



## Op-Ed Series

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# Taking Cambodia-Vietnam Relations to New Heights

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Cambodia and Vietnam established their official relationship in 1967. This year marked the 53rd anniversary of their diplomatic relations. To celebrate their strong ties, the Vietnamese Embassy in Cambodia in late June posted on Facebook [hailing](#) the relationship as “the sacred treasure.” During the recent ceremony commemorating the 43rd anniversary of Prime Minister Hun Sen’s historic crossing to Vietnam to seek help during the Khmer Rouge regime, Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Tea Banh [reiterated](#) in a speech that “nothing can be done to break the Cambodia-Vietnam friendship”. In various official statements, the [terms](#) “good neighbourliness,” “traditional friendship,” and “comprehensive, sustainable and long-term cooperation” are constantly used by both sides.

However, putting the Cambodia-Vietnam ties in a recent historical context, their relationship over the last five decades has not always been smooth. There were early periods of ups and downs between the two sides, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s when their relations were [constrained](#) by various complicated geopolitical issues.

Fast forward to the 2010s, Cambodia-Vietnam relations have been on an [upward](#) trajectory. Politically, there have been frequent high-level exchanges between the two sides. For instance, during the visit of Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc in Phnom Penh in April 2017, Cambodia and Vietnam [signed](#) four cooperation deals to promote infrastructure development, connectivity and trade. When Premier Hun Sen made an official visit to Vietnam in December 2018, both sides affirmed commitments to further strengthen the relationship. Economically, Vietnam has been one of Cambodia’s biggest trading partners and investors. In 2019, their two-way trade volume was about \$5 billion and Vietnam was the third largest investor in Cambodia. Militarily, there has been active cooperation between the two countries. The five-day joint drill focusing on disaster relief, humanitarian work, and maintenance of border security in Svay Rieng province in late 2019 served as an example indicating that the two sides have had strong military cooperation.

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Despite these positive developments, looking beneath the surface, the bilateral ties between Phnom Penh and Hanoi have not been without hiccups. Negotiations surrounding border demarcation processes are ongoing and standoffs or incidents have often resurfaced, affecting the bilateral relationship. So far, according to a senior official from the Cambodian Border Affairs Committee, Cambodia has planted more than 80% of a total 375 border markers with Vietnam. Although substantial progress has been made, complication remains, especially with regard to legal and technical issues. As border affairs are sensitive issues for both sides, disagreements have often occurred. For example, the recent tent installments by Vietnam on disputed areas have caused protests from the Cambodian side. There were diplomatic exchanges between the two parties but the border issues and concerns over the demarcation process have not been fully settled. Addressing the border issues and completing the remaining demarcation work are essential if both sides want to avoid future border disputes.



PM Hun Sen and PM Nguyen Xuan Phuc. Source: <http://en.freshnewsasia.com/index.php/en/13692-2019-04-13-06-42-13.html>

There are also other non-border affairs that Cambodia and Vietnam have to address. To further advance their relations, there is a real need for viable unilateral and bilateral initiatives to proactively re-examine and improve the relationship between the two countries. This not only can be done at the government-to-government level, but it can also be channeled through people-to-people exchanges at the institutional and individual levels. Moreover, efforts should be made to enhance a deeper, broader and better understanding among people of the two countries to reduce inherited negative sentiments and prejudice. These historical sentiments obviously have important implications for the reinvigoration of Cambodia-Vietnam relations in the near and distant future.

At the regional level, it is vital that Cambodia and Vietnam seek to understand each other's core interests and be mindful of their respective goals, needs and challenges if both countries wish to advance a healthy and long-term relationship. Candid and constructive dialogues at both bilateral and multilateral levels are therefore required so that both sides can have the opportunities to genuinely understand one another and discover minimum acceptable benchmarks that can be mutually accepted over remaining challenges confronting both countries at various engagement levels.

Being close neighbours and having been strategic partners in their modern history for 53 years, Cambodia and Vietnam need to continue to constructively and proactively work together to address unresolved inconveniences and challenges and to move their relations forward.

Further reinvigorating Cambodia-Vietnam ties has to start from the fact that all existing channels of communication which have been used by both sides should be restored and further utilised to address issues of mutual concerns. When discussing and addressing common issues confronting the two countries, especially issues concerning illegal immigration and border demarcation, it is vital that both parties have to be honest and understanding while seeking to engage in dialogues that aim to assess, identify and resolve their differences. They also need to consider their respective core interests and challenges when trying to work together to discuss and tackle important matters at both national and regional levels.

In addition, there is a strong need for both countries to do their best to engage in diplomatic manoeuvres and actions that aim to create a conducive environment for both sides to sustain and enhance their close bond. While both should try to refrain from perpetuating any moves that are considered as existential threats to one another, the two ASEAN neighbours have to jointly discuss and adopt measures that are designed to reduce certain perceptions that their citizens may have on each other.

Moving forward, in order to strengthen Cambodia-Vietnam relations, people-to-people exchanges have to be fully taken into account. Undeniably, there is a pressing need to address the anti-Vietnamese sentiment among many Cambodians. One way to achieve this is to establish a joint commission between Cambodia and Vietnam to foster frank evidence-based debates and discussions on any historical issues facing the two neighbouring countries. The commission should be an independent entity joined by different stakeholders from the two sides including government officials, historians, researchers, academics, teachers, students, youth representatives and other concerned individuals or groups in the public, private and non-governmental sectors. Any findings or reports resulting from the work or discussion of the joint commission should be made available to the public to reduce doubts and misconceptions about what both governments are up to and to enhance trust and confidence in the government of each country.

Enhancing public knowledge about issues surrounding Cambodia-Vietnam relations and other matters of significant importance to the future of both countries is crucial and would be the way forward to further improve and cement the relationship between the two countries.

In the midst of global uncertainty and volatility resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and the increasingly tensed strategic competition between major powers for primacy in the Asia-Pacific, Cambodia and Vietnam need to take steps to resolve remaining challenges and further strengthen their relationship. As members of ASEAN and other multilateral organisations, both countries will have to continue to work together as well as with other countries in constructive and respectful manners to address various related challenges at the regional and international levels.

Finally, as next-door neighbours, it is crucial that Cambodia and Vietnam continue to sustain positive momentum, prevent negative one and seek to engage one another constructively and respectfully. With strong and genuine commitment, innovative initiatives, proactive collaboration and long term visions, both countries could take the bilateral relationship to new heights.

*CICP accepts no responsibility for facts presented and views expressed. Responsibility rests solely with the individual authors.*

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CICP is an independent, neutral, and non-partisan research institute based in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. We aspire to become a leading institution in Cambodia and we are dedicated to the study of social, political and economic trends in both Cambodia and the region of Southeast Asia as a whole. Our mission is to cultivate broader interests concerning the development of Cambodia and promote wider attention among a community of scholars to engage in research within the fields of political science, international relations, history, peace building, and socio-economics studies in order to better understand the current and future prospects of the country and the region.

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