



Op-Ed Series

Phnom Penh between Washington and Beijing: A Small State's Strategy for Survival

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As a small state in the middle of the game changer between the traditional power - the United States (U.S.) - and the new emerging power in Southeast Asia - the People's Republic of China (PRC), Cambodia does not have much space for maneuvering its foreign policy in international affairs. U.S.-China strategic competition is now shaking the regional security and the world order at large - Cambodia, geopolitically, cannot escape from this serious threat. What strategy should Phnom Penh carry out for its survival in the phase of game changer between Washington and Beijing?

Thucydides, the ancient Greek historian, pointed out that the inequality of states' power and men by nature as a political animal make state competitions inevitable in the international arena. Thucydides' political concept really matters for Washington-Beijing relations in the 21st century. Both super powers are strategically competing each other in economic, military, and diplomatic levels in Southeast Asia. Trump vs. Xi have been using the conspiracy theory of the Covid-19 outbreak to rhetorically attack each other, the unprecedented tension of trade war, simmer of the freedom of navigation operation (FONOPS) vis-a-vis the South China Sea (SCS) disputes, and technological competition such as the blockage of 5G and Huawei, just to name a few.

Phnom Penh has recently become a very sensitive strategic center of the competition. To survive with prosperity in such a critical time, Cambodia though should not use the mainstream "hedging" strategy, essentially the combination of engaging and balancing, to interact with the U.S and China. If the hedging is exercised, there is no doubt that it will lead Phnom Penh to closely engage with Beijing while balancing with Washington. Strategically, Chinese foreign aid usually comes with no string attached, the so-called "carrot diplomacy". Nevertheless, U.S foreign assistance usually comes with political conditions, i.e. the 'carrot vs. stick' approach. At the sphere of the competition, Phnom Penh is seen to gradually move closer to Beijing but away from Washington or engaging with China but balancing with the U.S. Nonetheless, this strategy does not guarantee Cambodia's security and survival in the long-term. As one of the ten members of ASEAN, choosing side is not one of the

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options in Cambodia's foreign policy. Therefore, Phnom Penh should do whatever it can to adopt and adjust itself at the center of the Washington-Beijing regional competition, particularly maintaining its good friendships with the two super-power.

The plausible and effective approach in a situation of uncertainty is constructive engagement by embracing the open-door diplomacy, diversification strategy, and neutrality. Three scenarios are raised to underpin this argument as follows:

First, Phnom Penh is carrying out the "open-door diplomacy" through constructive engagement. Cambodia affably welcome the U.S. and China all areas of cooperation including trade, cultural exchanges, and military drills. While visiting the construction sites in Sihanoukville on June 1, Prime Minister (PM) Hun Sen stressed that ships from any countries are welcome to dock at Ream Navy base. Cambodia also welcomed jointly military exercises with Australia, Canada, Japan, France, India, UK, and the U.S. as well as any countries. In addition, Phnom Penh places ASEAN at the "corner stone" of its foreign policy. Even though this regional organization was unable to help Cambodia to resolve the border dispute with Thailand, or to some members, Cambodia was at the cutting-edge during its chairmanship in 2012 over the SCS disputes, ASEAN has always been projected as to enhance Cambodia's foreign policy regionally and globally. This regional organization paves the ways for Cambodia to seek wider market opportunities and diversify its export products via the "ASEAN Single Window (ASW)". ASEAN Smart City Networks (ASCN) strengthens Cambodia's capacity in relations to the Industry 4.0. ASEAN elevates Cambodia's role in the international stage, during its leadership roles in 2002 and 2012 as the ASEAN Chair respectively. ASEAN also facilitates Cambodia in engaging with the U.S. and China under the framework of ASEAN Plus (ASEAN Plus One and Plus Three), ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference, ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus), East Asian Summit (EAS), and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). These provide fundamental principles, guidelines, norms and mechanisms for Phnom Penh to approach Washington and Beijing as well as other states. The Special ASEAN-U.S. Foreign Ministers' Meeting on COVID-19 (April 23) via video conference; the Special ASEAN Plus Three Summit on COVID-19 (April 14) via video conference, and the ASEAN-China Foreign Ministers' Meeting (February 20) are the clear evidences. In addition to ASEAN, the government has built as well as strengthens its ties with other key regional actors including Australia, India, Japan, Russia, South Korea and the European Union (EU). Foreign Minister H.E. Prak Sokhonn talked on the phone with Australian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Marise Payne, on June 9 on the cooperation to combat the pandemic crisis. PM Hun Sen communicated with Indian PM Narendra Modi on phone call the following day, praising each other's successful leadership in the fight against the COVID-19 outbreak. PM Modi regards Cambodia as a friend of India and an important part of the 'Act East Policy'. In response, PM Hun Sen admired India for playing a key role on the international stage, producing and supplying medicine to 130 countries across the globe. The two leaders also discussed the joint fight in order to combat the pandemic outbreak altogether.

Second, the Kingdom does diversify its economic and cooperation. During the Annual Conference in March 2019, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MFAIC) summarized Cambodia's foreign policy into three key terms: sovereignty, self-reliance and diversification. The sovereignty's concept is very critical for Cambodia. PM Hun Sen has reiterated that Cambodia would never compromises or surrenders its own sovereignty in exchange with foreign assistance, although that has and would greatly enhance developments and empowering the country's young

economy. Cambodia's Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn also emphasized that sovereignty is extremely important for Cambodia's security and survival. Sovereignty can only be firmly secured upon self-reliance and diversification instruments. The country has gradually reduced dependence on foreign assistance through economic diversifications at both regional and international levels. Cambodia will conclude the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with China at the end of this year and will launch FTA negotiations with South Korea this month. The Kingdom has also moved further to discuss FTA with countries in the Eurasian Economic Union.



Cambodia and the great powers. Source: <https://southeastasiaglobe.com/cambodia-hedges-against-rising-china-and-erratic-us/>

Third, “neutrality” is still the fundamental component, being one of the five basic principles of Cambodia's foreign policy stated in Article 53 of the Constitution. Under the leadership of PM Hun Sen, neutrality shapes Cambodia's attitude in the regional and global affairs, especially with regards to the SCS disputes, the hottest spot between the two great powers in Southeast Asia. During the Informal Meeting of ASEAN Foreign Ministers - the 21st ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) Council Meeting and the 26th ASEAN Coordinating Council (ACC) Meeting, via video conference on June 24, Cambodia's Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn signified Cambodia's neutral stand on the contested waters to jointly enhance regional stability in Southeast Asia. During the 36th ASEAN Summit on June 26 via video conference, PM Hun Sen called for all concerning parties in the disputed areas to put priority on self-restraint and peaceful resolutions upon international laws such as the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). He also underscored that the negotiation of the Code of Conduct (CoC) should be concluded early for the sake of ensuring peace and mutual interest. The remarks from both leaders send messages to the claimant states that Cambodia shall remain neutral at all front, and that South China Sea shall not be regarded as the ASEAN dispute.

However, Cambodia's survival relies not only on the Kingdom alone but also on both great powers. Thucydides advised, "The strong [the U.S. or China] do what they have power to do and the weak [Cambodia] accept what they have to accept." If Washington tries to challenge with Phnom Penh, it will make Cambodia very difficult to keep its position in the middle of the political game. Or if either Washington or Beijing enact "coercion" to bully Phnom Penh to take side, the future of the Kingdom would encounter uncertainty. As the tiny ant in the elephants' unpredictable battle, Cambodia has to be flexible. The engaging strategy with diverse measures plus adaption and adjustment towards the U.S. and China is the best and possible option for Cambodia to behave.

To conclude, the "open-door diplomacy", "diversification", and "neutrality" plus "rule-based international order" in promoting multilateralism are indeed the significant approaches to flourish Cambodia's engagement strategy for the sake of maintaining its national interests as well as contributing to peace, stability, and prosperity for the region and the world at large.

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