



## Op-Ed Series

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# Cambodia's Foreign Policy Beyond 2020: Confronting Challenges in the New Decade

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The last decade has been significant for Cambodia on both the global and regional stages. Cambodia served as chair of ASEAN in 2012 and the first Southeast Asian co-chair of the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) mechanism from 2016-2018. Cambodia received a steady stream of official state visits, has paid several official visits in exchange, and has signed Memoranda of Understanding with various development partners – collectively strengthening its diverse set of bilateral relationships. The Kingdom raised its engagement with China to new heights by signing the Action Plan 2019-2023 on Building China-Cambodia Community of Shared Future in April 2019 – an upgraded position from Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2010 – strengthening cooperation and covering 31 measures across five areas of politics, security, economy, people, and multilateral cooperation. In 2018, Cambodia also commemorated the 60th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations with China and the 65th anniversary with Japan. This year Cambodia and the United States are commemorating the 70th anniversary of formal relations.

Looking back to 2010, Cambodia's position in Southeast Asia was a difficult one. The decade began with the exchange of fire between Cambodia and Thailand along the border stemming from the Preah Vihear dispute. While resolved via an International Court of Justice ruling, the first half of 2010s was marked by a particularly sour relationship between the two countries. During its term as ASEAN chair in 2012, the South China Sea dispute dominated the agenda with Cambodia blamed for favoring China's position at the expense of the interests of regional partners. ASEAN, for the first time in its history, could not issue a Joint Communique given the absence of consensus. Cambodia's reputation was diminished, with some going so far as to argue that China was influencing ASEAN decision-making through Phnom Penh. The second half of 2010s also witnessed a drastic downturn in Cambodia-US relations, due to developments in Cambodia's domestic politics and rising Sino-American tensions in the region.

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As Cambodian foreign policy enters a new decade, it is timely to ask: what were the lessons-learned over the last ten years? What are the trends and challenges are most likely to hallmark Cambodian diplomacy? What should be the balancing strategy when it comes to domestic politics versus foreign relations? How is the Kingdom's national interest to be balanced versus regional interests in the context of ASEAN? Interference approach versus international norm?

One of the key challenges in Cambodia's foreign policy will be in the area of neighborhood diplomacy. Although the Preah Vihear dispute has been put to rest, other lingering issues remain, i.e., border demarcation with Vietnam, unregistered immigrants, land disputes along the border, maritime border demarcation, and populist politics stirred up by opposition factions leading to extreme nationalism that has diluted the bilateral relations between countries. These issues have been addressed, after a fashion, over the last decade, e.g., task force groups have been set up; Cambodia's diplomatic mission in Thailand has actively worked with their Thai counterparts over immigration issues, etc. Perhaps most salient for Cambodia is the balancing of its burgeoning relationship with China with its historic ties to Vietnam. This has proven to be difficult given the continuing issue of the South China Sea (of which Cambodia is not a claimant state and thus has abstained from making statements or taking an official position at the ASEAN level) as well as long-standing concerns over the future of the Mekong river and the implication thereof in the various sub-regional cooperation platforms.



ASEAN needs bigger voice in US-China Rivalry. Source: <https://asiatimes.com/2019/11/asean-needs-bigger-voice-in-us-china-rivalry/>

Concerning regional diplomacy, ASEAN has played an important role in setting the regional agenda for decades as well as maintaining the region's security equilibrium. Abiding by the non-interference principle, ASEAN has been reluctant to "resolve" regional disputes or to intervene in

conflicts between member states (as in the case of Cambodia and Thailand). ASEAN has a high place on Cambodia's foreign policy agenda but lingering sentiments from the 2012 scenario has made it difficult for Cambodia to recalibrate its position towards the international community as a whole and has created suspicion about Cambodia's actions within the ASEAN family. The rebuilding of strategic trust will be needed if Cambodia is to successfully deepen ties within ASEAN and overcome the legacy of 2012. At the same time, the Kingdom also needs to present its core values such that a stronger set of shared, collective interests can be generated and serve as a basis for future cooperation and confidence-building. ASEAN and its dialogue partners need to move beyond both perceived legacies of mistrust and the perception of geopolitics as a "zero-sum game" in Southeast Asia.

Finally, Cambodia is embracing a diversification strategy - maximizing friends, minimizing antagonists. It is incorrect and reductionist to view the Kingdom's foreign policy from the prism of great power conflict or to analyze it solely via the analytical lens of Cambodian domestic politics. The challenge though hinders around the aspects of interference and the cliché of state sovereignty. In such an interconnected world and interdependence economy, one could not help but to conform with the presiding international order. Cambodia though seems to have received very limited 'diplomatic space' to flex around and usually imply negative connotations for its strategic moves in the international arena vis-à-vis its foreign policy. Prejudice and presumption have largely dominated Cambodia's diplomatic agenda in the eyes of [some] outsiders, although the fact is Cambodia has always diversified its foreign policy instrument for the benefit of trade, investment, development partner, military cooperation, strategic partner, and so on.

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