



Op-Ed Series

China-Cambodia-Vietnam Relations in Contemporary Context: The Patterns and Ways Forward

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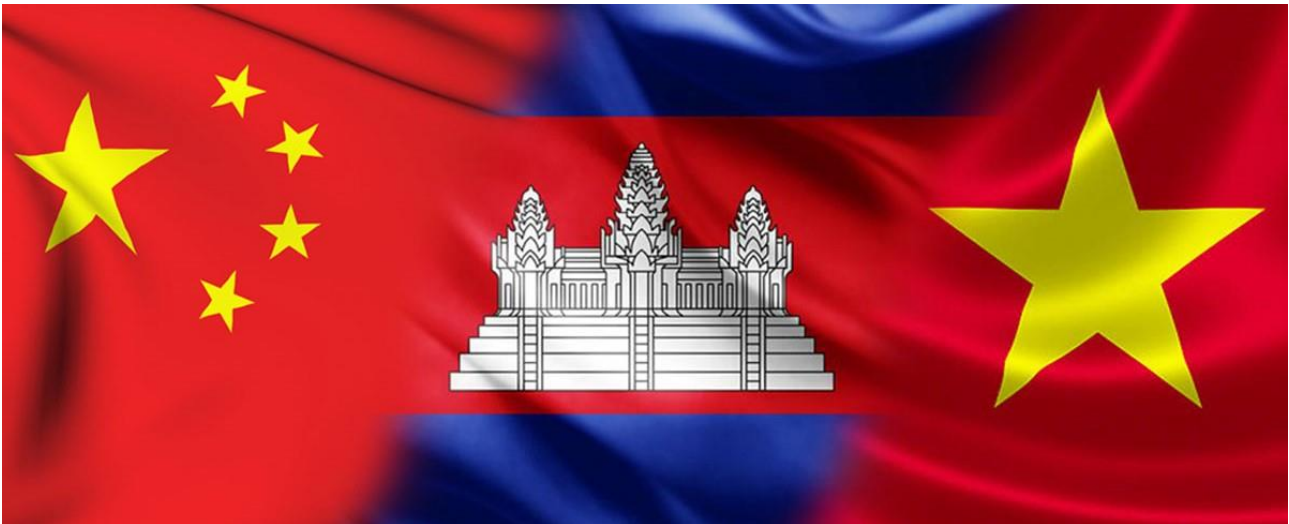
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After the end of the First Indochina War, Sino-Cambodian-Vietnamese relations have been unfathomably entwined due to the history, proximity, and interests of the three countries. Cambodia's relationship with China records a long past of collaboration and resistance between a small state and the larger power in the ['reciprocal'](#) nature. Cambodia shares a profound history with Vietnam, and through thick and thin, the two neighbors have managed to work shoulder to shoulder when their relations are in full bloom and continue to overcome challenges when their interests are at odds.

In a contemporary context, Cambodia is geopolitically sandwiched between China and Vietnam as a consequence of extensive political engagements and economic cooperation provided by Beijing and Hanoi. Cambodia's geography places the Kingdom in a crucial spot of both countries' strategic interests in Indochina. The contest for regional influence makes China and Vietnam tenacious competitors. The bittersweet legacies of Sino-Vietnamese relations during the Cold War and perplex strategic calculations in tandem with potential confrontations over [energy security and transportation networks](#) have morphed into geopolitical flashpoints.

The rising tension between Beijing and Hanoi and territorial disputes in the South China Sea surely has implications for Cambodia. Although Cambodia is not the only country in Southeast Asia who is a faithful supporter of China with regard to both the diplomatic and economic realms, given China's close ties with Laos and Myanmar, it appears that Cambodia is an important leverage for Beijing in the region by using Cambodia to offset Vietnam's influence and as a surrogate of its geopolitical interests (e.g. South China Sea). Chinese President Xi Jinping concomitantly called the China-Cambodia community ['unbreakable'](#). Henceforth, the rising Sino-Vietnamese tensions will have implications on Cambodia, including (1) jeopardized Vietnamese-Cambodian relations, (2) endangered multilateral relations and regional cooperation, and (3) stained Cambodia's international status.

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National Flags of China, Cambodia and Vietnam

First, jeopardizing bilateral relations threatens the survival of Cambodia and Vietnam. Vietnam is a bigger country with a more than [96 million](#) population while the Cambodian population is [16.5 million](#). Vietnam's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2018 was \$245.2 billion, while Cambodia's was US\$24.54 billion. The differences in size and economic development, as well as the memories of historical conflicts, elevate the perceived security threats along the borders. Not to mention the asymmetrical military strength between the two countries, which puts Cambodia in a more vulnerable position if tensions culminate.

It is obscure that the closer Cambodia tilts toward China, the further it estranges from Vietnam. Beijing and Hanoi have deliberately battled for Phnom Penh's favor, and the weight seems to be on China's side. Hanoi-Phnom Penh relations seem to have noticed friction and mistrust in the last decade despite the [positive developments](#) in the 2010s. For instance, Vietnam seemingly took a [unilateral action](#) to close all land borders with Cambodia on March 20 to control the spread of the Coronavirus without consulting Cambodian authorities. Simultaneously, Vietnam has set up temporary military camps along the Cambodian border, claiming this was a measure to stop people's movement to prevent the spread of the Coronavirus.

Second, the asymmetrical Sino-Cambodian relations might endanger multilateral and regional cooperation between Cambodia and its neighbors. Typically, the weaker state supports the stronger power's diplomatic agenda, economic interests, and its projection of military might as an act of [repaying for aid and protection](#). The speculation about allowing a Chinese naval base in Sihanoukville province therefore creates a perturbing climate on regional security among ASEAN members. A foreign military base on Cambodian soil would antagonize neighbors and sabotage Phnom Penh's extensive partnerships with international actors who provide viable options to maneuver in the future. In this sense, Cambodia would partially lose benefits it has been enjoying economically, politically, and socially since its integration into regional and global organizations. Moreover, Cambodia would face punishments imposed by the international community, especially the European Union and the United States, such as diplomatic shaming, suspension of economic privileges, or worse, economic sanction.

Third, a less immediate but more relevant implication in the long run damages Cambodia's international image. Many, if not all, countries view Cambodia as one of China's closest friends, along with North Korea and Ethiopia. This badly affects the Kingdom's [international status](#) and strains its relationships with the United States and its allies due to China's increasingly [assertive foreign policy](#) in the South China Sea. Although other major powers do not occupy a panoply of means – political, economic, and military – like China does towards Cambodia, they play a part in our growing economy. As a backdrop of U.S.-China strategic competition, Cambodia's proximity to China prompts skepticism for Western investors to come to Cambodia because of the concerns over [violation of human rights principles](#) and [decaying democratic values](#). This in turn erodes Cambodia's ability to address the three key concepts: sovereignty, self-reliance, and diversification of its foreign policy. Cambodia will suffer economic losses and be prone to accusations from the West that wants to contain Chinese' influence as well as have its status diminished on the international stage.

In hindsight, there are salient patterns to China-Cambodia-Vietnam relations. History is an important epitome that should not be forgotten. The decoupling between Beijing and Hanoi during the 1960s led Cambodia to become a horrendous victim of the Khmer Rouge (KR) genocidal regime. The KR's antagonistic behaviors towards Vietnam and its strategic miscalculation resulted in a proxy war between China, the Soviet Union, and the United States. History shows that superpowers' foreign policy decisions significantly impact the security of small countries in Indochina. More appalling, the historical animosity between Cambodia and Vietnam regarding border and ethnic issues, together with China's strong military and political support for defense measures, inspired the KR leadership which was fueled by [extreme nationalism and hatred](#) against Vietnamese ethnicity to fight against Vietnam. Now that Sino-Vietnamese relations began to crumble due to the rising geopolitical uncertainties, Cambodia seems to be once again facing a critical challenge to stay neutral and relevant amidst global power shifts.

Thus, preserving a cordial relationship with Vietnam and maintaining a robust partnership with China is essential for the survival of Cambodia. Cambodia should not depict clear and fixed lines between China and Vietnam as an ally or enemy. Cambodia indeed should abide by its neutrality and non-alignment policy. The Kingdom needs to reinforce its regional integration and cooperation to diversify its security survival and economic development. At the end of the day, regional institutions such as ASEAN is a paramount source of [bargaining power](#) for the three Indochinese countries against the traditional hegemon and potential hegemon (the United States and China). Resilient cooperation with Vietnam and Laos will enhance the countries' common status and power to negotiate both within ASEAN and vis-à-vis external powers.

Cambodia should also embrace China's benign strategy with extreme caution. The Chinese 'charm offensive' which has brought huge Chinese influences through concessional loans and grants, trade and investment, and educational and cultural exchanges come with price. Cambodia can minimize the costs of bandwagoning with China by maintaining viable alternative sources for security support, aid, and investment. It is less likely, though not impossible, that China will push Cambodia to be a submissive client state under its patronage system.

The relations between Cambodia and China are more of a [quid pro quo](#) which gives the Kingdom ample incentives not to behave like a client and China has [good reasons](#) not to press too hard in order to maintain its cordial image. In short, China sees Cambodia as an [‘ironclad friend’](#) in Southeast Asia and has abundant strategic interests in strengthening Phnom Penh’s role to support Beijing’s long-term goals in the region.

Ultimately, Cambodia should commit joint efforts to maintain a rules-based international order while adopting pragmatic and flexible foreign policy strategies that are tailored to suit the fast-changing regional security landscape. There are no permanent friends or foes in international relations, only interests matter. The survival of a small state like Cambodia in an anarchic international system, which is filled with self-interested actors pursuing selfish goals, depends on its preservation of multiple options to gamble against external threats.

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