such as leaders’ interpersonal relations, diplomatic and economic interests, and regional geopolitical dynamics, shifted after leadership changes in the 1990s (Chheang, 2024).

Unlike the strong personal bond once shared between Cambodia’s Norodom Sihanouk and North Korea’s Kim Il-sung, their successors did not maintain the same level of connection or engagement. The absence of consistent exchanges and dialogue after Kim Il-sung’s era led to a noticeable decline in the depth of Cambodia–North Korea relations. Since then, most interactions between the two countries have taken place through ministers and diplomatic representatives at the embassy and ministry level. For instance, there are no public records or credible reports of either Hun Sen or Hun Manet meeting with Kim Jong-un, nor have either side shown efforts to pursue such meetings. Instead, relations have occasionally been reaffirmed through meetings between Cambodia’s prime minister and North Korea’s ambassadors to Phnom Penh (Taing, 2024).

Moreover, trade and economic cooperation between Cambodia and North Korea remains minimal, especially when compared to Cambodia’s exchanges with South Korea. In 2016, trade between Pyongyang and Phnom Penh totaled around USD 2 million, but by 2021 it had dropped to only about USD 300,000, which is one of the lowest among Cambodia’s trading partners (Trading Economics, 2025). This sharp decline is largely due to the heavy international sanctions imposed on North Korea, which have made bilateral trade nearly impossible. These sanctions also strained broader relations, which resulted in the deportation of North Korean workers operating illegally in Cambodia and the closure of the Pyongyang Restaurant and the Angkor Panorama Museum.

North Korea’s repeated missile tests have raised concern in Phnom Penh, which

consistently advocates for the peaceful resolution of tensions on the Korean Peninsula. Cambodia recognizes that the conflict between the DPRK and the ROK is a complex issue requiring time, mutual understanding, active engagement, and a long reconciliation process. During the World Peace Summit in 2022, Prime Minister Hun Sen emphasized the importance of diplomatic dialogue aimed at addressing the root causes of division between the two Koreas, while acknowledging that more than seven decades of distrust and instability remain difficult to overcome (Sochan, 2022).

V. Cambodia's Position on the Korean Peninsula Issue

The return of Donald Trump to the White House in 2025 marked the revival of his “America First” policy. Since his campaign, Trump has sought to rebuild U.S.–North Korea relations by drawing on the personal rapport he established with Kim Jong-un during his first term. Unlike the Biden and Obama administrations, which adopted a strategy of “strategic patience” towards Pyongyang (Hwang, 2025), Trump’s second-term approach emphasized renewed engagement with the DPRK. This policy shift carries implications for Cambodia and its broader relations with the Korean Peninsula.

Recently, Washington publicly referred to North Korea as a “nuclear power,” a term that U.S. officials had long avoided using to prevent implying formal recognition of North Korea’s nuclear status (Song, 2025). As of now, it remains too early to assess the outcome of Trump’s renewed engagement policy with Pyongyang. Despite that, Cambodia’s position is clear: while it values its long-standing diplomatic ties with North Korea, Phnom Penh will not risk international isolation or violate UN mandates to strengthen those relations. Instead, Cambodia continues to advocate for peaceful negotiations on Korean Peninsula issues and urges all parties to engage in dialogue, potentially within the ASEAN framework, to seek an effective resolution. Regardless of whether the renewed Trump–Kim dialogue succeeds or fails, Cambodia must carefully navigate its path, as a small state, between principle and pragmatism.

During his first term, Trump proposed a quid pro quo to North Korea in which the U.S. would lift sanctions in exchange for the complete and verifiable dismantlement of its nuclear weapons program, including all related materials and facilities (Bicker, 2025). Although such a deal was overly ambitious and unfulfilled, Trump has approached Pyongyang more cautiously in his second term. Nevertheless, Cambodia could benefit from any positive outcome of renewed U.S.–DPRK talks. As a consistent advocate for peaceful conflict resolution on the Korean Peninsula, a successful Trump–Kim summit could open space for Cambodia to cautiously expand its diplomatic and limited economic engagement with North Korea, while remaining within the boundaries of the UN sanctions.

In contrast, if the Trump–Kim peace efforts end unfavorably, Phnom Penh would likely sustain its cautious distance from Pyongyang. The Kingdom’s policy tradition of neutrality posited continuity between Cambodia–DPRK relations rather than reaction, while Phnom Penh would still adhere to the UN resolutions and measured diplomacy for stability. This would signal Cambodia’s alignment with international consensus, ASEAN values, and its

own diplomatic principles. Scholars have noted that Cambodia's approach toward North Korea has often reflected China's policy posture toward Pyongyang (Chheang, 2024 & Hunt, 2017). If this pattern holds, any adjustment in Cambodia–DPRK relations during Trump's second term could be indirectly influenced by Beijing. China's position, whether supportive of Washington's engagement or inclined toward greater pressure, would likely serve as a key guide for Phnom Penh's diplomatic stance toward North Korea.

VI. Future Prospects and Challenges

Beyond Phnom Penh's cautious maneuvering between North and South Korea, both Cambodia and the Republic of Korea were working to conclude trade deals with the United States. The negotiations saw Cambodia facing a 19 percent tariff and South Korea a 15 percent tariff. This tariff finalization revealed the U.S. structural shift in its market policy in which Washington utilized its trade access as a strategic tool to renegotiate agreements in favor of the United States. However, it was this bargaining leverage that facilitated the ceasefire between Cambodia and Thailand in July 2025.

The five-day border clash between Cambodia and Thailand in July 2025 left a lesson that will be examined for decades to come. Trump's intervention, by threatening to suspend tariff negotiations with both Bangkok and Phnom Penh, pressured the two governments to reach a ceasefire and end the violence. This move created an opening for Phnom Penh–Washington's ties revitalisation. Prime Minister Hun Manet's nomination of Trump for the Nobel Peace Prize demonstrated not only Cambodia's appreciation for America's mediation but also reflected Phnom Penh's strategic hedging posture, which signaled that Cambodia is not an outright pro-Chinese client state but is a pragmatically oriented state that responds constructively to any engagement that respects national interest.

The Republic of Korea maintained a neutral stance during the Cambodia–Thailand border clash. Without endorsing either side's account, Seoul expressed “grave concern” over the confrontation and offered condolences to the victims. The ROK urged both governments to resolve tensions through dialogue, which reflected South Korea's middle-power diplomacy, involving neutrality, mediation, and a dialogue-driven mechanism (Jordaan, 2003). With over USD 15 billion in bilateral trade between Thailand and Korea in 2024 (The Nation, 2025), being neutral allowed Seoul to retain its economic and security interests with both Phnom Penh and Bangkok while avoiding entanglement in their dispute.

Seoul and Phnom Penh possess strong synergies in economic cooperation, this momentum has not extended to the sensitive security spectrum. Since the ties re-establishment (Bin, 2017) up to the Yoon administration, their economic relations have evolved from basic trade to a Free Trade Agreement, and their political ties have deepened from re-engagement to a formal Strategic Partnership in 2024.

In security cooperation, the Kingdom and South Korea tend to converge on non-geopolitical issues and diverge on those involving regional strategy. Their collaboration continues to strengthen in areas such as mine and unexploded ordnance (UXO) clearance,

United Nations peacekeeping operations, and transnational crime. However, strategic alignment remains limited due to the diverging orientations of South Korea's security outlook in its Indo-Pacific Strategy with Cambodia's foreign policy agenda. With the inter-Korean issue still looming large, Seoul is likely to remain confined to the peninsula, which limits its security presence abroad; thereby, resulting in the ROK's hard-power influence and strategic footprint in Cambodia remaining modest.

In addition, the close resemblance between the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy and South Korea's regional blueprint left little space for Seoul to position itself as a neutral actor not only for Cambodia, but also for the ASEAN member states, who prefer neutrality than being involved in the major power competition. The alignment presents difficulties for Southeast Asian states to fully endorse the strategy. Moreover, Phnom Penh had shown its signal of interest for the ROK to be a more strategic partner in the security spectrum by "*welcoming the ROK's navy plan to conduct its first port call in Cambodia*" – as part of the 2024 Strategic Partnership agreement (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, 2024a). However, the plan was never actualized following President Yoon's impeachment in 2025. As a result, South Korea remains a sectoral hedger that is engaging Cambodia primarily through non-security domains such as supply chain diversification, education, investment, and trade, while both sides continue to seek greater synergy in the security sphere.

Challenges in Cambodia–South Korea relations persist over the issue of scam operations. The death of a 22-year-old South Korean student in Kampot in October 2025 triggered strong public and political reactions in Seoul. The ROK government issued a travel advisory, proposed the appointment of a liaison officer to manage cases involving Korean nationals, and some lawmakers even called for the review of Seoul's ODA to Cambodia (Shon, 2025). However, the scam problem is not confined to Cambodia alone but represents a regional criminal ecosystem that has expanded rapidly since the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime Report in 2025, scam networks thrive across mainland Southeast Asia due to weak rule of law, corruption, and collusion between officials and business elites (Global Initiative, 2025). In this context, Cambodia's porous borders and limited regulatory enforcement have made it increasingly vulnerable to such transnational operations.

Seoul has strongly urged Phnom Penh to intensify efforts to address online job scams and human trafficking (Kim, 2025). In response, Cambodia has cooperated with the ROK authority and has detained more than 2,000 operators in 2025 alone (Cheang, 2025). However, the pace has remained unsatisfactory to South Korea for the time being (Korea Times, 2025) and could be a growing source of tension in bilateral relations if left unresolved. While the issue has not seriously harmed broader ties, its present severity could affect Cambodia's international image, erode bilateral trust, and undermine tourist and investor confidence, including from South Korea, which could impede the Kingdom's long-term development goals.

With North Korea, Cambodia's future bilateral relations with the DPRK are likely to remain limited but diplomatically sustained. Phnom Penh's cautious foreign policy and Pyongyang's apparent disinterest in deepening engagement have kept the relationship at a standstill. With little sign of progress, North Korea may instead look to other states in

the Greater Mekong Subregion, such as Vietnam and Laos, to expand its regional outreach beyond the Korean Peninsula. Nevertheless, space may still exist for low-level cooperation in areas such as cultural exchange, education, or humanitarian initiatives within the United Nations framework. For Cambodia, maintaining ties with Pyongyang will likely be secondary to preserving its growing economic and strategic partnership with Seoul, which holds far greater significance for the Kingdom's long-term development and regional standing.

VII. Conclusion

The ties between Cambodia and both Koreas have endured changes and geopolitical difficulties throughout history, including the major powers' rivalry. The NSP and the NSP Plus significantly contribute to the development of not only Cambodia but also Southeast Asia and India, while the ROK's Indo-Pacific Blueprint has a wider regional approach to elevate South Korea's image in the international community. In the Indo-Pacific Strategy framework, Southeast Asia and Cambodia are focused through the Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative (KASI). Although KASI and the NSP had many similarities, differences persisted that distinguish both administrations' approaches towards the region. Despite that, Seoul and Phnom Penh have shown signs that cooperation has been beneficial to both countries' economic advantages through the CKFTA, the people-to-people exchange, education, and labor cooperation.

On the other hand, the DPRK-Cambodia relations appear in a traditional deadlock in which both states have neither the incentive nor the capability to bolster their relations to another level due to leadership preference, regional and global dynamics, and minimal economic ties. The continued missile and nuclear development programs for the DPRK continued to be the "Achilles Heel" of the future Phnom Penh-Pyongyang relations. As an advocate of peaceful conflict resolution, the aggressive behavior of North Korea in its pursuit of nuclear and missile technologies will continue to contradict Cambodia's values and principles.

The Trump administration's tariff finalization and involvement in the 2025 Cambodia-Thailand border clash altered the RGC's posture towards Washington, while Seoul's restrained neutrality showcased its middle power diplomacy. Although Cambodia and South Korea have deepened economic and institutional cooperation, their security partnership remains limited due to Seoul's geopolitical constraints in the Korean peninsula and its Indo-Pacific strategy's alignment with Washington. Challenges, such as scam operations, stand to test the credibility of Cambodia's domestic government and indirectly place Phnom Penh-Seoul's bilateral trust and investment confidence at stake. Despite these challenges, the ties between the Republic of Korea continue to endure through economic synergies and functional cooperation; however, it is imperative that both states navigate strategic sensitivities to build a more comprehensive partnership in the long run.

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Chapter 12

Cambodia-Australia Relations: Toward a New Era of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

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- I. Introduction
- II. Historical Background
- III. Bilateral Cooperation
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- V. Prospects and Challenges
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I. Introduction

Following the signing of the Paris Peace Agreements, Cambodia and Australia resumed their diplomatic ties in 1991. In recent years, the regional and international outlook has undergone a remarkable transformation, confronting new and challenging realities. Critical developments at the domestic, regional, and global levels have significantly shaped the environment in which both Cambodia and Australia operate.

Cambodia's political landscape underwent its first generational leadership transition in decades in 2023, from Prime Minister Hun Sen to his son and successor Hun Manet. Although the consolidation of power within the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) remains in flux, the new leadership is facing mounting challenges from both internal and external sources. The absence of credible opposition parties in the legislature and the decline of civil society and independent journalism have further reshaped the nation's political and social environment. Regionally, Cambodia continues to grapple with intensifying geopolitical competition, unresolved border disputes with Thailand and Vietnam, protracted disputes in the South China Sea, and the growing fragility of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Globally, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing wars between Russia and Ukraine, Israel and Palestine, and others across the Middle East, rising protectionism, and the increasing decline of the liberal, rules-based international order have collectively reshaped and will continue to influence the foreign policy outlook of both Cambodia and Australia. The two countries share a strategic interest in a stable, peaceful, cooperative, and prosperous region. From the Mekong sub-region to ASEAN and the Indo-Pacific region at large, growing geopolitical competition among the superpowers has placed nations in the region in increasingly dangerous positions.

This chapter calls for strengthened Cambodia–Australia relations through concrete and practical steps, such as upgrading diplomatic status. It begins by revisiting the historical foundations of the relationship and reviewing and building on Dr. Leng Thearith's chapter titled *Australia's roles in Cambodia: More Than a Peacemaking Architect*, from the previous edition of this book. This provides the basis for the analysis in this chapter, which primarily focuses on developments since the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 to the present. The chapter then offers a detailed review of cooperation in the political, economic, and development sectors, followed by an assessment of Cambodia–Australia relations within the regional context. It concludes by evaluating the prospects and challenges, along with recommendations.

II. Historical Background

The most prominent and significant historical event in Cambodia–Australia relations was Canberra's active diplomatic engagement during the post-1979 Cambodian conflict under the Hawke government, between 1983 and 1991. The Cambodian conflict, which unfolded within the context of the Third Indochina War, resulted in casualties and displacement, fueled political instability and prolonged economic hardship, and most notably imposed a dreary outlook on security in the Southeast Asian region.

Southeast Asian regional security mattered to Australia as a middle power seeking to assert itself as an “energetic” and “creative” actor in international security, defined by former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans in his speech on *Australia as Peacemaker: Cambodia’s First and Last?*, at the University of Melbourne (Evans, 2016). Employing a neoclassical realist point of view, Jannika Brostrom (2014) argued that Australia’s involvement as a peace deal broker was incidental to the “material and prestige interests” it sought to gain from bilateral relations with Vietnam rather than Cambodia, and the reputation as a regional security problem-solver. This chapter does not aim to assess the underlying rationales behind Australia’s engagement, but to shed light on the evolving dynamics of the Cambodia–Australia relations within the context of Cambodia’s shifting socioeconomic development landscape.

Brostrom’s argument was relevant at the time, as Cambodia, ravaged by decades of war, had been severely weakened, making it less appealing as a strategic partner to developed countries compared to other neighboring states. However, the 1991 peace agreement marked a progression in Cambodia’s developmental landscape that further shaped Cambodia–Australia relations through both multilateral and bilateral frameworks. The aftermath of the 1991 peace agreement further witnessed a remarkable expansion of the bilateral ties into areas beyond security, with healthcare, agriculture, infrastructure, education, and people-to-people connections emerging as key areas of cooperation (Leng, 2017). Frameworks such as the Australia–Cambodia Joint Aid Program Strategy 2010–2015 and the Aid Investment Plan in Cambodia 2015–2018 served as vital conduits for bilateral engagement. By 2019, Australia had become one of Cambodia’s largest bilateral aid donors, with an annual development assistance program exceeding AUD 80 million. These developments have projected a positive trajectory in Cambodia–Australia relations.

After becoming a member of ASEAN in 1999, Cambodia engaged with Australia via regional platforms, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (1994), the East Asia Summit (2005), and the ASEAN–Australia–New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (2009). Notably, Cambodia led the initial negotiation for the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) during its ASEAN Chairmanship in 2012 and again played a key role in 2022 when RCEP entered into force, with Australia as a member. From a war-torn country, Cambodia emerged as a capable leader and negotiator within regional settings like ASEAN.

Cambodia has repositioned itself as a proactive actor in the international system, advocating for peace, stability, and a rules-based order. Its commitment to resolving disputes with Thailand through the International Court of Justice (ICJ), adherence to international law, and reliance on ASEAN’s mediation mechanisms underscore its consistent support for multilateralism. However, mounting global challenges—including territorial revisionism, the resurgence of protectionism, and escalating attacks on multilateralism—pose significant threats to Cambodia’s development trajectory. Against this backdrop, the future direction of Cambodia–Australia relations must carefully account for these shifting dynamics and emerging uncertainties.

III. Bilateral Cooperation

Political, Security, and People-to-People Ties

Political

Cambodia and Australia share similar interests, underpinned by an unwavering commitment to a rules-based international order. Although direct high-level exchanges between the two countries have been relatively limited, political relations have remained constructive, cooperative, and pragmatic. Australia's 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper underscored Australia's ambition as a regional power with global interests. This commitment further reflects its aspiration for a more active engagement at cross-sectoral levels and key spheres, including political relations with countries in the Indo-Pacific region (Byrne, 2021). Therefore, an avenue for strengthened political cooperation is promising.

Australia's calibrated approach to sensitive issues, particularly human rights and governance, has afforded it a greater degree of trust among Cambodia's ruling elites compared to other major Western partners. This approach has not been without criticism, especially from Cambodia's opposition figures and civil society, who often view it as overly accommodating (Day, 2023). Nevertheless, Australia is increasingly well-positioned to become one of Cambodia's strategic bilateral partners. Canberra's balanced engagement strategy has allowed it to maintain relevance and credibility within Cambodian policymaking circles, offering a platform for further strengthening ties.

On the other hand, while Cambodia has often faced criticism for its close ties with China, Cambodian leaders, policymakers, and scholars alike have consistently reaffirmed a broader commitment to a diversified and balanced foreign policy. Cambodia's stated foreign policy principles positioned the country to be a constructive and dependable partner in regional and international affairs. This broader outlook offers a timely opportunity for Australia to recognize Cambodia's strategic importance and growing potential, and to advance the relationship to a new level of engagement. Cambodia and Australia can and should elevate their diplomatic status to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) level, aiming for a deeper and more future-oriented cooperation. This approach would not only reflect the changing realities of Australia-Cambodia cooperation but also strengthen Australia's broader commitment to ASEAN centrality and regional inclusion. It is aligned with both Cambodia's diversification strategy and Australia's foreign policy objectives. The Australian 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper emphasized that "No long-term foreign policy objective is more important to Australia than ensuring our region evolves peacefully and without an erosion of the fundamental principles on which the Indo-Pacific's prosperity and cooperative relations are based" (DFAT, 2017). Cambodia's evolving development trajectory and its strategic positioning—from the Mekong sub-region to ASEAN and the broader Indo-Pacific—are closely aligned with these objectives. An upgraded diplomatic status would offer both countries greater scope to shape a more stable and prosperous regional order.

Security

On the security front, the planned transfer and construction of nuclear-powered submarines under the AUKUS framework, a trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States (US), has raised concerns in the region. Countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia have expressed apprehensions that the emphasis on nuclear-power submarines could escalate regional tension, concerns that Cambodia has also echoed (Patton, 2024). Cambodia's stance on the matter is straightforward, clearly articulated in its foreign policy commitment to a “nuclear-free world.”

This principled stance does not oppose but rather influences Cambodia's engagement with Australia, as long as mutual respect for sovereignty and non-proliferation remains central to the partnership. First, Cambodia's constitution affirms the principle of “non-interference” in the development of other countries' self-defense capabilities (Bong, 2023). These frameworks collectively support Cambodia's ongoing engagement with Australia, without viewing its defense initiatives as causes for diplomatic tension. Second, Australia has actively worked to address ASEAN's concerns about the AUKUS pact. According to former Australian Ambassador to ASEAN, Will Nankervis, the proposed nuclear-powered submarines will not carry nuclear warheads, and Australia remains committed to the principles of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (Dziedzic, 2021). While such rhetorical assurances may temporarily ease regional worries, they do not fully resolve the deeper strategic uncertainties surrounding AUKUS—particularly whether the pact will mitigate or exacerbate political and security tensions in the Indo-Pacific. The strategic relevance of the pact has also come under scrutiny following the order of review by the Trump administration since June 2025, with the outcome expected in November 2025. Nonetheless, Canberra has already made USD 1 billion to support US submarine production capacity (The Straits Times, 2025). Given the Trump administration's reputation for transactional decision-making, such substantial contributions may incentivize Washington to reaffirm AUKUS as strategically important, one driven more by economic pragmatism and domestic industrial interests than by a shared regional security vision.

Small and developing states such as Cambodia will need to navigate the shifting regional security landscape with prudence and diplomacy. This highlights the need for increased political engagement between Cambodia and Australia. Strengthening diplomatic and security cooperation, such as through joint military training programs and capacity-building initiatives, helps reduce lingering skepticism and build deeper bilateral trust.

People-to-People Ties

Australia's development assistance, educational exchanges, and people-to-people connectivity have significantly bolstered a deep reservoir of goodwill and mutual understanding at both the societal and governmental levels. Among foreign educational destinations, Australia ranks at the top for Cambodian students and their parents – a testament to Australia's distinct reputation and soft power through educational linkage in Cambodia (Seah et al., 2023). A key pillar of this engagement is the Australia Awards

Scholarships program, which is one of the most regarded and inclusive scholarship schemes for Cambodian applicants. Since 1993, more than 1,000 Cambodians have received scholarships to pursue master's or PhD studies at Australian world-class universities (Ki, 2024). Consequently, the program has played a transformative role in shaping Cambodia's human capital and institutional leadership.

At the political and institutional leadership level, Australia has played a formative role in nurturing a new generation of Cambodian leaders. Many prominent figures who studied in Australia now occupy senior positions in government and the civil service. The prominence of these figures not only exemplifies the success of Cambodia–Australia educational linkages but also serves as a critical bridge for bilateral engagement. This alumni network thus strengthens the foundation for Cambodia–Australia relations, translating educational cooperation into enduring political, economic, and diplomatic ties.

People-to-people and cultural ties form an essential foundation of the bilateral relationship. As of 2021, there were approximately 57,000 Cambodian diasporas residing in Australia and around 7,000 Australians living and working in Cambodia (DFAT, 2024). Vibrant transnational communities such as these reinforce mutual cultural understanding and strengthen informal diplomatic channels. In fact, these connections are complemented by Australia's early and ongoing support for Cambodia's peacebuilding and post-conflict rehabilitation processes, which continue to shape perceptions of Australia as a dependable and long-standing partner.

The findings from the ISEAS State of Southeast Asia Survey 2025 offer insights into Cambodian perceptions of Australia within the ASEAN context (Seah et al., 2025). The survey reveals that Australia ranks relatively high among Cambodian respondents in terms of soft power, placing 3rd as a preferred destination for living, working, and tourism (see Table 1). However, it is perceived as less significant in terms of political and strategic relevance, ranking only 6th out of 11 ASEAN dialogue partners (see Table 5). A more dedicated survey on Cambodia–Australia relations would develop more nuanced and targeted insights. Observations, however, suggest that Australia is well regarded at the elite level—among educated groups, political leaders, policymakers, business leaders, institutions, and the civil society—while broader public awareness remains limited, particularly regarding Australia's relevance and significance to Cambodia and ASEAN. Therefore, multiple layers of cooperation, including diplomatic, security, developmental, educational, and societal, could provide a robust foundation for deepening political relations.

Table 1. Cambodian Views on Australia in the Context of ASEAN Dialogue Partners Based on the *State of Southeast Asia Survey 2025*

Question	Cambodian Respondents' View
Q43: Most preferred country to live or work in.	14% of Cambodian respondents ranked Australia 3rd among 9 non-ASEAN member states as the most preferred country to live or work, slightly behind Japan (14.5%) and the U.S (26.7%).
Q44: Most preferred country to visit.	7.6% of Cambodian respondents indicated a preference to visit Australia, placing it 3rd among 9 non-ASEAN member states, significantly behind Japan (22.1%) and the US (16.9%).

Source: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute

Economic and Trade Relations

Economic cooperation between Cambodia and Australia has intensified in recent years. Since the accession to the WTO in 2004, Cambodia, as a Least Developed Country (LDC), has had duty-free access to the Australian market for all goods that fulfill the Rule of Origin requirement under Australia’s Generalized System of Preferences for LDCs known as Australia’s System of Tariff Preferences (ASTP). Following the establishment of the ASEAN–Australia–New Zealand Free Trade Area in 2010 and the recent conclusion of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in 2022, there has been a notable increase in economic cooperation and a clear commitment to strengthening bilateral economic ties.

Trade between Cambodia and Australia has expanded significantly. From USD 156.11 million in 2015 to USD 598 million in 2024 (GDCE, 2025), the bilateral trade volume has nearly quadrupled in less than a decade and almost tripled from USD 215 million in 2020 to USD 598 million in 2024 (Table 2). Similarly, the exports from Cambodia to Australia have surged more than 3.5 times over the past four years. Cambodia’s top exports to Australia include gold, clothing, footwear, travel goods, and bags, while its main imports from Australia are education-related travel, recreational travel, coal, and beef (DFAT, 2024).

Table 2. Cambodia–Australia Bilateral Trade Volume from 2020 to 2024

Year	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Bilateral trade (USD Million)	215	325	524	502	598
Export (USD Million) (Cambodia to Australia)	134	205	379	371	488
Import (USD Million) (Aus to Cam)	80	120	145	131	110

Source: General Department of Customs and Excise of Cambodia

Australia’s foreign direct investment (FDI) in Cambodia remains modest but has demonstrated steady growth in recent years. According to the National Bank of Cambodia, Australia’s FDI stock rose from USD 215 million in 2020 to USD 238 million in 2023 (Table 3). Although annual FDI flows have fluctuated, they have ranged between USD 5 million and USD 9 million per year. In 2024, Australian investment accounted for 0.08% of total investment in Cambodia, ranking 18th among all investment sources (CDC, 2025).

Table 3. Australia’s FDI Stock and FDI Flow from 2020 to 2023

Year	2020	2021	2022	2023
FDI Stock (USD Million)	215	224	232	238
FDI Flow (USD Million)	6	5	9	5

Source: National Bank of Cambodia, 2024

The governments of the two countries have shown a strong commitment to deepening economic engagement. In 2023, the Cambodian Chamber of Commerce established representative offices in Melbourne and Sydney to strengthen commercial networks and attract Australian investors. In parallel, Australia partnered with the Council for the Development of Cambodia to publish the *Handbook on Investing in Cambodia*, a practical guide to facilitate the investment process.

Aligned with its *Invested: Australia’s Southeast Asia Economic Strategy to 2040*, Australia has committed to boosting regional investment. This is evidenced by the establishment of the AUD 2 billion (USD 1.3 billion) Southeast Asia Investment Financing Facility, which provides loans, guarantees, and insurance for strategic infrastructure and development projects. Furthermore, Australia has created Investment Deal Teams across Southeast Asia,

including Cambodia, offering go-to advisors to support Australian investors through local connections and practical assistance. However, as Cambodia is scheduled to graduate from LDC status in 2029, the loss of the LDC-specific benefits, including the duty-free access to the Australian market, calls for the early arrangement of the new trade terms and the upgrade of the diplomatic status based on mutual common interests.

Development Cooperation

Australia remains a strategic development partner for Cambodia’s development. Since the 1990s, Australia has provided over AUD 2 billion (USD 1.3 billion) in development assistance (DFAT, 2025), with a gradual increase in the volume (Table 4). Australia’s development cooperation priorities with Cambodia have expanded over time. While the focus during the 2010s and 2020s was on infrastructure, agriculture productivity, better health and education, the current agenda outlined in the *Australia–Cambodia Development Partnership Plan 2025–2029* reflects a more comprehensive vision. It emphasizes three key goals: (1) stronger institutions and better governance, (2) more inclusive public services, and (3) a resilient, inclusive, and sustainable economy—demonstrating Australia’s firm commitment to deepening its partnership with Cambodia. In volume, Australia’s Official Development Assistance to Cambodia has seen a gradual increase in recent years.

Table 4. Australia’s Official Development Assistance to Cambodia in Recent Years, 2019–2025

Program	2019-20 Budget estimate (AUD million)	2020-21 Budget estimate (AUD million)	2022-23 Budget estimate (AUD million)	2023- 24 Actual (AUD million)	2024-25 Budget estimate (AUD million)	2025-26 Budget estimate (AUD million)
Bilateral	43.4	43.4	46.7	47.9	48.9	49.9
Regional	6.3	8.1	34.1	21.1	19.3	23.0
Global	14.2	11.1		10.0	10.8	10.9
Other Government Department	2.2	3.3		3.2	4.7	3.9
Total ODA to Cambodia	66.0	65.9	80.8	82.2	83.7	87.8

Source: Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade’s Cambodia Development Program Progress Reports 2019–2026

Australian aids had supported the development of the needed physical infrastructure through various projects such as the Cambodia Rural Roads Improvement Project Phase II (RRIP II) managed by the Asian Development Bank aiming at rehabilitated 1,200 kilometers (km) of rural roads in ten provinces; and the Investing in Infrastructure ('3i'), an innovative approach in working with private sector to connect the water and reliable electricity networks, funding for studies on energy options and long terms financing plans.

In promoting stronger institutions and better governance, Australia has maintained consistent support in areas such as civic engagement, human development, and evidence-based policymaking. One key initiative is the Implementation of the Social Accountability Framework (ISAF), which empowers Cambodian citizens to better understand the services to which they are entitled and to provide regular feedback on service quality. Through the Australia Awards Scholarship program, more than 1,000 Cambodians have studied in Australia and returned to apply their expertise in fields critical to Cambodia's development. Building on this, Australian alumni have established one of the most active alumni networks in the country—the Australian Alumni Association of Cambodia—which continues to play a vital role in fostering professional exchange and community engagement. Similarly, the *Ponlok Chomnes* program, through local collaboration, strengthens the capacity of Cambodia's knowledge sector institutions to conduct high-quality research that informs public policy and promotes constructive policy dialogue.

Furthermore, Australian aid has also contributed significantly to promoting inclusive public services, particularly in the health sector. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Australia supported Cambodia through the Health Equity Fund (HEF), which secures access to basic healthcare for the poorest Cambodians. In addition, Australia also provided health equipment, vaccine assistance, and technical support under the ongoing Health Equity and Quality Improvement Project (H-EQIP). Australia-Cambodia Cooperation for Equitable Sustainable Services – Phase 2 (ACCESS 2) program focuses on improving the service delivery for survivors of gender-based violence and people with disabilities, aiming to promote social inclusion in Cambodia. Aiming to promote a more resilient, inclusive, and sustainable economy, the Cambodia Australia Partnership for Resilient Economic Development (CAPRED) adopts a multifaceted approach. It supports policy development, market and technology interventions, financial investment, and women's empowerment to advance the Cambodian government's market-oriented strategy for inclusive growth and regional and global integration.

IV. Cambodia and Australia in the Regional Dynamics

ASEAN and Australia

Australia became ASEAN's first dialogue partner in 1974, establishing itself as one of the region's longest-standing diplomatic allies. However, the State of Southeast Asia 2025 Survey Report by ISEAS – Yusof Institute reveals that ASEAN member states, including Cambodia, perceive Australia as relatively less significant in terms of strategic relevance within the region (Table 5). Whereas in the 1990s it was seen as a prominent actor in regional

security following the successful 1991 Cambodian peace agreement, Canberra’s contemporary engagement is more influential in the realm of soft power, especially through education initiatives and people-to-people connections.

This perception stems primarily from three factors: (1) Australia’s divergent strategic priorities on the international stage; (2) Australia’s economy being considerably smaller than the combined ASEAN economy; and (3) differences in political outlooks that hinder political will for cooperation (ISEAS, 2025).

Table 5. Cambodian views on Australia in the context of regional influence and leadership

Question	Cambodian Respondents’ View
Q22: Which country/regional organization is the most influential economic power in Southeast Asia?	Only 1.7% of Cambodian respondents identified Australia as the most influential economic power in the region—placing it behind China (45.9%), the European Union (5.2%), India (3.5%), Japan (7.6%), South Korea (2.9%), the United States (20.3%), and on par with the United Kingdom.
Q24: Which country/regional organization has the most political and strategic influence in Southeast Asia?	Only 1.7% of Cambodian respondents identified Australia as the most influential political and strategic partner in the region—placing it behind China (35.5%), European Union (2.9%), India (6.4%), Japan (5.8%), South Korea (3.5%), the United States (31.4%), and the United Kingdom (2.9%).
Q26: Rank the following Dialogue Partners in order of strategic relevance to ASEAN.	Cambodian respondents ranked Australia 6 th in order of strategic relevance to ASEAN in 2025, behind China, the United States, Japan, the European Union, and India.

Source: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute

However, Australia has the potential to enhance its relevance in key regional domains. First, ASEAN currently confronts both internal and external challenges that complicate its diplomatic posture. Persistent economic disparities among member states continue to pose significant obstacles to regional integration, while rising protectionist and nationalist sentiments threaten ASEAN’s cohesion and unity. Addressing these challenges depends largely on the politics of ASEAN member states. Australia’s engagement with ASEAN therefore comes at a critical juncture. To enhance its relevance, Canberra should focus its initiatives on supporting ASEAN’s cohesion and contributing to efforts that reduce political and cultural disparities within the bloc.

Second, recent developments in Australia–ASEAN relations reflect a deliberate effort to reinforce and adapt the partnership. The outcomes from the Australia–ASEAN Special Summit in Melbourne 2024 and the launch of *Invested: Australia’s Southeast Asia Economic Strategy to 2040* by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese in 2023 underscore that effort. Additionally, the upgrade of the ASEAN–Australia–New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (AANZFTA) in response to the COVID-19 disruptions, the integration of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and the launch of the AUS4ASEAN Futures Initiative collectively underscore a shift toward deeper economic interdependence and a more multidimensional partnership. Notably, AUS4ASEAN Futures articulates a more expansive and forward-looking agenda, encompassing capacity building, digital transformation, and infrastructure development. These developments illustrate Australia’s consistent commitment to enhancing its strategic partnership with ASEAN. For Cambodia in particular, as a member of ASEAN, this evolving partnership presents an opportunity to diversify its strategic relations within the region.

Toward a Stable, Peaceful, Cooperative, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region

Within the Indo-Pacific region, Cambodia–Australia bilateral engagement remains comparatively limited. Australia was one of the few countries, along with Japan and the US, to adopt the term “Indo-Pacific,” which ASEAN member states, including Cambodia, only later followed suit. For Australia, regional security in the Indo-Pacific constitutes a central pillar of its defense policy as first outlined in the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper and reaffirmed in the 2024 Defence Policy. In 2024, the Australian government unveiled its National Defense Strategy (NDS), which articulates its strategic posture toward the region. Central to this strategy is the “strategy of denial,” emphasizing the enhancement of military capabilities aimed at deterring potential aggression by any actor to safeguard both national security and regional stability. In recent years, we have seen Australia’s participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and AUKUS, both of which reflect strategic efforts to strengthen its naval military capabilities and expand its security alliances. On the other hand, the pacts are also perceived as components of a containment strategy against China, which potentially increases the risk of open conflict in the region, though this remains unlikely for now. For Cambodia, escalating tensions may not pose direct security threats to the country given its geography, yet the broader implications could still undermine economic growth, disrupt social development, and limit diplomatic flexibility as Cambodia risks entanglement in great power rivalry. Recent precedent shows how Cambodia has often been unfairly perceived as aligning with one major power over another.

The Indo-Pacific security environment is undeniably at a critical juncture. While the vision for a free, open, secure, and resilient region persists, current realities suggest otherwise. The US and China are increasingly assertive through both military build-up and strategic rhetoric, signaling a firm readiness to respond to any perceived aggression. Additionally, middle powers like Japan, India, South Korea, and Australia are deeply involved in the region’s security dynamics. Stability in the Indo-Pacific depends heavily on the

behavior and calculations of these major powers. Despite the structural constraints as a small state, Cambodia must remain vigilant and strategically engaged with its regional members in safeguarding the regional peace and stability.

V. Prospects and Challenges

Contemporary global dynamics suggest that the world is operating in a new era, characterized by heightened geopolitical tensions and trade competition, persistent economic uncertainty, rising protectionist policies, and growing international aid fatigue. Cambodia–Australia relations have thus entered a new phase marked by both prospects and challenges.

A potential trajectory for Cambodia–Australia relations is a deepening of bilateral ties, underpinned by a shared commitment to multilateralism and free trade. To reinforce international and regional security, stability, and prosperity, the Australian NDS and the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper emphasize a deliberate effort to strengthen diplomatic engagement. This alignment of strategic priorities positions Cambodia and Australia on a convergent path across a range of issues, establishing a substantive foundation for future regional cooperation. Moreover, key opportunities for a more sustainable and impactful bilateral relationship lie in development cooperation in Cambodia. Against the backdrop of shifting aid paradigms, sustained Australian engagement aligns with its strategic imperative to preserve and enhance its influence as a trusted and relevant partner, not only in Cambodia but throughout Southeast Asia, where many countries, particularly those on the mainland, continue to depend on international assistance to support their development.

Challenges, however, cannot be underestimated. Ongoing global conflicts have prompted major countries to prioritize national security, resulting in increased defense spending and a redirection of foreign policy and resources away from development assistance. For instance, the UK plans to raise its defense budget to 2.5 percent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by 2027–28, while the Trump administration is urging Australia to increase its defense spending to 3.5 percent of GDP. While the Albanese government has yet to finalize its position, defense spending is expected to increase. Such shifts risk reducing the focus and funding available for development assistance. Despite Canberra’s ongoing commitment to foreign aid, the long-term viability of this support is uncertain. Furthermore, Cambodia’s impending graduation from LDC status in 2029 presents further challenges. This transition raises concerns about Phnom Penh’s ability to remain competitive and attractive to foreign investors amid shifting geopolitical, trade, and aid dynamics. The international aid paradigm is evolving, moving away from traditional “aid-for-development” toward “aid-for-trade” models, which focus more on economic integration and market competitiveness. Compounding these challenges, Cambodia must leverage its strong partnership with Australia and undertake concerted efforts to maintain economic competitiveness by preparing and implementing a robust LDC graduation strategy.

VI. Conclusion and Recommendations

An analysis of Cambodia–Australia relations through both bilateral and multilateral frameworks suggests that the partnership is well-positioned to continue flourishing, provided that both countries uphold a strategic commitment to multilateralism and a foreign policy grounded in sustained diplomatic engagement. To further strengthen and advance this relationship, the following recommendations are proposed:

First, Cambodia and Australia should upgrade their diplomatic status to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership soon, ideally within 2026. This move would make Australia the fourth country to enter CSP with Cambodia, following China in 2010, Laos PDR in 2019, and Japan in 2023. This upgrade will enable both countries to achieve a deeper, more forward-looking strategic alignment. It will also broaden their shared regional agendas, particularly in areas of social, political, and security, economic connectivity, and development cooperation.

Second, reciprocal official visits by the two prime ministers should be prioritized to demonstrate high-level political will and strengthen bilateral ties. Prime Minister Hun Manet, since taking office in 2023, has paid nine Official Visits to China, Vietnam, France, Thailand, Malaysia, Laos PDR, South Korea, Singapore, and the Philippines (as of June 2025). While Hun Manet's foreign policy continues the strategic trajectory of the previous administration, he has also demonstrated proactive diplomacy (Soth and Lak, 2024). The Prime Minister should pay his next official visit to Australia. Likewise, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese should plan an official visit to Cambodia during his second term. Such a visit would be highly symbolic, reinforcing Australia's strategic relations with Cambodia and the broader Southeast Asian region. At a time when multilateralism is under tremendous strain, a timely and proactive diplomatic posture would reaffirm Australia's commitment as a reliable and constructive partner.

Third, Australia's approach to people-to-people exchanges with Cambodia has been largely elite-centric, focusing predominantly on higher education and professional networks. While this strategy has been effective in cultivating strong ties among government officials, policymakers, and alumni of Australian institutions, cultural and educational exchanges at the undergraduate and high school levels remain limited. This represents an open opportunity to foster early cross-cultural understanding and to build a more inclusive and sustainable foundation for bilateral relations. To address this gap, the two governments should play a facilitating role in organizing regular forums that bring together representatives from universities and high schools in both countries to explore and design short-term exchange programs and cooperative initiatives. These forums would serve as a practical space for dialogue, partnership-building, and program design.

The governments form a bilateral framework that eases constraints and incentivizes participation. This framework should be designed to encourage private actors such as schools, educational organizations, and community groups to take the lead in initiating and managing exchange programs. Practical supporting mechanisms could include reduced visa fees, streamlined visa processing, and the provision of limited subsidy schemes during the early phases of implementation. This model envisions minimal government intervention

in program design, allowing for a school-to-school and institution-led approach to foster innovation, ownership, and sustainability. Facilitating people-to-people exchange at the youth level would not only deepen bilateral ties but also help nurture a new generation of leaders and citizens with a strong foundation of mutual respect and understanding.

Fourth, the Cambodian government should capitalize on the extensive pool of highly competent Australian alumni, many of whom are now cross-sectoral leaders, by facilitating the establishment of an informal think tank network. Through this principle of network governance, the government can draw on a diverse range of ideas, expertise, and resources in support of its national development agenda, particularly the implementation of the Pentagonal Strategy. It is also aligned with the new public management strategy under the current government of Cambodia. The network would function as a flexible and collaborative platform, enabling alumni to contribute to policy advisory, as well as monitoring and evaluation functions on selected thematic areas, such as education reform, digital transformation, climate resilience, and public sector innovation. The optimal outcome would be the institutionalization of knowledge exchange between the government and alumni leaders, ultimately contributing to more informed policymaking, enhanced policy coherence, and broader stakeholder ownership of Cambodia's development goals.

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Chapter 13

India-Cambodia Relations in the Shadow of Great Power Politics

Dr. RO Vannak and Dr. CHUM Chandarin

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- I. Introduction**
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I. Introduction

Chapter 15 of the previous edition, authored by Bhati and Murg (2017), outlined key dimensions of India–Cambodia relations, including historical linkages, India’s diplomatic and economic engagements, cultural diplomacy, and the strategic balance in Southeast Asia. The chapter highlighted the growing trade ties, infrastructure development, and India’s role in conservation efforts; it also concludes by emphasizing the long-standing historical ties between India and Cambodia. The conclusion emphasized that India had untapped soft power potential, particularly in cultural diplomacy and Buddhist heritage. It suggested that India should capitalize on its strengths in English–language education and global Buddhism. Prospects for trade, investment, and cordial diplomatic continuity were also expected by both authors.

In recent developments, however, although India–Cambodia relations can be strengthened through the Act East Policy and regional multilateral frameworks, the looming shadow of great power competition has silently emerged. Cambodia’s deepening dependence on China, particularly in infrastructure, trade, and military cooperation, has complicated India’s strategic calculus. At the same time, the U.S. disengagement, significantly under the Trump administration, and the shifting dynamics in ASEAN have made the Indian–Cambodian relationship more relevant yet more complex.

Against this backdrop, this chapter explores how India–Cambodia relations are being shaped not only by shared history and bilateral agreements but also by the pressures and realignments of regional geopolitics. It examines the evolution of ties since 2018 and explores the impact of leadership transitions, including the rise of Prime Minister Hun Manet, and the prospects and constraints facing India’s engagement in Cambodia amid intensifying great power rivalries—U.S. under Trump 2.0 vs. China. This chapter will highlight key strategic developments from 2018 to 2025. Next, it presents an analysis of the thematic areas that significantly shape the India–Cambodia relationship and offers a strategic outlook for the future.

II. Key Developments, 2018–2025

Cordial Diplomatic Ties, 2018

The year started with the visit of the Cambodian former Prime Minister Hun Sen to India in January 2018. According to the joint statement between the two countries, the relationship has been strengthened across various domains. Emphasizing shared historical and civilizational ties, the statement outlines key areas of collaboration, including political dialogue, defense cooperation, trade and investment promotion, cultural exchange, and educational linkages (MoFA, 2018a). Both parties expressed a mutual interest in strengthening strategic partnerships and addressing common security concerns through mechanisms such as training programs and joint exercises. Moreover, the statement highlights a convergence

of views on regional and global issues, reaffirming the importance of working together within multilateral frameworks to support peace, stability, and development. Overall, the document illustrates a shared vision to elevate India-Cambodia relations and reinforce their partnership in the evolving geopolitical landscape.

In May of the same year, Cambodia hosted the 5th India and the CLMV countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam) Business Conclave. According to the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA, 2018), this was the first significant event held outside India aiming at enhancing regional trade and investment. Organized by the Ministry of Commerce & Industry of India in collaboration with Cambodia's Ministry of Commerce, the conclave represents a strategic move to foster greater regional participation, with the establishment of the Indian Business Chamber in Cambodia (IBCC) in 2023 to institutionalize business engagements. The CLMV Business Conclave served as a vital platform to enhance regional trade and investment, especially in sectors like agriculture, pharmaceuticals, IT, and manufacturing.

The year ended with the formal visit of the Minister of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, Sushma Swaraj, to Cambodia in August. The Cambodian press release (MoFA, 2018b) suggested that there would be high-level discussions with Cambodian leaders, including Prime Minister Hun Sen and Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn. The visit focused on enhancing bilateral cooperation across various sectors such as trade, investment, defense, and cultural exchange. A significant outcome of the visit was the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between India's Sushma Swaraj Institute of Foreign Service and Cambodia's National Institute of Diplomacy and International Relations, aiming to strengthen diplomatic training and capacity building. Additionally, both nations reaffirmed their commitment to regional stability and development, emphasizing the importance of ASEAN-India collaboration. Minister Swaraj's visit underscored India's ongoing commitment to deepening its strategic partnership with Cambodia under the Act East Policy.

Steady Progress, 2019–2021

India and Cambodia steadily strengthened their bilateral relationship from 2019 to 2021, even while the world grappled with growing uncertainty. While the pace may have been cautious, the progress made, especially in the realm of soft power, was both meaningful and enduring. One of the clearest signs of this was India's deepening cultural engagement. Through the Archaeological Survey of India, India continued its restoration work on some of Cambodia's most treasured heritage sites, including the Ta Prohm and Preah Vihear temples (Khmer Times, 2020). These efforts not only helped preserve ancient architecture but also served as a powerful symbol of the deep historical and civilizational ties between the two nations. At the same time, India remained committed to human resource development in Cambodia. Through the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program, scholarships and training continued to be offered to Cambodian professionals, even amid the logistical disruptions brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. As of March 2025, there were about three thousand participants who benefited from the ITEC scholarship program (Embassy of India to Phnom Penh, 2025; Fresh News, 2025). Whether in technology,

governance, or public service, these educational opportunities helped build local capacity while strengthening mutual understanding between the two countries.

Though the pandemic inevitably slowed down high-level visits and major public engagements, it also brought about new ways for the two countries to connect. India's "Vaccine Maitri" initiative, for example, saw the delivery of COVID-19 vaccines to Cambodia at a critical time. This act of support was widely welcomed and reinforced India's role as a trusted and responsive partner in the region. In many ways, the pandemic tested the strength of international relationships—and in the case of India and Cambodia, it showed that even in the face of crisis, cooperation and goodwill could still thrive (Niseiy, 2021).

70th Anniversary of Diplomatic Ties, 2022

The year 2022 marked a significant milestone in India-Cambodia relations as the two countries celebrated 70 years of diplomatic ties. On 21 June 2022, Cambodia and India commemorated the 70th anniversary of their diplomatic relations with a special event in Phnom Penh. The ceremony was co-hosted by His Excellency Deputy Prime Minister Prak Sokhonn, Cambodia's Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, and His Excellency Dr. Rajkumar Ranjan Singh, India's Minister of State for External Affairs (MoFA, 2022). A key highlight of the event was the unveiling of a commemorative logo symbolizing seven decades of friendship and cooperation between the two nations.

India's External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar, visited Cambodia in August 2022, during which he held constructive talks with Cambodian leaders on expanding bilateral cooperation across trade, development, and cultural sectors. This was followed by the visit of Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar in November 2022, reflecting India's growing emphasis on strengthening political and strategic ties with Cambodia and the broader ASEAN region.

These high-level visits coincided with India's participation in two major multilateral forums hosted in Phnom Penh: the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit and the East Asia Summit. These events were particularly significant as they celebrated the 30th anniversary of the ASEAN-India dialogue partnership and the 10th year of strategic partnership status. India's active participation underscored its commitment to regional peace, prosperity, and its "Act East" policy, which places ASEAN at the core of its Indo-Pacific strategy (MEA, 2022).

Hun Manet and Deepening Engagement, 2023-2025

India was among the first countries to extend warm congratulations, signaling an eagerness to strengthen ties under the new leadership. On September 8, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi extended a formal congratulatory message to Samdech Moha Borvor Thipadei Hun Manet upon his appointment as the Prime Minister of Cambodia (MoFA, 2023). Prime Minister Modi expressed his anticipation of working closely with Prime Minister Hun Manet to further elevate the longstanding and friendly ties between India and Cambodia.

By 2025, this diplomatic goodwill had translated into tangible outcomes. On March 10, India and Cambodia convened the Third Foreign Office Consultations (FOC) in Siem

Reap, marking a significant step in their bilateral relations. The Indian delegation was led by Secretary Jaideep Mazumdar, while the Cambodian side was represented by Dr. Un Kheang, Secretary of State at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. The discussions encompassed a comprehensive review of bilateral ties, including political cooperation, trade and investment, defense and security, development assistance, heritage conservation, and consular matters (Uniindia News Service, 2025). Both nations expressed satisfaction with the progress achieved and agreed to explore new avenues of collaboration, particularly in health and digital technologies.

III. India's Act East Policy and Cambodia's Strategic Significance

India's Act East Policy seeks to strengthen political, economic, and cultural ties with Southeast Asia. With this framework, Cambodia stands out as a country of growing strategic importance due to its location and role as a member of ASEAN. Many scholars and analysts, however, interpret the policy not only as a tool for regional engagement but also as a strategic response to China's expanding influence in Asia (Acharya, 2012; Grossman, 2023; Horam, 2022; Roy-Chaudhury, 2025; Palit, 2016).

India's increasing engagement in the region, alongside China's rise, is reshaping Southeast Asia's strategic landscape, reminiscent of the historical period when both civilizations served as major trade partners and centers of cultural and political influence (Acharya, 2012). Following Acharya (2012), China's emergence as an economic and security powerhouse has sparked renewed interest in New Delhi within Southeast Asia as a potential counterbalance to Chinese dominance. India's motivation for building security and strategic partnerships with Southeast Asia is partly driven by its concerns over China's growing strategic influence in the region (Horam, 2022).

Derek Grossman (2023) observes that New Delhi and its allies are gradually aligning their strategies to counterbalance Beijing's assertiveness. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India has increasingly reinforced strategic ties with Southeast Asian nations, particularly those situated along the Indo-Pacific maritime rim. This cooperation is aimed at promoting a rules-based international order amid China's expanding influence. India also recognizes the CLMV subregion (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam) as a key arena of strategic competition, given China's extensive investments there (Palit, 2016).

Theoretically, Cambodia's relationship with India reflects a hedging strategy, wherein smaller states cultivate ties with multiple major powers across economic, diplomatic, and security dimensions to preserve strategic autonomy and mitigate external vulnerabilities (Kuik, 2008). Cambodia's growing ties with India should not be seen as a pivot away from China but rather as a complementary effort that aligns with its ongoing bandwagoning posture toward Beijing (Po & Primiano, 2020; Leng, 2019).

Among Southeast Asian states, countries such as Cambodia, Laos, the Philippines, and Vietnam, each maintaining close relations with China, the United States, or Russia,

tend to assign India a comparatively lower level of strategic importance (Seah et al., 2024). Nonetheless, as competition between Washington and Beijing intensifies, incorporating India into Cambodia's broader strategic framework could strengthen its ability to balance external influences and safeguard national interests (Gill, 2022). Such an approach would enable both India and Cambodia to diversify their partnerships and expand cooperation in Southeast Asia, thereby contributing to regional stability and security.

However, perceptions of India across the region remain cautious. A recent report reveals that overall distrust toward India stands at 44.7%, with Cambodian respondents showing an even higher level of skepticism at 57.2%. This sentiment largely stems from perceptions of India's limited capability or political willingness to assume a more assertive global leadership role (Seah et al., 2024). While Southeast Asian nations recognize India's potential to contribute to regional balance, they also observe that New Delhi's priorities often remain inward-focused—centered on domestic development and subcontinental affairs (Seah et al., 2024). Moreover, India's regional initiatives face structural challenges, including relatively modest economic leverage, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and slow implementation of connectivity projects, especially when contrasted with China's expansive and well-funded *Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)*. Yet, despite these constraints, Cambodia would benefit from viewing India as a vital strategic partner. Engaging more deeply with New Delhi can help Phnom Penh maintain equilibrium amid major power rivalries and promote a more multipolar and stable regional order.

IV. Geopolitical Constraints and Future Outlook

The trajectory of India–Cambodia relations is shaped by a combination of historical affinities, shared development goals, and an increasingly contested geopolitical environment in Southeast Asia. As both nations navigate the complexities of the Indo-Pacific, their bilateral engagement is influenced not only by mutual aspirations but also by the enduring influence of dominant regional powers, particularly China. Against this backdrop, the leadership transition in Cambodia, marked by Prime Minister Hun Manet's ascent, opens a potential window for recalibrating foreign policy orientations. However, enduring structural constraints, especially those stemming from entrenched Chinese influence and India's capacity limitations, continue to shape the contours of what is realistically achievable.

The accession of Hun Manet as Prime Minister in 2023 has been widely viewed as a symbolic shift in Cambodian politics, potentially heralding a more nuanced and diversified foreign policy. Educated in the United States and the United Kingdom, Hun Manet represents a generation of Cambodian leadership that is arguably more cosmopolitan and globally attuned than its predecessors. While it would be premature to suggest a radical departure from the policies of Hun Sen, there are indications that Phnom Penh may seek to rebalance its external engagements, particularly by reducing over-reliance on any single external partner, although this may not be seen immediately (Strangio, 2023). In this context, India emerges as an attractive partner. Its emphasis on capacity-building, educational exchanges, and cultural cooperation complements Cambodia's long-term development objectives. Unlike

more overtly strategic actors, India’s engagement in Southeast Asia has been broadly seen as cautious and collaborative (Chatterjee & Das, 2021). This approach may resonate with a Cambodian government looking to diversify its partnerships while maintaining sovereignty and strategic flexibility.

India’s engagement with Cambodia is also strengthened by its normative positioning in the region. Rather than projecting power through coercive means, India has largely employed soft power instruments such as education, cultural heritage restoration, and development assistance. For instance, the Archaeological Survey of India’s work on the Ta Prohm temple and India’s continued support for initiatives through the Mekong–Ganga Cooperation framework reflect a commitment to civilizational partnership rather than strategy. Cambodia, with its historical sensitivity to foreign intervention, may find this approach particularly appealing. India’s democratic credentials, emphasis on mutual benefit, and respect for ASEAN centrality reinforce its suitability as a long-term partner. In areas such as digital governance, health systems strengthening, and technical education, India possesses considerable experience that aligns with Cambodia’s national development priorities mentioned in the Cambodia Digital Economy and Society Policy Framework 2021–2035 (MPCT, 2023). As Phnom Penh seeks to nurture a knowledge-based economy, India’s model of South–South cooperation offers practical and ideological advantages.

Despite the positive dimensions of the India–Cambodia relationship, several obstacles remain. One among them is the scale and depth of China’s involvement in Cambodia’s economy and strategic infrastructure. Over the past two decades, China has become Cambodia’s largest source of foreign investment, trade, and concessional loans. As of 2024, China is “Cambodia’s largest investor, trading partner, and donor” (Liu, 2024). More controversially, Chinese involvement in the Ream Naval Base has sparked concerns about the erosion of Cambodia’s neutrality. For India, these developments pose both a diplomatic and operational challenge: expanding strategic cooperation with Cambodia without triggering tensions with China or putting undue pressure on Phnom Penh.

Another constraint arises from India’s relatively modest economic presence in Cambodia. While New Delhi enjoys considerable goodwill, this has not yet translated into substantial commercial investments or major infrastructure development. In 2023, bilateral trade between Cambodia and India amounted to approximately USD 403.79 million, reflecting only a slight increase from USD 366.44 million in 2022–23 (Pti, 2024). By contrast, Cambodia’s trade with China reached an impressive USD 10 billion in 2023 and further expanded to about USD 15.19 billion in 2024, a 23.8% year-on-year increase (Hin, 2025).

Despite multiple memoranda of understanding and cooperation frameworks, Indian private-sector engagement in Cambodia remains limited. Key impediments include regulatory opacity, small market size, and perceptions of political and investment risk. Cambodian officials have expressed interest in negotiating a free-trade agreement with India, but analysts remain skeptical about its feasibility due to limited trade volume and overlapping tariff structures (Kath & Ngin, 2024).

Furthermore, although both countries have pledged to strengthen ties through mechanisms such as the Cambodia–India Joint Business Council, India’s investment levels

remain modest compared to those of China or South Korea (Hin, 2024). Overall, India's economic initiatives in Cambodia continue to be hampered by bureaucratic hurdles, slow project implementation, and a comparatively small financial footprint—especially when contrasted with China's extensive *Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)* projects across the region (Ngin & Khath, 2023).

Given these constraints, the path forward for India–Cambodia relations lies in targeted, patient, and values-based engagement. Rather than competing head-on with China in large infrastructure or defense projects, India may be more effective by deepening its presence in sectors where it holds a comparative advantage: digital governance, education, public health, and grassroots innovation. Initiatives such as digital skill-building programs, collaborative academic exchanges, and support for entrepreneurship can yield high returns in terms of soft power and societal impact. Moreover, India can work with ASEAN frameworks and engage in multilateral initiatives that enhance its visibility without imposing bilateral strains on Cambodia. For instance, trilateral cooperation involving India, Cambodia, and Vietnam could facilitate regional capacity-building without eliciting zero-sum perceptions.

Cambodia, for its part, will likely continue its strategy of hedging—maintaining close ties with China while cautiously opening space for engagement with other partners. Hun Manet's leadership offers an opportunity to reinforce Cambodia's agency in foreign policy, and India, by virtue of its developmentalist and pluralistic model, may find resonance with Cambodia's evolving aspirations.

V. Conclusion

India–Cambodia relations stand at a delicate yet promising juncture, where history and hope intersect amid a turbulent geopolitical landscape. Rooted in civilizational bonds and nurtured through decades of cultural, educational, and diplomatic exchanges, the partnership between the two states has steadily evolved. Yet, as Cambodia becomes increasingly entwined in China's strategic embrace and as great power competition intensifies, India's role and relevance must be recalibrated.

India's approach, anchored in its Act East Policy, offers Cambodia a unique partnership model we believe is developmental rather than domineering, soft rather than coercive, pluralistic rather than prescriptive. India's investments in education, cultural heritage restoration, and human capital development have fostered goodwill and demonstrated a quiet resilience, even amid structural constraints and limited economic scale.

However, the constraints are real. China's financial footprint in Cambodia is immense and deeply embedded in strategic infrastructure. India's influence, while morally persuasive and historically significant, has not yet matched the immediacy or magnitude of Chinese engagement. Economic asymmetry, institutional inertia, and regional bandwidth limitations continue to challenge India's deeper integration into Cambodia's strategic orbit.

That said, the ascent of Prime Minister Hun Manet—cosmopolitan, reform-oriented, and internationally educated—may create subtle openings for diversification in Cambodia’s foreign policy. His leadership, combined with a maturing Cambodian society and evolving national aspirations, could nudge Phnom Penh toward a more balanced external posture. India must be ready to meet this moment—not by mimicking China’s grandiosity, but by doubling down on its comparative strengths: human development, democratic partnerships, and inclusive capacity-building.

The future of India-Cambodia relations will likely not be forged in headlines or hardware, but in classrooms, clinics, and temples; in quiet negotiations and multilateral cooperation; and in the shared ambition for sovereignty, sustainability, and self-reliance. In this way, India can offer Cambodia not just an alternative partner, but an alternative paradigm.

Ultimately, the India-Cambodia partnership is not merely a counterweight to great power rivalry; it is a relationship with its intrinsic worth, one that deserves cultivation not only for strategic balance but also for the shared promise of regional peace, mutual dignity, and people-centered development. If nurtured wisely, this partnership can grow into a stabilizing anchor in Southeast Asia’s unfolding future.

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Chapter 14

Navigating Diplomacy: Cambodia and Germany from Modest Ties to Global Partnership

SENG Kim Hour

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I. Introduction

Unlike Cambodia's long-standing diplomatic ties with Vietnam, China, or France, its formal relationship with Germany was established much later and remains relatively young. Historically, the two countries had limited direct contact, yet certain parallels can be drawn between them: both have endured periods of political upheaval, war, and subsequent efforts to secure peace and stability. Despite its recent origins, the partnership has been notably productive. Cambodia benefits from Germany as one of its largest export markets in Europe and a long-term development partner across key sectors. For Germany, Cambodia represents a reliable supporter of the rules-based international order and multilateral cooperation.

Nevertheless, persistent political differences and the absence of deep diplomatic traditions have constrained the growth of the relationship. A mutual lack of strong governmental initiative has further slowed progress. Looking ahead, the trajectory of Cambodia–Germany relations may evolve in response to shifts in the global order and domestic political transitions. While the partnership holds considerable untapped potential, it currently remains characterized more by inertia than innovation, sustained largely by regional dynamics rather than proactive bilateral engagement.

This chapter examines the historical evolution and contemporary dynamics of Cambodia–Germany relations, tracing the partnership from its Cold War origins through post-reunification engagement, and into the current era under Prime Minister Hun Manet. It explores the interplay of diplomacy, trade, development cooperation, and geopolitical strategy, highlighting both the constraints and opportunities that define the bilateral relationship today.

II. Cambodia and the Two Germanys during the Cold War Era (1950s–1990s)

Following Cambodia's independence from France in 1953, the newly sovereign state sought to establish diplomatic and economic relations with a range of partners, including both East and West Germany. As with its relations elsewhere, Cambodia's post-independence foreign policy was profoundly shaped by the Cold War. Although Prince Norodom Sihanouk officially proclaimed neutrality—particularly in the context of the Vietnam War—the country was inevitably drawn into regional conflict when he allowed the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) and the Viet Cong (VC) to use Cambodian territory as a sanctuary and as part of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. This decision prompted the United States to initiate *Operation Menu*, a secret bombing campaign that further complicated Cambodia's geopolitical predicament (Path, 2017).

Cold War rivalries also defined Cambodia's interaction with both the Soviet-aligned German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the Western-aligned Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). West Germany was the first of the two to recognize Cambodia's independence and proposed establishing diplomatic relations and exchanging ambassadors in October 1956.

Several months later, however, Cambodia declined the offer, citing its commitment to neutrality, as conveyed in a verbal note from the Cambodian government to the FRG Embassy in Bangkok.

Gerd Berendonck, a German diplomat then stationed in Bangkok, recounted that he accompanied a Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) delegation that visited Phnom Penh in 1959 to offer economic and technical assistance. Prince Sihanouk received the delegation, during which the FRG expressed its desire to obtain diplomatic status distinct from that of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) office in Phnom Penh. The Cambodian side agreed to allow the FRG to send a head of representation with diplomatic standing. Berendonck was appointed head of the FRG mission to Cambodia in 1963 and arrived in Phnom Penh the following year. Owing to the volatile political climate and external pressures facing Sihanouk, he was able to present his credentials as ambassador only in 1967. He remained in post until January 1969, when Dr. Walther Marschall von Bieberstein succeeded him and presented his credentials in April of that year (G. Berendonck, personal communication, February 24, 2014). Shortly afterward, Cambodia recognized the GDR, and its Consul General in Phnom Penh was elevated to ambassadorial status on May 8, 1969—signaling Sihanouk’s growing distrust of the United States.

Before Chancellor Willy Brandt introduced *Ostpolitik* (i.e., “Eastern Policy” toward normalization with Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union), the FRG recalled its ambassador and suspended diplomatic relations with Cambodia in 1969—a move Sihanouk later described as a misunderstanding. In response, Cambodia formally severed ties with West Germany. The FRG subsequently requested that France safeguard its interests in Cambodia, maintaining a small mission within the French Embassy led by von Marschall. This suspension of relations, described as *en sommeil* (a term used in Cambodian diplomatic usage to denote discontent with foreign states), persisted until the restoration of peace after the 1991 Paris Peace Agreements, when diplomatic relations were resumed.

After the 1970 coup led by Lon Nol, the GDR continued to maintain cordial relations with Sihanouk, who became part of the Royal Government of the National Union of Kampuchea and the National United Front of Kampuchea. When Phnom Penh fell on April 17, 1975, the GDR’s diplomatic personnel were among the foreigners confined to the French Embassy. According to the testimony of an American journalist during the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) proceedings, East German diplomats were later expelled from the compound at gunpoint, appearing visibly distraught and embittered (Oesterheld, 2014).

By late 1975, diplomatic relations between the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and Democratic Kampuchea were “practically frozen,” as the GDR’s repeated requests to reopen ties and establish an embassy were ignored by the Khmer Rouge. The Cambodian Embassy in East Berlin was subsequently closed on 14 May 1977, along with other Cambodian missions in several socialist countries, although Phnom Penh maintained diplomatic relations with a few states, including China, North Korea, Laos, and Vietnam.

At the end of 1978, East Germany’s foreign policy toward Cambodia underwent a significant shift. The GDR’s foreign minister sent a letter to the Secretary General of the

Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party, recommending that the GDR officially support the Vietnam-backed Kampuchea United Front for National Salvation (FUNSK) (Oesterheld, 2014).

Meanwhile, West Germany attempted to communicate with the new Cambodian government through several channels. These efforts included asking Thai Foreign Minister Chatchai Chunhawan to convey the Federal Republic of Germany's (FRG) message of goodwill to Cambodia—a request that the Thai minister declined. Additionally, the FRG's deputy head of mission in Peking made an unsuccessful attempt to establish contact with Prince Norodom Sihanouk (Grafeld, 2006).

After the fall of the Khmer Rouge in 1979, the GDR's foreign minister moved quickly to reestablish diplomatic relations, with East Germany becoming one of the first countries to extend full recognition to the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). Despite differing political outlooks, the GDR maintained an active presence and engagement in Cambodia from this period until German reunification. East Germany provided various forms of assistance for Cambodia's early post-Khmer Rouge reconstruction, dispatching jurists, health professionals, and technicians who served as advisors to the PRK. The GDR also played a notable role in designing the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum. Additionally, East Germany sent a legal advisor to the People's Revolutionary Tribunal, which sentenced Pol Pot and Ieng Sary to death *in absentia* in August 1979.

In 1982, East Germany signed a military cooperation agreement with the PRK that included a training program for the Cambodian armed forces. Between 1982 and 1989, East Germany was among the limited number of destinations available to young Cambodians for study abroad. A German language school was established in 1981, staffed by two teachers dispatched by the GDR. East Germany also emerged as one of the PRK's principal donors, contributing approximately USD 5 million—following the Soviet Union and Vietnam (Oesterheld, 2014).

Diplomatic relations between unified Germany and Cambodia were officially resumed in 1993, following Cambodia's first general elections, organized under the framework of the 1991 Paris Peace Agreements and the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC). At that time, Germany was the third-largest contributor to the United Nations and sought to play a significant role in UNTAC from 1992 to 1993. However, due to domestic legal constraints, the Bundeswehr's armed forces were not permitted to participate directly in the mission. Instead, Germany provided 150 corpsmen and 350 tons of equipment to establish a field hospital on the sports grounds of the Royal University of Phnom Penh. Initially intended to treat only UN soldiers, the facility later became known as the "House of Angels," saving thousands of Cambodian lives (Nhean, 2013).

III. Unified Germany and the Resumption of Diplomatic Relations

Following the reunification of Germany on 3 October 1990, when the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) and the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) merged to form a single sovereign state, Germany began re-establishing and expanding its international diplomatic relations, including with Cambodia. Before reunification, East Germany (GDR) had maintained diplomatic relations with Cambodia, particularly during the period of the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) and the State of Cambodia (1979–1991), while West Germany (FRG) remained cautious in its engagement. After reunification, much of the relationship between Germany and Cambodia was conducted through embassies and nongovernmental institutions. Germany reopened its embassy in Phnom Penh on Sunday, 3 October 1993, followed by the establishment or expansion of several German institutions operating in Cambodia.

Development Cooperation: Institutional Anchors and Impact

The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), a key actor in German development cooperation, began operating in Cambodia in 1994 and established its permanent office in 2001. It has since implemented bilateral technical cooperation programs in sectors such as sustainable economic development, health and social protection, climate and energy, and other cross-cutting areas. Flagship initiatives supported by GIZ have made lasting contributions to Cambodia's governance and development landscape, including the One Window Service Office, local governance decentralization, the IPDoor system, the National Social Security Fund (NSSF), and the modernization of agricultural communities, among others. According to data provided by the GIZ office in Phnom Penh, ongoing projects are valued at approximately EUR 116.2 million, though not all are fully German-funded (GIZ Cambodia, 2024).

In terms of financial cooperation, KfW Development Bank opened its office in Cambodia in 2008, focusing primarily on infrastructure, rural development, social protection, and health programs. KfW has played a central role in supporting Cambodia's rural and sustainable development through projects in road and energy efficiency, health improvement, and environmental conservation. According to a KfW programme manager, an estimated EUR 189 million has been committed to active or recently completed projects since 2020 in support of Cambodia's development priorities.

Germany has also maintained consistent humanitarian assistance to Cambodia since the UNTAC period, particularly in mine action. German support for demining began in 1989 and has continued through both humanitarian and development channels—mainly via the Federal Foreign Office for humanitarian demining and previously through the Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) for development-oriented support. Initially, assistance focused on capacity building for the Cambodian Mine Action Centre (CMAC), including over EUR 14 million in support of Demining Unit 6 until 2015. More recently, funding

has been directed toward major international NGOs. The Federal Foreign Office has provided over EUR 10.7 million through 2021 to The HALO Trust for critical clearance operations in the K5 mine belt and approximately USD 5.22 million for 2023–2026 to Norwegian People’s Aid (NPA) for demining, risk education, and border projects (Cambodian Mine Action Authority, 2025).

Cultural and Educational Engagement

Germany has played an important role in Cambodia’s cultural preservation efforts, particularly through its long-term involvement in the restoration and conservation of Angkor Wat under the German-Cambodian Archaeological Cooperation Program (GACP). This partnership, supported financially by the Federal Foreign Office, has been active for more than 30 years (Kanning, 2022).

In the area of academic exchange, Cambodian students have been able to pursue higher education in Germany through scholarships offered by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), based in Hanoi, along with other German and international scholarship programs. Although Cambodia does not host an official Goethe-Institut, the Cambodian-German Cultural Center “Meta House,” established in 2007, serves as a key partner of the Goethe-Institut in promoting German language education, cultural activities, and artistic collaboration.

According to estimates compiled by the German Embassy in Phnom Penh staff, including the author, as of May 2025, approximately 800 Cambodian students have studied in Germany since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. The majority of these students attended institutions in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) during the 1980s. In more recent years, Cambodian participation in German higher education has been primarily facilitated through scholarships provided by DAAD, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS), Deutsche Welle (DW), and individual German universities.

Political Foundations (Stiftungen)

Beyond traditional diplomatic and cultural institutions, the relationship between Germany and Cambodia has been strengthened through the engagement of German political foundations, or *Stiftungen*. These non-governmental organizations receive financial support from the German government and maintain close ties with the political parties represented in the German parliament. For example, the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) is affiliated with the Social Democratic Party, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) with the Christian Democratic Union, and the Heinrich Böll Stiftung (HBS) with the Green Party (Mair, 2000, pp. 128–149).

These foundations play a crucial role in promoting democratic values, fostering political dialogue, and supporting sustainable development. By strengthening civil society, advancing political education, and reinforcing democratic institutions, they contribute significantly to Germany’s broader foreign policy objectives, fostering long-term partnerships and addressing global challenges.

The Heinrich Böll Stiftung began operations in Cambodia in 1992, initially focusing on research to support the country's development. Since 2010, the HBS office in Phnom Penh has operated as a Country Office, concentrating on three key areas: resource governance, gender democracy, and climate change.

The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung has been active in Cambodia since 1994, initially emphasizing cultural preservation and capacity building in refugee camps in Battambang and Banteay Meanchey. From 2004 onward, KAS expanded its work to include human rights, good governance, and civic education. Since 2016, it has further addressed contemporary challenges, focusing on governance, rule of law, peacebuilding, youth empowerment, and sustainability (Nuon, 2024).

Although the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung does not maintain a physical office in Phnom Penh, it has established a strong presence in Cambodia, championing labor rights, social justice, and initiatives that promote political dialogue.

Political Relations and Diplomatic Engagement

Politically, the relationship between Cambodia and Germany remains modest and largely free of major disputes on the international stage. Both countries approach their engagement cautiously. Germany views Cambodia as a reasonably reliable partner on global, rules-based governance and international issues, though Berlin remains wary of Cambodia's close ties with China and, to a lesser extent, Russia. From Cambodia's perspective, Germany is seen as a valuable development partner and an important export market. At the same time, Cambodian officials are well aware of Germany's consistent criticism regarding human rights and democratic governance within the country.

Regarding exchanges of visits between the two governments, these have primarily involved members of parliament, ministers, and officials from the foreign ministries. Bilateral meetings between heads of state or government have generally taken place on the sidelines of ASEAN summits or other international forums. One of the earliest high-profile visits was King Norodom Sihamoni's trip to Germany, hosted by President Horst Köhler on 14 December 2006, a few years after the king's coronation (Taing, 2025). The most recent visit at this level was by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who became the first German head of state to visit Cambodia on 14–15 February 2022. During this visit, he was received by the Acting Head of State, Senate President Say Chhum, and also met with then-Prime Minister Hun Sen (Der Bundespräsident, 2023). Since President Steinmeier's historic visit, more than a dozen delegations from the German Bundestag, federal ministries, and the private sector have traveled to Cambodia. The frequency of these visits now surpasses the total number of such visits over the entire decade preceding Steinmeier's trip.

Bilateral Trade and Investment

Over the past five years, trade between Cambodia and Germany has demonstrated resilience and growth, solidifying Germany's position as Cambodia's leading European Union trading partner. According to the General Department of Customs and Excise of Cambodia

(2025), bilateral trade between the two countries has consistently exceeded USD 1 billion, with Germany remaining Cambodia's top trading partner within the European Union. Trade has consistently favored Cambodia, with Germany serving as a major export destination for garments, footwear, travel goods, bicycles, and agricultural products. In 2024, Germany was Cambodia's eighth-largest trading partner overall, with a total trade volume of USD 1.07 billion, and the country's seventh-largest export market, accounting for USD 911 million in trade.

In contrast, German investment in Cambodia has remained modest. Direct investment is limited and often routed through regional branches or subsidiaries based in neighboring countries such as Thailand, Vietnam, or Hong Kong. Key factors constraining investment include Cambodia's market size, competitive position relative to its neighbors, the regulatory environment, and investor confidence from German enterprises.

IV. Shifting Ties: The Hun Manet Era in the Context of Germany's Indo-Pacific Strategy

Following the 2023 national election, Cambodia entered a new political phase under Prime Minister Hun Manet, marking the first new Head of Government in over three decades, accompanied by a significant cabinet reshuffle. Under this younger administration, Cambodia has openly expressed its desire to assert greater independence and focus on boosting trade and investment. Meanwhile, Germany has recalibrated its foreign policy toward greater diversification, driven by the Ukraine war, the global rise of protectionism, and a decline in traditional development cooperation. Consequently, Cambodia–Germany relations are likely to shift from a focus on development cooperation to trade and economic engagement.

The Hun Manet administration continues to adhere to the core principles and strategic direction of the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), with former Prime Minister Hun Sen retaining substantial influence as CPP President. The administration's primary roadmap is the Pentagonal Strategy Phase 1 (2023–2028), which builds upon and refines the CPP's long-term development agenda. Cambodian government spokespersons have consistently emphasized in press conferences that the country aims to move forward independently and assert itself on the international stage. The government has set ambitious economic goals, seeking upper-middle-income status by 2030 and high-income status by 2050, highlighting the need for stronger international economic partnerships. Cambodia articulates a “friend to all, enemy to none” foreign policy, seeking equilibrium in international relations, though its strategic partnership with China remains notably prominent. While full realization of this strategy is yet to be seen, it has already facilitated Cambodia's outreach to establish stronger partnerships with additional countries, including Germany.

Germany, for its part, introduced its Indo-Pacific guideline in 2020 in response to rising US–China rivalry and the increasing importance of Asia. The guideline sets a fresh direction for the German Federal Government in the region, emphasizing diversification of relations while upholding multilateralism, a rules-based international order, the United

Nations Development Goals (UNDG), human rights, and inclusivity. It also highlights greater cooperation with ASEAN (Federal Government of Germany, 2020, pp. 9–12).

Based on Cambodia's new strategic direction and Germany's Indo-Pacific guideline, several points of convergence are evident. Germany consistently commends Cambodia for supporting a rules-based international order, particularly in conflict resolution, peacekeeping, and broader geopolitical issues such as the situation in Ukraine. Both countries are strong advocates of multilateralism and the UN's mechanisms for international order, including peacekeeping, where both have actively participated. Their current development cooperation further demonstrates common ground, especially in areas such as climate action and sustainable free trade, as evidenced by projects implemented by GIZ and other German government initiatives.

What is preventing the Germany–Cambodia partnership from advancing more rapidly? While trade relations are already relatively healthy and projected to grow as Cambodia continues to strengthen its competitive advantages, deeper bilateral engagement faces significant obstacles. For Germany, the Indo-Pacific Guidelines represent a strategic effort to diversify its regional engagement and reduce overreliance on a China-centric approach. For Cambodia, however, political and economic ties with China have strengthened in recent years, culminating in the “Diamond Hexagon” cooperation framework, a strategic partnership model launched in 2023 to deepen bilateral ties. Chinese Premier Li Qiang described it as marking a “high-quality, high-level, and high-standard” phase in China–Cambodia relations and a shared future between the two nations (Phoung, 2023).

Cambodia's increasing alignment with China, which provides Phnom Penh with greater political autonomy, runs counter to Germany's broader regional strategy. Human rights and the rule of law remain central pillars of German foreign policy, and Berlin has been consistently vocal in criticizing the erosion of these principles in Cambodia. This negative perception, particularly in Germany, hinders tourism and investment and contributes to a more cautious approach to bilateral engagement.

From Cambodia's perspective, the tension lies in ongoing criticism from Western partners, including Germany, regarding its domestic political environment. Concerns persist over electoral integrity, the dissolution of opposition parties, restrictions on civil society, and pervasive corruption. These issues have created friction in the political dimension of the relationship, even as economic ties continue to expand. Complicating matters further, Cambodia's strategic flexibility—afforded by its close alignment with China—reduces incentives to implement reforms that might facilitate broader or more balanced international partnerships.

Cambodia's development cooperation with Western partners, including Germany, shows signs of decline. Although the government likely remains dependent on foreign aid, it consistently avoids acknowledging this, in line with a broader CPP strategy emphasizing national sovereignty and non-alignment. Prime Minister Hun Manet's reaffirmation of Cambodia's independence following Xi Jinping's 2025 visit underscores this stance, signaling a deliberate move away from responsiveness to Western pressure.

Meanwhile, Western donors are undergoing a marked shift in their approach to development aid. On 20 January 2025, President Trump issued an executive order freezing USAID funding, initiating a comprehensive review aimed at realigning aid priorities with U.S. strategic interests (Bruce, 2025). While some argue this creates opportunities for other global actors to increase development spending, others contend that Trump's decision catalyzed a broader global recalibration of foreign aid. The Netherlands, for example, has announced plans to reduce its development aid budget by EUR 2.4 billion annually by 2029—a substantial cut reflecting shifting donor priorities. This move exemplifies a growing trend among Western governments to focus inward, prioritizing domestic political and fiscal pressures over sustained international aid commitments.

In Germany, Chancellor Friedrich Merz's government plans to intensify defense and security spending, particularly in response to the growing geopolitical challenges in Europe. In 2024, Germany's regular defense spending totaled approximately EUR 90 billion, accounting for around 2.1% of its GDP. Plans to raise this figure to 5% would push the annual defense budget beyond EUR 160 billion (Noll, 2025). Such a substantial increase carries profound financial implications that have yet to be fully assessed, and it remains unclear how the necessary funds will be secured. Given the finite nature of public resources, increased military commitments will likely necessitate trade-offs elsewhere, with development cooperation budgets being one of the most probable sources of reallocation. While Germany has not yet announced specific cuts to Cambodia, former Development Minister Gerd Müller's broader policy agenda favored aligning aid with strategic foreign policy interests, reducing its current list of 85 "partner" nations with annual USD 10 billion expenditure to focus on just 60 nations. He emphasized that partner countries must recognize this signal and adhere to German criteria for future aid cooperation, including good governance, respect for human rights, and the fight against corruption.. This suggests a future in which development assistance becomes more conditional and politically targeted (Deutsche Welle, 2025). As a result, Cambodia may find itself not only less responsive to Western criticism but also increasingly sidelined by donors as they recalibrate their priorities in an era of strategic competition and fiscal constraint.

One door that will likely allow the partnership to grow even further is the one that both sides are huge supporters of: the multilateral approach. Germany is a key player in the European Union, while Cambodia proudly utilizes the multilateral approach as much as possible, including the ASEAN framework, RCEP, and others. Former Prime Minister Hun Sen made it clear that he would like to see the EU-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement materialize as soon as possible. At a press conference for the first-ever EU-ASEAN commemorative summit, marking 45 years of diplomatic relations in Brussels on 14 December 2022, Hun Sen demonstrated his eagerness to secure the FTA and stated that ASEAN, including Cambodia, can no longer sit and wait for EU assistance. He also stated that the political issues within ASEAN should not hinder the FTA's progress further (Kang, 2022). Six ASEAN member states have already initiated discussions with the EU regarding bilateral free trade agreements (FTAs), but to date, only Singapore and Vietnam have successfully concluded such deals. Cambodia is not among the six, and it appears unlikely that bilateral negotiations with the EU will begin soon.

The EU, for its part, continues to pursue its broader ambition of a region-to-region free trade agreement (FTA) with ASEAN. This agreement would link two of the world's largest economic blocs, encompassing over one billion people and accounting for EUR 271.8 billion in goods trade in 2022, making the interests from both sides quite clear (Jochheim & Falkenberg, 2023). Although the regional FTA negotiation was suspended, the ASEAN Economic Ministers–EU Consultation decided to reorient the Joint EU–ASEAN Working Group for the development of a Framework setting out the parameters of a future ASEAN–EU FTA, which would focus on sectoral cooperation on the digital economy, green technologies, green services, and supply-chain resilience (European Commission, 2025).

V. Conclusion

Cambodia is currently determined to resist external political pressures, and Germany's strong emphasis on the rule of law and regulatory compliance makes significant direct German investment unlikely in the near term. Unless Cambodia broadens its strategic alignment beyond its existing dominant partnerships or takes meaningful steps toward greater political pluralism and institutional transparency, Germany is unlikely to shift its position. Conversely, unless Germany adopts a more pragmatic approach to engagement—balancing normative concerns with geopolitical and economic interests—the current stalemate is likely to persist.

Development cooperation, historically a cornerstone of Cambodia–Germany relations, is also unlikely to remain the central pillar going forward. Cambodia has increasingly sought to reduce its dependency on foreign assistance, emphasizing economic self-reliance and sovereignty. Simultaneously, the German government, alongside broader trends within USAID and European development agencies, is re-evaluating its aid strategies amid domestic scrutiny and growing public skepticism over overseas development spending. This dual shift signals a move toward more interest-based, mutually beneficial engagement.

However, if both countries choose to move beyond a posture of cautious disengagement and actively seek areas of convergence—whether in green investment, digital infrastructure, or regional supply chain diversification—their economic partnership could be revitalized. Cambodia's positioning as a potential “plus-one” destination complements Germany's interest in spreading economic risk across a broader set of markets. Absent such efforts, the future of Cambodia–Germany ties will likely hinge more on the broader EU–ASEAN agenda, where strategic attention often centers on larger regional actors such as Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Despite these constraints, Cambodia's outlook remains relatively optimistic. Its strategic geography, investment openness, and shifting diplomatic posture create opportunities for deeper engagement, if both sides are prepared to recalibrate their expectations.

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Chapter 15

A Pivot to the Mekong: Russia-Cambodia Relations in an Era of Multipolarity (2020-2025)

Dr. Bulat G. AKHMETKARIMOV

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I. Introduction: A New Geopolitical Framework for an Enduring Partnership

The relationship between Russia and Cambodia is a subject of growing importance in the evolving landscape of 21st-century international relations. This partnership, which has deep roots in the Cold War era, has recently entered a new and more intensive phase. From the robust solidarity of the Soviet Union's support for the People's Republic of Kampuchea in the 1980s to the relatively stagnant period following the collapse of the USSR, the bilateral relationship has demonstrated remarkable resilience (Pichkhun, 2022). The relationship began to revive with the rise of Vladimir Putin and the increased engagement of both nations within platforms such as the East Asia Summit (El'nikova, 2025). This chapter builds upon prior historical analyses, such as those by Dr. Teng Delux from the previous edition, by focusing on the most recent period of 2020–2025 and re-examining the partnership through the lens of Russia's dramatic foreign policy reorientation.

The central conceptual framework of this chapter is the Russian strategic pivot toward Asia, a policy often referred to as the “turn to the East” or “reorientation to Asia” (Korolev, 2016; Rozman and Christoffersen, 2024). While this shift has been a gradual, long-term process, it was dramatically accelerated by specific global events, particularly the implementation of Western sanctions following the 2014 referendum in Crimea and the subsequent breakdown of economic and political ties after the February 2022 special military operation in Ukraine (El'nikova, 2025). In this context, Russia has intensified its efforts to cultivate partnerships with countries that have not joined the Western-led sanctions regime, with a particular focus on the nations of Asia, including key members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS (El'nikova, 2025).

To provide a nuanced reassessment of the Russia-Cambodia relationship, this analysis frames the bilateral dynamics within the broader context of Russia's evolving strategic documents and its public discourse. The study draws on a comparative analysis of key foreign policy and security documents, including the Concepts of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, the National Security Strategies, and the Information Security Doctrine. Additionally, it uses the Valdai Discussion Club as a key lens for understanding the official narratives and ideological underpinnings of Russia's strategic shifts (Valdai Discussion Club, 2025). By linking these macro-level geopolitical shifts to the micro-level of specific bilateral interactions, this chapter seeks to illuminate the motivations and constraints that define this enduring, yet evolving, partnership.

The subsequent sections of this chapter are structured to analyze the multifaceted nature of the relationship, examining its political-military, economic, and socio-humanitarian dimensions. This comprehensive approach will reveal how each sphere of engagement reflects the larger geopolitical currents that are reshaping the international order and demonstrate how Russia-Cambodia relations serve as a case study for understanding the complexities of a new, multipolar world.

II. The Geopolitical Crucible: Contextualizing Russia's Pivot

The intensification of Russia-Cambodia relations since 2020 cannot be understood in isolation. It is a direct consequence of fundamental, long-term shifts in Russian foreign policy that were crystallized by mounting tensions with the West. An analysis of Russia's key strategic planning documents reveals a clear evolution from a foreign policy that sought a degree of integration with the Euro-Atlantic system to one that explicitly frames the "collective West" as a source of existential threats and seeks to build a new world order.

A comparative examination of Russia's Foreign Policy Concepts provides a clear illustration of this change. The 2013 document, while asserting Russia's great-power status, still contained language that envisioned cooperation with the West. This changed dramatically in the subsequent revisions. The 2016 and, most pointedly, the 2023 concepts, explicitly reframed the West as the primary antagonist (*The Concept of the Foreign Policy*; USIP, 2023). The 2023 concept is particularly noteworthy for its confrontational tone, portraying Russia's actions in Ukraine as a defensive measure and a "pretext" for a "hybrid war" launched by the West (OSW Centre for Eastern Studies, 2023; USIP, 2023). It positions Russia as a "unique country-civilization" and a "vast Eurasian and Euro-Pacific power" that is actively courting an "anti-colonial alliance" with the Global South (*The Concept of the Foreign Policy*). This framing is a key element of Russia's new foreign policy, designed to resonate with developing countries that share a critique of Western-led global institutions and historical legacies of colonialism (OSW Centre for Eastern Studies, 2023).

Similar strategic shifts are evident in Russia's National Security Strategies (NSS). A comparison between the 2015 and 2021 versions reveals a deepening inward focus and a strengthened determination to "deter the West and engage the East" (NATO Defense College, 2025; Belfer Center, 2025). The 2021 NSS eliminates all references to cooperation with the United States and the European Union, a stark contrast to the 2015 document (Belfer Center, 2025). The 2021 strategy's focus on domestic components of national security, such as "saving the people of Russia" and "scientific-technological development," signals an internal reorientation and a move away from external partnerships with Western nations (NSS). This change in strategic documents, which was well underway before the 2022 conflict, suggests that Russia's pivot was a deliberate, long-term policy evolution rather than a simple reaction to sanctions. The 2022 events merely removed any remaining ambiguity, compelling Russia to fully execute an already formulated strategy.

The Valdai Discussion Club, a Moscow-based think tank established in 2004, has served as an important platform for disseminating and refining these strategic narratives.¹ The Club's discourse, which has been attended by high-level officials including President Putin, consistently emphasizes the end of the post-Cold War international order and the necessity of a new, multipolar world (Valdai Discussion Club, 2019). This intellectual framework provides a theoretical justification for Russia's pivot, portraying it as a necessary and logical response to a world order that has become "unfair" (Valdai Discussion Club, 2019). The Club's discourse also highlights non-Western institutional frameworks, with the Shanghai

Cooperation Organization (SCO) being cited as a prime example of “successful cooperation and interaction” built on “trust and confidence” (Korolev, 2016; Valdai Discussion Club, n.d.). This narrative reinforces Russia’s commitment to creating new, non-Western-centric institutions and frameworks.

The decisive catalysts for the full-throttle implementation of this pivot were the Western sanctions following the 2014 referendum in Crimea and, most acutely, the comprehensive rupture of political and economic ties after the 2022 special military operation in Ukraine. These events forced Russia to rapidly accelerate its search for new partners and markets in the Global South, with a particular focus on the dynamic economies of Asia (El’nikova, 2025). In this context, Russia’s relationship with Cambodia, a nation that did not join the sanctions regime, became a crucial component of its new multi-vector foreign policy.

III. The Political-Military Dimension: Reinforcing a Strategic Partnership (2022–2025)

Prior to 2022, Russia–Cambodia relations were characterized by a politically warm and historically rooted friendship that had deepened under Russia’s “pivot to Asia,” yet remained constrained by a lack of substantial economic depth. The core of the relationship lay in the enduring legacy of Soviet support—most notably during Cambodia’s post-Khmer Rouge reconstruction and through educational scholarships granted to thousands of Cambodians—which sustained high-level political dialogue and cooperation in military and security affairs. However, bilateral economic ties and trade volumes remained limited, often overshadowed by the longstanding issue of Cambodia’s decades-old Soviet-era debt, which both sides sought to resolve through debt-for-investment proposals (Teng, 2017).

The period from 2022 to early 2025 has seen Russia and Cambodia solidify their political and security ties, demonstrating a robust and enduring partnership in a time of significant global turbulence. The relationship is characterized by frequent high-level diplomatic meetings, which serve as a powerful signal of Russia’s commitment to the region.

From January 2022 to the first half of 2025, the Russian Ambassador to Cambodia, H.E. Mr. Anatoly Borovik, held numerous meetings with Cambodian officials, including the Acting Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Ministers for foreign affairs and national defense (Embassy of the Russian Federation in Cambodia, 2022–2025). These consistent engagements at various levels of government, including inter-party contact between Russia’s United Russia and Cambodia’s People’s Party, confirm that Russia is prioritizing its relationship with Cambodia (Khmer Times, 2024a). This strategic importance was further underscored by Cambodia’s role as the ASEAN Country-Coordinator for the Russia-ASEAN Dialogue Partnership from 2021 to 2024, positioning Phnom Penh as a key facilitator of Moscow’s broader regional engagement (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, 2021).

The Ukraine crisis has served as a significant test of this relationship. Throughout 2022 and 2023, Russian diplomats proactively communicated their perspective on the conflict

to Cambodian officials, and Russian diplomatic statements were published in Cambodian media (Russian Embassy in Cambodia, 2023; Ben, 2024). Cambodia's response, however, was a demonstration of its independent, multi-vector foreign policy. Despite historical ties to the Soviet Union, the Cambodian leadership has consistently voiced its support for a peaceful resolution based on international law, a stance which has been praised by Western countries and has even been used to strengthen ties with them (Teng, 2025). This independent position was most clearly demonstrated by Cambodia's votes at the United Nations General Assembly in favor of resolutions that condemned Russia's actions and called for the withdrawal of its forces (Torn, 2025).

On the surface, Cambodia's UN vote appears to contradict Russia's goal of building a coalition of states that either align with its position or remain neutral. However, the continued high-level engagement between Moscow and Phnom Penh suggests that both nations view this as a strategic reality of a multipolar world, rather than a betrayal of their partnership. The apparent contradiction is resolved by understanding that Cambodia's primary objective is to maintain its sovereignty and protect its national interest, a goal that aligns with its own historical experiences and vulnerable position as a smaller state between larger neighbors. While supporting the UN vote, former Prime Minister Hun Sen's statements also pointed to the role of Western military aid in prolonging the conflict, underscoring this nuanced position (Khmer Times, 2025). The assertion that he personally intervened to order the UN vote, overriding the foreign ministry's initial inclination to abstain like Laos and Vietnam, further reveals the intense internal balancing act that defines Cambodia's non-aligned strategy (Pichkhun, 2022). This shows that partners in the Global South are not uncritical allies but sovereign actors navigating a complex landscape.

In the realm of security and defense, the relationship has moved from dialogue to tangible cooperation. In 2023, the Russian Pacific Fleet's large anti-submarine destroyer, the "Admiral Panteleyev," made a working port call in Sihanoukville, a notable event as it was the first such visit since the COVID-19 pandemic (Russian Embassy in Cambodia Cambodia, 2023; Chea, 2023). This was followed by a significant development in June 2024, when the Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Land Forces held talks with his Cambodian counterpart, culminating in the signing of a Memorandum on Cooperation between the two armies (Russian Embassy in Cambodia, 2024). These events signal a recommitment to military-technical cooperation and a desire for a visible Russian presence in the region.

A more powerful demonstration of political solidarity occurred in September 2025, when Cambodia sent observers to the Zapad 2025 joint military exercises. These drills, explicitly framed by Russia and its ally Belarus as a defensive measure against NATO and located in a geopolitically sensitive area near the Polish and Lithuanian borders, are widely perceived as a powerful statement of intent (Al Jazeera, 2025; Chatham House, 2025; DGAP, 2025). By sending observers, Cambodia may have implicitly endorsed Russia's geopolitical narrative and possibly could have signalled its willingness to participate in a security architecture that stands in opposition to the West. This action, while of limited direct military significance, carries substantial symbolic weight, demonstrating that engagement itself can be a potent form of diplomatic support in a multipolar world. It shows that both nations are willing to engage in symbolic security cooperation to signal their political alignment, moving beyond

mererhetoric. Alternatively, Cambodia might simply want to diversify its military engagement beyond China and does not necessarily side entirely with the West's narrative of blaming Russia. After all, military observers from three NATO member states also participated in the exercises. Regardless of the motive, Cambodia's participation as an observer to the Zapad 2025 drills clearly demonstrates a form of military-diplomatic cooperation and continued security ties with Russia. This diplomatic action signals Cambodia's ongoing willingness to engage with Russia on security matters, despite the exercise's sensitive context and timing.

Russia's Diplomatic Role in the 2025 Border Crisis

The Cambodia-Thailand border crisis of 2025 served as a significant test for Russia's diplomatic posture in Southeast Asia, particularly within the framework of its "turn to the East" foreign policy. The conflict, which escalated in late July 2025, involved a long-standing border demarcation dispute and led to armed clashes and a humanitarian crisis. Russia's official reaction was swift and consistent, characterized by a public call for restraint and peaceful dialogue. Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova issued a statement expressing concern over the escalation and urged both nations to engage in dialogue to resolve their differences (Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025). In a pointed geopolitical commentary, Zakharova attributed the root cause of many territorial disputes globally to the "legacy of colonial policy of the West." She also emphasized the importance of finding a resolution in the "spirit of unity and solidarity inherent in ASEAN," highlighting Russia's recognition of the regional body's role in conflict resolution (Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025).

Beyond official statements, Russia's diplomatic presence on the ground reinforced this position. The Third Secretary of the Russian Embassy in Phnom Penh, Alexander Ugolnikov, visited refugee camps in Oddar Meanchey and Siem Reap provinces to address the humanitarian impact of the conflict (Khmer Times, 2025). Ugolnikov described the situation as a "huge humanitarian problem" and urged both sides to uphold the ceasefire agreement to alleviate the suffering of displaced civilians (Khmer Times, 2025). He also welcomed the ceasefire, reiterating Russia's support for a peaceful resolution that would allow refugees to return home (Khmer Times, 2025).

Despite a statement from Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen reportedly drawing parallels between Thai aggression and Russia's actions elsewhere, Russia's measured response did not appear to damage its relations with Cambodia. Instead, Russia's diplomatic and humanitarian efforts during the crisis likely reinforced its role as a stable and supportive partner in the region (Russia's Pivot to Asia, 2025). The crisis provided Russia with an opportunity to act as a neutral diplomatic actor, advocating for de-escalation and humanitarian assistance without siding with either Cambodia or Thailand. This approach underscored Russia's broader strategy of cultivating a multipolar world order and securing a strategic foothold in Southeast Asia through a combination of political, military, and soft power influence.

IV. The Economic Dimension: The Challenge of Deepening Ties (2020-2025)

The economic relationship between Russia and Cambodia presents a notable contrast to the robust political and military ties. While the political dialogue is consistently high-level, the economic partnership is more aspirational than substantive, characterized by a persistent gap between rhetoric and reality. An analysis of available trade data confirms this imbalance. Russian exports to Cambodia in 2023 were a fraction of Cambodia's exports to Russia, with a negative balance of over USD 179 million for Russia in 2018 (Trading Economics, 2025b). The total bilateral trade volume remains low, with Russian exports primarily consisting of machinery, vehicles, and foodstuffs, while Cambodia's exports are dominated by textiles, food products, and agricultural raw materials (Trading Economics, 2025a). While there have been numerous high-level meetings, including the 11th Inter-Governmental Commission for Trade, Economic, Scientific, and Technical Cooperation in 2024, and discussions on a "roadmap" for industrial cooperation, these efforts have yet to translate into significant increases in trade volume or investment.² This is a crucial finding that highlights a key constraint on Russia's pivot: its limited economic and investment capacity to compete with other major players in the region, particularly China. The economic dimension of the relationship therefore serves a more political purpose, allowing Russia to demonstrate a multi-vector foreign policy in practice, even if the tangible benefits are limited.

A notable case study of this aspirational approach is the cooperation in nuclear energy. Since 2015, Russia's state-run nuclear corporation, Rosatom, has signed numerous MoUs and agreements with Cambodia, including one to establish a Joint Working Group and a Nuclear Information Center (Trading Economics, 2025; The National Council for Sustainable Development, 2025). These agreements, often signed at high-level events, are presented as a pathway to developing Cambodia's nuclear infrastructure for peaceful purposes (The National Council for Sustainable Development, 2025). However, the tangible outcome to date has been the establishment of an information center rather than the development of an actual power plant (Atomexpo, 2025). The provided data on Cambodia's energy sector reveals that the country is actively pursuing multi-billion dollar projects with other partners like the Asian Development Bank (ADB) to strengthen its clean energy grid, with no mention of Russian involvement in these large-scale endeavors (Thang, 2025). Furthermore, internal critiques of Rosatom's domestic projects suggest significant technological and financial challenges (Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 2025). This suggests that Russia's nuclear cooperation is a form of patient, strategic diplomacy aimed at exporting its model of "technical sovereignty" and securing a long-term foothold in a potential future market, rather than a practical, near-term economic partnership.

Another example of this dynamic is Russia's COVID-19 vaccine diplomacy. The Russian Direct Investment Fund announced the authorization of its Sputnik V vaccine in Cambodia in October 2021 (Sputnik Vaccine, 2025). However, this gesture came well after China had already established itself as the dominant vaccine provider, donating and supplying millions of doses of its Sinopharm and Sinovac vaccines, which became the cornerstone of Cambodia's

national immunization program (Chheang, 2025; Zaini, 2021). The United States and the EU also contributed millions of vaccine doses produced by Western pharmaceutical companies such as Pfizer and AstraZeneca through the COVAX Facility (EEAS, 2025). This confirms that while Russia's vaccine offer was an act of goodwill, it was more of a symbolic gesture than a major strategic contribution that would significantly alter the bilateral economic or public health landscape.

V. The Socio-Humanitarian Dimension: Cultivating People-to-People Connections (2020-2025)

While the economic relationship struggles to gain traction, the socio-humanitarian dimension of Russia-Cambodia relations is consistently active, productive, and serves as the most resilient pillar of the partnership. This is not coincidental; this sphere of engagement is less susceptible to the geopolitical and economic pressures that constrain other aspects of the relationship. It is the most effective channel for Russia's soft power, built on a shared legacy and nurtured through people-to-people connections. This sphere provides a crucial foundation of trust that helps sustain the broader partnership through periods of tension and economic stagnation.

The educational legacy of the Soviet era remains a powerful force in bilateral relations. Over 8,000 Cambodian professionals have been trained in Russia and the former Soviet Union over the years, creating a vast and influential network of alumni (Trading Economics, 2025a). The Russian Embassy and the Russian House in Phnom Penh consistently engage with these alumni, hosting reunions and forums that serve as a vital diplomatic bridge. These events are not merely social gatherings; they are strategic opportunities to strengthen ties and leverage existing networks for business and academic development. The ongoing commitment to providing scholarships for Cambodian students to study in Russia demonstrates a clear focus on fostering future generations of leaders who are familiar with Russian culture and institutions (Fresh News, 2023; Fresh News, 2024; Khmer Times, 2024b; Taing, 2025; Russian Embassy in Cambodia, 2024).

Cultural diplomacy and public outreach are key functions of the Russian House in Phnom Penh. The center serves as a hub for activities that popularize the Russian language, literature, and arts, from hosting literary evenings to screening documentaries (Russian House in Phnom Penh, 2025). Beyond cultural promotion, the Russian House also functions as a tool for public diplomacy and information dissemination. In 2024, it demonstrated "photo evidence of the crimes of the Kiev regime" to the Cambodian public, a clear example of its role in projecting Russia's geopolitical narrative directly to a foreign audience (Rossotrudnichestvo, 2025). This form of direct communication bypasses traditional media and strengthens a shared information space.

The political significance of shared history is also consistently leveraged. The Russian Embassy participates in commemorative events that honor shared memories, such as the anniversaries of Russian-Cambodian diplomatic relations and the commemoration of

Soviet specialists who died in Cambodia in the 1980s. These events reinforce a narrative of historical friendship and mutual support, helping to sustain the trust and goodwill that form the bedrock of the relationship. In May 2024, the Ambassador even visited the Khmer-Soviet Friendship Hospital, highlighting the long-standing ties in healthcare (Russian Embassy in Cambodia, 2024b).

Beyond these consistent engagements, the socio-humanitarian sphere has also seen new developments. In February 2025, the Russian Ambassador hosted a reception for “Defender of the Fatherland Day,” where a military attaché explicitly mentioned the “ongoing fight against Ukrainian neo-Nazism,” a direct attempt to convey Russia’s narrative to a wider Cambodian audience (Russian Embassy in Cambodia, 2025). Cooperation in the justice and human rights spheres has also seen tangible progress, evidenced by the 2024 signing of an MoU between the Russian Prosecutor General’s Office and its Cambodian counterpart to collaborate on areas such as countering crime, protecting human rights, and asset recovery (Russian Embassy in Cambodia, 2024c). These diverse and consistent efforts by the Russian Embassy and various governmental and academic institutions signify a multifaceted partnership that extends beyond traditional state-to-state relations, fostering people-to-people connections and mutual development.

As of 2025, reliable official figures on the total number of Russian expatriates (long-term residents) in Cambodia are not publicly available from either the Cambodian or Russian governments. Based on available data and historical context, Sihanoukville was home to a steady community of former Soviet citizens in the early 2010s. This number reportedly declined sharply after 2017–2018 due to the Chinese-led development boom, which drove rents up and led to the closure or transformation of much existing infrastructure and businesses (Far Outliers, 2025). During the Russian presidential elections held in Cambodia in early 2024, approximately 170 Russian citizens—permanent or temporary residents—voted at the embassy’s polling station (Russian Embassy in Cambodia, 2024a). While not a comprehensive count of all expatriates, this figure provides a recent indication of the registered community’s size. The number of Russian visitors remains substantially higher: in 2022, Cambodia received around 14,339 Russian tourists, which, though much lower than the pre-COVID peak of over 55,000 in 2019, reflects ongoing high-volume interaction (Gubin & Khromchenko, 2024).

VI. Conclusion: A Resilient Partnership in a Multipolar World

The analysis of Russia-Cambodia relations from 2020 to 2025 confirms that the partnership is a critical case study of Russia’s foreign policy pivot to the East. The relationship demonstrates an asymmetric development, with its political and socio-humanitarian dimensions proving to be robust and resilient, while the economic dimension remains largely aspirational. This dynamic reveals a nuanced truth about Russia’s strategy in a multipolar world.

Russia has successfully leveraged its historical legacy and soft power to maintain a strategic foothold in Southeast Asia. The consistent and high-level political dialogue, coupled with a deep foundation of educational and cultural ties, provides a powerful mechanism for diplomatic influence and trust-building. This allows Moscow to count on Cambodia as a reliable partner in key regional and multilateral forums, and to use the relationship as a platform to project its geopolitical narratives on a multipolar world order. The symbolic, yet politically potent, act of Cambodia sending observers to Russia's Zapad 2025 military exercises is a testament to the strength of this political alignment.

However, the analysis also reveals the inherent constraints on Russia's pivot. Its limited economic capacity and investment capital prevent it from competing with major economic powers like China, the European Union, and the United States in a meaningful way in the Cambodian market. The economic relationship, therefore, is defined more by "prospects" and "potential" than by concrete trade and investment flows. This is particularly evident in the highly symbolic nature of Russian initiatives, such as nuclear cooperation and vaccine diplomacy, which serve a long-term strategic purpose but do not offer immediate, tangible economic benefits for Cambodia.

The relationship is not one of uncritical alignment but of strategic convenience, where both nations navigate a complex global landscape to serve their respective national interests. Cambodia, in a masterclass of multi-vector diplomacy, has been able to support a UN resolution condemning Russia's special military campaign in Ukraine while simultaneously deepening its political and military ties with Moscow. This approach allows Cambodia to maintain its relationships with the West, securing economic and development aid, while also preserving its historical and strategic partnership with Russia, which offers a degree of autonomy in an increasingly complex geopolitical environment.

In conclusion, the Russia-Cambodia partnership is a resilient one that has withstood the test of time and is poised for further development. The challenges ahead, however, are significant. The future of the relationship will depend on Russia's ability to translate political ambition into concrete economic and technological benefits, as well as on Cambodia's continued ability to carefully balance its diverse international relationships. Ultimately, this enduring partnership is a microcosm of the new global order, defined by a strategic ambiguity and mutual trust that allow two nations to find common ground in a world increasingly characterized by great-power competition.

Finally, although outside the immediate scope of this chapter, a useful future step would be to examine how the prospects and constraints of Russia-Cambodia relations are unique or fit a comparable pattern throughout Southeast Asia, particularly given Russia's pivot to the East and Eurasian focus.

Endnotes

- 1 The Valdai Discussion Club is cofounded by The Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, The Russian International Affairs Council, National Research University – Higher School of Economics, and The Moscow State Institute of International Relations.
- 2 Based on available public data and official statements, specific, quantifiable data on Russian Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Cambodia is scarce, which aligns with the argument that the economic partnership is more “aspirational than substantive.” Still, high-level officials have explicitly invited Russian entrepreneurs to explore opportunities, particularly in the agriculture and food processing sectors. This aligns with Russia’s strength as an agricultural exporter and Cambodia’s need for agro-industry development. Cooperation in energy and natural resources and industrial cooperation is consistently highlighted as a priority area during bilateral meetings, such as those held by the Inter-Governmental Commission for Trade, Economic, Scientific, and Technical Cooperation.

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Chapter 16

Cambodia–European Union Relations

CHANCHEM Vichny

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I. Setting the Scene: Cambodia–EU Historical Relations

The relationship between the Kingdom of Cambodia and the European Union (EU) has been comprehensively explored in the predecessor to this volume, *Cambodia's Foreign Relations in Regional and Global Contexts*. Looking back through time, formal engagement between this Southeast Asian nation and the EU, as a prominent regional actor, can be traced back to the signing of the European Community (EC)–Cambodia Cooperation Agreement in 1997. Although relatively young, the ties between the two partners have proven to be highly impactful, with the EU consistently playing a significant role as a value promoter, as a main supporter assisting Cambodia's economic and social development efforts, as well as one of the largest trade partners with Cambodia (Hör, 2017).

Since the signing of the 1997 cooperation agreement, the partnership between Cambodia and the EU has expanded across multiple areas of cooperation, including, but not limited to, politics, economics, trade, development, agriculture, natural resource management, education, governance, humanitarian aids, democracy and human rights, food security, environment, and gender equality.

This agreement also resulted in the establishment of a Joint Committee whose primary task is to oversee the implementation of the Agreement itself. The Committee has since then functioned as a central institutional mechanism that underpins the bilateral cooperation framework with Cambodia. Its primary objectives is to foster the application of most-favored-nation treatment in trade relations, enhance bilateral economic ties, promote mutual benefits from economic cooperation, improve the living standards of the Cambodian population, and ensure the effective protection of environment and sustainable natural resources management (European Union, 1997).

Nevertheless, the bilateral relation between Cambodia and the EU has strongly been built around the image of the EU as a value promoter. The Lisbon Treaty legally obliged the EU to incorporate the promotion of democracy and human rights into all aspects of its external action. This holds true for its partnership with Cambodia as well, whereby the EU must ensure that the elements of human rights, democracy, and rules of laws are embedded in every dimension of the cooperation (Hör, 2017). Furthermore, these values not only constitute the normative framework that the European Union is obliged to uphold in its external relations, but they are also actively promoted, advocated, and employed as conditional criteria in the EU's development assistance policies that shape the terms of engagement and access for partner countries.

As a case in point, this value-based approach consistently manifests and extends itself into the domains of trade and development assistance with Cambodia. When looking at the EU–Cambodia commercial relations, the economic activities between the two have experienced a marked expansion over the past two decades, with the EU emerging as a key destination for Cambodian exports, particularly textiles, footwear, and travel-related goods. This trade growth was facilitated largely through Cambodia's access to the EU's Everything But Arms (EBA) initiative, which grants least developed countries tariff- and quota-free access to the European market for all products except arms. Despite the expanding of economic activities,

persistent reports of human rights violations in Cambodia, particularly in relation to land grabs and forced evictions tied to agro-industrial exports, have led the European Parliament to call for a reconsideration of Cambodia's EBA preferential trade status, which in turns also strains both the trade, development aids, and political relations between the two parties.

As a case in point, in 2016, the European Parliament called for the suspension of millions of euros in development assistance following the arrest of former opposition leader Sam Rainsy by the Cambodian government, showing that the EU is standing strong with its attitude in incorporating human rights and democratic values into its partnerships. Another notable example occurred in 2020, when the European Union partially withdrew the trade preferences granted to Cambodia under the Everything But Arms scheme. This measure was taken based on what the EU identified as serious and systematic violations of the human rights principles enshrined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Despite the Cambodian government's defense of its human rights records, the withdrawal was partially implemented and affected some key export sectors, including garments, footwear, travel goods, and sugar. While the European Union acknowledged that this decision would have had possible undesirable implications on Cambodia's economic and social development through trade preferences, it also reaffirmed that respect for human rights remains a non-negotiable principle in its external relations (European Commission, 2020). The then PM was consistently quoted as saying that Cambodia would not "trade sovereignty for EBA" (Khmer Times, 2022).

These tensions illustrate the complex balance the EU seeks to strike between promoting economic growth and upholding its normative principles in external partnerships.

Despite the occasional setbacks, the EU remains firmly committed to supporting Cambodia's sustainable and inclusive development. Through its Global Gateway Initiative (GGI) and the Indo-Pacific Strategy, the EU aims to assist Cambodia in achieving the goals outlined in its National Strategic Development Plan (NSDP) 2024–2028, including the ambition to transition from a lower-middle-income to an upper-middle-income country by 2030. Key examples of this support include the second Joint European Development Cooperation Strategy (2021–2027), which allocates USD 179.5 million to promote ASEAN integration, green growth, and job creation, as well as additional investments through the European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus (EFSD+). The EU flagship projects continue to support Cambodia's education, agriculture, garment and footwear, health, trade and private sectors (European Commission, n.d.).

From the very beginning, the EU continues to play a central role in sustaining Cambodia's export-led development, which underscores the mutual importance of continued engagement (Hör, 2017). It has also assisted in the facilitation of Cambodia's trade through providing targeted technical assistance, including efforts to modernize customs systems and streamline border procedures. In order to smoothen European businesses operating in Cambodia, the EU has also set up EuroCham Cambodia, which serves to strengthen public-private dialogue and promote a more enabling business environment and allowing European businesses to benefit from institutional support through this platform. At present, the export value of Cambodian goods into the EU market stands at USD 6,389,200,000 (Eurostat, 2025).

II. The Pandemic: Building Resilience in the Cambodia-EU Relations

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic marked a significant moment in global affairs that reshaped international relations and tested the strength of long-standing partnerships. Cambodia-EU relations were no exception. As both regions grappled with the public health crisis and its far-reaching socio-economic impacts, their cooperation evolved in response to emerging needs and challenges.

During the pandemic, the EU provided timely and targeted support to Cambodia, particularly in the area of health security and emergency preparedness. Through its Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) Risk Mitigation Centres of Excellence (CoE) Initiative, the EU mobilised USD 231,600 to assist the Institut Pasteur du Cambodge (IPC) during the most critical phase of the outbreak, which helped to strengthen infection prevention and control measures. In a continued effort to enhance Cambodia's public health infrastructure, the EU also allocated an additional USD 254,800 to improve biosecurity facilities and equipment at IPC, with implementation scheduled to commence in the third quarter of 2022. These contributions reflect the EU's commitment to supporting Cambodia's capacity to manage current and future biological threats (EU Delegation to ASEAN, 2022).

To assist Cambodia respond to the pandemic, at the regional level, the EU, in collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO), launched a USD 3,242,400 initiative for the span of three years to strengthen Cambodia's healthcare system. Complementing this effort, Team Europe, which comprises the EU and its Member States, has also emerged as a key supporter of the COVAX Facility that was a global initiative co-led by the United Nations to ensure equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines. The total contribution of Team Europe exceeds USD 2,779.2 million, including USD 1,158 million from the EU budget in the form of grants and guarantees. As part of this global solidarity, Cambodia received 324,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine through COVAX in March 2021, with a total allocation of 1.1 million doses for that year (European External Action Service, 2021).

On top of the assistance provided to the health sector, the EU has also collaborated closely with the government of Cambodia, UN agencies, and civil society organizations to support the development of a new social protection program. This initiative aims to strengthen Cambodia's social safety net by providing targeted support to the most vulnerable populations adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (European External Action Service, 2021). In 2022, the EU partnered with UNICEF, the International Labour Organization (ILO), and Oxfam to advance Cambodia's national social protection policy. Backed by USD 8,569,200 in EU funding, this collaboration supported two major initiatives: the *Fostering an Inclusive and Shock-Responsive Social Protection System in Cambodia* (FIRST) project, led by Oxfam, and the *Advancing Social Protection in Cambodia* project, coordinated by the National Social Protection Council and carried out by the ILO and UNICEF. These efforts aim to strengthen the country's capacity to protect vulnerable populations, particularly in times of crisis (Open Development Cambodia, 2022).

In the face of this global challenge brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU and its Member States have nevertheless reaffirmed their strong partnership with Cambodia. On 18 May 2022, a group of European partners, including Belgium, the Czech Republic, the EU, the European Investment Bank, France (through AFD), Germany (via GIZ and KfW), Hungary, Ireland, Sweden, and Switzerland, jointly introduced a new development cooperation framework to the Royal Government of Cambodia: the *Joint European Strategy for Development Cooperation with Cambodia 2021–2027*. This strategy is designed to align with Cambodia's national priorities under the Rectangular Strategy Phase IV, while also reflecting Europe's broader global objectives in international cooperation. It supports Cambodia's efforts in deepening its ties within ASEAN, advancing sustainable development, and promoting inclusive growth. With a total commitment exceeding USD 1,655.94 million, the strategy focuses on six interconnected goals: promoting accountable governance, encouraging civic engagement, improving human capital, boosting Cambodia's competitiveness, advancing environmentally sustainable growth, and safeguarding cultural heritage. To help realize these goals, the *Multi-Annual Indicative Programme (MIP) 2021–2027* serves as a key funding instrument, with an estimated USD 500 million earmarked to drive progress in three core areas: green and inclusive economic development, education and workforce skills, and governance. The MIP will be implemented in two stages, with the allocation for the second phase (2025–2027) to be decided based on the achievements of the initial phase and in consultation with Cambodian authorities and key stakeholders (Open Development Cambodia, 2022).

In the broader context of political economy and trade relations, a significant and complex moment unfolded as Cambodia and the EU engaged in discussions on trade preferences during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Coinciding with this global health crisis, the European Commission announced on 12 February 2020 its decision to partially suspend the tariff preferences granted to Cambodia under the EBA scheme. This decision, which took effect on 12 August 2020, was based on what was claimed to be a serious and systematic violation of human rights principles enshrined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights by the Cambodian government. The partial withdrawal of EBA preferences took place at a time when the country was also grappling with the socio-economic fallout of the pandemic (European Commission, 2019). This convergence underscored the delicate balance between upholding normative commitments to human rights and maintaining economic resilience amid a global crisis. It further illustrated the EU's consistent yet inflexible approach in aligning its trade policy with its values-based external action, even during periods of extraordinary global uncertainty.

According to data from the Cambodian National Trade Repository, bilateral trade between Cambodia and the EU reached approximately USD 4,110.9 million in 2020, marking a significant decline from USD 7.132 billion in 2019. This sharp contraction was largely attributed to the economic disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which also affected global trade flows and supply chains, including those between Cambodia and its European partners (Cambodia National Trade Repository, 2020).

Despite the diplomatic challenges that culminated in the European Union's partial withdrawal of trade preferences under the EBA scheme, the EU remained a committed partner to Cambodia throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. As demonstrated by the various forms of

assistance to Cambodia outlined above, the EU continued to offer substantial support aimed at strengthening Cambodia's public health response, social protection systems, and broader socio-economic resilience during an unprecedented global crisis.

In 2025, Cambodia's trade performance with the European Union continued to strengthen in the first nine months of the year, with exports rising to USD 3.75 billion, a 13.76 percent increase from the same period last year and accounting for 16 percent of the country's total exports. Although imports from the EU declined 11.89 percent year over year, overall bilateral trade reached USD 4.4 billion, reflecting a nine-percent increase. According to Secretary of State Penn Sovicheat, these trends highlight the growing competitiveness and improved quality of Cambodian products, particularly in sectors such as apparel, textiles, footwear, travel goods, bicycles, and agriculture (Chea, 2025).

III. The Post-pandemic Era: Cambodia and EU Foreign Policy Transformation

This section explores the evolving landscape of Cambodia's foreign policy in the post-pandemic era, alongside shifts in the European Union's external engagement with the region. By examining these developments, the aim is to provide a nuanced understanding of the emerging opportunities and persistent challenges that may influence the trajectory of Cambodia-EU relations in the coming years, thereby laying the groundwork for deeper analysis in the sections that follow.

The aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic presented an opportunity for the European Union and Cambodia to refocus, recalibrate, and renew their engagement with one another. While the health crisis exposed structural vulnerabilities within Cambodia's socio-economic framework, it also highlighted the enduring importance of international partnerships. Despite earlier tensions linked to the partial withdrawal of trade preferences under the EBA scheme, the EU has continued to demonstrate its commitment to supporting Cambodia's sustainable recovery and long-term development.

The EU's support for the enhancement of Cambodia's healthcare system is ongoing. In 2024, it extended assistance to the Institut Pasteur du Cambodge by providing advanced technological equipment aimed at modernizing the institute's biological waste management practices. Specifically, the delivery of two high-performance systems, one for pre-shredding infectious waste and another for steam sterilization, has substantially strengthened IPC's capacity to safely handle hazardous materials. This contribution represents a significant step toward protecting laboratory personnel, public health, and the environment (European Union, 2024).

In addition to the support for the health sector, the EU has also been actively engaged in promoting rural development in Cambodia. Even before the full end of the pandemic, the EU had begun extending assistance to facilitate the country's post-pandemic recovery. Notably, in 2021, the European Investment Bank (EIB), with financial backing from the EU, provided a USD 17.37 million grant for the Sustainable Assets for Agricultural Markets, Business and

Trade (SAAMBAT) project. This initiative aims to improve the livelihoods of approximately 200,000 rural Cambodian families by enhancing resilience to natural hazards and food insecurity, while also strengthening connectivity across the country. The EU envisions that the project will improve market access for farmers and rural communities, foster the growth of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the agricultural sector, and contribute to rural economic development and job creation throughout Cambodia's countryside (European Investment Bank, 2021).

In line with the Cambodian government's policy priorities to modernize the agricultural sector, enhance food security, and strengthen export potential, the EU has also provided complementary support to a USD 69.48 million loan from EIB Global. This support includes an additional USD 5.211 million in technical assistance, financed by the EU and implemented by the EIB. The initiative is designed to benefit approximately 100,000 smallholder farmers and 25,000 land-poor households by generating new income opportunities, particularly in rural areas. With a strong focus on women's empowerment, youth engagement, and the inclusion of indigenous communities, the project contributes to fostering inclusive and sustainable rural development (European Investment Bank, 2025).

Additionally, as part of its broader efforts to strengthen public health and improve living conditions in Cambodia, the European Union has extended its financial support to the Phnom Penh Water Supply Authority through a new grant of USD 13 million. This comes on top of the previous loan agreement totaling USD 99,412,200 for Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the Bakheng Water Treatment Plant project (European Investment Bank, 2019). The new funding will support Phase 3, which builds on earlier phases to expand the plant's capacity and ensure a sustainable, clean water supply for Phnom Penh. The project, located on the northern outskirts of the city with water intake from the west bank of the Mekong River, has already enabled the installation of 170,000 new household connections, benefiting many disadvantaged communities, along with 25,000 connections for commercial establishments and factories (Construction & Property, 2024).

In the education and youth skills development sector, the European Union has been a longstanding and committed partner to Cambodia. Since 2000, the EU has played a pivotal role in supporting the development of Cambodia's education system, including efforts to improve teaching quality and expand access to education. Between 2018 and 2021, the EU allocated USD 115.8 million to support a series of education reforms, with a particular emphasis on strengthening early childhood and basic education for approximately three million Cambodian children (European External Action Service, 2021). Recently, under the EU's Global Gateway strategy, European Commissioner for International Partnerships, Jutta Urpilainen, announced a series of new initiatives aimed at strengthening the EU-Cambodia partnership. Among these is the Global Gateway flagship programme, *Education for Green and Digital Jobs*, backed by a financial commitment of EUR1.1 billion. Additionally, two Team Europe Initiatives, *Green Agribusiness and Decent Jobs* and *Green Factories and Decent Jobs*, represent a further USD 463.2 million in support. Commissioner Urpilainen also signed four new programmes focused on agriculture, sustainable energy, education, and trade, thereby reinforcing the EU's comprehensive commitment to Cambodia's sustainable development (European Commission, 2024).

When examining the external policies, in recent years, the foreign policies of both actors have undergone notable changes in response to the global health crisis brought on by COVID-19, as well as the intensifying geopolitical competition between the two major economic powers, China and the United States.

The evolving geopolitical tensions between China and the United States have placed Cambodia in a position that necessitates strategic adjustments in its foreign policy orientation. The intensification of geopolitical and geoeconomic rivalries, driven by China's aspirations to expand its global influence and the United States' efforts to retain its supremacy, has created a complex environment for smaller states such as Cambodia. The Indo-Pacific region, in particular, has become a focal point of both economic significance and geopolitical competition, where regional powers such as China, Japan, India, and others are seeking to assert greater influence. The Cambodian government has no alternative but to acknowledge that global politics is increasingly shaped by the dynamic interplay between these two major powers and that Cambodia needs to strategically reform their foreign policy direction (Niem, 2023).

In an effort to navigate these multifaceted challenges, Cambodia underwent a significant political transition in 2023 with the appointment of Hun Manet as Prime Minister, succeeding his father, Hun Sen, who had held the position for nearly four decades. Upon the establishment of the new government, Prime Minister Hun Manet articulated six key priorities that will shape Cambodia's foreign policy direction under his leadership. These priorities include:

1. Deepening existing bilateral ties and expanding cordial relations with all nations by fostering mutual trust and understanding, win-win partnerships across all sectors under the political-security, economic, and socio-cultural pillars, emphasizing building a border of peace, friendship, and cooperation with immediate neighbors.
2. Advancing multilateralism by actively engaging in global governance, supporting United Nations peacekeeping operations, and reinforcing Cambodia's contributions to peace, stability, and sustainable development worldwide.
3. Enhancing ASEAN's centrality by consolidating ASEAN unity and its central role in maintaining regional stability, supporting peaceful conflict resolution, contributing to ASEAN's common interest and prosperity, and realizing the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 to be adopted this year.
4. Promoting Cambodia's economic and cultural diplomacy to broaden the country's perspective in the global marketplace, increase trade relations, attract foreign investment, promote tourism, and leverage the country's cultural heritage to bolster economic growth and national image.
5. Strengthening public diplomacy efforts to combat misinformation and protect and promote Cambodia's positive image and national interests on the world stage.
6. Enhancing the strength of Cambodia's diplomacy through institutional reforms and improving Cambodia's foreign service's operational efficiency and professionalism (Khmer Times, 2025).

Compared to its predecessor, the new government under Prime Minister Hun Manet appears to adopt a more proactive and globally engaged approach to foreign policy. This includes a stronger emphasis on Cambodia's role in global governance, sustainable development, and the promotion of due diligence standards, in addition to the traditional conceptions of security, centered on national sovereignty and economic development, the current leadership signals a broader and more diversified foreign policy agenda that seeks to align more closely with emerging international norms and global partnerships (MFAIC, n.d.).

From this concrete foreign policy directive, it is evident that Cambodia is pursuing a strategic approach aimed at deepening its engagement with both regional and global partners while also seeking to leverage economic and development cooperation while enhancing its international image as a constructive actor contributing to a sustainable, rules-based global order.

For its part, the European Union has also adapted its strategic orientation in response to evolving geopolitical dynamics and the growing importance of asserting influence in the international arena. Under the leadership of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, the EU has undergone a notable shift in both its geoeconomic and foreign policy approaches. In reshaping its external engagement, the EU has introduced three key global strategies designed to advance its interests on the world stage while also delivering mutual benefits in terms of economic growth, security, trade, and environmental sustainability. These include the Global Gateway Strategy, the Indo-Pacific Strategy, and the Team Europe Initiative. This evolution reflects a broader transformation in the EU's foreign policy, from its traditional role as a promoter of values and norms to a more assertive and strategically oriented global actor (Hackenesch et al., 2024, p. 1).

Launched in 2021, the Global Gateway Strategy marked a significant step in the European Union's efforts to strengthen its role in international politics and global influence. Designed to mobilize up to EUR300 billion in investments worldwide, the strategy aims to enable the EU to make a lasting and sustainable impact in partner countries (European Commission, n.d.b). By promoting resilient infrastructure, sustainable development, and inclusive growth, the Global Gateway has opened a new chapter in the EU's foreign relations. It seeks to address the vulnerabilities exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly disruptions in global supply chains, while positioning the EU as a more assertive actor in promoting democratic values and international norms. Through this strategy, the EU integrates its development objectives with its external action policy, offering partner countries support in building infrastructure and enhancing governance capacity (Mark & Niels, 2022).

In addition to the Global Gateway Strategy, the EU also launched its Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific in 2021, aiming to increase its presence in a region marked by heightened geopolitical tensions. The Indo-Pacific is not only a focal point for strategic rivalry, particularly in the realms of security, defense, and both traditional and non-traditional security issues, but also a vital hub for global economic activity and trade routes.

Acknowledging the complexity of the geopolitical landscape, the EU seeks through this strategy to uphold the security and openness of Indo-Pacific trade routes while reinforcing its role as a normative power committed to a rules-based international order. To this end,

the strategy emphasizes the importance of deepening partnerships, expanding cooperation frameworks, and concluding new economic agreements. It also highlights the EU's commitment to supporting sustainable development in partner countries, including through enhanced free trade agreements and development cooperation initiatives (European External Action Service, 2024).

The Team Europe Initiative is another strategic approach employed by the European Union to enhance the effectiveness of its external action. By pooling resources and expertise from EU Member States, implementing agencies, and European public development banks, such as the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the initiative embodies a collective effort to maximize development impact. Originally launched as an internal coordination mechanism to ensure a unified EU response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Team Europe Initiative has since evolved into a robust instrument of external action. It now plays a central role in supporting partner countries in addressing their development priorities, strengthening resilience, and promoting sustainable and inclusive growth (European Union, n.d.).

Despite the wide range of foreign policy initiatives launched by the European Union, their overarching objective remains consistent: to safeguard the EU's internal and external interests while promoting a rules-based international order. These initiatives are designed to secure the EU's economic resilience, protect critical supply chains, and advance its normative and geostrategic priorities. Through sustainable and inclusive development, the EU seeks to strengthen cooperation with external partners in key areas such as infrastructure, human security, the green transition, and environmental protection (European External Action Service, 2024).

IV. Enhancing Bilateral Resilience: Prospects for Cambodia-EU Engagement

By examining the evolution of the foreign policies of both the European Union and Cambodia, numerous areas of mutual interest emerge that offer opportunities for enhanced cooperation. For Cambodia, engaging with an external partner such as the EU presents the possibility of support for its economic and social development, while also contributing to the maintenance of its geopolitical stability and strategic neutrality amid intensifying global power rivalries. At the same time, the EU seeks to advance its interests within this shifting geopolitical landscape by reinforcing its engagement with developing partners and reaffirming its commitment to an active foreign policy. These converging interests create a timely opportunity for collaboration in areas such as development cooperation, foreign aid, trade, geopolitical security, and the strengthening of Cambodia's international role.

Although Cambodia has made significant progress in its development journey, there remain several critical areas that require further improvement. In its Pentagonal Strategy - Phase I (2023-2028) document, the Cambodian government has identified a range of development challenges that need to be addressed. These include the country's continued

reliance on a labor-intensive economic model, limited availability of skilled human resources, the constrained capacity of public institutions, inadequate infrastructure to support economic activities, the need to enhance the quality of the healthcare system, and challenges in the sustainable management of natural resources, among others (MFAIC, 2023).

While these development challenges persist, the Cambodian government has outlined key priorities in its Pentagonal Strategy, including the development of human capital, diversification of its economic model, enhancement of competitiveness, and the promotion of resilient, sustainable, and inclusive growth, along with the advancement of the digital economy. However, Cambodia does not need to pursue these objectives in isolation. Supporting the development of partner countries has long been a central pillar of the EU's foreign policy. Through its Global Gateway strategy, the EU offers a wide array of investment opportunities in sectors such as energy, digitalization, education, health, transport, agriculture, textiles and garments, improved market access, and sustainable food systems, among others. Cambodia stands to benefit from further partnerships and continued collaboration, as demonstrated by its active engagement in various EU flagship initiatives currently underway (European Commission, 2025).

In the realm of foreign development assistance, Cambodia stands to benefit significantly from its partnership with the European Union, particularly as the United States has shown a decreasing willingness to expand its development aid commitments. In this context, the EU is increasingly assuming a more prominent and strategic role in the global development landscape.

In terms of trade, Cambodia can continue to deepen its cooperation with the EU by seeking greater access to the EU market and working jointly to enhance production and supply chains. Given the imposition of high tariffs by the United States on Cambodian products, there is a growing opportunity for Cambodia to diversify its export destinations and strengthen its trade ties with Europe as an alternative and reliable partner.

As articulated in the foreign policy agenda of Cambodia's new government, the country aspires to take on a more active and constructive role in global governance, particularly in advancing peace and sustainable development. This ambition opens up new avenues for cooperation with the European Union in areas such as corporate sustainability, due diligence, and the development of sustainable supply chains. These areas are increasingly gaining global attention as key instruments for preventing environmental degradation, mitigating social risks, and ensuring broader societal well-being. The EU, through its evolving regulatory frameworks and initiatives, is at the forefront of promoting these principles. Cambodia has begun to engage more actively in this global shift by formulating domestic sustainability policies and incorporating sustainability objectives into its international partnerships. By aligning with these global standards and practices, Cambodia not only reinforces its commitment to sustainable development but also enhances the resilience and long-term sustainability of its economic and social systems.

On the international stage, amid the intensifying strategic competition between the United States and China, Cambodia can benefit from strengthening its partnership with the European Union as a constructive alternative. Deepening ties with the EU can help ease the

pressure of geopolitical alignment and reduce the risks associated with over-reliance on a single partner, particularly in light of Cambodia's growing dependence on China. Diversifying its partnerships in this way would not only enhance Cambodia's strategic autonomy but also contribute to a more balanced and resilient foreign policy approach based on multilateralism.

Furthermore, the European Union could serve as a valuable partner for Cambodia in addressing its ongoing disputes with Thailand. As Cambodia is seeking to project an image of a nation committed to resolving conflicts through peaceful and multilateral means, there is potential for Cambodia-EU cooperation, where Cambodia could engage the EU as a neutral third party in the border conflict. Through this partnership, Cambodia could also work with the EU to facilitate the safe return of Cambodian soldiers captured by Thailand after the ceasefire, an issue that continues to hold both humanitarian and diplomatic significance.

Despite the EU's longstanding and substantial partnership with Cambodia in the area of development cooperation, the political and diplomatic dimensions of the relationship remain influenced by ongoing concerns related to human rights and democratic governance. The EU has on several occasions voiced criticism regarding perceived democratic backsliding in Cambodia, highlighting a persistent tension between its development assistance and the normative aspects of its foreign policy. This dynamic underscores the complexity of balancing pragmatic cooperation with the EU's commitment to promoting fundamental values such as democracy, the rule of law, and human rights (DW, 2023).

In addition, there appears to be a fundamental mismatch in the political cultures of the two actors that affects their interactions. The European Union prioritizes a rules-based, value-driven international order and often conditions its development assistance on adherence to these principles in its external relations. Conversely, Cambodia places a strong emphasis on safeguarding its sovereignty, asserting its right to determine its own path without external interference in its internal affairs. This divergence has, at times, posed challenges to effective communication and cooperation between the two partners, complicating efforts to align their respective approaches.

While the European Union frequently engages with Cambodia through the lens of promoting universal values such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, it could benefit from a more nuanced understanding of Cambodia's unique political culture and historical context. Cambodia's strong emphasis on stability, national sovereignty, and state-led development is deeply rooted in a legacy marked by decades of conflict, trauma, and the urgent need for social cohesion. Appreciating how these priorities shape policy decisions and public attitudes, where political order and economic growth are often viewed as essential foundations for broader democratic reforms, can help the EU refine its engagement strategy. Recognizing the significance of face-saving diplomacy, consensus-building, and the influential role of political elites within Cambodian governance would enable the EU to move beyond normative prescriptions towards more context-sensitive dialogue. Such an approach does not entail compromising core values but rather adopting a respectful and locally attuned strategy that honors Cambodia's agency, traditions, and development trajectory, thereby fostering more effective and sustainable cooperation.

At the same time, Cambodia has the opportunity to deepen its engagement with the European Union by actively participating in structured political dialogue and revitalizing key cooperation frameworks, such as the EU–Cambodia Joint Committee. By demonstrating greater transparency and accountability in both domestic and foreign policy decisions, particularly in areas such as labor rights, land governance, and environmental protection, Cambodia can further align itself with EU expectations and strengthen the foundation for sustained partnership. This is particularly timely in light of the recent Cambodia–Thailand border conflict, in which Cambodia has emphasized its commitment to peaceful dispute resolution through multilateral and legal mechanisms – a stance that resonates with the EU’s emphasis on rules-based international order.

Improving the relationship between Cambodia and the EU necessitates a balanced approach rooted in mutual respect, pragmatic cooperation, and shared development objectives. Rebuilding trust through the revitalization of formal political dialogues, such as the EU–Cambodia Joint Committee and structured human rights discussions, is crucial for addressing existing tensions in a constructive manner. The EU should foster incremental democratic reforms by supporting domestic reformers and civil society actors through targeted capacity-building initiatives, while applying conditionality in a predictable, transparent, and context-sensitive way.

On a positive note, both parties have demonstrated a strong and shared commitment to deepening their relationship. The European Union has expressed its intention to increase high-level visits to Cambodia, reaffirming its dedication to supporting the country’s ongoing development. Likewise, both sides have agreed to strengthen their dialogue through more frequent bilateral engagements and sustained diplomatic cooperation, thereby laying a solid foundation for a more dynamic and mutually beneficial partnership (Som, 2025).

V. Conclusion

Relationships between Cambodia and the European Union have been robust and complex, requiring ongoing commitment from both parties to further strengthen and deepen their partnership. This relationship is grounded in genuine cooperation, with the EU’s development assistance playing a significant role in supporting Cambodia’s social and economic progress. There are numerous areas of mutual interest where collaboration can be expanded, as Cambodia seeks support to advance its social development, economic diversification, and international profile with the goal of achieving an upper-middle-income status by 2030 and a High-Income country by 2025. Concurrently, the EU is enhancing its global engagement through initiatives such as the Global Gateway and Team Europe, aiming to increase its visibility and impact alongside its member states.

The growing global emphasis on human rights, due diligence, and sustainable development presents further opportunities for cooperation, as the EU remains a strong advocate for these values, while Cambodia aspires to play a more active role in global governance.

Despite existing challenges, a constructive way forward hinges on renewed political will: the EU adopting a more context-sensitive and balanced approach, and Cambodia demonstrating genuine efforts to expand democratic space and uphold shared values. Revitalizing structured political dialogue, broadening cooperation on climate action and inclusive development, and strengthening people-to-people exchanges can provide a solid foundation for a more respectful, constructive, and forward-looking partnership. Ultimately, only through mutual understanding, fostered by frequent and open dialogue, can both parties effectively advance their cooperation.

Last but not least, an improved relationship between the EU and Cambodia would not only strengthen their long-term strategic partnership but also position the EU as a valuable partner in helping Cambodia address complex challenges that extend beyond their bilateral relations.

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Chapter 17

Priorities and Challenges for Cambodia's Relations with the Middle East

KHUN Ratanak and Dr. Daniel BULTMANN

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I. Introduction

The relationship between the Khmer Empire and the Arab world, though limited, was primarily commercial in nature. It began around the 13th century, coinciding with the expansion of maritime trade networks and the gradual introduction of Islam into Southeast Asia. Arab and Malay traders interacted with the Khmer Empire, facilitating early cultural and religious exchanges that laid the groundwork for the later spread of Islam in Cambodia. This influence became more pronounced in the 16th and 17th centuries, particularly during the reign of Prince Ponhea Chan – later known as Ramathipadi I (r. 1614–1659) – who embraced Islam, adopted the name Sultan Ibrahim, and, with the support of Muslim mercenaries, became Cambodia's first and only Muslim monarch. Although the Ottoman Empire maintained extensive commercial and religious networks across the Indian Ocean, these connections seldom extended beyond Aceh or the Malay Peninsula (Göksoy & Yücel, 2024). From the 16th to the 20th centuries, Cambodia's political subordination to Siamese and Vietnamese influence, colonial domination, and prolonged civil wars further limited its participation in the broader diplomatic, political, and economic exchanges that linked it to the Middle East.

Following Cambodia's reintegration into the regional and global order after 1993, its foreign policy has increasingly sought to diversify diplomatic and economic partnerships beyond its traditional reliance on China, the U.S., and other regional trading partners. Although historically limited, Cambodia's relations with several Middle Eastern countries, such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Türkiye, have expanded in recent years, with particular emphasis on diplomatic support, tourism, agriculture, trade and investment, labor migration, education, as well as the oil and gas sector. These evolving ties illustrate Cambodia's broader strategy to enhance its global engagement, bolster economic resilience, and diversify diplomatic and economic partnerships beyond its traditional partners like China, while simultaneously mitigating the impact of Western sanctions imposed over alleged human rights and political violations. Drawing primarily on government-aligned media outlets such as *the Phnom Penh Post*, *Khmer Times*, alongside other local and international sources – this chapter analyzes the strategic priorities, opportunities, and challenges shaping Cambodia's evolving engagement with selected Middle Eastern countries.

II. Diversifying Tourist Markets

Cambodia, endowed with rich natural, cultural, and historical assets, has established itself as a key international tourism destination. Despite a sharp decline due to the Covid-19 pandemic, tourism – one of the four main pillars of the country's economy – has shown remarkable resilience, with 2024 marking a significant recovery. That year, Cambodia welcomed 6.7 million international visitors, a 23% increase from 2023 (Hin, 2025), generating USD 4.9 billion in revenue and directly employing 630,000 individuals (Khut, 2024). Chinese tourists remained central to this rebound, accounting for 12.7% of total arrivals in 2024. However, Cambodia's heavy reliance on Chinese tourists has raised social and political

concerns. The influx of Chinese nationals, particularly in Sihanoukville, has been linked to rising criminal activities such as online fraud, kidnappings, and illegal gambling (Long, 2019; Nachemson & Kong, 2019; Ellis-Petersen, 2018). Media portrayals, including the 2023 Chinese film *No More Bets*, have further damaged Cambodia's image, highlighting the vulnerabilities inherent in its overreliance on Chinese tourism.

In response, Phnom Penh has prioritized attracting tourists from the Middle East as part of a broader strategy to diversify its tourism market, which has been heavily reliant on Chinese visitors, while acknowledging the significant spending capacity of Arab visitors and their potential contribution to enhancing Cambodia's economic resilience. As concurred by Cambodian tourism experts, including representatives from the Cambodian Tourism Federation and the Cambodian Association of Travel Agents, Middle Eastern tourists have become key targets in the government's strategy to revitalize the tourism sector and reduce reliance on the Chinese (Friel, 2025). Moreover, the Cambodian government also acknowledges the potential of Arab tourists, who are predominantly from the upper-middle class, prefer accommodation in four- and five-star hotels, and demonstrate substantial spending power, as observed in several other Southeast Asian countries. According to a pre-pandemic UNWTO study, outbound tourism from the Middle East was projected to increase from 46 million in 2020 to 61 million in 2030, with the region exhibiting the highest global average expenditure, including an anticipated USD 43 billion from Saudi Arabia alone by the end of 2025 (Carruthers, 2020).

As a result, both Cambodia's public and private sectors have been actively seeking to capitalize on this opportunity by launching recent promotional campaigns that position the kingdom as a tropical paradise, harmoniously blending modernity with a Muslim-friendly environment. In late 2024, Cambodia's Minister of Tourism, Huot Hak, introduced a five-pronged strategy aimed at attracting Muslim tourists. This strategy focuses on enhancing the quality and availability of Muslim-friendly tourism products and services, improving travel connectivity, promoting Cambodia within the international Muslim tourism market, fostering collaboration among industry stakeholders, and expanding awareness and training programs for tourism professionals (Friel, 2025). In October 2025, the Ministry of Tourism launched the *Cambodia Muslim Friendly Book* as part of the government's Muslim Tourism Development Plan (2023–2027), which aims to capture a significant share of the global Arab tourism market (Nhean, 2025a).

Moreover, in October 2024, Cambodia also signed MoUs with Qatar, the UAE, and Türkiye, with the aim of promoting direct flights, international passenger travel, and freight traffic (Chea, 2024a). While Qatar Airways, Emirates, and Etihad currently operate direct flights between Doha–Phnom Penh, Dubai–Phnom Penh, and Abu Dhabi–Phnom Penh, respectively, analysts have expressed optimism about the potential expansion of air routes between Cambodia and other Middle East countries. This optimism is particularly tied to the commencement of operations at Cambodia's large-scale 4F airport, Techo International Airport, scheduled for September 2025. Turkish Airlines has also announced plans to launch flights to Phnom Penh by the end of 2025 (Anadolu, 2025). In collaboration with the government, Cambodia's tourism and hospitality industries have undertaken reforms to better accommodate Muslim visitors, including the introduction of halal certification in

2017 and the launch of the country's first halal Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in September 2024 (Friel, 2025). According to its official website, the 267-hectare SEZ is designed for the production of halal food and cosmetics, potentially positioning itself to tap into the multi-trillion-dollar global halal market.

Of the 6.7 million international tourists who visited Cambodia last year, approximately 430,000 (7.3%) were from Arab nations, representing an increase of nearly 20% compared to the 360,000 recorded in 2023 (Friel, 2025). Although this figure remains lower than the volume of Chinese tourists, it nonetheless indicates a promising trend. This growth is expected to continue in the coming years, particularly as Cambodia's government and private tourism sector have implemented targeted policies aimed at attracting more tourists from the region.

III. Seeking Balance: Cambodia's Economic Diversification and Trade with the Middle East

Since 1993, Cambodia has undergone a remarkable transformation from a conflict-ravaged, centrally planned economy to a market-oriented one characterized by sustained GDP growth, substantial poverty reduction, and structural shifts toward industry and services – particularly during the late 1990s and 2000s. This growth trajectory has been driven by political stabilization, rising foreign direct investment (FDI) – notably from China and other regional partners – development assistance, and preferential trade access to the U.S. and European markets, with textiles and apparel emerging as the dominant export categories.

For twelve consecutive years, China has remained Cambodia's largest source of FDI and a cornerstone of its economic strategy. In 2024 alone, Chinese enterprises invested nearly USD 3 billion in Cambodia (Sum, 2024), while bilateral trade surpassed USD 15 billion. China also stands as the kingdom's largest donor and infrastructure financier while holding approximately 40% of Cambodia's foreign debt (Hin, 2024). However, this deep reliance has raised growing concerns about economic vulnerability and strategic dependence. This has been notably evident in Cambodia's stance within ASEAN, particularly its opposition to the regionalization of the South China Sea dispute, exemplified by its blockage of the bloc's joint statement in 2012 and 2016. Such actions have led to accusations that Cambodia is prioritizing Chinese strategic interests, raising concerns about its political autonomy, regional credibility, and long-term foreign policy independence.

Meanwhile, the U.S. and EU have been Cambodia's principal export markets. In 2023, exports to the U.S. were valued at USD 8.9 billion (Hin, 2024), while those to the EU reached USD 4.4 billion (Khmer Times, 2025). Yet, Cambodia's heavy dependence on Chinese investment and Western markets renders its economy increasingly fragile. China's economic slowdown, the repercussions of the U.S.–China trade war, and the partial suspension of Cambodia's preferential trade privileges under the EU's *Everything But Arms* (EBA) and the U.S. *Generalized System of Preference* (GSP) schemes have exposed the risks inherent in this dependency. As of July 2025, the Trump administration's announcement of a 36% reciprocal

tariff on Cambodian exports is expected to further strain the country's trade performance and economic resilience.

In response, Phnom Penh's next strategic priority is to revitalize and expand economic partnerships with like-minded small- and medium-sized powers to foster sustainable economic growth, reduce overreliance on China, and diversify its export markets beyond the U.S. and the EU. In this context, Middle Eastern countries present opportunities within Cambodia's economic diversification strategy, particularly in areas such as agriculture and food security, labor migration, FDI, access to greater African markets, and cooperation in the oil and gas sector. First, the Middle East has still faced major challenges in food security due to population growth, climate change, and global disruptions intensified by the Covid-19 pandemic and geopolitical conflicts like the war in Ukraine (Nowacka, 2022). Moreover, the Gulf region's harsh environmental conditions, marked by high temperatures, scarce water resources, and poor soil quality, pose major challenges to domestic food production and national food self-sufficiency. Hence, the Middle East has prioritized food security by investing in foreign arable land, adopting advanced agricultural technologies, and establishing international partnerships for food imports. In 2023, Saudi Arabia announced a USD 20 billion food industry investment by 2035 (Arab News, 2023). Qatar imported 90% of its food and spent USD 29 billion on food imports between 1998 and 2017 (Miniaoui, et al., 2018). In 2024, the UAE launched its National Food Security Strategy 2051 to enhance local food production, promote agricultural innovation, and secure global food supply chains through acquisitions and strategic collaborations to ensure long-term food sustainability (US–UAE Business Council, 2024).

Agriculture has long been a cornerstone of Cambodia's economy, contributing 24.4% of GDP in 2013, though this share declined to 17.1% in 2023 (Meng, 2025). Despite this gradual decrease, the sector remains vital, employing nearly 40% of the country's labor force while accounting for approximately 16% of GDP in 2024 (World Bank, 2025). Recognizing the strategic potential of expanding into new markets, Cambodia has sought to capitalize on growing demand in the Middle East, not only to export agricultural products – such as rice, vegetables, and other staple crops – but also attract high-value FDI into its agriculture industry. A notable example of this engagement was the high-level delegation led by Senate President Hun Sen to several key Middle Eastern nations in December 2024, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Türkiye, and the UAE. During his meeting with the Saudi Senate President, Hun Sen encouraged Saudi investors to invest in Cambodia, specifically in rice milling, storage facilities and packaging, to facilitate the exports of Cambodian rice to Saudi Arabia and its neighboring markets (Chea, 2024c). According to the Cambodia Rice Federation, Cambodia's rice export to the Middle East market increased from 1,398 tons in 2015 to 7,521 tons in 2023 (Chea, 2024b), which around 7,200 tons absorbed by Saudi Arabia in the first eleven months of 2024 (The Nation, 2024).

In broader economic terms, bilateral trade between Cambodia and the Gulf states remains modest and does not place them among Cambodia's top 20 trading partners. The non-oil trade between the UAE and Cambodia exceeded USD 401 million in 2022, marking a 31% rise from 2021 and a 146% surge from pre-Covid-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, Cambodia–Saudi Arabia bilateral trade amounted to USD 26 million in 2021, an increase of nearly 40%

compared to 2020, which was USD 19 million, according to the latest data from the Ministry of Commerce. By the end of 2023, bilateral trade between Cambodia and Türkiye approached nearly USD 200 million, with both countries setting a target of USD 1 billion following Turkish President Erdogan's official visit to Cambodia in 2019 (Mao, 2024). Although overall trade volumes remain modest, future prospects appear promising, particularly following the introduction of a Comprehensive Economic Partnership (CEPA) with the UAE in early 2025. Similar economic agreements, especially the one currently under negotiation with Saudi Arabia – are expected to be finalized in the near future, potentially strengthening Cambodia's trade and investment with the Gulf states.

Moreover, the Middle East countries have also become labor market destinations, particularly for Cambodian Muslims and agricultural workers, which the Cambodian government has described as part of its broader strategy to improve the job market for Cambodians (Yon & Daphne, 2018). No precise data show how many Cambodian workers are currently working in specific Middle Eastern countries, but according to Cambodia's Ministry of Labor, Cambodia planned to send as many as 100,000 Cambodian workers to Qatar alone ahead of the 2022 World Cup (Yon & Daphne, 2018). However, both local and international labor rights groups have consistently expressed deep concerns about Cambodia's sending workers to these countries, including Qatar, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, citing reports of serious abuses of migrant workers. The most recent example was in 2024, when 90 out of 133 Cambodians in Saudi Arabia, who claimed to be subjected to long work hours and no meals, collectively asked the government to facilitate their return to Cambodia (Soth, 2024).

In addition, several Middle East countries have become important destinations for Cambodian students seeking higher education and professional training opportunities. As of 2024, more than 450 Cambodian students were studying and working in Israel in the field of agriculture (Khmer Times, 2024). Although the Cambodian government expressed concerns over the Israel– Hamas conflict in October 2023, the repatriation of these students has not been placed on the agenda, as their continued presence in Israel is considered beneficial for both countries (Meng, 2023). The signing of an MoU on education, youth, and culture between Cambodia and Israel in March 2025 is expected to further strengthen this academic and professional exchange. In particular, an increasing number of Cambodian students, many of whom participate in agricultural internships, have gained access to Israel's leading technological universities, internationally recognized for their advancements in agricultural innovation.

Meanwhile, Türkiye has also emerged as an educational partner for Cambodia. As of 2024, twenty-five Cambodian students were pursuing studies in Türkiye, with the number expected to increase in the coming years (Sok, 2024). The establishment of the Yunus Emre Institute Turkish Cultural Center at the Royal University of Phnom Penh has further strengthened this partnership by offering Turkish language courses to fifty students (Ministry of Information, 2023). Moreover, for the 2024–2026 academic years, Türkiye has offered eighteen scholarships to students from Cambodia's Police Academy to pursue higher education in Turkish institutions (Khmer Times, 2025a). Similarly, Kuwait expressed its keenness to provide scholarships in the field of oil and gas to Cambodian students, as well

as job opportunities for graduates to gain relevant work experience in Kuwait (May, 2023a). Upon returning to Cambodia, these students not only strengthen people-to-people relations but also enhance their own livelihoods and those of their families, and contribute valuable knowledge and skills to their local communities, supporting broader national development.

The most recent and only available data on bilateral FDI between Cambodia and the UAE amounted to USD 3.8 million as of the end of 2020 (Gardazi, 2023). However, comprehensive data on investment flows from Middle Eastern countries into Cambodia, as well as precise figures on Cambodia's investment in the Middle East, remain unavailable. Despite this data limitation, several Middle Eastern countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Türkiye, have expressed interest in investing in various sectors in Cambodia, including oil, energy, agriculture, food production, halal food, finance, education, sports, and tourism. This progress has been facilitated through high-level exchanges of visits among top leaders, diplomats, and investors from both sides, the signing of the CEPA and other trade and investment-related deals, as well as the establishment of trade offices. Notably, Cambodia finalized the terms of a CEPA with the UAE in January 2024. This new framework is expected to enhance trade and investment by reducing tariffs on over 92% of product lines, with projections indicating the potential to double non-oil trade to USD 1 billion by 2030 (B2B Cambodia, 2024). Cambodia's key export sectors, including leather goods, apparel, footwear, meat products, grains, and processed foods, are expected to benefit from the tariff reductions introduced under the CEPA, which could also lead to a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in the future.

In February 2024, Cambodia launched the Cambodia-UAE Commercial Center, an institution authorized by the Ministry of Commerce to be established in the UAE – a key step in the implementation of the CEPA between the two countries. The first three centers, located at the Oneroad Group headquarters and automotive showrooms in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, not only serve as key platforms for economic, trade, and cultural exchange, but are also expected to enhance investment opportunities in Cambodia for UAE investors (Oneroad Group, 2024). In early 2024, Cambodia and Saudi Arabia signed an MoU aimed at strengthening bilateral trade relations, with a particular focus on diversifying trade cooperation and creating new investment opportunities for both countries (Nhean, 2025).

Even more than a new economic and trade partner, Cambodia is apparently looking to the Middle East as a conduit to reach the greater African market, a vast and populous region historically connected to the Middle East through maritime and land trade routes, particularly via the Red Sea, the Suez Canal, and the Gulf of Aden. The Middle East can play a key role in connecting Cambodia and Africa. According to Cambodia's Ministry of Commerce, its strategic focus on the Middle East serves as a gateway to facilitate trade and investment opportunities in Africa (Nhean, 2024). In this effort, Cambodian officials have engaged with ambassadors and high-level representatives from several African nations to explore opportunities for establishing trade connections and facilitating the export of Cambodian products, particularly within the rice industry. One example is the bilateral meeting between Cambodia's Minister of Commerce, Cham Nimol, and Nigerian Ambassador Folakemi I. Akinleye at the ministry in September 2023, during which both parties pledged to strengthen bilateral trade, particularly in agricultural commodities such as rice, along with other

export goods (Hin, 2023). Meanwhile, the Ministry spokesman Pen Soviecheat considers the Middle East a strategic transit hub for the movement of goods between Cambodia and Africa, particularly some Muslim-dominated African markets, such as Senegal, Morocco, and Nigeria (Sam, 2022).

Among other key sectors, oil stands out, particularly in light of Cambodia's first offshore oil extraction in 2021 following a decade of exploration and speculation since 2010. From the outset, Cambodia has actively sought engagement with several Middle Eastern countries, many of which are OPEC members, to attract investment and benefit from their expertise in the oil and gas industry. Notably in 2010, then-Foreign Minister Nor Namhong led a high-level delegation to Iran, during which oil management and investment featured prominently in bilateral discussions (Kurczy, 2010). Cambodia is renewing efforts to attract Middle Eastern investment in its oil and gas sector following setbacks with prior stakeholders, including Chevron's withdrawal and KrisEnergy's 2021 bankruptcy, which stalled Block A's development. In response to these setbacks, Cambodia has intensified its outreach to both domestic and foreign companies, with a particular focus on Middle East firms. This is evidenced by a series of high-level diplomatic meetings between Cambodia and several Gulf states, where energy cooperation often emerges as a key topic. In a 2022 meeting, the Cambodian Minister of Mines and Energy invited Iran to assess existing oil blocks and exploration ventures (Tehran Times, 2022); in 2023, its discussions with Kuwait's ambassador focused on progress and future cooperation in Cambodia's oil and gas sector (May, 2023b). Similarly, during a meeting with the UAE Minister of Foreign Trade in 2023, Hun Sen urged UAE investors to consider Cambodia's underdeveloped oil potential, emphasizing its strategic value and investment opportunities (Khmer Times, 2023).

Yet, no major Middle Eastern oil producers, including Saudi Aramco, the National Iranian Oil Company, or Kuwait Petroleum Corporation, have announced investment in Cambodia's offshore or onshore oil and gas sector. Although Mubadala Petroleum, one of the UAE's leading oil and gas firms, expressed interest in the country's energy sector in 2019, this interest has not been materialized into any concrete investment. While a comprehensive analysis of the underlying reasons falls beyond the scope of this book chapter, preliminary observations indicate that factors, such as limited proven reserves, regulatory uncertainty, past project failures, and a mismatch with the strategic investment priorities of Middle Eastern national oil companies, may have contributed to the absence of concrete investment to date.

IV. Cambodia's Political and Diplomatic Engagement with the Middle East

As Cambodia seeks to maintain its relevance and enhance its role in the global system both independently and within the framework of the UN and ASEAN, it has sought to contribute insights to peace processes in the Middle East, particularly concerning the ongoing conflicts in the Gaza Strip, Lebanon, and other areas in the region. Cambodia, under the ruling Cambodian People's Party, is widely recognized for ending the country's

civil wars through Hun Sen's acclaimed "Win-Win Policy," which reintegrated remaining Khmer Rouge soldiers in 1998. And as an active member of the UN and ASEAN, it also seeks to contribute its expertise in peacebuilding through participation in UN peacekeeping missions and other initiatives. First, Cambodia deployed over 800 peacekeeping troops to Lebanon and several African countries including South Sudan, Mali, and the Republic of Central Africa by the end of 2023 (Chhun, 2023). As of early 2025, 184 Cambodian peacekeepers are currently participating in missions at the UN Interim Force in Lebanon, focusing on demining and infrastructure reconstruction efforts (Xinhua, 2025). In 2017, Cambodia also sent a team of 23 deminers and their 12 sniffer dogs to Israel at the request of Israel's Defense Minister (Mom, 2017).

Second, the Cambodian government regularly engages in political dialogue with representatives from the Palestinian Authority. For instance, immediately after it was admitted as a member of the Conference on Cooperation among East Asian Countries for Palestinian Development (CEAPAD), a regional initiative led by Japan since 2013 to support Palestinian state-building, Meas Kim Heng, Secretary of State of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, promises to the Palestinian representatives that Cambodia committed to contributing its expertise in socio-economic rehabilitation to support Palestinian reconstruction efforts (Ministry of Foreign Affairs & International Cooperation, 2024).

Third, although Israel was among the first Middle Eastern nations to establish diplomatic relations with Cambodia in the 1960s, was the first to raise the issue of the Khmer Rouge's auto-genocide at the UN in 1978 when much of the world remained silent (Sao, 2024), and has since 1993 strengthened bilateral cooperation across key sectors including trade, investment, agriculture, education, health, tourism, employment, vocational training, and technology (Office of the Council of Ministers 2025), Cambodia has nonetheless consistently aligned itself with the broader Arab cause by expressing steadfast support for Palestine, advocating a negotiated two-state solution, and voicing concern over Israel's military actions. In May 2024, Cambodia joined 142 other nations in voting in favor of a UN resolution supporting Palestine's bid for full UN membership (Sao, 2024). This long-standing position was reaffirmed at the 79th session of the UN General Assembly in September 2024, when then-Minister of Foreign Affairs Sok Chenda Sophea stated, "This is the only way Palestinians and Israelis can resolve their prolonged conflict and attain lasting peace" (Niem, 2024).

Cambodia's alignment with the Arab perspective was further demonstrated during Hun Sen's visit to Türkiye, where he expressed concern over Israel's actions in Syria – accusing Israel of exploiting the situation to occupy parts of Syrian territory and conduct military operations. He noted that while such conflicts might appear distant to outsiders, the Syrian people must have the right to determine their own destiny, with external assistance serving only a supportive role. Hun Sen stressed that the Syrian crisis exemplifies Cambodia's broader commitment to maintaining peace and sovereignty through independent means. He also highlighted that Cambodia is approaching the 27th anniversary of full territorial unification – marking the first period of sustained peace in five centuries – which has enabled national reconstruction and stability.

For Cambodia, support for Palestine's UN membership and criticism of Israel's military actions do not equate to endorsing violence or opposing Israel as a nation. Following the October 7 attacks on Israel, Cambodia reaffirmed its principled stance in condemning all acts of terrorism and violence against innocent civilians, irrespective of race, culture, or religion (Sao, 2024). Similar to its position on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Cambodia's approach reflects the prudence of a small nation with a tragic past – one that cannot afford to make misguided decisions. Its commitment to upholding international law and defending the global order underscores the country's enduring belief in unity, peace, and the collective responsibility of states within the international community.

While contributing insights and resources to conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts in the Middle East, Cambodia has simultaneously pursued diplomatic and political support from the region, particularly during its campaign for a non-permanent seat on the UNSC for the 2013–2014 term. As part of this effort, then-Foreign Minister Hor Namhong conducted state visits to several Middle Eastern countries, notably securing public endorsements from Iran (Hunt, 2012). However, despite these diplomatic overtures, Cambodia's candidacy was undermined by persistent criticism from Western nations concerning its human rights record and democratic backsliding. Although eventually unsuccessful, the campaign reflected Cambodia's broader strategy to cultivate alliances beyond the West and bolster its international standing through engagement with key Middle Eastern partners.

V. Major Challenges in Cambodia's Relations with the Middle East

Cambodia's overall relations with the Middle East remain constrained by the lack of an embassy and consulate, particularly in key states such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Iran. From a state's perspective, effective relations are largely predicated on sustained, smooth, and structured communication, which becomes significantly hindered in the absence of formal diplomatic channels. The lack of mutual recognition and clarity of intentions further complicates bilateral interactions, often leading to misunderstandings or misinterpretations. Even existing relations may suffer from distortion or stagnation without appropriate mechanisms for dialogue. Establishing embassies and consulates is therefore vital, as they serve not only as symbols of diplomatic presence but also as functional instruments for facilitating cooperation, promoting mutual understanding, and advancing national interests. Currently, Cambodia maintains official diplomatic missions only in Kuwait and Türkiye, along with an honorary consulate in Israel. Consequently, Cambodia's engagement with other key Middle Eastern countries – such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Iran – is conducted indirectly, often through third-party or non-resident embassies, which limits the scope and effectiveness of bilateral relations.

From the viewpoint of travelers, including but not limited to tourists, businessmen, students, and migrant workers, embassies and consulates serve a crucial role by providing consular assistance in times of emergency, such as passport loss or damage, hospitalization,

or unforeseen accidents, as well as minimizing potential risks that businesses encounter in their foreign operations. In the context of Cambodia, which is currently seeking opportunities to deploy laborers to Middle Eastern countries, the absence of diplomatic missions presents significant challenges in safeguarding the rights and welfare of its citizens there. This is particularly concerning in cases where Cambodian migrant workers may face exploitation or abuse by employers, as the lack of formal diplomatic representation impedes timely intervention and protection. A notable case occurred in 2017 involving a Cambodian woman who was smuggled illegally into Saudi Arabia for domestic work. Upon arrival, she was subjected to exploitative conditions, including being transferred between multiple households, receiving minimal compensation and sustenance, and enduring consistent physical abuse. Eventually, she was helped by a police officer who took her to the Thai embassy, where she was provided temporary shelter for six months before being repatriated to Cambodia (Agape International Mission, 2017). This case highlights the vulnerability of Cambodian nationals in the absence of formal diplomatic representation and underscores the critical need for consular protection mechanisms in Saudi Arabia.

As Cambodia seeks to attract a greater number of tourists from the Middle East, the establishment of embassies and consulates between the two sides becomes increasingly important as these institutions serve as essential sources of information, assistance, and reassurance for travelers. For example, the official website of the Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia in Thailand outlines its consular services, which include providing travel advice, issuing emergency travel documents, and assisting Saudi nationals residing abroad in times of difficulty. Such services are standard offerings of most foreign embassies worldwide. Consequently, the absence of a Cambodian diplomatic mission in key Middle Eastern countries and the lack of reciprocal representation may discourage prospective Middle Eastern visitors, who might view a deficit in institutional support and personal security during their travels. Accordingly, in the absence of direct diplomatic representation, they are compelled to seek consulate assistance from relevant missions and embassies in neighboring countries, such as the Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia in Hanoi or Bangkok, thereby adding complexity and inconvenience to their stay.

An examination of non-Middle Eastern countries that maintain close relations with the region reveals a strong emphasis on think tanks (centers of studies and research), which play a vital role in providing essential knowledge and empirical data to address contemporary challenges and transformations in the Middle East. Moreover, they contribute to educating individuals and society about the Arab world while shaping public opinion to advance their objectives or those of policymakers. However, another key challenge for Cambodia is the absence of Middle East- and Arab-focused think tanks. Although very few academic institutions, such as the Royal Academy of Cambodia, host a small research department on Middle Eastern studies, no significant research or political initiatives have been undertaken in this area. A notable concern is Cambodia's call for Iranian investment in the oil and energy sectors, which carries potential risks due to ongoing Western sanctions on Iranian companies. As such, a comprehensive expert assessment is crucial to evaluate the legal, economic, and geopolitical implications before any such investments are pursued. Moreover, despite years of political and diplomatic persuasions to attract investment from Middle Eastern oil and

energy firms, Cambodia has yet to realize this objective. Limited in-depth research has been conducted to identify the underlying factors behind these firms' reluctance, hindering the development of informed and effective strategies to address the issue.

VI. Conclusion

Cambodia's efforts to diversify its foreign policy by strengthening ties with selected Middle Eastern countries reflect a strategic shift aimed at reducing Cambodia's dependence on China, mitigating the effects of Western diplomatic and economic pressures, and positioning the country for a more balanced economic growth and international standing. As it continues to broaden its diplomatic, economic, and political relationships with nations, such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Iran, and Türkiye, Cambodia unlocks new opportunities in areas like tourism, trade and investment, agriculture and food security, education, and diplomatic support. Yet, the challenges of limited diplomatic representation and the need for greater institutional support remain significant obstacles. Moving forward, Cambodia should address these challenges by establishing formal diplomatic channels, especially with key Middle East states like Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the UAE, and investing in research and expertise to navigate the complexities of its engagement with the Middle East as a whole. Such efforts will be critical for ensuring sustainable development and securing Cambodia's long-term strategic goals in the region.

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Chapter 18

Cambodia's Relations with Latin America: Work in Progress

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- I. Overview
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I. Overview

Following Cambodia's independence in November 1953, Cambodia began building relationships around the world. First, with the Non-Aligned countries, then with Africa, where because of its former association with France, Cambodia enjoyed a certain appreciation, as Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the Head of State of Cambodia was well-known in that continent because he supported anti-colonial causes and, lastly with Latin and Central America, where the influence of the United States was considerable and countries behaved in international relations according to the whims of the Cold War.

The primary motivation of Sihanouk's foreign policy was the preservation of Cambodia as a nation-state. Although survival is, in the final analysis, the root policy of all nations, the difference in this case is that Cambodia felt that its continued existence was in real and constant jeopardy. This preoccupation was in part an expression of Sihanouk's emotional response to factors beyond his control—the discrepancy in population and power between Cambodia and its neighbors, Thailand and Vietnam—but it also has been based on certain historical facts which no Cambodian nationalist can ignore.¹

As Roger Smith (1974, p. 475) observed, “The Prince believed that internal cohesion and a neutral policy in Cambodia's external relations formed the edges of the sword that could most effectively ward off threats of intervention by rival foreign powers and a subsequent demise of Cambodian independence.”

Sihanouk had foreseen the fragile position of his country in a 1958 opinion piece he had authored for the influential U.S. foreign policy journal *Foreign Affairs*:

Cambodia had no other choice but neutrality imposed on us by the necessity of being wedged in between two medium-sized nations of the Western bloc and only thinly screened by Laos from the scrutiny of two countries of the Eastern bloc, North Vietnam and the vast People's Republic of China. What choices have we but to try to maintain an equal balance between the blocs? (Norodom, 1958, p. 583).

Sihanouk managed to successfully balance attempts at infiltration by external powers while using Cambodia's extra-regional links to help balance the basic security threat to the survival of Cambodia's territorial integrity posed by its immediate neighbors.

Thus, the symbol of Cambodia's foreign policy under Norodom Sihanouk was a balancing act comprised of abrupt but calculated shifts to the right or to the left, in accordance with external political circumstances.

However, Sihanouk's balancing act did not work as well in Latin America as it had in Africa, where many countries belonged to the Non-Aligned Movement.² While in Latin America, under the influence of the United States, the Non-Aligned countries were watched with suspicion. Cuba, a full member of the NAM, was considered to be a marionette of the Soviet Union, and most of Central and Latin America were hostile to the Cuban revolution and subsequently broke diplomatic relations with that country under US pressure.

As we will see in this chapter, the first country that Cambodia established diplomatic relations with in Latin America was Argentina in 1960, at the level of Legation. Then, with Cuba, a few months later that same year. The establishment of diplomatic relations with Cuba and the opening of a Cambodian embassy in La Habana in the late 1960s seems to have hindered the interest of Latin American countries to establish diplomatic relations with Cambodia until after the Lon Nol coup in 1970.

A strong rivalry soon developed between the Khmer Republic and the Royal Government of National Union of Cambodia (GRUNC)—established by Prince Norodom Sihanouk in Beijing on 5 May 1970—as both sought diplomatic recognition from Latin American countries following the Lon Nol coup, though their efforts met with little success.

The Khmer Republic, with strong help from the United States, wished to open embassies in Argentina and Colombia, while GRUNC hoped to obtain recognition from Chile and Peru. In the end, the Khmer Republic opened embassies in Bogota, Colombia, and Montevideo, Uruguay, but only for a few months. GRUNC established an embassy in Chile from July 1973 to January 1974, when Chile broke diplomatic relations with GRUNC (El Mercurio, 1974b).

Until the 1990s, the Cambodian embassy in Cuba served as the conduit of Cambodia's relations with Latin America. According to the GRUNC Ambassador to Cuba (personal communication, 1971), "I am the Viceroy of Cambodia in Central and Latin America."³ As such, the Ambassador actively worked for the GRUNC recognition by Chile, which he obtained in January 1973. Today, the Cambodian Ambassador to Cuba is also accredited to Venezuela and Nicaragua, but no longer plays a key role in Cambodia's relations with Latin America.

Therefore, Cambodia's relations with Latin America should be considered as work in progress. Memorandums of Understanding have been signed, and there is an increasing trade exchange, but politically and diplomatically, the various relationships need more work. It is hoped that the opening of a Cambodian embassy in Brazil in August 2022 and the accreditation of a resident Ambassador last year, who will also be accredited to Argentina and Chile, will assist in enhancing Cambodia's presence in the Latin American region.

II. Argentina

The Republic of Argentina and the Kingdom of Cambodia established diplomatic relations on 28 January 1960, through diplomatic notes signed by the two countries' Ambassadors in Bangkok, Thailand. The level of the diplomatic representation was Legation, and Argentina proposed to open a Legation in Phnom Penh.⁴

However, in the midst of the Cold War, the opening of the Argentinian Legation did not eventuate, and when Cambodia proposed the accreditation of its Ambassador to the United Nations, Huot Sambath,⁵ as non-resident Ambassador to Argentina, the latter refused to accept him for the stated reason of Cambodia's attendance at the Three Continent Conference in Havana, Cuba (Australian Embassy, Phnom Penh, 1966).

At the time, most of Latin America had severed diplomatic relations with Cuba, accusing the Havana regime of interference in the internal affairs of various countries of the region by supporting revolutionary movements.

Relations between the two countries remained dormant for several years as Argentina was ruled by a succession of military governments, and Cambodia would see Prince Sihanouk ousted by General Lon Nol in March 1970. Sihanouk established a government in exile in Beijing, the Royal Government of National Union of Cambodia (GRUNC), which competed for diplomatic recognition with Lon Nol's Khmer Republic.

In December 1972, Long Boret, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Khmer Republic, visited Argentina and held discussions with General Eduardo McLoughlin, Argentina's Minister for External Relations and Cult. On this occasion, the Argentinian diplomat expressed the concern of his government for the situation in Cambodia and the willingness of Argentina to support all initiatives that could bring an end to the Cambodian civil war. The Khmer side also expressed its interest in opening a Cambodian embassy in Buenos Aires.⁶

Following the recognition of GRUNC by the Non-Aligned Movement, Prince Sihanouk met the new Argentinian Foreign Minister, Mr. Alberto Vignes, at the NAM Summit in Algiers in September 1973 and requested the recognition of GRUNC by Argentina and also its support for the forthcoming resolution at the UN General Assembly restoring the seat of Cambodia to GRUNC (US Embassy Buenos Aires, 1973).

The new Argentinian President, Juan Peron, extended an invitation to a GRUNC delegation to attend his inauguration, and he personally received the GRUNC Foreign Minister, Sarin Chhak, on 19 October 1973 and expressed "Argentina's support for the just cause of the Cambodian people" (US Embassy Phnom Penh, 1973a). Yet, Peron also wrote to Lon Nol to thank him for a message of good wishes the latter had sent on his re-election to the Presidency of Argentina, expressing "his delight in the moral support of your country, which Your Excellency governs with such dignity" (US Embassy Phnom Penh, 1973b).

The letter from Peron to Lon Nol prompted the Khmer Republic government to once again ask for the agreement for a Cambodian Ambassador to be based in Buenos Aires, but there was no answer from the Argentinian side. It seems the Argentinian government was reluctant to allow the establishment of a Cambodian embassy in Buenos Aires while the conflict in Cambodia remained unsettled (US Department of State, 1973b).

During the Khmer Rouge's "Democratic Kampuchea," a delegation from the Argentinian Communist Party (known in Spanish as Vanguardia Comunista) led by its Secretary General, Roberto Cristina, visited the country and met with Pol Pot. Cristina, who had been living in hiding before he visited Cambodia, was assassinated by the military who ruled Argentina at the time, upon his return from Cambodia.

In May 1994, Argentina and Cambodia decided to renew their diplomatic relations, which had been dormant for several decades to the Ambassadorial level. The Argentinian Ambassador to Thailand was accredited to Cambodia, and the Cambodian Ambassador to the United Nations initially was accredited to Argentina.⁷ Since then, Argentina and Cambodia have signed an Agreement of Technical Cooperation (24 September 2012) and an MOU on

Political Consultations (22 September 2022). The first bilateral meeting was held in Buenos Aires on 11 May 2023.

In August 2014, the Argentinian Deputy Foreign Minister, Ms. Carolina Perez Colman, visited Cambodia and sought Cambodia's support for Argentina's sovereign claim to the Falkland Islands (known in Spanish as "Las Malvinas"), which are claimed by Argentina from the United Kingdom.⁸ Hor Nam Hong, the then Cambodian Foreign Minister, told the Argentinian visitor that Cambodia was a neutral country that did not interfere in the internal affairs of other countries and encouraged the Argentinian authorities to settle the issue peacefully together with the United Kingdom (Royal Embassy of Cambodia, 2014).

Commercial Exchanges

In 2023, Argentina's exports to Cambodia amounted to USD 69.4 million. The principal products were meat products, corn, grinding residues, soybean pellets, and leather. Cambodia exported clothes and shoes for an amount of USD 12.1 million.⁹

III. Brazil

Diplomatic relations between Brazil and Cambodia were established in 1960¹⁰ and they were suspended in 1966, because of Cambodia's relationship with Cuba and its participation in various events held in the revolutionary island.¹¹ They were resumed on 25 March 1994, through a joint declaration signed by the two countries' permanent representatives at the United Nations.¹² Brazil assigned its representation in Cambodia to its embassy in Thailand and Cambodia to its embassy in Cuba.

During the 1970s, Brazil adopted a generally sympathetic stance toward the Khmer Republic under Lon Nol, often supporting it in United Nations General Assembly votes concerning Cambodia's representation, in opposition to the exiled Government of National Union of Cambodia (GRUNC) led by Prince Norodom Sihanouk. Nevertheless, despite encouragement from the United States, Brazil refrained from establishing formal diplomatic relations with the Khmer Republic (U.S. Department of State, 1973a).

From 2000 onwards, it seems the relationship moved forward. In 2000, Prince Norodom Ranariddh, President of the National Assembly of Cambodia, visited Brazil. The Prince's visit was followed by an important three-day visit by Long Visalo, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs from 29 April to 3 May 2011, during which he signed with his Brazilian counterpart an Agreement on Educational Cooperation and an Agreement on the Exemption of Visa Requirements for Holders of Diplomatic, Official and Service Passports (Ministry of External Affairs of Brazil, n.d.).

In addition to offering an opportunity to foster the bilateral relationship, the visit made possible the exchange of information on strengthening ties between Brazil and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), whose rotating chairmanship was to be held by Cambodia in 2012 (Ministry of External Affairs of Brazil, n.d.).

The visit of Secretary of State Long Visalo was followed by a visit by the Minister for Environment, Mok Mareth, in June 2012, to participate in the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20 Conference). The Conference was a follow-up of the 1992 Earth Summit, also held in Rio de Janeiro, and aimed to renew political commitment to sustainable development (Ministry of External Affairs of Brazil, n.d.).

In 2013, Brazil contributed to the construction of a pavilion for children with special needs at a hospital belonging to the Cambodian Ministry of Health, as part of a project developed by the IBSA Fund. Four years later, in 2017, the IBSA Fund began a project entitled “Reduction of Poverty among Young Cambodians,” with a duration of 2 years (Ministry of External Affairs of Brazil, n.d.).

In 2021, Cambodia and Brazil signed a Technical Cooperation Agreement, and in 2022, the First Political Consultations between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of both countries were held in Brasilia. This was followed by the visit of Ouch Borith, Standing Secretary for Foreign Affairs of Cambodia, to Brazil in November–December 2022, during which it was agreed that both countries would open resident Embassies in their respective capitals. Cambodia opened its Embassy in Brasilia in August 2023, and the first resident Cambodian Ambassador to Brazil was accredited on 3 December 2024 (Ministry of External Affairs of Brazil, n.d.).

The Brazilian Minister for External Affairs, Mauro Vieira, paid a one-day official visit to Cambodia on 11 October 2023 and announced that Brazil would open its Embassy in Phnom Penh during 2024 to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the resumption of diplomatic relations (Nhean, 2023).

In September 2025, Brazil accredited its first resident Ambassador to Cambodia and opened its embassy in Phnom Penh. Accepting the credentials of the new Ambassador, Acting Head of State, Samdech Techo Hun Sen, expressed his happiness at the opening of the Brazilian embassy and welcomed Ambassador Vivian Loss Sanmartin, stating that her arrival represented “a strategic turning point to strengthen cooperation between the two countries, both politically and economically.”¹³

Samdech Techo suggested the creation of parliamentary friendship groups within the National Assembly and the Senate to strengthen interparliamentary cooperation, a strong signal in favor of active and constructive diplomacy.

Regarding sports, a source of national pride for Brazil, the Ambassador was invited by Samdech Techo to strengthen cooperation in this area. The Acting Head of State recalled Brazil’s world-renowned football and volleyball, sports in which the country boasts abundant talent. Samdech Techo suggested sending Brazilian coaches to Cambodia in the near future to train local athletes, a project that, according to Ambassador Sanmartin, is well underway and could materialize quickly.

The bilateral relationship between Cambodia and Brazil is developing rapidly, and the Cambodian Foreign Minister is expected to pay an official visit to Brazil in the next few months.

Commercial Exchanges

In April 2025, Brazil exported USD 2,200,000 worth of goods to Cambodia while importing USD 14,400,000, resulting in a trade deficit of USD 12,200,000. Compared to the same period in 2024, Brazil's exports to Cambodia increased by USD 381,000 (21%), rising from USD 1,820,000 to USD 2,200,000, whereas imports grew by USD 4,730,000 (48.8%), from USD 9,710,000 to USD 14,400,000 (Observatory of Economic Complexity, n.d.).

Brazil's primary exports consisted of poultry meat (USD 982,000), leather of other animals (USD 251,000), and sawn wood (USD 201,000). Cambodia's main exports to Brazil included rubber tires (USD 5,820,000), trunks and cases (USD 1,180,000), and knit babies' garments (USD 879,000) (Observatory of Economic Complexity, n.d.).

IV. Colombia

Cambodia and the Republic of Colombia established diplomatic relations during the Khmer Republic on 16 December 1972. Cambodia opened an embassy in Bogota a few months later. Cambodia proposed Ambassador Touch Vutthi, who was its Permanent Representative to the United Nations, based in New York, as its resident Ambassador in Bogota. The idea was that Ambassador Vutthi would be based in Bogota but spend some time in New York during the UN General Assembly. He would have also been accredited as Ambassador to Haiti, Ecuador, and the Dominican Republic (US State Department, 1974).

The underlying objective of this arrangement was to garner support from as many Latin American countries as possible in defense of the Khmer Republic's diplomatic credentials, which faced challenges from the supporters of the exiled Royal Government of National Union of Cambodia (GRUNC), led by Prince Norodom Sihanouk, including Albania, Algeria, China, and twenty other states (US State Department, 1974).

The relationship between the two countries was inactive for several decades. In January 2011, Foreign Minister María Ángela Holguín visited Cambodia to participate in the ASEAN Tourism Forum. In October 2012, Cambodia's Secretary of State for International Cooperation, Rathchavy Soeung, visited Colombia to participate in the Forum on East Asia-Latin America Cooperation (FEALAC) Week. From 2013 to 2014, Deputy Minister Patti Londoño met twice with Cambodia's Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Ouch Borith: in April 2013 in Phnom Penh, during a tour of Asia-Pacific countries, and during the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) Ministerial Conference, held in May 2014 in Algiers, Algeria (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Colombia, n.d.).

On 8 April 2013, the two Ministries signed an MOU establishing a mechanism for Political Consultations. The First Consultation was held in Phnom Penh on 19 January 2018. During the Consultation, topics on the bilateral agenda in political, economic, and cooperation matters were discussed. In this regard, issues related to visa facilitation, opportunities to strengthen trade and investment, education, tourism, teaching Spanish as a foreign language, and demining (an area in which Cambodia has extensive experience) were highlighted (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Colombia, n.d.).

The Second Bilateral Consultation was held in Bogota on 4 and 5 December 2022. The Ministers decided to increase efforts to intensify the trade exchange between the two countries. The Cambodian side briefed the Colombians on the favorable conditions for business investment policies in Cambodia and proposed the holding of a Business Forum during the next consultation to be held in Phnom Penh. Cambodia would continue helping Colombia with training for deminers and Colombia has been training tourist guides and public servants in Spanish language, as well as offering Masters and Doctoral scholarships to Cambodian students from 2023 onwards.

Commercial Exchanges

In 2023, Colombia's exports to Cambodia amounted to USD 168,000. The main products exported by Colombia were animal food (USD 69,900), coffee (USD 56,900), and plastic lids (USD 21,300) (Observatory of Economic Complexity, n.d.).

Cambodia exported goods worth USD 45.9 million to Colombia. The primary Cambodian exports were non-knit women's clothing (USD 9.17 million), bicycles, delivery tricycles, and other cycles (USD 4.88 million), and rubber footwear (USD 4.01 million) (Observatory of Economic Complexity, n.d.).

Over the past five years, Colombia's exports to Cambodia have grown at an average annual rate of 14.6%, increasing from USD 84,900 in 2018 to USD 168,000 in 2023. Meanwhile, Cambodia's exports to Colombia rose at an average annual rate of 9.49%, from USD 29.2 million in 2018 to USD 45.9 million in 2023 (Observatory of Economic Complexity, n.d.).

V. Chile

Chile was the only country in Latin America to extend diplomatic recognition to the exiled Royal Government of National Union of Cambodia on 9 January 1973. A GRUNC embassy was established in Santiago in July 1973 with Dr. Nou Pech appointed as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary.¹⁴

The then-President of Chile, the late Salvador Allende, had promised to recognize the GRUNC during the electoral campaign. However, it seems the pro-Moscow Communist Party of Chile, which formed part of the coalition supporting Allende, was not too keen to recognize the exiled government led by Prince Norodom Sihanouk and based in the Chinese capital, Beijing. Therefore, while North Vietnam, the Vietcong and North Korea were granted diplomatic recognition by the Allende government almost immediately after his election in September 1970, the GRUNC had to wait for a couple of years. Unfortunately, the relationship would not last long.¹⁵

On 11 September 1973, a coup d'état overthrew Allende, who died during the coup, and a military junta took over and ran the country until 1989. The GRUNC embassy continued to operate in Santiago, even though Prince Sihanouk had asked his government to withdraw the embassy from Santiago as he felt that the military would break diplomatic relations

with GRUNC. Prince Sihanouk asked the GRUNC to transfer Dr. Nou Pech from Santiago to Conakry, Guinea, as that African country wanted to host a GRUNC embassy in its capital.¹⁶

The military junta, which had overthrown President Allende, changed Chile's support for GRUNC at international gatherings such as the Law of the Sea Conference held in New York in November 1973, where Chile supported the credentials of the Khmer Republic's delegation against GRUNC (US Embassy Santiago, 1973b).

However, GRUNC followed China's steps and kept its embassy in Santiago, even though Chile no longer supported GRUNC's credentials at international conferences, UNESCO, and the UN General Assembly (US Embassy Santiago, 1973b).

On 18 January 1974, Chile broke its diplomatic relations with GRUNC and asked Dr. Nou Pech to leave the country and close the GRUNC Embassy. According to press reports, the Chilean customs had intercepted boxes sent to the Embassy from Beijing containing booklets showing the activities of the armed units of the United National Front of Kampuchea (FUNK) inside the liberated zone of Cambodia. The Chilean military authorities considered these booklets as "guerrilla training literature" and ordered the GRUNC Embassy closed (US Embassy Santiago, 1973a; *El Mercurio*, 1974a).

Relations between the two countries remained dormant for many years, and Chile, like most of Latin America, supported various ASEAN resolutions in favor of the Khmer Rouge's Democratic Kampuchea, including its UN seat from 1979 onwards.

Diplomatic relations were reestablished on 16 February 1994, but this restoration has been slow. Chile accredited its Ambassador to Thailand as concurrent to Cambodia in the mid-2000s. Cambodia did not accredit one and let its embassy in Bangkok deal with the Chileans.

On 27 November 2015, a bilateral consultation was held in Phnom Penh attended by Ambassador Alfredo Labbe, Director General of Foreign Policy at the Chilean Ministry of External Affairs. He signed an agreement with Ouch Borith, Secretary of State of the Cambodian Foreign Ministry, by which diplomatic, official, and service passport holders from both countries were exempted from visa requirements.

On 28 September 2019, the Foreign Ministers of Cambodia and Chile co-chaired the 6th ASEAN-Pacific Alliance Ministerial Meeting at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. This was followed by various meetings between Chilean and Cambodian Ambassadors to Thailand.

More recently, on 12 June 2025, Madame Eat Sophea, Acting Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the Kingdom of Cambodia, and Patricio Powell Osorio, Ambassador of the Republic of Chile to the Kingdom of Cambodia, with residence in Bangkok, signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on the Establishment of Political Consultations between the Foreign Ministries of Cambodia and Chile. Both sides also expressed commitment to further enhancing cooperation in international fora and emphasized the importance of bilateral consultations between the two Foreign Ministries. They agreed to convene the first meeting in the near future (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Cambodia, 2025).

Commercial Exchanges

In 2023, Cambodia exported to Chile leather footwear (USD 8.67 million), knit sweaters (USD 8.11 million), and rubber footwear (USD 5.65 million). Chile's main exports to Cambodia were non-iron and steel slag, ash, and residues (USD 23.7 million), precipitated copper (USD 21 million), and raw copper (USD 16.7 million) (Observatory of Economic Complexity, n.d.).

VI. Guyana

Guyana, a former British colony, is the only English-speaking country in Latin America. Officially known as the Co-operative Republic of Guyana, it is a country on the northern coast of South America. It gained independence from Britain in May 1966.

It hosted the Non-Aligned Ministers of Foreign Affairs Conference in 1972, when the Royal Government of National Union of Cambodia (GRUNC) was restored as the legitimate representative of Cambodia in the Non-Aligned Movement.¹⁷ Guyana did not immediately recognize the GRUNC but waited until the Non-Aligned Summit in Algiers in September 1973 to announce its recognition of the GRUNC.

Guyana's relations with Cambodia were based on both countries' membership of the Non-Aligned Movement, of which Guyana was a leader in Latin America. Following the fall of Phnom Penh to the Khmer Rouge, Guyana ceased to support the regime at the UN General Assembly annual votes on the Cambodian seat.

The relationship has been inactive, apart from occasional meetings between the Cambodian and Guyana Ambassadors in Cuba.

Commercial Exchanges

In 2019, Guyana exported goods worth USD 180,000 to Cambodia. The main products exported were mixed mineral or chemical fertilizers. Over the five-year period from 2014 to 2019, exports from Guyana to Cambodia increased at an annualized rate of 1,020%, growing from USD 0 in 2014 to USD 180,000 in 2019 (Observatory of Economic Complexity, n.d.).

In 2023, Cambodia exported goods worth USD 144,000 to Guyana, primarily consisting of leather footwear and other clothing articles (Observatory of Economic Complexity, n.d.).

VII. Peru

During the 1970s, both sides of the Cambodian conflict, the Khmer Republic and GRUNC, tried to establish diplomatic relations with Peru. In 1973, a delegation of GRUNC visiting Chile tried to visit Peru, but the Peruvian government of General Juan Velasco Alvarado, who was anti-USA and of left-leaning persuasions, denied visas to the delegation as well as to the Foreign Minister of the Khmer Republic, Long Boret, arguing that it wished to remain neutral as far as the Cambodian conflict was concerned.¹⁸

In August 1975, Ieng Sary accompanied by Sarin Chhak, Minister of Foreign Affairs of GRUNC, visited Peru to attend the Ministerial Conference of the Non-Aligned Movement. Peru established diplomatic relations with Democratic Kampuchea on 31 May 1976. The Peruvian Ambassador to Malaysia was also accredited to Cambodia.¹⁹

From 2015 to 2022, there was no Peruvian Ambassador accredited to Cambodia. In April 2023, Ambassador Ricardo Morote presented his credentials to King Sihamoni. The King recalled that Cambodia owed a debt to H.E. Javier Perez de Cuellar, the late Peruvian Secretary General of the United Nations, who had actively cooperated in the search for a peaceful settlement of the Cambodian conflict in the 1980s.²⁰

On 4 September 2023, an MOU was signed in Jakarta between the two countries' Ministries of Foreign Affairs, establishing a mechanism of bilateral consultations.

Peru and Cambodia are two countries among the cradles of the world's oldest civilizations, and Peru has proposed to the Cambodian authorities several initiatives on cultural, technical, and diplomatic matters that would benefit both countries, including the pairing of the Machu Picchu National Archaeological Park and the Angkor Wat Archaeological Park, sites listed as World Cultural Heritage Sites.²¹

Next year, Cambodia and Peru will celebrate 50 years of their diplomatic relations.

Commercial Exchanges

In 2023, Cambodia exported goods valued at USD 41.2 million to Peru, with the main products being rubber footwear, knit t-shirts, and leather footwear. Cambodian exports to Peru grew at an annual rate of 14.1% between 2018 and 2023 (Observatory of Economic Complexity, n.d.).

In 2023, Peru exported goods valued at USD 10.6 million to Cambodia. The main products were copper ore, non-retail animal hair yarn, and tanned equine and bovine hides. Peruvian exports to Cambodia grew at an annual rate of 131% between 2018 and 2023 (Observatory of Economic Complexity, n.d.).

VIII. Uruguay

Having failed in its attempts to open an embassy in Argentina, the Khmer Republic opened an embassy in Montevideo, Uruguay, in July 1974. A senior Cambodian diplomat, Ambassador Ong Khuy Treng, was appointed as Ambassador to Uruguay and also concurrent to Bolivia, Ecuador, and Paraguay. However, with the fall of the Khmer Republic in April 1975, the Embassy had to be closed down (US Embassy, Montevideo, 1975).

On 29 September 1994, the two countries reestablished diplomatic relations through a protocol signed by HRH Prince Norodom Sirivuddh, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Cambodia, and H.E. Dr. Sergio Abrteu-Bonilla, Minister of External Affairs of Uruguay.²²

The two countries signed an agreement on 23 April 2013, abolishing visas for the holders of diplomatic, official, and service passports of Cambodia and Uruguay.

The relationship between Cambodia and Uruguay has been slow to mature, but during a visit by the Ambassador of Uruguay to Thailand, also accredited to Cambodia, in August 2024, the possibility of cooperation in the field of agriculture was discussed.

Commercial Exchanges

In 2023, Uruguay exported goods valued at USD 1.09 million to Cambodia. The main product exported was rough wood (USD 1.09 million). Over the past five years, Uruguayan exports to Cambodia decreased at an annual rate of 9.48%, falling from USD 1.79 million in 2018 to USD 1.09 million in 2023 (Observatory of Economic Complexity, n.d.).

In 2023, Cambodia exported goods valued at USD 8.53 million to Uruguay. The main products were knit sweaters (USD 1.36 million), footwear (USD 801,000), and non-knit women's suits (USD 732,000). Over the past five years, Cambodian exports to Uruguay increased at an annual rate of 10.2%, growing from USD 5.25 million in 2018 to USD 8.53 million in 2023 (Observatory of Economic Complexity, n.d.).

IX. Conclusion

Cambodia, having confronted numerous challenges due to the Cold War in Southeast Asia, saw its relationships with various countries in Latin America disrupted by these challenges, which some countries in Latin America also confronted to a lesser degree during that period. However, this situation has generated considerable sympathy in Latin America for Cambodia and its people. There is a willingness to learn more about Cambodia and its rich ancient history, as well as to strengthen cultural, political, and commercial relations.

The opening of a Cambodian embassy in Brasilia in 2024 and of a Brazilian embassy in Phnom Penh in September 2025 augurs well for a multiform increase in exchanges between Cambodia and Latin America, as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Cambodia has highlighted the Latin American region as one of its outreach priorities.

Endnotes

- 1 For an extensive assessment of Sihanouk's foreign policy, see my PhD thesis, *Norodom Sihanouk and the Formulation of Cambodian Foreign Policy (1953–1975)*, Monash University, 2015, Monash University Thesis Repository.
- 2 At the First Summit Conference of Heads of State of Non-Aligned Countries in 1961, held in Belgrade, 12 of the 25 participating countries were from Africa and one—from the Americas—was Cuba. Ecuador, Brazil, and Bolivia were present, but only as observers, not as members.
- 3 Dr. Toch Kham Doeun served as GRUNC Ambassador to Cuba from 1970 to 1973, after which he was appointed Ambassador to China. He was killed by the Khmer Rouge in 1976–77.
- 4 Decree No. 15810 of 31 May 1961. Copy by courtesy of the Embassy of Argentina in Thailand.
- 5 Huot Sambath was one of Cambodia's most senior diplomats, who had previously also served as the country's Foreign Minister.
- 6 Joint Declaration of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Khmer Republic and External Affairs and Cult of Argentina, 20 December 1972. Copy by courtesy of the Argentinian Embassy in Thailand.
- 7 Joint Declaration on the Upgrading of Diplomatic Relations between the Government of the Argentine Republic and the Government of the Kingdom of Cambodia, New York 25 May 1994. Copy by courtesy of the Argentinian Embassy in Thailand.
- 8 Cambodia had supported Argentina in 1982, when the UK and Argentina fought a bloody war over the Falkland Islands, which Argentina had invaded but were retaken by the UK.
- 9 Figures by courtesy of the Argentinian Embassy in Thailand.
- 10 Author was unable to find the exact date and a request to the Brazilian Embassy in Thailand was not answered. The website of the Brazilian Ministry of External Affairs states that relations between Brazil and Cambodia were suspended in 1966 but it does not indicate the reason.
- 11 Email communication from a former Brazilian Ambassador who wishes to remain anonymous. 15 March 2025.
- 12 Communiqué of the reactivation of diplomatic relations between the Kingdom of Cambodia and the Federative Republic of Brazil, New York, 25 March 1994. Copy by courtesy of the UN Archives in New York.
- 13 Private communication from a staff member of the Cambodian Senate, 27 September 2025.
- 14 Dr. Nou Pech had previously been Deputy Chief of Mission at the GRUNC Embassy in Cairo.

- 15 The author, as Director of the Students Friends of Cambodia association in Chile, was very much involved in seeking the recognition of GRUNC by the Chilean government, between 1970 and July 1972, when he left Chile to study in Australia.
- 16 Telegram from Samdech Norodom Sihanouk to Samdech Penn Nouth, Prime Minister of GRUNC, sent from Algiers on 12 September 1973, copy from the Norodom Sihanouk Archives, Beijing 2004.
- 17 Telegram from Samdech Penn Nouth to Samdech Norodom Sihanouk, 11 August 1972, copy from the Norodom Sihanouk Archives, Beijing, September 2004.
- 18 Report of a visit to Chile by Chau Seng, Minister of Special Missions of GRUNC, Santiago, 1973. Copy in possession of the author.
- 19 Information obtained from H.E. Ricardo E. Morote Canales, Ambassador of Peru to Malaysia, Cambodia and Brunei, 29 May 2025.
- 20 Information obtained from H.E. Ricardo E. Morote Canales.
- 21 Information obtained from H.E. Ricardo E. Morote Canales.
- 22 Copy of Protocol by courtesy of the Ministry of External Affairs of Uruguay.

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Chapter 19

Cambodia's Security and National Defense in a Changing World: Contemporary Challenges and Future Prospects

BONG Chansambath

CONTENTS

- I. Introduction
- II. Continuities and Changes in Cambodia's Security Environment
- III. Cambodia's Defense Strategy and Responses to Security Challenges
- IV. Future Prospects

I. Introduction

Over the past several years, the global security landscape has been marked by increasing volatility, driven by strategic competition between the United States and China, Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, military tensions in the South China Sea, the COVID-19 pandemic, and, most recently, the return of Donald J. Trump to the White House for a second term. In the previous edition, Var Veasna (2017, pp. 370–372) argued that Cambodia faces several strategic challenges, including territorial disputes with Thailand and Vietnam, terrorism, and geopolitical pressures stemming from the U.S.–China rivalry and Cambodia's precarious position between China and its membership in ASEAN.

Building upon Var's analysis, this chapter analyzes the evolution of Cambodia's security environment since 2017 and advances one central argument. It contends that, despite the evolving global environment outlined above, Cambodia's principal security concerns remain domestic and sub-regional in nature. Under the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP), Cambodia remains primarily focused on regime survival and the traditional security challenges posed by neighboring Thailand and Vietnam. Nevertheless, the recent emergence of cyberscam operations presents a new, digitally enabled non-traditional security threat to Cambodia, while maritime disputes in the South China Sea remain a military flashpoint threatening regional trade and stability.

This chapter has three parts. The first part examines both the continuities and changes in Cambodia's security landscape since 2017, explaining how domestic, sub-regional, and regional security dynamics have influenced Cambodia's threat perceptions. The second part discusses Cambodia's defense strategy and its responses to existing security challenges, with an emphasis on the roles and modernization of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF). The final part looks at the future prospects of the challenges shaping Cambodia's security and strategic outlook in the coming years.

II. Continuities and Changes in Cambodia's Security Environment

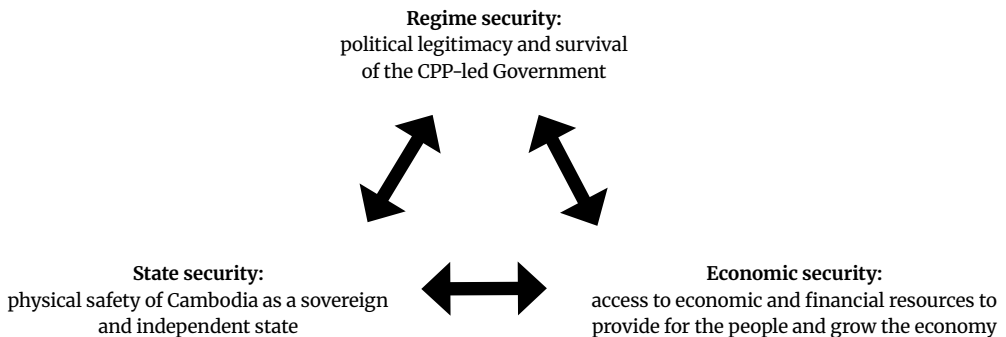
Since 2017, Cambodia's security priorities have remained anchored in domestic and sub-regional issues, despite the fluid global environment. At the domestic level, the ruling CPP government, under Prime Ministers Hun Sen and Hun Manet, has continued to keep regime security front and center in its strategic considerations. Regime security, defined broadly as the preservation of political legitimacy and the ability to stay in power, is understood by the CPP as existential. Potential threats to regime security include electoral defeat, a military coup, external interferences, or foreign-backed regime change (Jackson, 2013, pp. 161–166). Closely linked to regime security is economic security, which encompasses Cambodia's ability to provide for its people and to promote greater socio-economic development. As a post-war developing country, Cambodia's economic development has depended on continued access to and integration with the post-World War II global trade and financial systems.

This, however, leaves the country vulnerable to external shocks beyond its control, including pandemics, trade or economic sanctions, tariff wars, or global economic downturns.

At the sub-regional level, Cambodia has devoted considerable policy attention and defense resources to managing its land and maritime borders with its larger and more powerful neighbors, Thailand and Vietnam. These borders remain critical to Cambodia's strategic outlook and constitute potential threats to its state security. In this context, state security refers to the ability to protect the physical safety of Cambodia as a sovereign state from threats emanating internally—such as unrest or rebellion—and externally, including armed aggression or invasion by state actors or non-traditional security threats posed by non-state actors. Cambodia's latest border clashes with Thailand in July 2025 exemplify this dynamic, which will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

While state security encompasses multiple dimensions, this chapter refers specifically to the protection of Cambodia's territorial integrity and physical borders with Thailand and Vietnam. Together, regime security, economic security, and state security constitute what political scientist Robert J. Art (2003) categorizes as “vital” national interests—those shaping a state's foreign policy and survival and whose neglect can lead to catastrophic outcomes for the state in question.

Figure 1: Cambodia's Security Triad (author)



As Figure 1 illustrates, the three dimensions of Cambodia's security—regime, economic, and state—are interlinked and mutually reinforcing. To preserve its governing legitimacy, the CPP must protect Cambodia from internal and external physical threats. Nevertheless, the protection of Cambodia relies on the existence of a functioning government able to govern its population and equip and command a unified armed forces capable of neutralizing threats. A similar logic applies to the regime security-economic security nexus. On one hand, the CPP's regime survival depends significantly on its capacity to deliver public goods, such as economic growth, jobs, political stability, and public services. On the other hand, Cambodia cannot develop its economy unless there is a functioning government with the authority to regulate and administer political authority within Cambodian territory. Finally, state security and economic security are intertwined in that Cambodia cannot pursue economic

development uninterruptedly while facing grave threats from either foreign powers or non-state actors. Conversely, the ability to make national revenues through tax collections, trade, and foreign aid is fundamental to Cambodia's national defense.

Beyond its borders, the recent emergence and proliferation of cyberscam operations—combining human trafficking with modern technologies—have posed an entirely new non-traditional security threat to Cambodia, entangling the country with transnational criminal networks and tarnishing its international reputation. Given their prevalence, such operations have become a core security problem for Cambodia. At the regional level, the South China Sea territorial disputes persist as an enduring flashpoint that can lead to military confrontations between China and the United States (and its allies), threatening to disrupt trade and stability in Southeast Asia.

Regime Security

Since gaining independence in 1953, Cambodia has faced regime security challenges under successive Khmer leaders. A brief overview of Cambodia's post-colonial history demonstrates this dynamic. Under Prince Norodom Sihanouk's rule (1953-1970), the country faced internal and external pressure to align with one side in the global ideological contestation between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Driven by what he described as "geopolitical necessity," Sihanouk pursued a neutrality foreign policy by precariously walking a tightrope between communist China and North Vietnam, on one side, and the United States, Thailand, and South Vietnam, on the other (Leifer, 1967, p. 18).

Domestically, Sihanouk exercised a personalized control over Cambodian politics, eliminating his political adversaries and keeping them off balance (Chandler, 2008, p. 240; Peou, 2000, pp. 42-47). Nevertheless, his government faced external threats from neighboring Thailand and South Vietnam, both of which viewed Cambodia's neutrality with contempt and even hostility. During the 1960s, these two countries violated Cambodia's borders and interfered in its internal affairs by supporting the Khmer Serei clandestine group led by Son Ngoc Thanh, Sihanouk's nemesis (Rust, 2016, pp. 97-98, 128-130, 141-143). The most notorious attempt to interfere in Cambodia's domestic affairs by these rapacious neighbors were the failed 1959 Dap Chhuon and Bangkok plots, as well as the palace bomb explosion that same year. The events implicated Sihanouk's estranged former confidant, Sam Sary, alongside Thailand, South Vietnam, and the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (Chandler, 1991, pp. 99-107; Rust, 2016, pp. 151-152, 170-184; Tarling, 2014, pp. 28-31). Beginning in the mid-1960s, the escalating war in Vietnam, the U.S. bombing of Cambodia, and growing domestic economic difficulties generated political instability and paved the way for Sihanouk's downfall.

Following Sihanouk's ouster on March 18, 1970, the U.S.-aligned Khmer Republic regime under Lon Nol (1970-1975) found itself in a grim internal security situation. The presence of more than 50,000 communist Viet Cong guerillas inside Cambodia threatened to engulf the country directly into the Vietnam War (Sak, 1980, p. 18). The Khmer Republic's regime

security was further diminished by rampant corruption within the armed forces, escalating military offensives by the Khmer Rouge, and Lon Nol's lackluster leadership, which combined indecisiveness with his strange obsession with the occult (Chandler, 1991, pp. 205–206, 226–235; Conboy, 2013, p. 41). These factors led to Lon Nol's demise on 17 April 1975.

After taking power, the communist Khmer Rouge imposed a totalitarian dictatorship on Cambodia. Between 17 April 1975 and 7 January 1979, at least 14,000 people were accused of having “Cambodian bodies and Vietnamese minds” were tortured and executed at the S-21 prison, while some two million of Cambodia's seven million population at the time died from starvation and other crimes against humanity at the hands of the Khmer Rouge leaders (Chandler, 2008, pp. 265–272). The Khmer Rouge's repeated armed attacks against Vietnam compelled the latter to launch a full-scale invasion of Cambodia starting in late December 1978, sparking the Third Indochina War (Heder, 1981, pp. 22–34, 42–61; Morris, 1999, pp. 97–110).

After ousting the Khmer Rouge on 7 January 1979, Vietnam occupied Cambodia for the following decade and installed a client regime in Phnom Penh known as the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), led by former Khmer Rouge defectors such as Heng Samrin and Hun Sen. Widely viewed as Vietnam's proxy, the PRK was the target of a concerted campaign of diplomatic isolation spearheaded by China, the United States, and ASEAN members—particularly Thailand and Singapore—each sought, for their own strategic reasons, to drive Vietnam out of Cambodia (Peou, 2000, pp. 138–145). The PRK's legitimacy was further weakened by the presence of the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK), a tripartite alliance made up of the Khmer Rouge, Son Sann's Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF), and royalist forces loyal to Sihanouk. Backed by China and ASEAN, the CGDK deprived the PRK of Cambodia's seat at the United Nations (UN) until 1993. Domestically, although Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia prevented the Khmer Rouge's return, it undermined the PRK's legitimacy in the eyes of Cambodians who were—and continue to be—deeply suspicious of Vietnam (Slocumb, 2003, pp. 145–146).

Following the signing of the Paris Peace Agreements in October 1991, the deployment of the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) in 1992–1993 brought a measure of normalcy to Cambodia after decades of internal conflict. However, the deployment posed “a direct challenge” to the CPP, which had ruled Cambodia under a different name since January 1979 (Strangio et al., 2025, p. 7). The UNTAC-administered election of 1993 resulted in an electoral setback for the CPP, which subsequently forced its way into a coalition government with the royalist FUNCINPEC. The tumultuous coalition imploded violently during armed clashes between CPP and FUNCINPEC military factions on 5–6 July 1997 (Peou, 1998, pp. 69–72). The survey of Cambodia's post-colonial history above demonstrates that, since 1953, successive Khmer leaders have faced challenges to their regime's survival.

Economic Security

Since 2017, Cambodia has faced three major economic headwinds. First was the partial withdrawal of preferential access to the European Union (EU)’s Everything But Arms (EBA) trade scheme in February 2020. Under the EBA framework, Cambodia had previously enjoyed duty-free and quota-free exports to the EU for all kinds of products except arms. With the partial withdrawal, tariffs are imposed on 20% of Cambodian exports to the EU. The regional bloc cited Cambodia’s democratic regression as the reason for the decision.

Second was the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2023), which had crippling impacts on Cambodia’s export-oriented, tourism-dependent economy. After a decade of over 7% growth, Cambodia’s gross domestic product (GDP) contracted by 3.6% in 2020 and has yet to fully bounce back to the pre-pandemic level (The World Bank, n.d.). COVID-19 also hit Cambodia’s tourism sector and related industries hard. The numbers of tourist arrivals by air dropped 82% in the 2019–2022 period, while between 390,000 and 570,000 workers had lost their jobs (Darc, 2024; Hong, 2024).

The third and most recent challenge stems from the imposition of the “Liberation Day” tariffs by the second Trump administration (Harithas et al., 2025). On 2 April 2025, U.S. President Trump announced a 49% tariff rate on all Cambodian exports to the United States. In 2023, the United States was Cambodia’s largest export market, accounting for USD 4.6 billion—or 38.6%—of its garment, footwear, and travel goods (GFT) products (TAFTAC, 2024, p. 5). The tariffs threatened Cambodia’s GFT export industry, which has been a key pillar of its economy, accounting for 70% of the country’s export since 2009 and employing nearly a million workers, the majority of them women from rural families (TAFTAC, 2024, p. 6). Although the United States reduced the tariff rate to 19% on 2 August 2025, uncertainties remain as to how much impact the new tariffs will have on Cambodia’s export industry. More broadly, the tariffs have dealt another blow to the post-World War 2 global trade system upon which Cambodia depends, while triggering a new round of global trade tensions as well as U.S.–China tariff war that can push cheap surplus Chinese goods originally bound for the U.S. market to flood Cambodia and other ASEAN economies (Bland, 2025; Pangestu & Armstrong, 2025).

State Security

Cambodia’s land and maritime borders with Thailand and Vietnam remain among its highest security priorities (RGC, 2022, pp. 7–9). Since 2017, notable incidents have continued to cause friction in Cambodia’s relations with its two larger neighbors. In April 2020, Cambodia discovered 31 Vietnamese military tents in a contested border area near Kandal Province, prompting it to demand the tents’ immediate removal (Cambodianess, 2020). Since 1985, Cambodia has demarcated roughly 84% of the 1,137-kilometer land frontiers with Vietnam, with the remaining 16% currently being negotiated (Po, 2025).

Since taking office in 2023, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet has reaffirmed Cambodia’s commitment to conclude the remaining land border demarcation with Vietnam in a timely and peaceful manner. However, as Po Sovinda (2025) notes, some segments of the

Cambodia–Vietnam land border remain contested, keeping alive a thorn in their bilateral ties and a source of anti-Vietnamese sentiments in Cambodia. Furthermore, the two countries have yet to formally negotiate their maritime frontiers. These territorial ambiguities allowed Vietnamese fishing boats to fish in waters under Cambodian sovereignty (Po, 2025).

The border situation along Cambodia's frontier with Thailand remains complicated and volatile. Since the chapter by Leang Sim Onn and Khan Menghok already covers Cambodia–Thailand relations, this author will only briefly examine the latest territorial disputes and their implications for Cambodia's security outlook. At sea, the long-standing maritime disputes over the 26,000-square-kilometer overlapping claims area (OCA) in the Gulf of Thailand has resurfaced, centering on the question of sovereignty over Koh Kood/Koh Kut Island. After coming to power in August 2024, former Thai Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra insisted on resuming the OCA negotiations with Cambodia using the memorandum of understanding (MoU) both countries signed on 18 June 2001. Paetongtarn's domestic critics pressed for the unilateral annulment of the 2001 document—known in Thailand as MoU-44—arguing that it implies Thailand's tacit acceptance of Cambodian claim to half of Koh Kood (Chalermphanupap, 2025). Thai nationalist sentiments were exacerbated further when Hun Manet said that the two neighbors have not yet settled their maritime boundary, including the issue of Koh Kood. How Manet will address the Koh Kood issue remains unclear, given the island has been under Thailand's *de facto* control.

On land, after a period of relative calm since 2011, Cambodia and Thailand are at loggerheads once again. On 28 May 2025, a brief gunfight between Cambodian and Thai armies broke out near Mom Bei—also known as the Emerald Triangle—a stretch of undemarcated frontiers where Cambodian, Thai, and Lao borderlands converge. The violence left one Cambodian soldier dead and triggered a chain of escalation by both countries. Unlike the 2008–2011 clashes near the Preah Vihear temple, the latest conflict stretches across four areas, from Mom Bei to three ancient Khmer temples of Tamone Thom, Tamone Touch, and Ta Krabei. On 15 June, Cambodia referred the four disputed areas to the International Court of Justice.

Tensions escalated into mutual economic retaliation, with Thailand unilaterally closing border crossings beginning on 7 June, followed by Cambodia's ban of Thai products in subsequent weeks. Things came to a head on 24–28 July when Cambodian and Thai forces fought in their deadliest border clashes to date, leaving at least 43 fatalities and 300,000 civilians internally displaced on both sides of the borders. On 28 July, the two countries reached a ceasefire brokered by Malaysia, with involvements of the United States and China (Head & Guinto, 2025).

By the end of October 2025, even though the truce has held precariously, the situation remains prone to renewed hostilities due to continued disagreements over whether the territorial disputes should be addressed bilaterally or multilaterally, alongside political uncertainties in Thailand. This dynamic resembles the 2008–2011 border crisis (Chachavalpongpun, 2013, pp. 74–77; International Crisis Group, 2011; Pou, 2013, pp. 90–94). Moreover, the armed clashes have forced the return of approximately 910,000 Cambodian migrant workers from Thailand, creating additional economic pressure on the Hun Manet

government (CDRI, 2025) and affecting fishery, agriculture, and manufacturing industries in Thailand due to labor shortages (Meng & Anna, 2025).

Cyberscam as Transnational Security Threat

Since 2020, the cyberscam issue has metastasized into the most prevalent non-traditional security threat facing Cambodia. The country is not only home to victims of online scams but has also emerged—alongside Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar—as a regional hub for cyberscam operations. These operations lure foreign nationals with false promises of high-paying jobs before trafficking them to compounds where they are then forced to conduct online fraud. In a May 2024 report, the U.S. Institute of Peace estimated that the annual revenue made by the cyberscam industry in Southeast Asia had reached nearly USD 64 billion by 2023. In Cambodia, the sector's revenues were estimated to exceed USD 12.5 billion—equivalent to half of the country's GDP. Similarly, the U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2024) reported that around 100,000 people have been trafficked into scam compounds and forced to conduct Internet frauds in Cambodia.

The emergence and proliferation of cyberscam operations present a serious security threat for Cambodia. First, it has compromised the information security of Cambodian citizens, resulting in the theft and sale of their private information by online criminals. Scam operations have also undermined Cambodia's domestic security, and tourism and investment climate.

Second, the cyberscam issue has seriously undermined Cambodia's international reputation and foreign relations. Citizens of ASEAN members have been lured into Cambodia-based scam centers, leading to diplomatic friction and growing calls for accountability (Al Jazeera, 2025; Strangio, 2022). Meanwhile, countries such as the United States have intensified pressure on Cambodia to address cyber scams that have defrauded American citizens of billions of dollars (The Straits Times, 2025; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2025). On 14 October 2025, the U.S. government, in coordination with the United Kingdom, issued a federal indictment and imposed sanctions on a prominent Chinese-born Cambodian businessman allegedly involved in global cyberscam and money laundering operations, further increasing international pressure on Phnom Penh (U.S. Department of Justice, 2025; U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2025). Around the same time, the death of a young South Korean student who was reportedly tortured and detained in a scam compound in Cambodia prompted Seoul to consider establishing a “Korean Desk” to liaise with Cambodian authorities on scam-related issues (Kim, 2025). South Korea's response underscores growing frustration among foreign governments with Cambodia's management of transnational cybercrime. As a result, countries disillusioned by Cambodia's inaction may become less inclined to cooperate with it on other matters of mutual interest. More broadly, the continued operation of scam networks undermines Cambodia's compliance with the eleven United Nations norms of responsible state behavior in cyberspace, which call on member states to “not knowingly allow their territory to be used for internationally wrongful acts” conducted through information and communication technologies (Hogeveen, 2022).

Third, cyberscam has gained a geopolitical dimension in the wake of Cambodia's 2025 border row with Thailand. Bangkok has used the scam issue to shape the public narratives about the territorial disputes and to accuse Cambodia of being complicit in the transnational criminal networks (Bangkok Post, 2025).

Regional Security

Although the South China Sea disputes are not among Cambodia's most immediate security concerns, they nonetheless have implications on the strategic and geopolitical environments in which the country operates. In recent years, dangerous naval encounters between China and the Philippines near the Second Thomas Shoal in the South China Sea have increased the risk of direct military engagement between China and the United States under the provisions of the 1951 U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty. As a non-claimant state, Cambodia has called for maximum restraints and bilateral settlements between the five claimants of the disputes—Brunei, Malaysia, Vietnam, the Philippines, and China (RGC, 2024, p. 10).

However, Cambodia's position and credibility on the issue have been tainted by the "Phnom Penh fiasco" during its 2012 chairmanship of ASEAN (Cheunboran, 2019, p. 2). Since then, Cambodia's close ties with China have contributed to the perception that it prioritizes its relations with China over ASEAN's unity on the South China Sea disputes. Yet, it is worth noting that the other nine ASEAN members also lack a common stance on the disputes, while the four ASEAN claimants themselves have lingering bilateral disputes to address in the South China Sea.

III. Cambodia's Defense Strategy and Responses to Security Challenges

Since the end of the Cambodian Civil War in 1998, the RCAF has played an indispensable role in safeguarding Cambodia's security, peace, and development. The RCAF performs four principal roles: (1) defending Cambodia and its national interests, (2) maintaining internal security, (3) participating in national development, and (4) enhancing international cooperation (RGC, 2006, p. 40). These roles strategically align with Cambodia's defense priorities, namely border security, internal security, military reform, and international cooperation, listed in order of significance (RGC, 2022, pp. iii-iv). These priorities are articulated in accordance with Cambodia's 1993 Constitution and the CPP government's political program, foreign policy, and security threat assessment (RGC, 2000, pp. 25-27). This alignment ensures that the RCAF remains prepared to defend Cambodia while contributing to international peace and security according to domestic and international law.

To enhance its border security following the 2008-2011 border clashes with Thailand, Cambodia has constructed hundreds of new military barracks and headquarters, defense communication facilities, and strategic routes to reinforce its land borders (Var, 2017, pp. 377-378). It has also conducted regular live-fire and field exercises to improve the

operational readiness of the RCAF. Moreover, Cambodia has recruited thousands of new officers and equipped its army with more modern equipment from China, including the SH1 155mm truck-mounted howitzers and the AR2 300mm and Type90B 122mm multiple rocket launchers (Hang, 2025; Kong, 2022).

Table 1: Cambodia's Defense Procurements from China, 2009–2023 (SIPRI, n.d.)

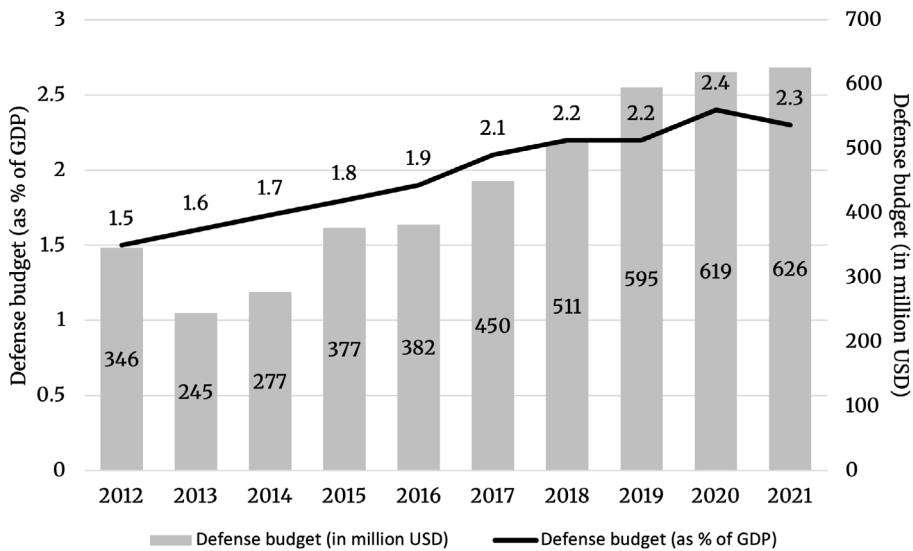
Description	Designation	Ordered Quantity	Order Year	Delivery Year
Portable surface-to-air missile	FN-6	50	2008	2009
Utility helicopter	Z-9	12	2011	2013
Transport aircraft	MA-60	2	2012	2012
Armored personnel carrier	Tiger AV	20	2018	2019
Portable surface-to-air missile	QW-3	288	2020	2021
Multiple rocket launcher	Type-09 122mm	8	2021	2022
Multiple rocket launcher	PHL-03 300mm	6	2021	2022
Self-propelled gun	SH-1 155mm	18	2021	2022
Surface-to-air missile	KS-1A MI	40	2022	2023
Surface-to-air missile system	KS-1A SAMS	1	2022	2023
Corvette	Type-056	2	2022	–
Anti-ship/land-attack missile	C-802A	15	2022	–
Surface-to-air missile	FL-3000N	50	2022	–

In the maritime domain, Cambodia has leveraged its strong defense relations with China to upgrade its Ream Naval Base, as discussed later below. The country has also modernized its air defense capabilities by recruiting 300 additional personnel into the RCAF's Air Defense Division and acquiring more modern Chinese-made systems, including the KS-1C medium and long-range air defense system, QW-3 man-portable surface-to-air missiles, and TH-S311 command-and-control systems (Sao, 2025). Currently, Cambodia is constructing a new air defense base adjacent to the newly upgraded Ream Naval Base to improve its aerial threat detection capabilities (Yaacob, 2024, pp. 10–11). These recent defense procurements and upgrades align with the strategic priorities and threat assessments articulated in Cambodia's 2022 Defense White Paper (DWP) and its 2024 Defense Strategic Update, both of which advocate for increased investment in force modernization.

Besides procuring new weapons, Cambodia has reformed the RCAF by streamlining its legal and operational frameworks, refining its command-and-control structure, restructuring its internal organization, and enhancing human resources across the four service branches—the army, navy, air force, and military police (RGC, 2022, pp. 9–10, 44–45). Moreover, Cambodia has increased its defense spending steadily from USD 346 million in 2012 to USD 626 million in 2021. Notably, the military budget exceeded 2% of GDP for the first time in 2017. According to the 2022 DWP, Cambodia is projected to spend roughly

2.5% of GDP on defense in the 2022–2027 period and increase this figure to 2.7% by 2030 to sustain the RCAF's force modernization (RGC, 2022, p. 68).

Figure 2: Cambodia's defense budget (Australia Department of Defense, n.d.)



To foster an indigenous defense industry and reduce its reliance on foreign arms imports, Cambodia is currently constructing the C-01 industrial park in partnership with the Chinese firm Sageras Defense (Cambodia) Co Ltd (RFA Staff, 2025). In the long-term, this project may help insulate Cambodia from geopolitically motivated sanctions by external actors on foreign arms imports. For instance, the United States' extraterritorial sanction on Türkiye for its imports of the Russian-made S-400 surface-to-air missile system under the "Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act" or CAATSA law serves as a relevant example for Cambodia's defense procurement strategy (U.S. Department of State, 2020).

As a small country with competing economic priorities and budgetary constraints, Cambodia incorporates international cooperation as a key component of its defense strategy. In recent years, the country has leveraged its relations with China to bolster its military capabilities and address security challenges through arms and funding provisions, joint training, and weapon procurements. Between May 2012 and January 2013, Cambodia and China signed two agreements, under which Beijing committed to training RCAF personnel, building a training facility in Cambodia, and providing additional defense materials (Thayer, 2013). Two years later, China donated a batch of heavy weaponry, including jeeps, rocket launchers mounted on trucks, anti-aircraft guns, and spare parts to the RCAF (Aun, 2015). In 2018, Beijing pledged USD 100 million in grants to support the RCAF's training and equipment (Eckert, 2018). In addition to offering military assistance, Beijing has become the principal arms supplier for the RCAF. For example, in 2019, Cambodia purchased USD 40 million worth of Chinese-made weapons, supplementing the USD 290 million it had already spent on Chinese-made arms (Eckert, 2019). Since 2009, Cambodia has procured various other advanced systems from China, some of which have been incorporated into the RCAF.

The most notable military assistance Cambodia has received from China to date is Beijing's funding of the Ream Naval Base renovation, carried out between June 2022 and April 2025. From Cambodia's security perspective, the renovation serves several purposes. Strategically, it addresses Cambodia's lack of modern naval infrastructures capable of repairing ships onshore and accommodating larger, more advanced vessels for the Royal Cambodian Navy (RCN), whose capabilities lag significantly behind that of its Thai and Vietnamese counterparts (Yaacob, 2024, p. 16). China will also provide two new Type 056A frigates to the RCN (Torn, 2024). Although these new frigates and Ream's renovation will not eliminate the capability gap between the RCN and its neighbors, it puts Cambodia in a better strategic position than in the past to respond to both traditional and non-traditional security threats in the maritime domain.

As a brown-water navy, the RCN's primary mission is not power projection far beyond Cambodia's shores but the defense of the country's 440-kilometer coastlines and the marine resources within its exclusive economic zone (EEZ). The renovated Ream allows the RCN to carry out its mission with enhanced operational effectiveness. The renovation lays a long-term infrastructural foundation for the RCN's modernization, improving its capacity to patrol Cambodian waters, conduct constabulary operations, surveillance and search-and-rescue operation, and undertake joint naval exercises with foreign navies more efficiently (Bong, 2023). Economically, the renovation enhances the RCN's capacity to protect marine resources within Cambodia's EEZ—including fish stocks, offshore gas, and minerals—from exploitation by foreign actors. In 2015, marine resources contributed 3.2 million jobs and USD 2.4 billion to the Cambodian economy (Poch & Oum, 2023, p. 1).

Concerning regime security, the CPP has not faced any credible electoral threat since the dissolution of the main opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) in November 2017. However, the CPP remains highly vigilant against potential threats to its power emanating from inside or outside of Cambodia. This sentiment is reflected in a February 2018 document released by Cambodia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, which accused then-CNRP leader Kem Sokha of colluding with the United States and U.S.-supported non-governmental organizations to orchestrate a "regime change color revolution" (MFAIC, 2018). Similarly, in its 2022 DWP, Cambodia identified anti-government subversion through color revolution, disinformation, social discrimination, and incitement as domestic security threats (RGC, 2022, p. 26).

During his 38 years as Cambodian prime minister, Hun Sen, who ruled from January 1985 to August 2023, maintained regime security through personalized control over the RCAF and by co-opting business tycoons (*Oknha*) into the CPP's extensive patronage network (Chambers 2015, pp. 188–194; Verver & Dahles, 2015, pp. 63–65). The orderly intergenerational transfer of power from Hun Sen to Hun Manet in August 2023 is a strong testament to the CPP's hegemonic political control of Cambodia. To ensure Manet's mandate, Hun Sen stayed on as the CPP's prime ministerial candidate for the 2023 general elections and stepped aside only after the party won a landslide victory with a voter turnout of about 85%. The handover of power was carefully choreographed to ensure both the electoral legitimacy of the new Hun Manet government and the maintenance of intra-party elite unity.

Evidently, Hun Manet's inaugural cabinet reflected this continuity since it includes seasoned bureaucrats from Hun Sen's 2018–2023 government and the children of top CPP members who, like Manet, have risen to national prominence within the party apparatus. As Neil Loughlin (2021) explains, Hun Sen's shrewd management of elite interests has been central not only to his political longevity but also to his success in orchestrating a political succession without prompting open intra-party dissent. This balancing of factional power underlines Hun Sen's ability to adapt to changing domestic political circumstances in Cambodia and maintain his political dominance.

Since taking power, Prime Minister Hun Manet has committed to maintain political stability while steering Cambodia towards achieving its ambitious goal of becoming a high-income country by 2050. Central to his bold vision is the Pentagonal Strategy–Phase 1 (2023–2028), which incorporates technology as the fifth pillar of development besides people, road, water, and electricity (RGC, 2023, p. 4). Beyond economic development and political stability, Manet has pushed for reforms of government ministries and institutions, with these reforms spearheaded by his younger brother, Hun Many. After less than a year as Minister of Civil Service, Many was elevated to the position of deputy prime minister in February 2024. This dual role theoretically provides him with the political heft required to undertake meaningful reforms of Cambodia's government institutions and public services. Nevertheless, it is too early to assess the actual effectiveness of Hun Manet's public reform agenda.

IV. Future Prospects

Since 2017, Cambodia has remained preoccupied with domestic and sub-regional security challenges while grappling with an emerging transnational threat from cyberscam. Domestically, maintaining power remains the top priority for the CPP government. Meanwhile, economic headwinds resulting from the EU's partial EBA withdrawal, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the United States' ongoing trade wars have complicated and threatened to undermine Cambodia's growth prospects. Sub-regionally, territorial disputes with Vietnam and Thailand have persisted as principal security concerns for Cambodia, with the potential to cause diplomatic friction affecting cross-border trades, border security, and regional stability.

Though relations with Vietnam are calm, Cambodia's recent withdrawal from the Cambodia–Laos–Vietnam Development Triangle Area economic framework (CLV-DTA) and its ongoing construction of the Funan Techo Canal—the USD 1.2 billion inland waterway—with Chinese funding have caused geopolitical anxieties in Hanoi (Bong, 2024; Cheang, 2025). These developments risk adding further complications to Cambodia–Vietnam security relations influenced by historical baggage, territorial disputes, nationalism, and the China factor (Leng, 2018, pp. 185–200; Neak & Lim 2024).

The 2025 border clashes with Thailand have resulted in the return of approximately 910,000 Cambodian migrant workers from Thailand, generating additional pressure on Cambodia's domestic labor market. This influx has also reduced household incomes due to decreased remittances from Thailand and increased demand for social services (CDRI,

2025). Moreover, the July 2025 clashes have dominated Cambodia's security outlook, with implications for its foreign policy.

The possibility of a larger war between Cambodia and Thailand seems low in the foreseeable future for three reasons. First, both sides may prefer a gradual return to normalcy over continued hostilities due to rising economic pressures and diminishing political gains from nationalist rhetoric and border clashes. The recent meeting on October 28, 2025, between Hun Manet and Anutin Charnvirakul on the sidelines of the 47th ASEAN Summits in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, marked the first bilateral talk between Cambodian and Thai leaders since 28 May (MFAIC, 2025d). This meeting signaled a declining temperature in bilateral relations and a mutual desire for de-escalation.

Second, informal contacts between top Cambodian and Thai military commanders may serve as backchannels used to manage the border situation and to prevent it from escalating beyond a low-intensity border conflict, a dynamic that occurred in 2008–2011 (Jenne, 2017, pp. 330–334). However, some caveats apply. The recent leadership transition in Cambodia means that Manet and his Defence Minister Tea Seiha may not share the same depth of personal contacts or war-time familiarity with their Thai counterparts as their predecessors, Hun Sen and Tea Banh, did. On the Thai side, political uncertainties remain following Paetongtarn's removal by Thailand's Constitutional Court on 29 August, raising questions about the ultimate objectives of the conservative Thai elites.

Third, the signing of a Joint Declaration between Cambodia and Thailand on October 26, 2025, witnessed by U.S. President Trump, add more diplomatic pressure on both Phnom Penh and Bangkok to avoid renewed hostilities or, at the very least, to contain their border dispute from escalating into a larger conflict. Following the signing, Cambodian and Thai armed forces began relocating heavy weapons away from contested borders as a gesture of goodwill to implement the Joint Declaration (Teng, 2025; The Nation 2025).

Cambodia's 2025 border clashes with Thailand have three strategic implications for its security posture. First, the hostilities underline that the borders with Thailand have been—and will remain—a potential challenge to Cambodia's state security. Furthermore, the clashes demonstrate the fragility of Cambodian–Thai relations rooted in historical grievances, nationalism fueled by factional politics, and a repeated cycle of hostilities and cooperation (Deth, 2020). The protracted territorial disputes and the weak foundation of their ties suggest that border management with Thailand will continue to occupy Cambodia's security outlook for years to come.

Second, the latest clashes are likely to reinforce Cambodia's resolve to modernize the RCAF. A similar situation followed the 2008–2011 clashes, which impacted Cambodia's reform and upgrade of its armed forces (Var, 2016, p. 257–258; Var, 2017, pp. 376–378). There is already evidence of how the recent clashes have shaped Cambodia's security posture. For instance, on 14 July, Hun Manet announced that his government will start implementing Cambodia's 2006 Law on Compulsory Military Service, requiring all eligible men aged 18 to 30 to serve at least 18 months in the RCAF beginning in 2026 (Torn, 2025a). Although

details regarding the fiscal feasibility, timeline, and implementation of the conscription policy remain unclear, the announcement reflects Cambodia's intent to enhance its military preparedness by expanding the pool of trained recruits. The government also plans to raise its annual budget to over USD 10 billion in 2026, with a projected increase in defense spending (Torn, 2025b).

Third, Cambodia may find little comfort in the support of its iron-clad friend, China, during its recent clashes with Thailand. Over the past decade, Cambodia has undertaken a foreign policy alignment with China, seeking to leverage Chinese support to strengthen its economic and military capabilities and to strategically counterbalance Thailand (and Vietnam) (Cheunboran, 2019, pp. 149–150). Available evidence, however, suggests that China's support may be less robust than Cambodia would have liked. For China, the Cambodian–Thai border row poses a dilemma. On one hand, China has nurtured close economic and security relations with Cambodia, whose membership in ASEAN is crucial to China's strategy in the South China Sea maritime disputes. On the other hand, China cannot afford to be overtly supportive of Cambodia without risking alienation of Thailand, with whom it has deepened ties across the board since the 2014 coup in Thailand (Hewison, 2018). Maintaining positive relations with Thailand—a treaty ally of the United States—serves China's broader geopolitical interests in Asia.

Since 28 May 2025, China has adopted a notably cautious approach, serving primarily as a behind-the-scenes facilitator of dialogue between Cambodia and Thailand. The Cambodian readout of the 14 August 2025 trilateral “tea chat” between Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and his Cambodian and Thai counterparts in Yunnan Province emphasized Beijing's role as an interlocutor (MFAIC, 2025b). This theme was reiterated in the press release following Prime Minister Hun Manet's meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping two weeks later on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Plus Summit in Tianjin Province (MFAIC, 2025a). Most recently, the Chinese Embassy in Bangkok was quick to reject allegations made by *The New York Times* that China had shipped new weapons to Cambodia for use during the 24–28 July clashes with Thailand (Khaosod English, 2025; Wee, 2025).

Tellingly, Cambodia's decision to amplify former U.S. President Donald Trump's role in brokering the 28 July ceasefire—by nominating him for the 2025 Nobel Peace Prize, which he ultimately did not receive—appears to reflect either a calculated act of public flattery aimed at maintaining Trump's attention on Cambodia or an implicit expression of dissatisfaction with China's muted role in the country's recent border clashes with Thailand. It is equally notable that Cambodia agreed to sign a joint peace declaration during a ceremony presided over by former U.S. President Donald Trump, who reportedly insisted on excluding China from the event (Kine, 2025). Ironically, Cambodia has turned to the United States—rather than China—to exert additional pressure on Thailand to make concessions, including the anticipated release of the 18 RCAF personnel detained by Bangkok since 28 July (Reuters, 2025). Should Cambodia's disappointment with China prove to be well-founded, the 2025 clashes may compel Phnom Penh to reassess the nature and scope of its foreign policy alignment with Beijing and to recalibrate its broader security and strategic posture. Ultimately, Cambodia's

continued alignment with, and pursuit of security assurances from, China—both of which entail significant benefits and costs—will be tested by the evolving trajectory of its border dispute with Thailand in the months and years ahead.

At the regional level, the emergence of cyberscam operations has posed the most serious non-traditional security challenge for Cambodia, while the South China Sea disputes continue to threaten peace and stability in Southeast Asia. Cambodia's fight against cyberscam will be an uphill battle given the prevalent and evolving nature of the scam industry. Effective responses will require strong political will, robust inter-ministerial coordination, and cross-border cooperation with neighbors, including Thailand, with whom Cambodia is locked in a border row with no end in sight.

Finally, despite significant progress in reforming and modernizing the RCAF, significant challenges remain, such as budgetary constraints, lack of domestic talents needed to create and sustain an indigenous defense industry, and sustainable force development and capability acquisitions. Greater financial investments into scientific research and development and sensible policy frameworks by the Cambodian government, backed by industrial collaborations between the public and private sectors will help ensure the RCAF's strategic resilience and operational readiness to protect Cambodia's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and interests amidst the uncertain global security environment.

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Chapter 20

Cambodia's Economic Statecraft

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- II. Conceptual Framework of Economic Statecraft
- III. Historical Evolution: Foreign-Policy Shifts and Cambodia's Economic Statecraft
- IV. Contemporary Economic Statecraft
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I. Introduction

In its simplest explanation, economic statecraft (ES) refers to a concept in which a state purposefully uses trade, finance, and investment to advance its foreign policy goals (Blanchard & Ripsman, 2013). It has long been analyzed through the lens of superpower competition, first U.S.–Soviet, now U.S.–China (National Bureau of Asian Research, 2023). Yet, small states are increasingly drawn into the same arena (Dosch, 2003). The Indo-Pacific today records more sanctions per capita than at any point since 1945, a metric that starkly illustrates how economic tools have become the weapons of choice in regional rivalry (AP4D, 2024). Additionally, even the related coercive measures have also been recorded at high levels since 1945, forcing even the smallest economies to calibrate their growth model against geopolitical blowback. For Cambodia, a lower-middle-income economy that averaged 7.6 per cent growth from 1995 to 2019, navigating such situations is no longer optional but existential (World Bank, 2024).

By stating that Cambodia is navigating the geopolitical rivalry via ES, one first and foremost has to prove that Cambodia is practicing the ES conceptually and from a theoretical lens. Thus, this article will examine Cambodia's history from its Independence period to the contemporary times under the Cambodian People's Party. By reviewing this evolution, this chapter will be able to identify how Cambodia has exercised ES, specifically in the context of economic instruments, foreign policy objectives, and foreign policy outcomes that were deliberately pursued during these times. Following this, heavier emphasis will be placed on the contemporary times, contextually post-COVID-19 pandemic, and the new government administration.

The central question is straightforward: how has Cambodia deployed ES to accelerate national development while preserving political autonomy in an era of intensifying great-power rivalry? Moreover, the significance of exploring this particular concept is that it can offer a template for similarly sized economies caught between larger powers, illustrating that even limited material resources can be converted into strategic leverage (Dosch, 2003).

II. Conceptual Framework of Economic Statecraft

Even though ES is a recognized concept in the field of international relations, the question of how small and middle powers like Cambodia use it is still largely understudied. Hence, this conceptual framework will (i) provide a definition of ES and indicate its importance for smaller states; (ii) explain what is not ES (for instance, purely commercial activities without any foreign policy intention); and (iii) make ES understandable by using different theoretical perspectives to find out if and how Cambodia engages in ES.

Literature Review

Across the literature review, this concept demands a clear understanding; otherwise, it becomes ambiguous. The most cited definition of ES is by far David A. Baldwin, quoted

as “the use of economic means to pursue foreign policy goals and continuously develop foreign relations” (Baldwin, 2020). Aside from Baldwin’s traditional definition, Newnham (2002) & Norris (2016) framed it as “Intentional Manipulation of economic interactions to exploit, enhance or mitigate related strategic externalities”. Moreover, for a more directed interpretation, Blanchard and Ripsman (2013) defined “the deliberate deployment of economic sanctions (sticks) or economic incentives (carrots), singly or in combination, to alter a target state’s cost-benefit calculations so that it changes policy in line with the sender’s preferences.” (Blanchard & Ripsman, 2013, p. 5). From these terminologies across four decades of scholarship, one can infer that its definition converges on two elements: (1) deliberate state use of economic instruments, for (2) external political or security objectives (Baldwin, 2020; Blanchard & Ripsman, 2013; Norris, 2016). Furthermore, one can also find its similarity in various concepts such as economic diplomacy, structural power, geoeconomics, and the theory of dependency. (Baldwin, 2020; Strange, 1998).

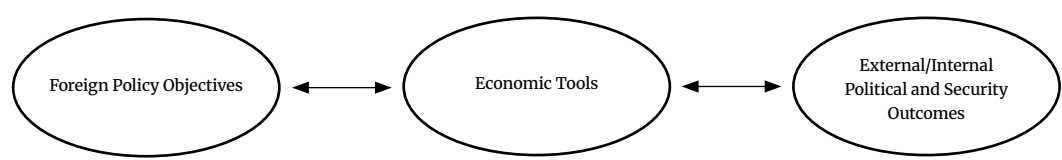
Not every economic act is considered ES. (Baldwin, 2020). To explain, firstly, Baldwin pointed out that economic acts become ES only when they are deployed to achieve foreign-policy goals, rather than for their own commercial or welfare merits. To elaborate, it is considered ES when the tool is purely and must be of the economic ones (a tool that directly involves the production, exchange, or allocation of monetized wealth). Secondly, economic tools should intentionally influence external actors (states, firms, international community), not purely internal actors. Thirdly, the sought outcome is political, security, or strategic rather than commercial profit per se (Baldwin, 2020; Blanchard & Ripsman, 2013). For instance, the same Free Trade Agreement (FTA) can serve as a growth catalyst today and as a security hedge tomorrow. That fluidity belongs inside ES (Baldwin, 2020; Haftel, 2015; Mansfield & Pevehouse, 2013).

ES has evolved substantially, primarily in terms of a country’s size and the tools it uses, correspondingly (Baldwin, 2020; Drezner, 2023). Traditionally, during the Cold War era, only the U.S. and the Soviet Union were capable of exercising economic sanctions (sticks) or incentivizing their allies (carrots) due to increased globalization, but also their vast supply chain network, economic resources, and market access that could alter a particular targeted country’s trade and thus affecting their economy (Hufbauer et al., 2009). These tools are divided into positive tools, such as preferential tariffs, subsidies, foreign aid, investment, and preferential taxation. The negative tools may include trade embargoes, boycotts, blacklisting, expropriation, sanctions, asset freezes, preclusive buying, and punitive taxation (Baldwin, 2020).

Contemporary research has expanded the concept ES to include not only powerful states but also middle powers such as Japan and South Korea, as well as smaller powers like Vietnam and Malaysia (Ping, 2017). One of the main findings is the idea of power-conditional tool choice: the means a state chooses to employ reflect its capabilities and limitations (Baldwin, 2020). Small states operate within the structures of great powers and therefore must confront or cooperate with them accordingly (Baldwin, 2020; Strange, 1998). As a result, they lack the “carrots and sticks” of major powers and thus optimize differently. In Middle Power Statecraft, Ping illustrates how Malaysia employs a hybrid domestic–international strategy through ASEAN and APEC. The OIC not only secures markets and reduces dependence but

also creates an image of power (Ping, 2005/2017, ch. 5). Recent studies suggest that ES has now changed to include domestic coordination and industrial policy as well. The Japanese Economic Security Promotion Act, for instance, is aiming at technology areas that are critical from the geo-strategic point of view (AP4D, 2024; METI, 2022). The literature, taken as a whole, is contradictory. On the one hand, it is argued that small and middle powers do have the capacity to perform ES. However, they reach different ends with different means. They look for favorability or resilience rather than coercion, make use of standards adoption, supply-chain positioning, and targeted FTAs, and focus on domestically oriented ES—niche industries and technology or security policies—as strategic complements (Ping, 2005/2017; AP4D, 2024; METI, 2022).

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Economic Statecraft



Theoretical Lens for Small-States Economic Statecraft

Up to now, research works have been inclined to judge the use of ES in countries (ES) mainly through the deliberate use of tools. This chapter, by integrating theory to explain the comparative small-power context, is closing this gap. In the case of small states, ES is influenced by power that shapes tools and strategy while making them the recipients of other states’ craft, choosing whether to defy or compromise (Cardoso & Faletto, 1979; Dos Santos, 1970; Strange, 1998). Dependency theory asserts that a core–periphery structure is at the base of interdependence that is not equal: peripheral economies have to depend on core capital, markets, and investment that limit domestic choices and foreign-policy options—most of the time leading to reactive or accommodating ES (Dos Santos, 1970, p. 231; Cardoso & Faletto, 1979). Structural power (Strange, 1998) is the reason for systemic constraint: “the power to shape and determine the structures of the global political economy within which other states...have to operate” (pp. 43–44). In contrast to dependency’s dyads, structural power is exercised through security, production, finance, and knowledge (Strange, 1998, chs. 3–6): those who control knowledge/technology have the privilege of setting rules and standards; small states have to function in such settings (e.g., WTO rule-setting) (Strange, 1998; WTO, n.d.-a; WTO, n.d.-b). However, limitations do not mean lack of power: by using Baldwin’s means–end logic, it becomes clear how small states are still able to utilize economic instruments intentionally within these structures (Baldwin, 2020).

III. Historical Evolution: Foreign-Policy Shifts and Cambodia's Economic Statecraft

By integrating three analytical components— (1) Baldwin's means–ends framework, (2) insights from middle-power and small-state literature, and (3) structural power and dependency perspectives—this chapter argues that Cambodia indeed practices Economic Statecraft (ES). The analysis goes from the past to the present and shows the components throughout to avoid picking only facts and making ahistorical claims. Historically, Cambodia's path is broken down using a common framework of official objectives, economic instruments, intended vs. actual outcomes, and significant foreign-policy changes, rather than by administrations. This arrangement makes the means–end connections at the most visible turning points clear. The post-independence periods are retained for continuity, with a more profound contemporary analysis of the CPP, including more documents on instruments and outcomes, thus enabling a more complete means–end evaluation.

The Foreign Policy of Strict Neutrality and Non-Alignment

During the Sangkum Reastr Niyum era, Prince Norodom Sihanouk pursued a policy of a “purer form of neutrality,” seeking to avoid entanglement in great-power rivalries and the influence of neighboring Thailand and communist North Vietnam. The cornerstone of his foreign policy was the strict preservation of sovereignty, with Sihanouk declaring an “unshakable determination” not to allow any foreign power to dominate Cambodia's political landscape. To maintain this neutrality while promoting economic growth and social welfare, Cambodia welcomed aid from a wide range of countries that imposed no political strings. Consequently, Cambodia received assistance from the United States (USD 350 million), China, the Soviet Union, France, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Japan, and West Germany, while also practicing “project sharing” to enable co-investment by foreign donors and local actors. This approach generated steady GDP growth of around 5% in the late 1950s and early 1960s, expanded infrastructure and rice production, and politically positioned Cambodia outside the U.S.-led SEATO alliance. By late 1963, Cambodia's neutrality began to erode with the renunciation of U.S. aid—its primary donor at the time—and by 1966, Sihanouk's tacit tolerance of North Vietnamese sanctuaries during the Vietnam War further undermined its credibility, coinciding with economic stagnation (Chandler, 1991).

The Foreign Policy of Pro-U.S. Alignment

Following the 1970 coup, when General Lon Nol established the Khmer Republic, Cambodia shifted from neutrality to overt alignment with the U.S. and South Vietnam, strategically leveraging U.S. aid as an economic instrument to pursue its anti-communist foreign policy objectives. Between 1970 and 1975, Washington provided an estimated USD 1.18 billion in military assistance and USD 503 million in economic aid, averaging nearly USD 1 million per day, alongside concessional programs such as the “Commodity Import Program” and “Food for Peace,” which generated revenue to support military expenditures.

These economic tools were intended to strengthen Cambodia's military capacity and sustain its government in line with its strategic objectives during the Vietnam War. Economically, however, the Khmer riel suffered hyperinflation, driven by war spending and U.S. loans for agricultural commodities.

Despite the deliberate use of these economic instruments, internal corruption and declining military morale prevented the Khmer Republic from achieving its intended political and security outcomes. When U.S. supplemental aid was suspended, Cambodia's structural constraints and domestic weaknesses left it unable to sustain itself, culminating in the Khmer Rouge takeover in April 1975. This episode illustrates the dependency dimension of Economic Statecraft for a small state: Cambodia's autonomy and survival were contingent on great-power support, and the withdrawal of aid exposed the limits of its sovereignty and the vulnerability inherent in relying on external economic instruments to achieve foreign-policy ends (U.S. GAO, 1975).

The Foreign Policy of Extreme Independence

After five years of U.S. aid, the new administration took office, bringing a complete reversal in foreign policy toward "Independence and Self-Mastery," with extreme economic autarky as its primary tool—a strategy that ultimately led to tragic political and security outcomes. Contrary to the Khmer Republic's dependence on external powers, Democratic Kampuchea purportedly pursued absolute non-alignment and rejected foreign aid in favor of a utopian agrarian communism. In practice, however, it remained aligned with China to counterbalance Vietnam and retained Cambodia's seat at the United Nations. To implement this policy, the country adopted extreme autarky: banks were shut down, currency was eliminated, industrial activity was minimized, and agricultural production was massively expanded (Kiernan, 2008).

Backed primarily by China, the Khmer Rouge also maintained limited diplomatic relations with a small number of other countries, including North Korea, Albania, Romania, Vietnam (initially), Laos, Cuba, Yugoslavia, and Egypt. Despite these connections, the regime's extreme autarkic policies and tightly constrained economic and political measures failed to achieve their intended goals, undermining production efficiency, heightening vulnerability to domestic and regional pressures, and weakening political and security stability.

The Foreign Policy of Alignment with Vietnam and the Soviet Bloc

Following the collapse of Democratic Kampuchea, the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) emerged under Vietnamese occupation, supported primarily by Vietnam and the Soviet Union. In opposition, the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK)—an alliance of Khmer Rouge remnants, royalists, and republicans—controlled the western border regions and received backing from China, the United States, and several ASEAN states, all of which opposed Hanoi's military presence. While the CGDK retained Cambodia's seat at the United Nations, the PRK remained diplomatically isolated.

Under these circumstances, the PRK's foreign policy focused on regime survival and state reconstruction within a Vietnamese security framework, heavily reliant on Eastern-bloc aid. Its principal security objective was to prevent the return of the Khmer Rouge (Gottesman, 2003; Slocomb, 2003).

The PRK spent much of the 1980s restoring basic normalcy in society while grappling with protracted conflict and resource scarcity (Deth, 2009). Early efforts to reintroduce collectivized agriculture achieved limited success due to weak state capacity and low rural compliance. Over time, pragmatic adaptation led to gradual market liberalization, officially recognized in 1985. As state industries failed to compete with traders and an expanding informal economy, black-market activity became widespread and tacitly tolerated. By the late 1980s, the state's formal recognition of private property in 1989 reflected accommodation to economic realities rather than ideological transformation (Slocomb, 2010).

Despite modest recovery, economic growth remained aid-dependent, industrial capacity limited, and shortages persistent. As Soviet support waned in the late 1980s, Vietnam's occupation became increasingly unsustainable, culminating in the withdrawal of its troops in September 1989 and paving the way for the transition to the State of Cambodia. This shift ultimately led to the 1991 Paris Peace Agreements and the establishment of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) in 1992–1993.

The Foreign Policy of Transitional Period

In April 1989, the State of Cambodia (SOC) initiated a series of economic reforms aimed at transitioning from a command economy to a market-oriented system. These included the legalization of private property, the abolition of price controls, and the adoption of macroeconomic stabilization policies under the guidance of international financial institutions (IFIs). The Paris Peace Agreements in 1991 and the subsequent UN-sponsored elections in 1993 marked the restoration of the Kingdom of Cambodia. Diplomatic normalization followed—relations with China were re-established in 1991, and ties with the United States resumed in 1993.

Cambodia rejoined the IMF and World Bank in 1992, liberalized trade and foreign direct investment (FDI), and sought to attract external capital through the 1994 Law on Investment, which positioned the country as investor-friendly. At the 1992 international pledging conference, Cambodia secured approximately USD 880 million in aid commitments, while the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC, 1992–1993) mobilized nearly USD 1.6 billion, revitalizing public administration and services. Through these developments, Cambodia transformed from an international pariah to an accepted member of the regional and global community, attaining ASEAN observer status as a precursor to full membership.

Despite these achievements, recovery remained heavily aid-dependent: donor funds accounted for over 75% of total government spending in the mid-1990s. Governance weaknesses, institutional distortions, and a narrow export base persisted, even amid substantial support from Japan, France, Australia, and China. Following the July 1997 clashes between the CPP and FUNCINPEC forces, Western donors briefly suspended assistance,

prompting Phnom Penh to turn increasingly toward Beijing for political and economic support (World Bank, 2000).

The Foreign Policy of Multilateralism

Between 1993 and 2008, Cambodia sought to enhance credibility, sustain economic growth, and preserve regime stability by skillfully balancing major powers against one another. This strategic maneuvering was facilitated by Cambodia's accession to ASEAN in 1999 and membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2004, both of which provided market access, institutional legitimacy, and rule-based integration into the global economy.

Economic statecraft during this period centered on leveraging trade preferences and investment incentives. The United States granted Most-Favoured-Nation (MFN) status in 1996, followed by the 1999 U.S.–Cambodia Textile Agreement, which uniquely linked labor standards to expanded export quotas. Alongside the European Union's *Everything but Arms* (EBA) scheme, these instruments catalyzed foreign direct investment (FDI) in the garment sector and embedded Cambodia's economy within a rules-based trade regime. Regional integration proceeded through AFTA tariff reductions, Mekong connectivity projects, and tourism cooperation. Domestically, the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) accelerated privatization, established Special Economic Zones (SEZs), and actively attracted investment from China, Taiwan, Malaysia, Thailand, and South Korea.

Meanwhile, Chinese finance began to play a growing role in infrastructure development—supporting the construction of dams, roads, and industrial facilities. Cambodia effectively balanced Western official development assistance (ODA) with Chinese loans and grants, using WTO commitments to signal policy predictability to investors. Following the expiration of global textile quotas in 2005, the government sought new safeguards for its garment exports.

The outcomes were notable: sustained GDP growth averaging 7–8 percent, significant poverty reduction, a stronger position within ASEAN (culminating in its 2002 chairmanship), and normalized relations with major powers. Yet, structural dependencies persisted: exports remained heavily concentrated in garments to the U.S. and EU (over 50 percent), while aid, at roughly 10 percent of GDP, continued to constrain policy autonomy. By 2008, Cambodia's hedging behavior endured, though its strict adherence to the One-China policy and muted stance on South China Sea issues signaled a gradual shift toward deeper alignment with Beijing.

IV. Contemporary Economic Statecraft

This section examines Cambodia's contemporary economic statecraft under the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) in the post-COVID-19 era. Building on the historical review, it traces the CPP's evolving foreign policy line and the economic instruments deployed to secure external security and achieve political goals. The analysis applies Baldwin's means–ends framework to assess the coherence between instruments and objectives, while also

engaging with structural power and dependency perspectives to understand how global rules, markets, and asymmetries constrain Cambodia's strategic options. The section then evaluates the effectiveness of these tools and the extent to which they have facilitated development and sustained regime stability.

To remain competitive in the global economy, Cambodia must continuously adapt and recalibrate its economic statecraft to ensure both survival and progress. Under the new administration of Prime Minister Hun Manet, who assumed office in September 2023, the government launched the *Pentagonal Strategy Phase 1*—a comprehensive policy framework outlining ambitious priorities for sustainable and inclusive growth.

Economic Diversification: Envisioning Cambodia's Economic Niche

Economic diversification is a privilege that can only be pursued when peace and stability are maintained. Like many developing economies, Cambodia has undergone multiple political and economic transitions in its effort to sustain growth and development. One of the key factors driving the country's post-conflict economic recovery has been its young labor force. In the 2000s, the demographic advantage of a youthful population, coupled with fertile land resources, enabled Cambodia to develop its agricultural and light industrial sectors as the main engines of growth. Between 2000 and 2022, these two sectors underpinned robust annual GDP growth averaging over 7 percent.

After more than two decades of reliance on these traditional sectors, Cambodia recognizes that economic diversification is essential for maintaining competitiveness in the global market system (Hing & Krui, 2025). Having attained lower-middle-income status in 2015 and projected to graduate from the Least Developed Country (LDC) category by 2029, the country faces the challenge of avoiding the so-called middle-income trap. Economic diversification, therefore, represents not merely a pursuit of profit but a strategic tool of economic statecraft—one aimed at ensuring long-term stability, reducing overdependence on a few export commodities, and safeguarding national security interests (Asia-Pacific Development, Diplomacy & Defense Dialogue, 2024).

As a small state with limited bargaining power, Cambodia's most effective form of economic statecraft lies in diversifying its economic base. Developing niche industries offers not only new avenues for revenue but also strengthens national resilience, independence, and credibility in the international arena. Sustainable growth requires moving beyond short-term industrial expansion toward cultivating sectors that enhance Cambodia's strategic relevance.

Despite decades of growth in textiles, construction, and agriculture, Cambodia's economic structure remains narrowly based. The Garment, Footwear, and Travel goods (GFT) sector continues to dominate exports, but its reliance on low-cost labor and external market conditions makes it highly vulnerable to global shocks. By contrast, agriculture—rooted in Cambodia's long agrarian tradition, fertile land, and skilled rural population—has

re-emerged as a potential economic niche. Enhancing value-added agricultural production and agribusiness could thus represent a strategic direction for achieving both economic diversification and long-term national security.

The Agricultural Sector as “Cambodia’s Food Stall Hub”

Situated in a naturally favorable environment in Southeast Asia, Cambodia possesses fertile land and experiences relatively few severe natural disasters—conditions that make it highly suitable for agricultural production and innovation. With these comparative advantages, the country can position itself as a regional hub for a diverse range of food products, from staple crops to high-value fruits. Enhancing productivity in this sector not only strengthens Cambodia’s niche in the global food market but also builds trust and reliability among importing countries. In this sense, agricultural exports serve not only economic goals but also soft power objectives, contributing to Cambodia’s reputation, recognition, and influence abroad.

In 2023, Cambodia exported approximately 8.82 million tonnes of agricultural products, including rice, bananas, mangoes, cassava, cashew nuts, corn, palm oil, pepper, and tobacco (Mom, 2024). Among these, rice—often called Cambodia’s “White Gold”—symbolizes both the quality of local production and the enduring dedication of Cambodian farmers. While roughly one quarter of rice output is reserved for domestic consumption, the remainder is exported to global markets, where Cambodian rice has gained a reputation for premium quality. Cambodia currently has the capacity to produce about 12 million tonnes annually, and under the Sustainable Rice Standard Program, it aims to export 1 million tonnes by 2025. This initiative not only promotes environmentally responsible production but also enhances Cambodia’s global brand as a supplier of high-quality rice (Mom, 2024).

Although rice remains central, other crops have begun to show strong export potential—particularly cashew nuts. Cambodia has become the world’s second-largest producer of raw cashew nuts, surpassing India and ranking just behind Côte d’Ivoire. Supported by favorable policies and growing international demand, production is expected to exceed 1 million tonnes within the next five years (Cashew Nut Association of Cambodia, 2025). A landmark development in this effort is the planned establishment of the country’s first agro-industrial park in Kampong Thom Province, which will serve as a processing and export hub for cashew nuts and other products such as rice, rubber, and cassava (Mom, Khmer Times, 2025).

With effective policy incentives and enhanced market access, Cambodian agricultural goods have the potential to evolve from basic commodities into premium products recognized in supermarkets worldwide. While Vietnam, China, and India remain the primary markets for Cambodian cashew nuts, expanding export destinations to the broader Asia-Pacific region, Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States could elevate Cambodia’s international profile. Ultimately, by transforming its agricultural sector from subsistence-oriented production into a high-value export base, Cambodia not only diversifies its economy but also gains greater leverage and voice within the global economic system.

Light Manufacturing Industry Hub

Since the 1990s, Cambodia's manufacturing sector has been largely synonymous with the textile and garment industry, given its substantial contributions to export earnings and employment. The growth of this labor-intensive sector has been driven by Cambodia's comparative advantages—particularly its abundant low-cost labor and preferential trade frameworks with key markets. However, identifying a niche within this sector requires moving beyond dependence on low-skilled production toward more value-added and diversified manufacturing. With a young and dynamic population, Cambodia envisions positioning itself as a light manufacturing hub in the region. As neighboring economies advance up the value chain, Cambodia's ability to capture and master light manufacturing provides both a developmental opportunity and a strategic position within regional production networks.

The garment and textile sector will likely continue to dominate Cambodia's economy in the near term. Yet, its vulnerability to external shocks and preferential trade conditions underscores the need for transformation—particularly as Cambodia prepares to graduate from Least Developed Country (LDC) status in 2029. Demography provides a key advantage: out of a population exceeding 16 million, around 60% are under 35 years old, and labor force participation stands at about 80%. Between 2021 and 2050, Cambodia's working-age population is projected to increase by 24%, while Vietnam's will grow by only 1%, and Thailand's and China's will decline by 23% and 22%, respectively (Manoj, 2024). This demographic momentum positions Cambodia as an increasingly attractive manufacturing destination in a region facing aging workforces.

Recognizing that labor intensiveness alone cannot sustain competitiveness, the government has prioritized skills upgrading. In 2023, it launched a National Vocational Training Program aimed at providing technical training to 1.5 million people from vulnerable backgrounds, in order to facilitate the transition toward higher-value industries. Economic diversification does not necessarily mean developing entirely new sectors; rather, it involves expanding existing industries while reducing overreliance on a few actors. Building on its established reputation in garment manufacturing, Cambodia can move up the value chain—from sewing and assembly to fabric dyeing, textile production, and eventually local fashion design and branding. A gradual shift from being a passive production base to an active industrial beneficiary would mark a significant evolution in Cambodia's manufacturing capabilities.

The development of Cambodia's light manufacturing industry can be understood through the Flying Geese Theory, which explains how industrial capacity shifts sequentially among Asian economies through factory relocation and technology transfer. Cambodia's strategic location within ASEAN, supported by policies such as the *Law on Investment* and the *Cambodia Industrial Development Policy 2015–2025*, positions it well to attract these relocations. Neighboring major industrial clusters in Thailand and Vietnam, Cambodia benefits from regional connectivity and the “Plus-One Effect,” as firms seek cost-efficient alternatives while maintaining proximity to established supply chains (EuroCham Cambodia, 2021).

Beyond garments, Cambodia has begun to diversify into other manufacturing segments. Key exports now include electronic components—such as wires, cables, lighting equipment, motors, computer parts, and automotive assemblies—as well as bicycles. Automotive component industries have particularly benefited from factory relocations into Special Economic Zones (SEZs) along the borders with Thailand and Vietnam. As of 2025, Cambodia hosts nine automobile assembly plants, six located within SEZs and three outside, reflecting growing investor confidence in its manufacturing ecosystem.

Looking ahead, Cambodia’s participation in more advanced sectors, such as the semiconductor value chain, presents a long-term strategic opportunity. Semiconductors are essential components in products ranging from smartphones and vehicles to industrial machinery. As global demand is projected to surpass USD 1 trillion by 2030, and as the United States–China trade tensions continue to reshape supply networks, ASEAN countries like Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines have begun integrating into semiconductor production (McKinsey & Company, 2025). While full participation in this high-tech sector remains aspirational for Cambodia, targeted entry into specific processes—such as chip testing, packaging, printed circuit board (PCB) assembly, or embedded systems—could be feasible. Achieving this will require investment in STEM education and human capital, along with strategic partnerships for technology transfer (ERIA, 2025).

With one of the youngest labor forces in the region, Cambodia is well positioned to absorb industrial relocation and climb the technological ladder gradually. Regional frameworks, such as ASEAN cooperation, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and other trade agreements can further amplify Cambodia’s attractiveness as a manufacturing hub (Meas, 2025). Through the twin strategies of skills development and industrial upgrading, Cambodia’s light manufacturing sector can evolve from a low-cost garment base into a diversified and competitive engine of economic statecraft.

Green Economy Hub

The concept of a green economy emphasizes economic development that is low-carbon, resource-efficient, and socially inclusive (UNEP, 2018). Transitioning toward this model requires both public and private investment in activities, infrastructure, and assets that promote sustainable consumption and production. Recognizing this opportunity, Cambodia has committed to a green economic transformation through the National Policy on Green Growth and the National Strategic Plan on Green Growth 2013–2030, in line with the United Nations’ 2012 Resolution on “The Future We Want” (National Council on Green Growth, 2013).

Situated in a tropical climate, Cambodia possesses abundant renewable energy resources, including solar, wind, river, and ocean power. To achieve its ambitious target of 70% renewable electricity by 2030 and net-zero emissions by 2050, the Royal Government of Cambodia approved 23 new energy projects worth approximately USD 5.79 billion in 2024 to enhance clean energy infrastructure (Khmer Times, 2024a). Regional and international

recognition for these efforts was demonstrated during the Clean Energy Week, organized by Australia and UNDP, highlighting Cambodia's potential as a leader in the clean energy sector (UNDP Cambodia, 2024).

Green growth offers Cambodia a strategic avenue to remain economically relevant while addressing global environmental changes. The rise of electric vehicles illustrates this alignment between market expansion, environmental protection, and societal well-being. Cambodia has introduced EVs from leading brands including China's BYD, Japan's Toyota, and the U.S.'s Tesla. By 2024, approximately 4,320 EVs had been registered, reflecting a rapid adoption rate and a positive impact on livelihoods (Khmer Times, 2024b).

Carbon trading represents another major opportunity. Carbon credits, tradable certificates that cap emissions, allow countries to profit while supporting global climate action. Committed to carbon neutrality by 2050, Cambodia has begun leveraging this market. From 2016 to 2020, it earned approximately USD 11.6 million from carbon credit projects in Mondulkiri, Koh Kong, and Stung Treng provinces (Kuok & Ros, 2024). The country possesses 73 protected areas and three biodiversity corridors totaling around 7.3 million hectares, creating a strong foundation for green investment. A 2024 memorandum of understanding between Prime Minister Hun Manet and Singapore's Prime Minister Lawrence Wong signals a formal carbon credit collaboration expected to finalize by 2025 (Teng, 2025).

The ASEAN carbon market is projected to reach USD 3 trillion by 2050, driven by decarbonization trends, abundant natural resources, and geostrategic positioning (Jennifer, 2024). Within ASEAN, Cambodia joins other suppliers such as Indonesia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam. While several ASEAN countries are increasingly industrialized, Cambodia's natural resource base and strategic policies provide opportunities to benefit economically and diplomatically, positioning the country as a regional green economy hub.

Multilateralism: Tools, Outcomes, and Trade-offs

Since 2010, Cambodia's CPP-led foreign policy has framed multilateralism as both a guiding principle and an operational tool. The country has sought to safeguard its sovereignty and maintain non-alignment through rules-based integration, embedding itself within ASEAN, the UN, and the WTO (ASEAN, n.d.; Royal Government of Cambodia, 2023; WTO, 2004). This approach reflects the interplay of domestic imperatives—such as urbanization and the transition from LDC to middle-income status—and external pressures, including the strategic rivalry between the U.S. and China and ASEAN's norm-enforcement mechanisms. The intended outcome has been to leverage collective security and diplomatic instruments while minimizing the risk of overt alignment.

Economic Tools of Multilateralism

Cambodia has operationalized multilateralism through four key economic instruments. First, it diversified its trading partners, investment sources, and aid to hedge against overdependence. This strategy involves engaging with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

while simultaneously maintaining robust relations with Japan, the EU, and the United States. Recent joint statements emphasize Phnom Penh and Beijing’s commitment to deepening BRI–national strategy “synergy,” signaling a sustained policy line (MFAIC, 2023). Sectorally, Chinese finance has been concentrated on infrastructure projects, including roads, railways, and waterways, whereas Japan and the Republic of Korea have focused on industrial connectivity, trade facilitation, and business support. The EU and U.S. have emphasized trade and economic development, often linking standards to market access (AidData, 2023; MOFA Japan, 1992; European Commission, n.d.; USTR, 1999).

Second, Cambodia strategically aligns itself with multilateral frameworks to broaden policy options and demonstrate compliance with international rules. It became a member of the WTO on 13 October 2004 and signed the RCEP on its entry into force on 1 January 2022, ensuring access to markets based on treaties rather than solely bilateral agreements (WTO, 2004; RCEP Secretariat, 2022).

Third, Cambodia leverages global development institutions, such as the World Bank, ADB, and AIIB, to mobilize funding, engage in policy dialogue, and strengthen regional partnerships, particularly through the Mekong cooperation with Japan, South Korea, and China. These engagements serve both economic and political-security objectives (ADB, 2024).

Finally, Cambodia engages in contributory diplomacy. Since 2006, it has deployed nearly 6,000 UN peacekeepers to Africa and the Middle East, enhancing its international reputation and increasing its influence in multilateral forums (Hing, 2019).

Intended vs. Observed Outcomes

Cambodia’s multilaterally coherent economic statecraft (ES) has been transformative in generating development gains, but it has also revealed structural constraints. Following a small-state means–end logic, Cambodia has selected instruments to ensure both political security and economic growth. Compared to the 1990s, the country has integrated with more partners, and this deliberate diversification has helped maintain an average growth rate of close to 7%, interrupted only by the COVID-19 pandemic (World Bank, 2024; Hing & Krui, 2025). Economic diplomacy has also enhanced Cambodia’s profile, exemplified by hosting ASEM 13 in 2021 (Council of the European Union, 2021; ASEM InfoBoard, 2021). Peacekeeping contributions have strengthened its diplomatic capital, with Cambodia ranking third in ASEAN and among the top 30 globally, its deployments influencing UN votes. These outcomes demonstrate that multilateral tools can provide aid, market access, and diplomatic leverage.

However, the strategy also exposes vulnerabilities. Competition among great powers and dependency constraints limit policy space and create performance fluctuations. Between 2010 and 2025, Cambodia’s ES was not strictly non-aligned. Domestic and external imperatives led Phnom Penh to increasingly rely on Chinese finance and markets, straining relations with Western democracies. Structurally, Chinese FDI accounted for nearly half of total inflows by 2021, with the 1994–2021 share averaging 44% (AidData, 2023). Between 2012 and 2017, China contributed more than \$15 billion, approximately \$11 billion of which

went to energy, linking production and infrastructure directly to Chinese capital (ASEAN Briefing, 2018). China is also Cambodia's largest single creditor, holding more than one-third of external public debt, creating concentration risks and constraining policy autonomy (Hogue & Yong, 2024). This pattern aligns with dependency theory: growth continues, but autonomy narrows. Cambodian officials have openly framed this reliance as necessary for infrastructure and regime security, stating that “without Chinese aid, we are going nowhere” (Hutt, 2016; *The Economist*, 2017). Chinese inflows have created a profitable ecosystem for Chinese enterprises through SEZs and land concessions, benefiting connected elites while furthering Beijing's strategic goals (ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2021). Yet parts of this ecosystem have also incubated illicit actors: the online-gambling boom and, after the 2019 ban, large-scale cyber-scam compounds operating from or around casinos/SEZ-style sites in Sihanoukville, with documented trafficking, forced criminality, and money-laundering; despite periodic raids, many operations persist (Ferrally, Dawkins, Deegan, 2022). In short, Cambodia has achieved substantial development gains, but rising exposure to criminalized economies adds reputational and sanctions risk, further eroding bargaining leverage and foreign-policy flexibility.

Politically, this dependence has produced visible trade-offs. Cambodia's apparent alignment with China has affected ASEAN consensus, including blocking statements on the South China Sea in 2012 and 2016, after which China provided \$600 million in aid and loans (Mogato, 2012; Webb, 2016). Relations with Western states have also deteriorated due to governance disputes. Cambodia benefited from the EU's EBA program until August 2020, and the U.S. remained a major market, but conditionalities tied to democratic and human rights standards conflicted with domestic political developments, including the dissolution of the main opposition party. The U.S. imposed sanctions and curtailed some assistance, while the EU partially withdrew EBA preferences, prompting Phnom Penh to pivot toward politically less demanding Asian partners (European External Action Service, 2020).

Subsequently, Cambodia secured treaty-based access through the China–Cambodia FTA (signed 12 October 2020, effective 1 January 2022), joined RCEP (1 January 2022), and activated the Cambodia–Korea FTA (1 December 2022) (Ministry of Commerce–Cambodia FTA Portal, 2022, 2023; RCEP Secretariat, 2022). This shift exchanged preferential access for treaty-based access and deeper integration in production networks, but policy autonomy increasingly favored major financiers and rule-setters. Security trade-offs are evident as well: multilateral law continues to manage disputes, such as the ICJ's 2013 interpretation of the Preah Vihear case (International Court of Justice, 2013), yet reports of privileged Chinese access at Ream Naval Base and Cambodia's solo engagement with Myanmar's junta in January 2022 suggest eroding perceptions of equidistance (Prak, 2022).

The net result is robust growth and short-term stability, but “friends-to-all” diplomacy is drifting toward *de facto* alignment, as China's positive economic instruments outweigh Western conditional tools. The policy challenge is instrumental rather than rhetorical: Cambodia must re-diversify creditors, markets, and standards within multilateral frameworks to regain bargaining space while preserving development gains.

V. Challenges and Future Prospects

External Shocks

Uncertainty remains one of the most significant challenges disrupting Cambodia's economic growth (International Monetary Fund [IMF], 2025a). Even as the global economy shows signs of recovery, countries of all sizes are reassessing policy directions to address emerging and unprecedented risks (IMF, 2025a). The COVID-19 pandemic represents more than a global health crisis—it has become a pivotal moment for rethinking globalization. The crisis exposed structural vulnerabilities, particularly how small states can be affected by the economic statecraft of major powers leveraging dependency ties.

The ongoing trade tensions between the United States and China illustrate the costs of hedging strategies in the global economy (Bown & Kolb, 2025). Reciprocal tariffs, such as those imposed by the Trump administration, have targeted global supply chains and directly affected Cambodia's exports to the United States (Bown & Kolb, 2025; Time, 2025). As a small and relatively open economy, Cambodia has limited tools to influence these shifts in the global order. The pressures from trade barriers compel the country to reconsider its international partnerships and economic strategies to mitigate exposure to market fluctuations, price manipulation, and potential recession (Teng, 2025; ASEAN Secretariat, 2022a).

The July 2025 border conflict with Thailand exemplifies a sudden external shock: border closures disrupted cross-border trade and the regional supply chain—particularly affecting sectors linked to the Plus-One production network—while the forced return of nearly one million Cambodian migrant workers added significant pressure to domestic labor markets.

Internal Challenges

As Cambodia approaches graduation from Least Developed Country (LDC) status in 2029, external shocks serve less as immediate threats and more as reminders of the need for effective foreign policy and transformative national strategies. While development represents progress, it can only translate into sustainable gains if the country's internal capabilities are fully realized. A key national priority is economic diversification and inclusive growth. Although Cambodia has identified several promising economic niches, structural constraints continue to limit their full potential. Three major challenges persist.

The first constraint concerns human capital and skills mismatches, which directly affect productivity. Cambodia's population is predominantly young, yet economic niches will remain underdeveloped without skilled professionals to implement them. The agricultural sector requires experts and farmers who can optimize cultivation despite environmental variability. Light manufacturing demands a workforce capable of adding value with minimal resources, while the green economy requires professionals who can generate profit from sustainable sources. Addressing these gaps requires improvements in education at all levels, including TVET and STEM programs, alongside targeted skills training to develop the workforce.

The second constraint relates to Cambodia's investment climate. Although the country has attracted foreign investment, concerns persist regarding logistical infrastructure, energy costs, bureaucratic complexity, and investor trust. Despite these challenges, ongoing infrastructure improvements—such as the opening of Techo International Airport and expanded highways connecting Special Economic Zones—signal Cambodia's commitment to facilitating business and attracting strategic investors.

The third constraint reflects the long-standing notion that “Cambodia is trapped in its own success.” Following decades of peace and reintegration into the global economy, Cambodia benefited from WTO accession, preferential trade schemes, and the rapid growth of low value-added sectors, particularly garments and certain agricultural commodities. This trajectory was further accelerated by substantial Chinese investment, which fueled nearly a decade of high growth. While these successes created wealth, they also risk fostering complacency. Reliance on preferential treatment and external support is unpredictable and unsustainable. To maintain momentum, Cambodia must continuously innovate, access new markets, and reposition itself as an autonomous economic actor rather than a passive recipient.

Future Prospects

Economic instruments reflect the outcomes of Cambodia's attempts to advance its foreign policy while simultaneously securing economic gains. Whereas traditional economic tools focus narrowly on financial benefits, economic statecraft aims to maximize both economic and political interests. As a small state with limited influence on the global economy, Cambodia cannot control external conditions and therefore prioritizes domestic economic diversification to achieve self-sufficiency, security, and stability amidst international shocks. Diversification is pursued not to isolate the country but to strengthen resilience and independence. In addition to sector and product diversification, Cambodia emphasizes multilateralism, expanding cooperation beyond the regional space to engage countries such as the United Kingdom and Arab states in the Middle East, while also deepening South-South partnerships. These efforts not only facilitate economic relations but also carry security and geopolitical implications.

While external shocks such as the Thailand border conflict highlight vulnerabilities, they also reveal new opportunities for Cambodia's economic statecraft. The sudden influx of returning workers can help address domestic labor shortages in manufacturing and service sectors, provided their skills are effectively harnessed (Cambodian Development Resource Institute, 2025). Simultaneously, surging nationalist sentiment and a boycott of Thai products have accelerated the consumption of domestically-made goods, offering a stimulus for local production and branding. Cambodia's diversification efforts—spanning agriculture, light manufacturing, and green industries—can leverage this environment to expand niche markets and foster self-reliance.

Multilateral engagement enhances Cambodia's leverage against sudden unilateral actions. While bilateral relations may be simpler to manage, they leave small states vulnerable. Multilateral agreements, though not always perfectly equitable, provide more predictable

benefits over time. For instance, in September 2025, Cambodian and Chinese companies signed an agreement to export USD 30 million worth of vegetables and fruits over two years, followed by discussions to expand exports of other agricultural products, bird's nests, meat, and animal feed (Torn, 2025; Cambonomist, 2025). Beyond direct commercial ties, Cambodia and China collaborate through broader frameworks such as the Cambodia–China Free Trade Agreement, the ASEAN–China Free Trade Agreement, and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which facilitate market access and production-network integration. Participation in such regional agreement signals Cambodia's commitment to long-term economic engagement based on respect and mutual benefit. Looking forward, accession to agreements like the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CP-TPP) offers further avenues for market expansion, investment, and sustainable growth in an increasingly uncertain global environment.

VI. Conclusion

This chapter has traced Cambodia's economic statecraft from the devastation of the 1970s to the post-pandemic recalibration under current Prime Minister Hun Manet. Across this trajectory, three patterns emerge that illuminate both the potential and the constraints of small-state economic statecraft.

First, Cambodia's strategy has been consistently reactive rather than proactive. The shifts from Soviet patronage in the 1980s, to Western-led donor coordination in the 1990s, to Chinese-dominated financing in the 2000s reflect adaptation to external shocks more than deliberate strategy. Economic statecraft here functioned less as an instrument of autonomous foreign policy and more as a survival mechanism within asymmetric dependency structures.

Second, the toolkit of Cambodian policymakers has remained narrow and contingent. Aid diplomacy, preferential trade agreements, and investment liberalization have been deployed, but largely in ways that reinforce rather than transcend structural dependency on external patrons. Even the much-vaunted diversification efforts—whether into agriculture, light manufacturing, or green energy—are underwritten by external capital and preferential market access that Cambodia does not control. The promise of potential niche markets risks replicating this dynamic unless underpinned by genuine domestic capacity and institutional reform.

Third, Cambodia's pursuit of autonomy has been constrained by domestic priorities and external conditional interference. The government has consistently privileged survival and external legitimation over long-term structural transformation. This is evident in the embrace of Chinese finance to offset Western conditionality in the past, or in the instrumentalization of trade and investment for political ends. Far from demonstrating small-state agility, Cambodia's trajectory illustrates the enduring vulnerability of aid-dependent, export-reliant economies in a contested geopolitical environment. While the geopolitical dynamic spurred up from both the withdrawal of Chinese investment in quick-profit industries, and the imposition of the US reciprocal tariff, Cambodia interpreted these shocks as a warning lesson. Diversification of product and sector is merely the starting point, but diversifying

partner and market with the embrace of multilateralism can assure the future of economic and political interest.

For international political economy scholarship, the case underscores a broader lesson: small-state economic statecraft cannot be understood as a scaled-down version of great-power practice. Instead, it is shaped by structural asymmetries, domestic priorities, and vulnerability to exogenous shocks. Cambodia illustrates both the possibilities of tactical hedging and the limits of agency under conditions of dependence. Going forward, Cambodia's challenge is not merely to diversify sectors or court new partners, but to revise the challenges of its own development model. Without strengthening domestic institutions, enhancing transparency, and broadening the base of productive capacity, economic statecraft will remain more rhetorical than real. In this sense, the Cambodian experience offers less a "playbook" for other small states than a warning: economic statecraft without structural transformation risks entrenching dependency rather than overcoming it.

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Chapter 21

Cambodia's Soft Power

NHEAN Socheat

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I. Introduction

According to American political scientist Joseph Nye, power is broadly defined as “the ability to affect others to get the outcomes one prefers,” which can be achieved through “coercion, payment, or attraction and persuasion.” Building on this conceptualization, he defines *soft power* as “the ability to obtain preferred outcomes by attraction rather than coercion or payment” (Nye, 2017, p.1).

Based on this definition, soft power is the psychological or inner capacity to persuade others to adopt new ways of thinking, leading them to admire those who wield this power without the use of force. Soft power is an indirect form of influence derived from a nation’s knowledge, talent, expertise, reputation, and natural or cultural resources. For Cambodia, this means that soft power can be derived from the expertise and reputation its people have built, as well as the unique natural and cultural resources it possesses.

Cambodia’s hard power may be limited, but it possesses substantial soft power, which at times can be immensely influential to others. Many studies have focused on Cambodia’s international relations in the context of geopolitics, but few have extensively investigated the role of Cambodia’s soft power and what constitutes its soft power. Chan Sam Ath (2019a) examined the role of Cambodian involvement in UN peacekeeping missions; and in (2019b) discussed Cambodia’s soft power and environmental diplomacy, which he creates the scenario for the future for Cambodia to convince others to fight against climate change by acting as a model for others to follow. Srey Mommarolin wrote “Soft power as Smart Diplomacy for Cambodia” (2023), but no study has thoroughly examined all the soft power components that Cambodia can utilize.

In this chapter, I will explore the major components in Cambodia’s pursuit of soft power in the context of a changing world order and their effectiveness and/or limitations. The chapter will explore the various elements that underpin Cambodia’s potential soft power capabilities. In doing so, I will highlight Cambodia’s expertise and contributions derived from its historical experiences—namely peacekeeping missions and demining efforts—along with its rich cultural heritage and emerging practices in food diplomacy. Finally, I will propose prioritizing the development of the film industry, as it represents a key avenue for enhancing Cambodia’s soft power and global image while simultaneously supporting the growth of the tourism sector.

II. Cambodia’s UN Peacekeeping Missions

Cambodia’s participation in global peacekeeping missions has gained recognition from the international community. Owing to Cambodia’s past experience in conflicts and its engagement with the United Nations (UN)’ peace mission in the early 1990s, Cambodia has utilized its experience and turned it into international contributions and a national

advantage. Understanding the hardship of wars, Cambodia has committed not only to finding and maintaining peace for itself but has been eager to join with the international community to establish global peace and security.

Pursuant to the Paris Peace Agreements of October 1991, the UN established the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) in 1992 as a comprehensive peacekeeping operation tasked with facilitating Cambodia's transition to peace and democracy through the organization of a national election to be held in 1993. Although the UN Mission operation could not achieve a complete peace for Cambodia, the mission significantly helped pave the way for a restoration of multi-party democracy and the opening up of Cambodia to the outside world. Although it was a signatory party to the Agreement, the Khmer Rouge eventually boycotted the UN-organized election in May 1993 and continued to wage a guerrilla war against the Cambodian government. After the UN peacekeeping forces left Cambodia, turmoil caused by the outlawed Khmer Rouge guerrilla forces persisted. One of the high-profile insecurities that was widely featured on the international news was the kidnapping and the killing of three foreign tourists—an Australian, a British and a French—during the train ambush in a southwestern province of Cambodia (Thayer, 1994).

The domestic stability Cambodia enjoys today was achieved through the visionary Win-Win Policy, initiated by former Prime Minister Samdech Hun Sen, between 1996 and 1998. This groundbreaking policy had a singular objective: to secure comprehensive national peace by offering three fundamental guarantees to the former Khmer Rouge forces—namely, the guarantee of life, the guarantee of employment and political status, and the guarantee of private property. Peace in Cambodia was finally achieved on 29 December 1998 through the Win-Win Policy, a legacy that former PM Hun Sen is keen to preserve. On this day, the last Khmer Rouge leaders, including Khieu Samphan and Nuon Chea, finally surrendered and traveled to Samdech Hun Sen's residence in Phnom Penh. The significance of this day is demonstrated by its designation as “Peace Day” and is now observed annually as a national holiday under a sub-decree signed on 1 January 2024. In his speech to the Cambodian diaspora and students in Geneva, Switzerland, on 24 October 2021, Samdech Hun Sen remarked, “War cannot end war; my philosophy is to resolve issues by peaceful means” (TVK, 2021).

After obtaining peace, Cambodia has been committed to joining international peacekeeping missions to maintain peace in conflict-stricken countries, especially in Africa. According to the 2024 annual report of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MoFAIC), by the end of 2024, Cambodia has sent 9,826 peacekeepers (857 female) in various humanitarian missions to ten countries worldwide such as Sudan, South Sudan, Lebanon, Chad, Cypress, Syria, Mali, Central African Republic, Yemen, and Congo. At present, 627 (130 female) Cambodian peacekeepers are reportedly deployed in the following missions: United Nations Interim Forces in Lebanon, United Nations Mission in South Sudan, United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central Africa Republic.

The missions that Cambodia has joined have enabled the country to gain recognition on the global stage. According to UN assessments, Cambodia ranks 28th out of 120 nations contributing to global peacekeeping efforts—and 3rd among ASEAN members. Notably, the country stands 13th worldwide and 2nd in ASEAN for female deployments, underscoring its significant role in advancing gender-inclusive peacekeeping. During the 54th Meeting of the UN General Assembly on December 19, 2024, Cambodia was elected as a member of the Organizational Committee of the Peacebuilding Commission for the 2025–2026 term (MoFAIC, 2025).

In November 2024, Cambodia hosted its first regional UN peacekeeping 5-week training course on engineering skills, intermediate heavy machinery training, explosives awareness and field rescue training attended by blue helmet participants from nine countries such as Cambodia, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Indonesia, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka (Torn, 2024b).

Cambodia's commitment to global peace and security was applauded by the UN. At the closing ceremony of the training course held on 20 December 2024, Under-Secretary-General Atul Khare commended Cambodia for its steadfast commitment to global peacekeeping in partnership with the United Nations. "Cambodia holds strong ties with the United Nations, which continue to strengthen and contribute to the promotion of international peace, development, and cooperation," Khare stated in his remarks (UN Cambodia, 2024).

III. Cultural Heritage as Soft Power

Cambodia is renowned for its rich cultural heritage, which stems from its status as one of the oldest civilizations in the world. Since the early centuries, when it was known as Funan, the kingdom encompassed all of present-day Cambodia and parts of present-day Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam. Influenced by India, like other parts of Southeast Asia, Funan grew to become one of the most important trading hubs in the region. Angkor Borei capital was the city center, connected to surrounding areas by roads and canals. At least five canals link the city to various towns. The longest one was a 30-meter-wide and 80-kilometer-long canal connecting Angkor Borei to the Funan seaport of Oc Ev, located in present-day southern Vietnam (Thang et al., 2025, p. 913). This canal remains in use today. The modern canal Funan Techo, currently under development, is named after this early Khmer kingdom.

Since then, Cambodian ancestors have built canals, water systems, roads, bridges, hospitals, temples, and more. Angkor Wat, built in the 12th century, was the largest religious edifice in the world. As a source of national pride, the temple symbolizes Cambodia's glorious past and the Khmer Empire, which lasted from the 9th to the 15th century. In his letter to Prime Minister Hun Manet dated 20 August 2025, US President Donald Trump praised Cambodia for having "a long and storied history and culture."

Angkor Wat and other ancient temples have served as major tourist attractions and

indispensable national assets driving economic growth. In 2024, 1.02 million foreign visitors purchased tickets to Angkor monuments, generating nearly USD 48 million (Khmer Times, 2025). The number of tourists is expected to rise annually. The launch of the new 4F-standard Techo International Airport in September 2025 has further enhanced Cambodia's capacity to receive more tourists.

The stone temples and monuments we see today are merely the skeleton of what was once a vast city. In 2007, research revealed that Angkor was the largest pre-industrial city in the world (Maugh II, 2007). While standing on the site, one can imagine how magnificent these temples were when in use. Henri Mouhout, a French naturalist and explorer, who visited Angkor 400 years after the city collapsed, found the setting astonishing when he arrived in 1860, three years before Cambodia became a French protectorate. "It [Angkor] is grander than anything left to us by Greece or Rome...." wrote Henri Mouhout (Glancey, 2017).

Unfortunately, decades of civil war and conflict led to a lack of protection and preservation, resulting in ancient monuments and artifacts being unlawfully smuggled out, sold on the black market, and plundered. To reunite these treasures with their original culture, the Cambodian government has actively worked to recover them. Since 1996, numerous artifacts have been returned. Some were privately owned, while others had been exhibited for years in galleries and museums across the US, Asia, and Europe.

During his speech at the 22 August 2024 homecoming ceremony for centuries-old looted artifacts, Prime Minister Hun Manet stated that Cambodia had received 1,098 artifacts between 1996 and 2024. Of these, 571 were donated by individuals, and 527 came from governments or institutions in fifteen countries, including the United States, France, Australia, the United Kingdom, Thailand, Japan, Indonesia, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Norway, and China (Torn, 2024a). While Cambodian antiques are returning home, some are traveling overseas as part of collaborative museum exhibitions abroad. At the moment, the giant 11-century reclining bronze statue, along with other bronze artefacts from the National Museum of Cambodia, are being displayed in the museum in Washington, California and Minnesota of the United States after the statue was displayed at Guimet Museum in Paris for more than four months (RFI Khmer, 2025).

Another recent moment when Cambodia's modern culture was showcased on an international high-profile stage occurred during the closing ceremony of Paris Summer Olympic on 11 August 2024. Dressed in traditional Khmer attire, the renowned Cambodian rapper VannDa took the stage perform "Time to Rise," a fusion of the traditional Khmer musical instrument *Chapei* – which was inscribed on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list in need of urgent safeguarding in 2016 – and contemporary rap. Released in March 2021, "Time to Rise" is one of the major hit songs in the history of Cambodian music, garnering over one million views within its first 24 hours on Youtube. As of early May 2025, the song has accumulated more than 130 million views.

IV. Food Diplomacy

Over the past four years, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MoFAIC) has been working to promote Cambodian cuisine abroad by developing a plan, publishing a cookbook, and training both foreign diplomats in the nation and Cambodian diplomats heading overseas.

In line with the Economic Diplomacy Strategy 2021–2023 with the aim at promoting Cambodia’s tourism and culture, MoFAIC initiated a culinary diplomacy campaign with the vision that good culinary diplomacy could benefit the economy because good food could attract investors as well as tourists to the country.

Key components of the campaign included the February 2021 publication of *The Taste of Angkor* cookbook, a culinary promotion tool for Cambodian diplomatic missions abroad. As part of the initiative, MoFAIC launched *Angkor Kitchen* in May 2022—a dedicated space to promote authentic Khmer cuisine, including traditional dishes and desserts, to international audiences.

There are three primary reasons for this *Angkor Kitchen* initiative. First, “The Taste of Angkor” cookbook won “Best Asian Cookbook” at the 2021 Gourmand World Cookbook Awards in Paris, which includes 38 recipes for traditional Khmer foods and desserts that are easy to follow. In its official statement dated 3 May 2022, MoFAIC identified the cookbook as an important vehicle for promoting Cambodia’s culinary diplomacy globally, particularly in strengthening cultural ties with ASEAN partners (MoFAIC, 2022a). MoFAIC stated that “it will use this cookbook as a key example to promote our culinary diplomacy via our foreign friends all around the world, particularly our ASEAN friends today” (MoFAIC, 2022a).

Second, MoFAIC’s National Institute of Diplomacy and International Relations (NIDIR) was tasked with organizing a training course on ‘Culinary Diplomacy’ to Cambodian diplomats, especially spouses of Cambodian ambassadors abroad to improve their capacity to understand the fundamental recipe and cooking instruction of the authentic Khmer cuisine.

Third, MoFAIC anticipates increased investment prospects in a variety of industries, including tourism, aviation, agriculture, restaurant and hotel expansion, and more, once Cambodian cuisine is recognized and well known. According to the statement’s conclusion, “it will support the Royal Government of Cambodia’s endeavor to transform the nation into an upper-middle income country in 2030 and a high-income country in 2050.”

Later that year, in mid-December 2022, NIDIR held the training course on “Culinary Diplomacy” in collaboration with the Economic Diplomacy Coordinating Group targets for ambassadors’ spouses and chefs who will be on mission and working at the Cambodian embassies abroad. MoFAIC has the vision to promote Khmer food via spouses and chefs of Cambodian ambassadors abroad as they are the ones who prepare food for foreign diplomats and high-ranking foreign guests, which is a good way to directly promote Khmer food. Ambassadors’ chefs are important because they prepare food for foreign guests during the important events hosted by the Cambodian embassies or Cambodian ambassadors abroad.

Deputy Prime Minister and MoFAIC Minister Prak Sokhonn emphasized that food is “a powerful tool for diplomacy in the modern days in order to enhance relations between countries through cultural exchanges such as food exhibitions and social gathering between the peoples, especially foreign diplomats” (Khmer Times, 2022).

More recently, from 19 to 21 September 2024, MoFAIC organized a three-day training course titled “Cambodian Culinary Diplomacy: Promoting Friendship and Cooperation Through Foods” in Phnom Penh and Kampot to foreign diplomats and their spouses who are on diplomatic missions in Cambodia. The purpose of the course is to promote Khmer cuisine, to increase the knowledge of foreign diplomats stationed in Cambodia about the country's food culture and more importantly to foster networking and friendships between the people of Cambodia and international diplomats stationed in Cambodia. According to MoFAIC's press release, “the course seeks to promote Khmer foods by offering foreign diplomats the chance to experience first-hand how to prepare local dishes” (MoFAIC, 2024).

The course, taught by two renowned chefs—Chef Nak and Oknha Luu Meng—includes a trip to *La Plantation* in Kampot, home of Kampot Pepper, which was recognized as a Geographical Indication product in Cambodia in 2010 and received Protected Geographical Indication status in the European Union in 2016.

On 3 March 2025, the second edition of the cookbook “The Taste of Angkor II” was officially launched, symbolizing Cambodia's sustained commitment to preserving and promoting traditional Khmer cuisine. This initiative underscores the nation's broader efforts to foster intercultural understanding through gastronomy, advance culinary tourism, and strengthen both economic and cultural relations with the international community.

V. Demining Efforts and Humanitarian Engagement

As a result of the Second Indochina War of the 1960s and the subsequent civil conflicts, particularly in the 1980s, Cambodia has been left heavily contaminated with landmines, unexploded ordnance (UXO) and other Explosive Remnant of Wars (ERWs). The Cambodian Mine Action Authority (CMAA) reports that from 1979 to 2023, landmines and ERWs caused 65,037 casualties, among them 51,184 casualties caused by landmines and other 13,853 by ERWs (CMAC, 2023, p. 21).

The problem of landmines, UXOs and ERWs not only continues to claim lives and cause severe injuries among civilians but also significantly hinders the country's socio-economic development.

Established in 1992, the Cambodian Mine Action Centre (CMAC) has worked tirelessly to turn the land once contaminated by mines, UXOs and ERWs, into a land for development towards the mission of “Saving lives and Supporting Development for Cambodia.” However, due to the complex nature of landmine and UXO identification and mapping, as well as challenges related to weather conditions, the vast scale of contamination, and financial

constraints, the demining mission has faced interruptions. Consequently, Cambodia has had to extend its timeline for achieving its goal of becoming a mine-free country.

In its National Mine Action Strategy 2018–2025 (NMAS), Cambodia has set eight goals for clearance of mines, cluster munition remnants and other ERWs, the first of which was to release all known landmine contaminated areas by 2025. However, these goals have yet to be achieved and the target has been postponed to 2030, the same year in which Cambodia aspires to become an upper-middle-income country. In addition to its original 17 Sustainable Development Goals, Cambodia has added the work of “clearance of land mines and explosive remnants of war” to the Cambodian Sustainable Development Goals Framework (2016–2030) (RGC, 2018, p. 2).

In recent years, through the concerted efforts of the Cambodian government and its international partners, the number of casualties caused by landmines and ERWs has declined from 4,320 in 1996 to an average of around 100 annually over the past five years, while a significant number of contaminated areas have been successfully cleared (CMAC, 2023; RGC, 2017). According to the National Mine Action Strategy, the Cambodian government, along with other NGOs, has worked to reduce casualties by implementing laws that prohibit the collection and storage of ordnance for scrap metal, conducting large-scale clearance of landmines and ERWs on a large scale, promoting mine risk awareness, and strengthening strategic planning and prioritization efforts.

With more than three decades of sustained efforts, Cambodia has developed considerable expertise in clearing landmines, UXO, and ERWs, emerging as a model and source of lessons for other countries engaged in similar humanitarian demining campaigns. Over the past decade, Cambodia has also taken an active role in supporting the United Nations humanitarian operations, including participation in international landmine clearance missions.

Cambodia not only continues to work towards achieving its own mine-free goal but also extends humanitarian assistance to help other countries remove landmines. As Ukraine has become one of the most heavily mine-contaminated countries in the world, Cambodia has demonstrated its commitment to international solidarity by providing technical support and expertise to assist Ukraine in its demining efforts. On 1 November 2022, then-Prime Minister Hun Sen and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky held a phone call discussion, during which Cambodia pledged to send landmines experts to assist Ukraine in clearing landmines (MoFAIC, 2022b).

In January 2023, a one-week basic training course was conducted in Cambodia for fifteen Ukrainian participants, as well as trainees from Poland and Japan. During the course, CMAC’s landmine experts provided comprehensive instruction on landmine detection, safety procedures, and efficient clearance techniques, including hand-on experience in a minefield. Subsequent training sessions were held in Poland in July 2023 and again in Cambodia in August 2024. According to the *Landmine Monitor 2022 Report*, Cambodia and Ukraine are among countries most affected by landmines worldwide. This humanitarian support for Ukrainian personnel in landmine clearance represents an act of global solidarity

and compassion. Through such assistance, Cambodia reaffirms its commitment to peace and humanitarian cooperation, standing with Ukraine in its efforts to protect civilians and support the rebuilding of the nation.

Through its humanitarian support to affected countries and its commitment to combating the use of anti-personnel mines, Cambodia was elected as Chair and host of the 5th Review Conference of the Ottawa Convention during the 21st Meeting of State Parties to the Mine Ban Convention in Geneva. The conference was held in Siem Reap in late November 2024, with participation from 164 member and observer states, as well as numerous international organizations and institutions. Notably, Cambodia became the first country in Asia and the fifth in the world to host this quinquennial meeting (MoI, 2023).

VI. The Film Industry as Cambodia's Future Soft Power

Some foreigners were introduced to Cambodia's rich cultural heritage, particularly the ancient temple complexes of Angkor Wat and Ta Prohm, through the 2001 film *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*. Starring Angelina Jolie as the adventurous archaeologist Lara Croft, the movie prominently features these iconic Khmer ruins, bringing global attention to Cambodia's historical and architectural wonders. The film's widespread popularity has played a significant role in enhancing international awareness of Khmer civilization while simultaneously contributing to the growth of Cambodia's tourism industry.

Among the temples showcased in the film, Ta Prohm has garnered particular fascination due to its striking visual appeal: massive tree roots enveloping the stone structures, creating a surreal and almost mystical atmosphere. This unique characteristic, combined with its cinematic exposure, has made Ta Prohm a must-visit destination for tourists. Notably, one specific location within the temple, where Angelina Jolie's character stands in a memorable scene, has become a popular spot for photography, further reinforcing the site's association with the film. As a result, Ta Prohm has colloquially been dubbed the "Angelina Jolie Temple" by both tourists and local tour guides, illustrating the lasting impact of popular media on cultural landmarks.

In the case of *Tomb Raider*, the movie not only heightened global interest in Cambodia's heritage but also stimulated economic benefits through increased numbers of visitors. This underscores the powerful role that media representations play in shaping perceptions of historical sites and driving international travel.

The Cambodian government recognizes the film industry as a vital economic sector that effectively promotes tourism and enhances the nation's soft power.

During a surprising visit to Angkor Wat on 3 September 2024, Prime Minister Hun Manet told a group of tour guides he met on the site about the government's plan to develop a comprehensive film tourism package. This initiative is expected to offer international film crews preferential access to designated locations and provide financial incentives for production companies choosing Cambodia as their filming destination.

Prime Minister Hun Manet has instructed his cabinet on numerous occasions to support the film industry in order to draw in the travel and tourism sector. At the Ministry of Tourism’s 2024 year-end workshop held in February 2025, the Prime Minister proposed that the Minister of Tourism consider forming a joint task force with the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts to facilitate foreign film productions in Cambodia. This initiative aims to ensure a smooth process from the issuance of film permits through to the completion of filming (OCM, 2025).

The Department of Cinema and Culture Diffusion under the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts is the primary government agency responsible for identifying potential film production locations and issuing permits to production companies planning to shoot in the country. The Department has provided significant support to foreign film crews; however, Cambodia continues to face challenges in attracting international productions. The main obstacles include a complex bureaucratic process and insufficient infrastructure and skilled human resources.

To promote the film industry and harness its potential for Cambodia’s benefit, the following recommendations should be considered:

Providing Incentives to Attract International Film Companies

Offering financial incentives, such as cash rebates, is one of the most effective ways to attract international film productions. Beyond distribution considerations, production companies often choose filming locations based on the availability of post-production incentives. Recognizing this, many countries around the world offer financial support to reduce production costs and reward film crews upon project completion. By implementing a competitive incentive program, Cambodia could become a more attractive destination for foreign filmmakers.

Establishing or Enhancing a One-Stop Service

A centralized one-stop service should be responsible for handling all administrative tasks related to film production—starting from issuing filming permits to coordinating logistics. This service would act as a liaison between foreign film companies and relevant government or private institutions, ensuring a smooth and efficient production process. Since film productions frequently require movement across multiple locations, streamlining operations would enhance efficiency and optimize the use of time and resources. Such improvements could generate positive experiences, which, in turn, may encourage additional production companies to choose Cambodia as a filming destination.

Upgrading Film Training to University Level

Although the government, NGOs, and independent groups have offered valuable training in areas such as scriptwriting, directing, and cinematography, the overall quality of locally produced films remains insufficient to compete internationally. Currently, the NGO *Pour un*

Sourire d'Enfant provides training in cinematography and post-production, culminating in a bachelor's degree in audiovisual studies, while the Department of Media and Communication at the Royal University of Phnom Penh offers a bachelor's program focusing on media-related skills and short film production. Nevertheless, Cambodia still lacks a dedicated film school.

The Royal University of Fine Arts, which currently offers bachelor's degrees in directing of traditional and classical dance, theater direction, circus arts direction, and creative writing, is well positioned to establish a comprehensive bachelor's program in film. Such a program would contribute to the development of a new generation of professional filmmakers capable of competing on the global stage.

Beyond economic and professional benefits, films also serve as a powerful medium to promote Cambodia's cultural image and soft power. This potential is reinforced by government initiatives and ongoing efforts by the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts to support the growth of the national film industry.

VII. Challenges to Enhancing Cambodia's Image: Online Scams and Reputation Risks

While Cambodia possesses a unique soft power that makes it a potential attraction, the country faces significant challenges that hinder its advancement. One of the most pressing issues confronting Cambodia over the last decade has been its association with online scams, which has harmed the country's global reputation.

Frequently featured in negative foreign news reports, Cambodia has seen its reputation suffer, frightening away tourists and deterring foreign investment. This perception was exacerbated by the 2023 Chinese film *No More Bets*, which depicts a computer programmer and a model lured to Southeast Asia with promises of lucrative employment, only to be forced into a scam operation. Although not explicitly set in Cambodia, certain details—such as misspelled Khmer script on characters' shirts and on a bus—led many viewers to believe it was. In a letter dated 12 September 2023, the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts wrote to the Chinese Ambassador, Wang Wenbin, requesting that the film's dissemination be prevented. The Ministry stated that these depictions “damage the nation's honor and reputation and have detrimental effects on investment, tourism, and other areas.” The film's release was particularly damaging, as Cambodia was struggling to revive its tourism sector after reopening from Covid-19 lockdowns. More recently, reports of the kidnapping and killing of a Korean university student, along with U.S. and U.K. news coverage, have further cast a negative light on the country (McCready, 2025).

Recognizing that news of scamming and related crimes—whether true or exaggerated—negatively impacts tourism, politics, and Cambodia's global image, the government has shown efforts to prioritize preventing and eliminating online scams in cooperation with foreign nations.

In a significant move to combat this global issue, strict measures were imposed in 2025. On 20 February, Prime Minister Hun Manet issued a decision to create an Ad Hoc Commission for Combating Online Scams, which he himself chairs. The Commission's vice-chairs and members include six deputy prime ministers, several ministers, all municipal and provincial governors, and other key officials. A secretariat was also established, headed by Senior Minister for Special Mission Chhay Sinarith.

Although crackdowns have led to the arrest of many online scammers—many of whom were foreign nationals—the government continues its efforts to eradicate these crimes. Officials emphasize that these are illegal operations run by foreign criminals who have sneaked into Cambodia. On 14 July, Prime Minister Hun Manet issued a directive for a nationwide combat against online scams, instructing all provincial governors and government institutions to identify and eliminate locations used for conducting online crimes. These crackdowns are conducted on a regular basis. Nearly two months later, in early September, the Prime Minister issued a decision to appoint 82 persons to work in the Secretariat.

VIII. Conclusion

Cambodia's peacekeeping missions and demining operations remain its most visible and successful soft-power initiatives, earning international recognition and demonstrating the country's commitment to humanitarian cooperation. Its rich cultural heritage, rooted in the achievements of Khmer ancestors, further underpins national identity and provides a strong foundation for projecting Cambodia's image globally.

Other soft-power avenues, such as cuisine, film, and contemporary arts, are still developing. *Num Banh Chok* is emerging as a potential national culinary symbol, with government efforts to showcase it internationally and seek UNESCO recognition. Strategic promotion, combined with private-sector participation—such as packaged products for global markets—could expand its reach. Likewise, the film industry and artists like VannDa offer promising platforms for projecting Khmer culture abroad, provided copyright protection and institutional support are strengthened.

Practical challenges, including online scams, continue to undermine Cambodia's reputation and limit the impact of its soft-power efforts. Tackling these issues is essential for protecting citizens, promoting tourism, and fostering international trust.

Overall, Cambodia has laid a solid foundation through peacekeeping, cultural heritage, and emerging creative initiatives. With focused investment, strategic promotion, and strengthened institutional frameworks, the country can enhance its global image, diversify its soft-power portfolio, and secure long-term cultural, economic, and diplomatic influence.

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Chapter 22

Cambodia's Climate Diplomacy: What is Needed for Effectiveness?

SAO Phal Niseiy

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I. Introduction

The climate catastrophe poses a significant threat to many nations. Developing countries are particularly vulnerable to extreme weather events, including floods, droughts, storms, and heat waves. This highlights a global disparity: despite poorer countries' less contribution to pollution, they endure the worst impacts of climate change (Imraan et al., 2024). Since the establishment of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in 1992, countries have developed collaborative frameworks to negotiate climate commitments. These structures empower small and least developed nations, urging wealthier ones to support adaptation and mitigation efforts. Climate diplomacy has become increasingly important since the adoption of the Paris Agreement at the 2015 Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP) in Paris. Countries are now incorporating climate change into international policies, improving discussions and funding opportunities, making it vital for all nations.

Cambodia has been actively engaged in climate diplomacy within the UN framework since the early 1990s, having ratified numerous global climate change instruments. However, its position remains weak and ill-defined, shaped by the complex interplay between its status as a least developed country and the need to pursue growth. This complexity hampers a proactive approach and limits ambitious domestic actions, resulting in inadequate climate measures and a slower transition to a low-carbon economy. Despite pledging to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 42 percent by 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality by 2050, success is uncertain due to insufficient resources and the government's reluctance to address issues of deforestation and energy transition.

This chapter examines Cambodia's history of climate diplomacy and its current position. It highlights the necessity for the country to reassess its approach to climate diplomacy, forging global alliances and bolstering its ability to attract funding and investments. By implementing rigorous climate initiatives and developing a comprehensive strategy to enhance institutional capacities, Cambodia can strengthen its climate leadership. Enhancing the expertise of diplomats on climate-related issues can boost advocacy efforts beyond the annual climate conferences. Moreover, creating a supportive environment will encourage more involvement from all stakeholders, including the private sector and civil society, thereby strengthening long-term climate diplomacy.

II. Climate Diplomacy in Brief

Climate diplomacy lacks a universally accepted definition. In contrast to the conventional foreign policy that states typically adhere to, the understanding of diplomacy becomes more intricate in the context of the climate crisis. It generally encompasses various strategies that countries employ in their diplomatic efforts to strengthen climate frameworks, promote ambitious domestic climate initiatives, and advocate for global actions to address the consequences of the climate crisis. According to the Climate Diplomacy Organization, climate diplomacy involves utilizing diplomatic tools to enhance the ambition and effectiveness of the international climate change regime, thereby mitigating the negative impacts of

climate risks on peace, stability, and prosperity. It prioritizes climate actions through close collaboration with partners worldwide, diplomatic dialogues, and public diplomacy (Climate Diplomacy 2020). While climate diplomacy focuses on implementing actions to achieve climate ambitions, its ultimate goal is to limit global warming to below 2 degrees Celsius compared to pre-industrial levels and to take adequate measures to address climate consequences (Dobrinka and Anna, 2020). To be precise, strong climate diplomacy will foster confidence-building and enhance collaboration that propels more decisive climate actions, effectively tackling the global challenge of climate change and creating a sustainable future for everyone.

According to Mabey et al. (2013), states have to acquire three elements to ensure strong climate diplomacy. These include: i) the ability to understand one's own interests, along with a clear comprehension of how the climate crisis affects and influences fundamental national interests; ii) the capacity to gather and assess information regarding the objectives, constraints and capacities of other actors in the international regime; and iii) the ability to persuade other states to incorporate national priorities into diplomatic and political processes. Although these capabilities may initially appear straightforward, their successful implementation necessitates significant institutional fine-tuning within governmental and non-governmental systems. Most nations, particularly the least-developed countries (LDCs) with limited institutional and resource capacity, have not sufficiently integrated the climate crisis into their foreign policy decision-making processes. Furthermore, the challenge intensifies for states as the global climate regime has progressed far more rapidly than their capacity to establish robust and flexible climate diplomacy, posing a structural challenge in addressing more complex issues with high ambition.

Like many other small nations, Cambodia's climate diplomacy has limitations and remains under-focused. This reflects a consistent pattern: the impacts of the climate crisis are inadequately recognized and are not seen as urgent issues. Despite being one of the most vulnerable countries, Cambodia remains slow in identifying the effects of the climate crisis as a critical component in discussions of national interests or foreign policy. This issue often arises from the trade-offs between climate action and development. Additionally, the reluctance to pursue robust international climate actions may originate from misunderstandings that such initiatives could impede development (Germanwatch, 2022).

III. Impacts of the Climate Crisis on Cambodia

Cambodia's vulnerability to climate-induced impacts and the potential future threats it may face are significant if the country fails to take adequate action to alter its trajectory. Although its greenhouse gas emissions are relatively low—around 1.1 tons of CO₂ per capita, contributing less than 0.1 percent to global emissions and ranking 158th globally (Koons, 2024)—Cambodia was ranked 12th worldwide in the 2020 Global Climate Risk Index, underscoring its high susceptibility to extreme weather events (UNDP, 2022). So far, the country already faces heightened risks from severe weather events such as flooding, droughts, and extreme heat, which have been more frequent in recent years. In 2024, the country saw

its highest temperatures in 170 years, negatively impacting the population and disrupting socio-economic activities (Sao, 2024). Economically, with projected climate change trends, Cambodia is expected to suffer more from severe floods and droughts, which are anticipated to impact its GDP by nearly 10 percent by 2050 (UNEP, n.d.).

By the 2090s, Cambodia's temperatures could rise by 3.1 degrees Celsius compared to the conditions from 1986 to 2005, assuming the highest emissions trajectory. The National Council for Sustainable Development predicts that the climate crisis could reduce Cambodia's GDP by 2.5 percent by 2030 and 9.8 percent by 2050 if global temperatures rise below 2 degrees Celsius by 2100 and current levels of climate investment remain the same. This decline represents a decrease in average annual GDP growth from 6.9% to 6.6%, delaying Cambodia's transition to Upper-Middle-Income Country status by one year. Not only does the country suffer economically and face the increasing frequency of climate-induced heatwaves, but it is also emerging as one of the nation's most critical health concerns. In 2024, Cambodia experienced its hottest year in 170 years, with summer temperatures surpassing 40 degrees Celsius in Phnom Penh and other provinces. Given the climate crisis, residents are likely to face an increase in extreme weather events, especially heatwaves (Sao, 2024).

Socio-economic variables are recognized as the principal contributors to Cambodia's greenhouse gas emissions as the country seeks to progress in its development. These variables encompass energy production, transportation, commercial operations, and agricultural practices that require deforestation. The International Energy Agency (IEA) listed transportation and energy production as the primary sources of emissions in Cambodia for 2022, accounting for 46% and 24%, respectively. The alarming rate of deforestation in the country has continued to undermine its resistance to climate change and diminish its ability to absorb rising greenhouse gas emissions.

IV. Cambodia's Engagement in Climate Diplomacy

Since the early 1990s, Cambodia has made significant strides toward reintegration into the global community. Since then, it has ratified numerous international legal instruments to secure financial aid from the international community, and engaging in climate change negotiations has been one of its key strategies. Over the past few decades, the country has portrayed itself as a strong supporter of multilateralism, with climate negotiations serving as a key example.

The country ratified the UNFCCC in December 1995, marking its first diplomatic interaction with the UN on climate issues. This followed its role as an Observer State at the first COP in Berlin in March 1995 (Ben, 2024). Held annually, the conference enables members to determine the necessary measures for successful implementation (UNFCCC, n.d.). Since the second COP in Geneva in 1996, Cambodia has actively engaged in climate diplomacy by participating in climate discussions and ratifying global climate change instruments.

At COP 3 in Kyoto in 1997, Cambodia joined other nations in adopting the Kyoto Protocol, the world's first treaty aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Five years later, the country

ratified the protocol to reaffirm its commitment to reducing emissions and maintaining its climate diplomacy. Cambodia also kept its focus on demanding climate finance from rich countries, and adopting the non-binding Copenhagen Accord was part of its diplomatic endeavor. Through the accord, wealthier countries pledged to provide up to USD 10 billion per year to help poor countries adapt to climate change from 2010 to 2012, to ramp up to USD 100 billion annually starting in 2020 (Jallow & Craft, 2014). As part of its efforts to reduce emissions related to deforestation and land use, Cambodia participated in REDD+. This UNFCCC process supports initiatives to decrease emissions from deforestation and forest degradation, while promoting conservation, sustainable forest management, and enhancing carbon stocks. It established the first two pilot projects in 2008 (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2017), and presently, the project sites include Keo Seima REDD+, Southern Cardamom REDD+, Central Cardamom REDD+ and Prey Lang REDD+ Projects. To date, Cambodia has generated about USD 12 million from carbon sales. The government prioritized these efforts by endorsing the National REDD+ Strategy (NRS) 2017–2026, implemented in two phases: Phase 1 (2017–2021) established the action plan and institutions, and Phase 2 (2022–2026) focuses on full implementation and measurable results. A key milestone is the development of a robust forest monitoring system to evaluate and improve policies on deforestation and forest degradation (Chou & Chinh, 2023).

A pivotal diplomatic moment was its adoption of the Paris Climate Accord (Kong and Anan, 2016), along with 195 other nations that chose to limit global warming to no more than 1.5 or 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. Since then, it has continued to adopt climate-related regulations and undertake more ambitious climate commitments on its domestic front, aligning with the climate commitments outlined in the climate deal. On the sidelines of the event, Cambodia, along with 22 other nations, also joined the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF) to enhance its diplomatic efforts in the climate arena (Climate Vulnerable Forum, n.d.).

Cambodia is committed to adopting a whole-of-government approach to the global climate response by engaging all ministries and governmental bodies in addressing climate change. As a signatory to the Paris Climate Agreement, it has adopted two Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) that detail its commitments to enhance climate resilience and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The Long-Term Strategy for Carbon Neutrality 2050, introduced in December 2021, made the country the first in Southeast Asia and the third least developed nation to present such a strategy (Sao, 2022). A year later, the former prime minister announced a commitment to reduce emissions by 42 percent by 2030 during a conference on Environmental Policy and Sustainable Development (Samban, 2022). In 2025, in its new NDC 3.0 for 2025–2030, Cambodia incorporates gender considerations in climate initiatives, which is essential for tackling gender inequalities in climate effects (UNDP, 2025). More importantly, the country made a new pledge to achieve a 55 percent carbon reduction by 2035. In 2025, Cambodia's updated NDC 3.0 for 2025–2030 integrates gender considerations into climate initiatives, addressing gender inequalities in climate impacts (UNDP, 2025). Significantly, the country also pledged to achieve a 55 percent reduction in carbon emissions by 2035 (Ousa, 2025).

At the regional level, Cambodia has actively advanced climate actions through ASEAN mechanisms, aligning its national goals with broader regional frameworks. The ratification of the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution in 2006 exemplifies Cambodia's engagement in addressing environmental issues, as sources of air pollution such as agricultural burning and fossil fuel use are key drivers of the climate crisis. Moreover, Cambodia has also contributed to regional policy roadmaps promoting environmental sustainability and decarbonization.

Notably, Cambodia was involved in formulating the ASEAN Climate Change Strategic Action Plan (ACCSAP) 2025–2030, launched in 2021, which sets out the region's targets for 2030 and 2050 by harmonizing commitments and strengthening coordinated adaptation and mitigation efforts (Putra, 2024). The country also contributed to the ASEAN Climate Change and Energy Project (ASEAN Centre for Energy, 2021) and endorsed the ASEAN Strategy for Carbon Neutrality, which complements national initiatives to achieve Nationally Determined Contributions under the Paris Agreement (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023).

Nevertheless, ASEAN's consensus-based approach limits the potential for ambitious regional action. Scholars argue that ASEAN's climate initiatives often remain symbolic, with progress largely dependent on individual member states' political will rather than collective enforcement (Salamanca, 2023).

Moreover, the country also employs domestic approaches to enhance its climate commitment through various dialogues and engagements with other foreign partners and international stakeholders. For instance, the Climate Change Summit and the Climate Change Alliance (CCA) are among the platforms that have become engaging venues where experts, civil society groups, and international partners can collaborate to find better ways to address climate impacts through policy interventions, adaptation, and climate finance channeling. For example, the CCCA, which has been active since 2010, integrates climate change into policies, funds projects, and enhances public awareness and capacities (UNDP Cambodia, n.d.).

Key policies and strategies, such as the Cambodia Climate Change Strategic Plan (CCCSP) 2014–2023, the Circular Strategy on Environment 2023–2028, and the CCCSP 2024–2033, are among the many essential policy instruments the government has adopted as a roadmap to materialize its climate commitment under the Paris Agreement. With eight strategic objectives, the CCCSP is the first comprehensive national strategy addressing climate change. It envisions a green, low-carbon, climate-resilient, equitable, sustainable, and knowledge-based society (Ministry of Environment, 2013). To achieve a carbon-neutral nation with 60 percent forest cover by 2050, the circular strategy outlines priority activities for environmental sustainability, climate resilience, and fostering a green economy (Greater Mekong Subregion, 2023). The CCCSP 2024–2033, launched in May 2025, also focuses on identifying gaps in the country's NDCs and Carbon Neutrality goals. It is a shared roadmap toward Cambodia's climate vision of achieving carbon neutrality and climate resilience for inclusive and sustainable development.

V. Cambodia's Climate Diplomacy Position

The preceding section underscores Cambodia's pivotal role in the global climate system, necessitating an examination of the nation's diplomatic position within the climate change framework. However, rather than adopting a distinctly ambitious stance in advocating for substantial climate steps to mitigate carbon emissions, its climate diplomacy is defined by a specific philosophy.

Its status as a least developed country and the principle of “Common But Differentiated Responsibilities,” through which it promotes targeted climate initiatives and acknowledges its developmental needs as a developing nation, have significantly influenced its diplomatic stance on the climate system. Cambodian representatives have exhibited the characteristics mentioned earlier at the two prominent climate conferences below. The concept of “common but differentiated responsibilities” has a long history, originating from the 1972 Stockholm Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment. Principle nine calls for “the transfer of substantial quantities of financial and technological assistance as a supplement to the domestic effort of the developing countries.” Twenty years later, the 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development reaffirmed this commitment in principles seven and nine (Aginam, 2011). At the COP 13 in Bali in 2007, prior to the adoption of the Copenhagen Accord in 2009 and the legally binding Paris Climate Agreement in 2015, Cambodian representative and former Minister of Environment Mok Mareth emphasized the necessity of exempting least developed countries from accountability for climate change they did not instigate.

“There is also an urgent need to improve financing for climate change activities. We want LDCs not to be held responsible for problems they have not caused but instead be funded on an unconditional, full-cost basis to adapt to climate change,” Mareth stressed in his remark, calling on the parties to consider a binding agreement under the UNFCCC that delineates explicit financial responsibilities and offers enhanced access to adaptation funding for impoverished nations like Cambodia (Ministry of Environment, Kingdom of Cambodia, 2023).

During the COP 21, King Norodom Sihamoni articulated the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, stressing that while all countries share the duty to address climate change, their obligations and capacities vary (Sassoon, 2015). The king highlighted the urgent need to sustain global efforts to fund least developed countries (LDCs), which includes the initial funding for the Green Climate Fund (GCF), and to encourage private investment in energy efficiency and renewable sources (International Institute for Sustainable Development, 2015). This diplomatic gesture showcased the nation's commitment to prioritizing adaptation funding over mitigation initiatives to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, aligning with its development goals.

Furthermore, it is crucial to understand that Cambodia's unique diplomatic position has been shaped by its relationships with various interest groups and organizations. The country has primarily focused on building ties and alliances with nations sharing similar values, while pursuing financial aid and technology transfers, particularly within the LDC group,

which comprises 44 nations, and the G-77. These groups aim to ensure a fair and ambitious global response to the climate crisis, calling for increased financial and technical support from developed countries. As a member of the G-77—the largest UN coalition of developing nations formed in 1964, comprising 134 members (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, n.d.)—Cambodia argues that the climate crisis primarily results from pollution linked to the historical industrialization of wealthy nations. Consequently, rich countries must provide financial and technological support to help developing nations address this issue. So far, Cambodia’s diplomatic stance has remained unchanged, with its officials consistently emphasizing the need for wealthy nations to take financial accountability. Cambodia often negotiates collectively, with key demands typically including repeated calls for technology transfers, climate finance for mitigation and adaptation, and climate justice.

Such a position has not changed. Cambodian leaders continue reiterating the need for financial contributions and technological transfer within the UN gathering frameworks. Former Prime Minister Hun Sen, in particular, called on industrialized countries to provide climate funding and technology transfer at the 77th UN General Assembly in 2022, emphasizing the importance of global mitigation efforts in keeping global warming below 1.5 degrees Celsius (Teng, 2022).

The country is also among the nations that endorsed the Loss and Damage Fund, a fund established at COP 27 following decades of advocacy from climate-vulnerable, low-income nations. At COP28 in Dubai, the UAE, the fund aims to enhance climate resilience and achieve net-zero emissions by 2050 (Petchkaew, 2023). The fund seeks to provide financial support to countries most vulnerable to and affected by the consequences of climate change, while addressing the gaps that existing climate finance organizations, such as the Green Climate Fund, currently fail to cover. As of 2020, the amalgamated financial flows for adaptation and mitigation fell short by at least USD 17 billion of the USD 100 billion promised to developing nations (United Nations Environment Programme, 2022).

VI. Weak Climate Diplomacy: Balancing Rapid Development and Ambitious Climate Actions

As mentioned earlier, Cambodia aims for rapid development. However, it faces a dilemma: continue growth or adopt ambitious climate measures that may hinder progress. Its leaders are skeptical, asking: Should they stick to the current development path or confront the issue of the climate crisis?

With the mantra of limited resources and the need for rapid growth, Cambodia appears to be at ease with not taking an assertive position in advocating for climate action internationally. While the urgency of the climate crisis does not drive its climate diplomacy position, it is characterized by a strong emphasis on adaptation and a reliance on international support to realize a commitment to sustainable development. Its approach is often framed in the context of its vulnerability and the need for developed countries to take greater responsibility and provide adequate financial and technical assistance.

Despite recognizing the dangers of climate change, Cambodia's status as a Least Developed Country (LDC) continues to limit its ambitions and weaken its international climate position. The government's belief that it lacks sufficient financial and technical resources to address climate change has fostered reluctance to act decisively, deepening its dependence on foreign aid. It prioritizes development goals such as poverty reduction and improvements in infrastructure, healthcare, and education, viewing aggressive climate measures as potential obstacles to economic progress.

As a result, the country views climate finance as the primary means of integrating climate action into its broader development strategy. Cambodia fears that ambitious climate initiatives, such as transitioning to clean energy, could raise development costs, discourage investment, and increase living expenses for its citizens. This condition is reflected in the country's limited progress on climate-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In 2024, UNDP Resident Representative Alissar Chaker noted that Cambodia's overall progress toward the SDGs had remained largely on track. However, she emphasized that achieving all goals remains difficult despite notable advancements in several areas, including climate action (Sao, 2025).

Further evidence of slow progress is presented in the Sustainable Development Report 2025, which shows Cambodia continues to face significant challenges under Goal 13 (Climate Action). The report found that progress across three key indicators is too slow to meet the 2030 targets. Efforts to reduce carbon dioxide emissions from fossil fuel combustion and cement production have stagnated, reaching less than half of the required rate. Greenhouse gas emissions embedded in imports have also shown minimal improvement. Under Goal 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy), Cambodia has made some progress; however, the share of renewable energy in total final energy consumption remains far below target levels, highlighting persistent difficulties in the country's energy transition (United Nations Statistics Division, 2025).

This leads the country to perceive that only embracing fossil fuels and exploiting natural resources suits its current development trajectory, as speedy transitioning can be risky. Regarding energy requirements, Cambodia heavily relies on inexpensive but environmentally damaging sources, such as hydropower and fossil fuels, particularly coal and oil. The growing reliance on fossil fuel imports significantly contributed to emissions and further strained energy security (Kimura & Han, 2019). From 2000 to 2010, its total primary energy supply (TPES) grew at an average annual rate of 5.8 percent, and from 2010 to 2019, it accelerated to 8.0 percent (Ministry of Mines and Energy, Cambodia & Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia, 2022). According to Mines and Energy Minister Keo Rattanak, coal-powered generation currently accounts for about 32 percent of Cambodia's national grid, primarily due to its low cost and ability to provide electricity around the clock. The minister also defended the country's reliance on coal, noting that despite transitioning to cleaner energy, coal power will continue to play a role in the world's energy production until 2050 (Ben, 2024).

Cambodia's pronounced emphasis on development appears to contradict its international position regarding the environmental impact of fossil fuels, evidenced by its sustained

hesitance to endorse a global legal framework designed to phase out and regulate fossil fuel consumption. Despite the nation's commitment to increasing its share of greener energy, advancement is sluggish. Moreover, its diplomatic endeavors suggest a lack of commitment to reducing reliance on fossil fuels. This issue is further emphasized by its failure to endorse the Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty, which necessitates a transition from dependence on fossil fuels (Sao, 2024). Now, 16 countries, primarily tiny island states, in addition to over 130 cities and subnational governments significantly impacted by climate change and increasing sea levels, have ratified this convention (Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty Initiative, n.d.).

The unsustainable extraction of natural resources also contributes to Cambodia's struggles with challenges such as persistent deforestation. Although it pledges to achieve 60 percent forest cover as mandated by the Paris Agreement, its journey has been an uphill battle, with hesitation in taking stringent actions to address forest losses. From 2000 to 2012, it was reported to have the fifth-highest deforestation rate in the world, ranking third in Asia, behind Malaysia and Indonesia (Hansen et al., 2013). Cambodia lost 1.48 million hectares of humid primary forest between 2002 and 2024, accounting for 51 percent of the overall tree cover loss. Cambodia's overall humid primary forest area diminished by 34 percent during this timeframe (Global Forest Watch, 2018). As of 2021, forests accounted for about 44.8 percent of the country's total land area, which included rubber and palm oil plantations alongside other permanent crops. The primary causes of forest degradation are linked to developmental forces, such as the increasing demand for agricultural land, Social Land Concessions (SLC), and economic land concessions (ELC). However, much of the illegal logging is driven by pervasive corruption (Flynn, 2024).

The Cambodian government has a tradition of disregarding deforestation, ostensibly benefiting from it. Initiatives such as REDD+, which focus on the generation and trading of carbon credits, have encountered significant hurdles in recent years, despite the government's emphasis on their beneficial impacts. Concerns have grown as observers fear that such projects may become greenwashing, potentially serving as a guise for land grabbing by elites. An analysis by Eco-Business suggests that illicit logging, particularly in protected areas like Keo Seima, often implicates affluent individuals with ties to the government. Notwithstanding its assertions of improving transparency and decreasing illegal extraction in protected regions, adverse representations persist, with media reports indicating that logging at a REDD+ site appears to be sanctioned by the very government that advocates the project (See, 2023). The results suggest that climate compensation from forest conservation may not be as profitable as the revenue derived from logging and wood investments in protected forests (Flynn, 2025).

Aside from the REDD+ controversies, Cambodia also deliberately declined the opportunity to take on firm commitments against deforestation within the UN framework, as illustrated by a high-profile diplomatic setback in 2021. That was when it chose not to endorse the Forest and Land Use agreement aimed at halting and reversing forest loss and land degradation by 2030 during COP26 in Glasgow. This decision not only undermined the

country's climate leadership but also underscored its ongoing struggle to balance economic growth with forest preservation.

The decision also drew criticism from environmentalists and development partners, particularly the UK government, as the conference host. Then UK Ambassador Tina Redshaw subsequently scrutinized the government's equivocal positions regarding a net-zero emission timeline and raised concerns about the country's lack of interest in compliance with the forest and land-use agreement. She underscored that in preparation for its 2022 ASEAN chairmanship, Cambodia forfeited the opportunity to demonstrate climate ambition and leadership in the region (Sao, 2021). Consequently, the controversy and adverse perception of the decision prompted the Cambodian government to unveil the Carbon Neutrality Strategy 2050 in 2022, becoming the first Southeast Asian country to do so. This is presumably a means to rectify its shortcomings and demonstrate its renewed dedication to climate objectives despite its economic circumstances.

These controversies, particularly the government's failure to combat deforestation while facilitating illegal extraction, have tarnished Cambodia's reputation. This has had adverse effects internationally, including diplomatic and financial repercussions. For instance, in 2021, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) opted to cut funding for Cambodian government entities through its USD 21 million Greening Prey Lang project, following an open letter from 110 academics regarding the widespread illegal logging occurring within the protected areas (See, 2023).

Nonetheless, Cambodia's climate diplomacy has not always appeared pessimistic, as the government has sought to demonstrate additional environmental pledges in successive COPs. This includes a commitment to uphold a 10-year moratorium on the construction of hydroelectric dams on the Mekong River and new coal power plants, aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 2020 (Phon, 2024). The Cambodian delegate has reiterated the moratorium to the COPs, as explicitly cited by former Environment Minister Say Samal during the 2021 COP. At COP 28 in the UAE in 2023, Environment Minister Eang Sophalleth announced Cambodia's plan to cancel a 700-megawatt coal-fired power project and replace it with LPG facilities. The nation pledged to plant at least one million trees annually to enhance forest cover and reduce carbon emissions as part of the Green Cambodia campaign. The government aims to increase the adoption of clean and renewable energy sources, such as solar, hydropower, and wind, by 70 percent by 2030 as part of the Clean Cambodia strategy, which also includes the elimination of plastic bags and improvements in waste management (Vicheika, 2023). At COP 29 in Baku, Azerbaijan, in 2024, Sophalleth highlighted the government's commitment to advancing this initiative by increasing tree planting to surpass one million annually, thereby supporting its long-term carbon neutrality objectives. The minister confirmed Cambodia's adherence to the new Article 6 Operations Manual of the Paris Agreement while actively seeking to broaden carbon market opportunities in six key sectors: energy, industry, solvents, agriculture, forestry, and waste (Seangly, 2024).

VII. Way Forward: Why Cambodia's Climate Diplomacy Depends on Actions at Home?

Cambodia is highly vulnerable to the climate crisis, partly due to its limited climate diplomacy, which underscores the need for financial and technological support from developed nations. However, Cambodia's pursuit of effective climate diplomacy can yield benefits, alleviating climate impacts while aligning with national interests, as shown by other LDCs. This can enhance the government's influence on climate action; for instance, Bhutan, a small LDC, achieved carbon neutrality through a moral climate diplomacy strategy and effective diplomatic engagement (Tshering & Craft, 2016).

Cambodia does not need to sacrifice economic growth for ambitious climate actions, but must develop its climate diplomacy. Success hinges on integrating global perspectives into national climate initiatives and demonstrating a genuine commitment to tackling climate impacts. Cambodia's climate strategies and plans, including aiming for carbon neutrality by 2050, will depend on addressing ongoing deforestation and transitioning to clean energy. The country should enforce laws against illegal logging and combat greenwashing to clear existing doubts.

With dedication, verification, and support from key partners, success is within reach. By aligning strategic interests with global climate commitments, Cambodia can enhance its climate diplomacy and urge wealthy nations to fulfill their financial responsibilities to vulnerable countries, crucial for climate justice. These initiatives can also aid Cambodia's transition from LDC status by 2029. Though graduation signifies growth, the climate crisis threatens economic progress due to geographical constraints and reliance on agriculture, reducing trade flexibility and concessional financing (Chaker, 2025). Therefore, enhancing climate resilience through green jobs and a low-carbon future is essential for sustainability (Ahmad, 2024).

Cambodia should promote active involvement from political figures and agencies to ensure effective coordination. Developing institutional capacity is vital, as it addresses gaps and barriers to climate actions, particularly the limited ability of national institutions to implement adaptation and mitigation measures and strengthen climate communication. The government needs to reassess its diplomatic communication strategies regarding climate change. The Ministry of Environment leads Cambodia's climate diplomacy, coordinating COP participation, but relying solely on COP meetings is inadequate in a rapidly changing climate diplomacy landscape. The government should involve a broader range of institutions, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in climate strategy discussions. A strong understanding of climate science and policy impacts is crucial for diplomats to effectively fulfill their roles. With their qualifications, Cambodia can advocate for climate action and extend its influence beyond COPs to bilateral and global forums.

Successful climate diplomacy also relies on a commitment to a whole-of-society approach, engaging the private sector, media, education, and nonprofits. The private sector and civil society have had limited participation in climate initiatives, necessitating

strong coordination among ministries and stakeholders, especially NGOs and community organizations, to unify efforts and share resources (United Nations Development Programme, 2021). Cambodia can leverage existing climate forums to encourage broader participation and create an environment supportive of stakeholder input. By incorporating diverse viewpoints, Cambodia can foster ownership of climate initiatives and promote innovative, context-specific solutions to climate challenges, ultimately advancing its long-term climate diplomacy.

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CONCLUDING REMARKS

NAVIGATING UNCERTAINTY AND OPPORTUNITY IN CAMBODIA'S FOREIGN POLICY

Over the past decade, Cambodia's foreign relations have entered a period of profound transformation. As this volume has demonstrated, the country's diplomacy has expanded in both scope and depth, navigating a world shaped by global crises, shifting power balances, and internal political renewal. Cambodia's external engagement today reflects a combination of resilience, pragmatism, and adaptability.

Since the publication of the first edition of *Cambodia's Foreign Relations in Regional and Global Contexts* in 2017, the international system has undergone a succession of disruptive changes: the COVID-19 pandemic, the return of great-power competition, wars in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, rising protectionism, and accelerating climate emergencies. These dynamics have tested the strength of multilateral institutions and redefined the contours of global and regional diplomacy. For Cambodia, they have underscored the imperative of recalibrating foreign-policy priorities and instruments to meet the challenges of a new era.

Domestically, the peaceful transition to a new generation of leadership under Prime Minister Hun Manet in 2023 has reinforced continuity while signaling a renewed effort to modernize Cambodia's global outlook. As the opening chapter argues, the new administration inherits the foundational foreign-policy principles of independence, neutrality, non-alignment, and peaceful coexistence, while adapting them to contemporary realities.

While it may be challenging to offer a definitive conclusion for a volume of more than twenty chapters presenting both complementary and divergent perspectives, several broad observations can be drawn with prudence and are discussed below.

Cambodia's multi-faceted foreign policy operates through multiple channels and levels, combining state-to-state diplomacy with parliamentary, party, and people-to-people interactions, while promoting peace and economic diplomacy alongside cultural engagement. This multi-pronged approach allows Cambodia to strengthen its visibility, expand partnerships, and assert agency despite structural constraints. The effectiveness of this diplomacy, however, depends on consistency and credibility. Cambodia's challenge will be to sustain this approach across administrations while institutionalizing coordination mechanisms that ensure coherence among foreign, economic, and defense policies. In this regard, the continuation of a professional and policy-oriented diplomatic corps will remain vital for advancing Cambodia's interests abroad. If pursued effectively, such efforts can help the country mitigate vulnerabilities by ensuring that its international profile is not overly dependent on any single actor or alignment.

Closest to home, Cambodia's relations with its immediate neighbors remain the cornerstone of its foreign policy. As shown in chapters on Cambodia's relations with Thailand, Vietnam, and Laos, maintaining good-neighborly relations continues to be both a strategic necessity and a test of regional diplomacy. Despite steady progress in trade and connectivity and its active role within ASEAN, contributing authors note that historical animosity and lingering border demarcation issues remain sources of friction. When politicized, these disputes can spill over into social and economic domains, straining public sentiment and cross-border cooperation.

Cambodia's consistent emphasis on resolving boundary issues through diplomatic negotiation, legal frameworks, and international mechanisms underscores its adherence to peaceful coexistence and the principles of international law. In doing so, Phnom Penh reinforces its credibility as a responsible actor and supports ASEAN's broader goal of conflict prevention and peaceful dispute resolution. Maintaining an open and pragmatic relationship with its neighbors will remain essential for securing Cambodia's long-term stability and growth. In practice, however, that has been easier said than done considering the sporadic occurrence of conflicts due to the politicization of border affairs by state actors and elite politicians when such moves are politically expedient and pay dividends regardless of the negative impacts on the peoples in the sub-region.

On the regional front, ASEAN continues to be a central pillar of Cambodia's foreign-policy identity. Membership in the regional bloc provides Cambodia with a platform to engage major powers, access multilateral cooperation, and advance national interests through collective mechanisms. As several chapters highlight, ASEAN offers both protection and opportunity for small and medium-sized states, but it also demands commitment and diplomatic finesse. Cambodia's future success within ASEAN will depend on how effectively it can manage perceptions of neutrality and independence. Episodes of intra-ASEAN disagreement in past years, especially concerning the South China Sea, have occasionally challenged Cambodia's image among its peers. Yet, the country's chairmanships and active participation in ASEAN-led frameworks such as the East Asia Summit and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) demonstrate its constructive engagement. Going forward, Cambodia's ability to serve as a bridge between ASEAN and external partners—including China, the United States, Japan, and the European Union—will remain an important measure of its regional influence.

Beyond Southeast Asia, the chapters in this volume collectively confirm that Cambodia's external strategy rests on balance and diversification. Relations with the United States and the European Union remain crucial not only because of their roles as major export markets and development partners but also for their contributions to Cambodia's human capital and institutional development. Cambodia's deepening engagement with China provides access to investment, infrastructure, and trade. The key challenge for Cambodia, however, lies in maintaining equilibrium — fostering strong relations with Beijing while simultaneously strengthening dialogue and cooperation with Washington and other partners, without allowing domestic political issues to take precedence and derail continued engagement.

Cambodia is also deepening its ties with Japan, South Korea, Australia, India, as well as Russia, Germany, and other European partners—albeit not without challenges, given partner-specific differences over human rights, governance, and/or strategic priorities. Nonetheless, these partnerships remain increasingly important for technology transfer, education, and trade diversification. The inclusion of new chapters on the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America reflects Cambodia's recognition of the need to look beyond its immediate region. Such diversification strengthens economic resilience and expands Cambodia's diplomatic space in a multipolar world.

Economic diplomacy has become the backbone of Cambodia's foreign policy. The pandemic exposed vulnerabilities arising from overreliance on a few export markets and sources of investment and tourism. By expanding trade and investment partnerships with the Middle East and Latin America, Cambodia is gradually embedding itself into new global value chains. Although not covered in this book, Cambodia's emerging—albeit still nascent—relations with Central Asian and Eurasian countries also reflect its broader strategy to promote South–South cooperation and strengthen economic sovereignty through diversified connectivity and regional integration frameworks. The next step is to align economic diplomacy with domestic reforms—enhancing productivity, governance, and human capital—to ensure that external engagements translate into sustainable development at home. Cambodia's foreign-policy success will increasingly depend on its ability to integrate external opportunities with internal modernization.

On the security front, as Cambodia modernizes, its approach to defense and international engagement continues to evolve. Strengthening national defense capacity is crucial for safeguarding sovereignty, particularly in light of recent clashes with Thailand. However, such efforts must be pursued transparently and responsibly to prevent misperceptions about Cambodia's external alignments, especially regarding the Ream Naval Base. While developing capable defense forces, Cambodia's commitment to regional peace and its avoidance of military entanglements must remain central to its credibility and neutrality.

Equally significant is Cambodia's growing investment in soft-power diplomacy. The country's contributions to UN peacekeeping operations, its leadership in post-conflict demining, and its promotion of cultural and interfaith dialogue highlight its role as a peace-oriented small state. These endeavors have enabled Cambodia to transform its difficult past into a diplomatic strength—projecting values of reconciliation, resilience, and humanitarianism. Furthermore, emerging initiatives in climate diplomacy demonstrate Cambodia's willingness to engage globally on sustainability, linking environmental stewardship to its broader development vision.

Looking forward, Cambodia's diplomacy should continue to be guided by four interrelated imperatives: preserving independence and strategic autonomy amid competing influences; promoting good-neighborly relations and ASEAN unity; broadening strategic and economic diversification; and projecting soft power and peace diplomacy as hallmarks of national identity. These approaches, however, must be grounded in a persistent commitment to domestic reforms, liberal democratic principles, sound governance, and investment in human resource development at all levels. If Cambodia can manage these priorities effectively, it can reaffirm not only its sovereignty but also its contribution to peace, dialogue, and partnership in a world still searching for equilibrium.

DETH Sok Udom, Ph.D.

Editor

Phnom Penh, 2025

Cambodia's Foreign Relations in Regional and Global Contexts (Second Edition) offers a timely and comprehensive analysis of the Kingdom's evolving foreign policy amidst intensifying geopolitical competition and global uncertainty. Building on the foundations of the 2017 edition, this updated volume brings together Cambodian and international scholars to examine how Cambodia navigates regional dynamics, global challenges, and a generational transition in national leadership.

Through more than twenty chapters, the book explores Cambodia's bilateral and multilateral engagements, its growing use of soft power and economic diplomacy, and its expanding partnerships beyond Asia to the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America. It highlights both continuity and innovation in Cambodia's external strategies, situating them within the broader debates on small-state diplomacy and regional order in the Indo-Pacific.

Rich in empirical insights and policy relevance, this volume serves as an essential reference for understanding Cambodia's place in an increasingly complex world—offering valuable perspectives for scholars, policymakers, diplomats, and students of international relations and Southeast Asian studies.

"Beyond its analytical contributions, this publication also reflects KAS Cambodia's enduring commitment to fostering informed dialogue, academic exchange, and regional cooperation."

Daniela BRAUN

Country Director, KAS Cambodia & KAS Philippines

"I am confident that readers will appreciate the in-depth and fresh perspectives offered in this volume on Cambodia's contemporary foreign policy and its implications for the Kingdom's bilateral and multilateral relations with key regional and global partners. I am certain that this second edition will appeal to academics, researchers, policymakers, diplomats, and students of international relations and Southeast Asian studies alike."

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