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### **Cambodia: Security Challenges and Implications for Defense Policy**

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**Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace**

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**Abstract:**

This paper provides an overview of the development of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces and examines the current emerging security challenges to Cambodia. The security challenges include border conflict with Thailand over Preah Vihear region, terrorism, maritime security especially the overlapping claims between Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam, and human security.

**About the Author:**

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# **Cambodia: Security Challenges and Implications for Defense Policy<sup>1</sup>**

**By**

**Chap Sotharith<sup>2</sup>**

## **1. Introduction**

Cambodia, with a surface area of 181,035 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of 14 million, is situated in South-East Asia and borders with Laos, Thailand and Vietnam as her neighbours. Some two-thirds of the country consists of forests, mountain ranges and hills. The majority of the population lives in the plains, where the land is favourable for agriculture especially rice farming and fishing.

Cambodia is experienced in dealing with disasters due to a protracted war lasting about three decades, marked principally by the genocide committed by the Khmer Rouge and international isolation.

Fortunately, as a result of the Paris Agreement of 23 October 1991 between the four Cambodian parties, the Supreme National Council was set up and was tasked with achieving national reunification and reconciliation. The United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) was charged with monitoring compliance with the Agreement and organising elections in 1993. After the General Election in 1993, a constitutional assembly was convened to draw up the new Constitution which was subsequently adopted in 1993. The new Kingdom of Cambodia with a constitutional monarchy, democracy and pluralism was then established.

After many changes in regimes and civil wars, Kampuchea or Cambodia has been redirected into the right track as a unified nation with full recognition from the international

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented at the International Workshop on Asia Pacific Security organized by the National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS), Japan, January 21-22, 2010

<sup>2</sup> I would like to thank Professor Lim Tai Wei for the comments and edition

community. The country has gained peace, political stability and security. This paper reviews the country's security challenges and its implication to national defense policy.

## **2. Historical background on Cambodian Armed Forces**

Cambodians consider themselves as Khmers i.e. descendants of the Angkor Empire that extended over much of Southeast Asia and reached its zenith between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries.

After achieving full independence from the French in 1953, the Cambodian people enjoyed reconstruction and development. However, at the same time, Cambodia also faced many problems including revolutions, fraternal wars and political turmoil caused by differences in ideologies among political factions.

After the 18 March 1970 *coup d'état* and the victory of the Khmer Rouge on 17 April 1975, Cambodia found itself in a state of chaos which did not improve until 7 January 1979, when the Khmer Rouge was toppled by the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Armed Forces with support from the Vietnamese volunteer armed forces.

From early 1979, the effect of the Cold War brought about a new security dimension to Cambodia: an increased effort to prevent the return of the genocide regime, and a movement against the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia. The Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Armed Forces, which later changed its name to the Cambodia People's Armed Forces (CPAF) of the Phnom Penh government, was re-built consistent with the socialist system and with the support of Vietnam, the former USSR, and other socialist countries. The Army evolved from battalions to divisions with Army, Navy and Air-forces. Besides this simple re-organization of the military structure, the Phnom Penh government also set up other command and coordinating systems such as military regions, provincial and district unified commands. Furthermore, to support its security plans across the country and to add to regular units during operations, the government established armed militia in communes and villages.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Chap and Im (2007).

The former USSR (or Soviet Union) and Vietnam provided various materials and training to CPAF. In addition, before its final withdrawal from Cambodia in 1989, the Vietnamese troops helped to strengthen the fighting spirit and combat techniques of the CPAF to defend the government and to prevent the recurrence of the Khmer Rouge. At the other side of warring faction, the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) was created on 22 June 1982 basing on the Khmer Rouge Constitution, having the Khmer Rouge as the core force, and as a “*government*” recognized by the UN-monitored armed conflict in Cambodia, and allowed the Khmer Rouge to exist until early 1999. As a result of the above-mentioned factors and the influence of the ideological context of the Cold War as well as interference of some global powers, Cambodia became bogged down in a disastrous tragedy within an insecure environment. The country’s conflict continued for more than 20 years after 1970, and was only resolved through the free and democratic elections of 1993. Consequently, the new Cambodian armed forces were formed under a national reconciliation and social integration policy which allowed former warring factions including CPAF, Khmer Rouge soldiers, KPLF, Molinaka and FUNCINPEC to be integrated into the national Armed Forces that was named the Royal Cambodia Armed Forces (RCAF).<sup>4</sup>

Though Cambodia has achieved full legitimacy and reconciliation, Khmer Rouge rebel groups continued to isolate themselves and stir up rebellions in some parts of the country. Cambodia continued to face the prospects of war and the Cambodian people lived in fear and insecurity. To resolve this problem, Prime Minister Hun Sen set up a “*Win-Win Policy*” by offering the rebel a pardon and re-integrating them into the society with financial support to their strongholds along Cambodia-Thai border for economic development. Most of the Khmer Rouge Armed Forces and administration were integrated into the Royal Government and Royal Cambodian Armed Forces. The remaining elements of the Khmer Rouge were fully dismantled and/or surrendered in early 1999.

After more than three decades of committing crimes against humanity and genocide, several top Khmer Rouge leaders are being persecuted under the Extraordinary Court of the Cambodian Courts, ECCC, which is a hybrid of the UN-Cambodia tribunal.

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<sup>4</sup> The KPLF (Khmer People Liberation Front) is led by Mr. Son San, former Prime Minister during the 1960s); FUNCINPEC (is the French Acronym for United Front for Cambodian Independence, Neutrality, Peace and Cooperation).

At present, Cambodia adheres to a multi-party system of liberal democracy. The country's official name has been changed to the Kingdom of Cambodia under the new constitution of 1993. It is an independent, peaceful, neutral and non-aligned State.

### **3. Main Security Challenges**

#### ***3.1. Border Disputes with Neighbors, especially with Thailand***

Traditional security threats for a poor nation like Cambodia are always considered as one of the top priorities in security challenges. Border disputes with neighboring countries are a longstanding historic legacy that continues to this day. All these disputes have arisen from the unclear demarcation of the border line resulting from French colonial administration and other problems arising from joint ventures and exploitation of natural maritime resources. When there are conflicts, Cambodia has opted for negotiations to discuss and settle these problems in a peaceful manner. Nevertheless, this option does not preclude the presence of military forces at the border. The impact of many years of protracted war has meant that some areas have not been under the control of one administration, especially in provinces adjacent to the border. Therefore, Cambodia temporarily lost some control over its borders at some periods of times. The signing of a supplementary treaty to the 1985 State Border Demarcation Agreement by the heads of state of the Kingdom of Cambodia and of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam is a historic and positive contribution to the process of defining a clear border between the two countries. Though there are some difficulties, at present, Cambodia has nearly completed demarcation with Vietnam and Lao PDR.

For Cambodia-Thai border settlement, Cambodia has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Thailand on Settlement of Land Border in 2000. But due to diplomatic problems between the two countries, no progress has been made, especially after Mr. Thaksin Shinawatra, the Thai democratically-elected Prime Minister was expelled by a bloodless coup- d'état. The diplomatic strife between the two countries has been expanded after Mr. Thaksin was appointed as an economic advisor to Cambodian Government in 2009. In response, Mr. Abhisit in November 2009 ordered a review of two road construction projects with Cambodia that involved loans of more than 1.4 billion baht (US\$42 million) to Phnom Penh. Thailand has already put all talks and cooperation programs with Cambodia on hold

and also tore up an oil and gas exploration deal signed during Thaksin's time in power.<sup>5</sup> Cambodia responded that the country will no longer need economic assistance from Thailand.

The border between Thailand and Cambodia is approximately 800 kilometers long. The current tension between the two countries has grown since July 2008 over a 10<sup>th</sup> century Hindu temple, Preah Vihear, perched on top of a steep cliff on the Thai-Cambodian border. The World Heritage Committee ruled that month that the Preah Vihear would be recognised as a world heritage site. It also recognised a 1962 ruling by the International Court of Justice that the temple was within Cambodian territory.

Thai ultra-nationalists responded with rage and invasion to the area surrounding the Temple, prompting a troop buildup and confrontation by both sides. In April 2009, the soldiers from both countries exchanged gunfire, leaving some of them dead and injured. At present, both armies are preparing to fight with all kinds of heavy arms and modern equipments and the situation is very fragile.

Both ambassadors from two countries have been called back to each country and have not resumed their positions yet. In November 2009, Thailand formally requested the extradition of Thaksin under an extradition treaty signed by both countries. But a diplomatic note from the Cambodian government said Phnom Penh cannot send Thaksin to Thailand because they believe his conviction in 2008 was political and not criminal.<sup>6</sup>

In the other event, the relationship between the richer Thailand and the poorer Cambodia hit a low point starting from January 2003, when the Thai embassy in Phnom Penh was burned down by rioters angered by a remark made by a Thai actress that allegedly questioned Cambodia's ownership of another landmark temple, Angkor Wat.

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<sup>5</sup> Taipei Times, Spy row, golf fuel Thailand-Cambodia row, Nov 14, 2009  
<http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/world/archives/2009/11/14/2003458382> accessed on 11 January 2010

<sup>6</sup> UPI, Special Reports: Thailand-Cambodia relations sink further" at  
[http://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/Special/2009/11/11/Thailand-Cambodia-relations-sink-further/UPI-89551257962256/](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/Special/2009/11/11/Thailand-Cambodia-relations-sink-further/UPI-89551257962256/) accessed on 12 January 2010.

### ***3.2. Terrorists Threat***

Although effective actions have been taken, Cambodia still considers international terrorist threats to the security of the Kingdom of Cambodia as a real concern. Cambodia faces challenges in enhancing the defense of its land border and its long stretch of sea border. Lack of communication infrastructure along the border, coupled with a lack of equipment and some specialised skills, could possibly allow the infiltration of terrorists. Also, the capability of law enforcement authorities to investigate the activities of major terror groups is limited due to the lack of training and resources.

There remains other aspects for Cambodia's increased attention to unequivocally prevent direct attacks by international acts of terror. Cambodia is keeping a close watch on the possible link between terrorism, drug trafficking and illegal immigration.

### ***3.3. Maritime Security***

The overlapping claims between Cambodia and its neighbouring States, namely Thailand and Vietnam involved not only the area of the continental shelf, but also the so-called territorial sea and internal waters. And in the Southern segment, to some extent, it carries the tripartite nature.<sup>7</sup>

Cambodia is facing emerging challenges in maritime security while the country has limited budget to promote capacity of her navy to defend the coastline, combat piracy and terrorism and protect oil exploration and sea transportation. Being in the Gulf of Thailand and sandwiched by Thailand and Vietnam, Cambodia is a zone-locked country since she is not able to gain access to the high seas except through the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of its neighbouring States. So Cambodia is in an extremely geographically-disadvantaged

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<sup>7</sup> Chap Sotharith and Im Sithol (2007) National Security Policy Review in Cambodia, CICIP Working Paper No.22

situation in comparison with other coastal states in this sub-region. Though Cambodia has strengthened its maritime security to fight against terrorism, transnational crimes and improve its sea environment protection, the country still needs assistance and cooperation with friends and colleagues in the world to deal with emerging threats in maritime security.

Cambodia and Thailand cooperate in exploiting natural resources such as petroleum in maritime border between the two countries particularly the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding between the Royal Government of Cambodia and the Royal Thai Government regarding the Area of their Overlapping Maritime Claims to the Continental Shelf in June 2001 which lays the foundation for new areas of cooperation between Cambodia and Thailand relations to the exploitation of petroleum resources in the area of their overlapping maritime claims to continental shelf. But the deal is closed as two countries are facing diplomatic problems.

### ***3.4. Human Security***

The term “Human Security” for Cambodia is not well-understood. Since the 1998 election, the national security situation in Cambodia has improved markedly. Aside from misplaced anxiety about the Thai border, little threat is perceived from neighboring countries, and for the first time in decades there is a unified government and no chance of civil war or revolution.

However, as indicated in many studies, Cambodians remain insecure in term of human security. The country is still poor as about 30 percent of population is living under the poverty line. The country has extremely high rates of communicable diseases, experiencing high violence, a heavily land-mined countryside, unexploded ordnance (UXO) left over from US carpet bombing and other conflicts, as well as a skewed demographic transition caused by the genocide.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Taylor Owen and Aldo Benini (2004), Human Security in Cambodia: A Statistical Analysis of Large-Sample Sub-National Vulnerability Data at <http://www.eudem.vub.ac.be/files/CambodiaOwenBeniniSummaryWithMap040419.pdf> accessed on 12 January 2010.

If the traditional notion of security is applied, Cambodians must be considered as a secure entity with peace, political stability and sound macroeconomic development. However, if the concept of human security is used as a gauge, the country is still facing big challenges in terms of human security.

#### **4. Implications to Defense Policy**

These challenges are related to Cambodia's defense policies which lead to changes in armed forces reforms and procurement. Cambodia never expected its neighbors to use forces for border settlement until it happened right after the Cambodian Temple of Preah Vihea was listed in the World Heritage in the July 2008 when Thai troops invaded the areas around Preah Vihea Temple and in October 2008 when there were armed clashes with Thailand at the areas. So far, Cambodian armed forces are modernized with weapons and ammunitions ready to defend the country making sure that its territory are well-protected.

The Royal Government's policy in the Defense White Paper 2000 (DWP2000) focuses on security and development throughout the Kingdom of Cambodia. These objectives are set based on three main factors: the Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia, the Royal Government's Political agenda and assessments of threats to security of the nation, demanding the full contribution and commitment by the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF).

The defense force must absolutely be responsible for prevention and resistance against any external threats, safeguard the territorial integrity of the nation, and also contribute to ensuring stability, security, safety and social order. The threats from the presence of Thai armies along the border necessitate Cambodia to build up and modernize armed forces in all capacities.

To assist the Royal Government in the effort of restoring and rebuilding the nation's administrative, economic and social infrastructure, especially in response to the Royal Government's policy on poverty reduction, the RCAF has the obligation to contribute to this duty, using capabilities and resources it has such as constructing and repairing roads, building and fixing irrigation systems, de-mining and so forth.

When there are disasters such as floods, droughts or epidemics, the RCAF has the

obligation to cooperate with all relevant authorities to rescue the people. Capability should be further developed to participate in international peace operations within the framework of United Nations requests.

One of the important and vital national defence priorities defined in Chapter 3 of DWP 2006 is to safeguard the borders of the Kingdom of Cambodia. While border disputes, threats from transnational criminals and international terrorism remain a concern, Cambodia needs to strengthen its border protection capability to maintain peace and stability with neighbouring countries and to ensure the security of the entire nation. The capabilities of border protection forces must be strengthened, especially the sustainable presence of forces at all strategically-important points, expertise in preventing any infiltration by international terrorism and transnational crime, mobility, communication, information collection, cooperation with other competent authorities, etc. Strengthening the presence of border protection forces does not mean confrontation; on the contrary, timely understanding and control of situations is an important element for finding a positive solution and confidence-building in the region. In addition, regular contact at the working level with partners will increase confidence and facilitate better relationships.<sup>9</sup>

Based on the assessment of all threats to the security of the Kingdom of Cambodia and in the response to all the strategic policies defined in both the DWP 2000, DSR 2002 and DWP 2006, a military strategy was prepared on the principle of “flexible and Control Response.” This strategy is an appropriate stance that Cambodia and especially the RCAF must adhere to given that the country has only just emerged from war and while the RCAF is undergoing reform and capability development. In addition, this strategy contributes to the Royal Government’s policy on national reconciliation, peacefulness with neighbouring nations, and good-will and effort to integrate Cambodia deeper into the international community.

Cambodia’s external security relies primarily on the strengthening of its internal security, a guarantee of national unity, political stability and economic growth. Nevertheless, although the nation has also chosen a policy of dialogue, it doesn’t mean that the presence of

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<sup>9</sup> Border protection is the responsibility of the RCAF, while the police have a role in immigration and drug control. Some of the responsibility for dealing with security threats such as anti-terrorism, drug control is shared by the police and the RCAF.

military force on the border is neglected. Although Cambodia is a small country with an effective military capability, it reserves the unconditional right to respond to any possible external aggression, specifying that and this response would be conducted with thorough control and patience.

Although military measures may be taken in such circumstances, other options such as negotiation and dialogue may be applied to reach a peaceful solution.

## **5. Future Directions**

Border dispute between Cambodia and Thailand is one of the top security threats for Cambodia. Thailand-Cambodia relations in the short and long-term depend on how the two countries resolve their differences and make full use of positive factors and to promote a culture of respect and equality.

Cambodia-Thailand relation is believed by many scholars to have impacts on regional cooperation, especially with regards to ASEAN political and security cooperation. Both countries should work together and understand each other to reduce gaps in perception and to behave as good neighbors.

Regional cooperation should be promoted through promoting dialogues and confidence-building. ASEAN and other regional mechanisms should play more assertive roles in constructive engagement and mediating disputes among member countries.