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## Cambodia's Strategic Embrace of China: Military Cooperation and Its Implications

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### Abstract

*The recent increase in military cooperation between Cambodia and China has raised concerns about Cambodia's neutrality and its role in regional power dynamics. Will this military relationship help Cambodia become a smart neutral nation or is it a pawn in China's ambitious political game? The study and assessment of Cambodia-China relations in the military field and their impact on Vietnam will be very necessary in the current international situation. Through the historical approach and on the basis of analysis of international relations, the article clearly analyzes the reasons for the increased cooperation between China and Cambodia in the military field in the twenty-first century. Concurrently, the article assesses the impact of this issue on Vietnam and gives opinions in Cambodia's neutral foreign policy.*

**Keywords:** Cambodia, China, Military, Viet Nam, International relation

### 1. Sino - Cambodian relations since the second half of the 20th century

The year 1956 marked the beginning of Cambodia's relations with China, when Prince Sihanouk signed the "Sino-Cambodian Friendship Declaration" to establish a neutral stance against the influence of neighboring countries like South Vietnam and Thailand, as well as the waning influence of the United States. This neutrality aimed to counter the growing communist threat from Vietnam (Chanborey, 2018). In 1958, China and Cambodia officially established diplomatic relations. This relationship continued to improve until 1967, when Sihanouk discovered China's support for the Khmer Rouge, a communist movement in Cambodia. By 1970, the Cambodian monarchy was overthrown in

a coup led by General Lon Nol, establishing the Khmer Republic, which was pro-American. The Khmer Rouge, backed by Beijing, rose against the Lon Nol regime. However, upon seizing power, the Khmer Rouge, driven by fanaticism, grand delusions, and misplaced trust in China's support, plunged Cambodia into a bloody chapter of genocide. They also launched a border war in the Southwest against Vietnam from 1977 to 1978. Beijing supported the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime, which killed an estimated 1.7 million people between 1975 and 1979, and continued to support Pol Pot in the 1980s (Veasna, 2019) This led to mutual distrust in the relationship between the two countries under Prime Minister

Hun Sen. However, relations between the two countries gradually strengthened starting in 1997. Prime Minister Hun Sen embraced China after facing post-coup harassment by political opponents, which led to a halt in international aid to his government. This forced Hun Sen to shift his stance toward China and improve relations. During the 1980s, Cambodians lost their autonomy, and became pawns in the Cold War power struggle. Under the terms of the 1991 Paris Agreement, a provisional government was formed, including representatives from all factions. Prince Norodom Ranariddh led the winning party in the election but faced pressure to share power with Hun Sen, who became the second Prime Minister in a coalition government. Relations between Beijing and Phnom Penh rapidly transformed from mistrust to partnership, driven by China's diplomatic offensive and efforts to secure influence in Cambodia. In 2010, Cambodia and China upgraded their bilateral relationship to a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership," marking a significant milestone in their foreign relations. In 2020, the two countries signed a China-Cambodia Free Trade Agreement, Cambodia's first FTA with another country, solidifying its position as a crucial partner (Devonshire-Ellis, 2020). This reasserts the close bond between the two countries, encompassing both economic and military cooperation.

The relationship between the two countries has reached a new peak, with closer ties in almost all areas of cooperation. Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen describes China as "Cambodia's most trusted friend" (Thuy, 2015). Historically, China emerged as a powerful ally that helped Cambodia escape the suffocating political and economic environment it faced after the coup, which led to international condemnation and isolation. China's support provided relief from the pressures of confrontation with neighboring countries like South Vietnam and Thailand, forcing Cambodia to seek external assistance to address its internal and external challenges.

In the latter half of the 20th century, China sought a partner to counter Vietnam, a close ally of the Soviet Union, sharing a similar ideology but ultimately at odds. By the beginning of the 21st century, the world was undergoing dramatic changes. China actively sought to establish itself globally, particularly within the ASEAN region, and saw Cambodia as a strategic geopolitical and geoeconomic location, especially in the Indochina region. China implemented strategies like the "Going South" policy and the "Belt and Road Initiative," with Cambodia emerging as a crucial jewel in China's "String of Pearls" strategy. Conversely, Prime Minister Hun Sen skillfully leveraged this relationship to ensure national security, particularly maintaining domestic security under the control of his government, and reducing pressure from neighboring countries like Thailand and Vietnam (Cheunboran C. , 2018). The growing closeness between the two countries reveals the deep-seated objectives and potential benefits each side has gained.

## 2. China-Cambodian Military Cooperation in the 21st Century

A significant milestone in China-Cambodia military relations occurred in December 1997 when China provided Hun Sen's government with 116 military trucks and 70 Jeeps worth \$2.8 million to bolster the Cambodian military. This came just months after the coup launched by Prime Minister Hun Sen to oust Prince Norodom Ranariddh, son of the reigning King Norodom Sihanouk, from his position as First Prime Minister of Cambodia (Cheunboran, 2018). Since this shift in approach, in December

1999, Beijing further provided \$1.5 million in materials for the construction of a military academy in Thlork Ta Sek in Kampong Speu province, about 80 km from Phnom Penh, along with a substantial amount of military equipment. To date, over 70 buildings have been constructed on a 148-hectare site (Hanh, 2015). Upon completion, this additional support cemented China's position as the largest source of aid to the Cambodian military. Strengthening human resources in the defense sector is considered a top priority for Cambodia. Therefore, China's support for training Cambodian military personnel has further strengthened ties between the two countries. Since then, military relations have become a crucial area for both Cambodia and China, growing increasingly strong through training, building academies, providing military weapons and equipment, and joint military exercises. Both countries engage in this cooperation with their strategic considerations. Liberalism argues that close cooperation between countries in any area leads to greater interdependence. This also means that closely connected countries are more vulnerable to events or crises elsewhere in the world, especially smaller countries like Cambodia.

China's investments in Cambodia's military infrastructure have steadily increased over the years. In 2012, China provided a \$17 million aid package to build a hospital and a military training school for the Cambodian armed forces. This was followed by a \$100 million package in 2018 for whatever Cambodia needed (Thao, 2018). In 2019, the two countries signed an agreement for a grant of \$85 million to enhance the capacity of the Cambodian military. The grant included non-refundable assistance for training, military equipment, accommodation, medical technology, military schools, and transportation (Huyen, 2019). China is Cambodia's largest investor, trading partner, and donor, committing \$588 million in aid from 2018 to 2021. China's influence in Cambodia is undeniably strong. However, Chinese aid is perceived as being targeted towards Cambodian politicians rather than the public, making it even more intertwined with political considerations and lacking transparency.

China's military assistance to Cambodia takes various forms, including the training of high-quality human resources for Cambodian military personnel. These individuals undergo training, supervision, and guidance from Chinese experts and are then placed in key positions within brigades. China has also committed to continuing military personnel training in Cambodia through various cooperation agreements. Furthermore, in 2022, China funded a three-month humanitarian demining training program held at the PLA's Military Engineering University in Nanjing, Jiangsu Province, China. The program included training in advanced technologies such as drones for minefield surveys, robot-assisted demining, and laser-based demining. Forty trainees from Cambodia and Laos attended the program. This is one of eight demining training programs for Cambodia and Laos, which have trained over 300 professionals in this field (Jiayao, 2024). The program demonstrates Beijing's intention to cultivate a generation deeply interconnected ideologically, a crucial component of the China-Cambodia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, through which Beijing can easily convey its larger intentions. The growing presence of China in training Cambodian military personnel indicates that this could be an initial step in China's long-term strategy to exert influence over Cambodia. In addition to training, China has also served as a significant supplier of weapons, military equipment, and hardware to Cambodia. This includes patrol boats, military trucks, Harbin Z-9 helicopters, Jeeps, missile-launching

trucks, mobile KS-1A anti-aircraft gun systems, chemicals, spare parts, and military uniforms. Over the years, Cambodia has spent \$290 million on weapons purchases from China (Hoang, 2020). China currently holds the position as the largest supplier of weapons and military equipment to Cambodia. The standard equipment used in the Cambodian Army, which is manufactured in China, consists of Type 56 assault rifles (a version of the AK-47), modern QBZ-97 assault rifles, machine guns developed from the Type 57 and QBZ-97 models, Type 69 and PE-89 firepower, anti-tank guns, Type 85 anti-aircraft guns, Type 62 light tanks, Type 59 main battle tanks, Type 63 and Type 81 multiple rocket launchers, Type 59 long-range artillery, QBZ-97 bullpup rifles, FN-6 shoulder-launched missiles, mobile KS-1A medium-range anti-aircraft missile systems, and personal equipment such as body armor, helmets, gas masks, and chemicals, all sourced from China. Meanwhile, the Royal Cambodian Air Force currently utilizes several dozen upgraded MiG-21s, L-39 trainers, Y-12 multi-purpose transport aircraft, Xian MA-60 light transport aircraft, and Z-9 multi-purpose helicopters from China. Additionally, the Royal Cambodian Navy primarily relies on patrol vessels supplied by China, specifically 15 high-speed patrol boats, 1 landing craft, and 200 various types of motorboats (Le, 2013). In the future, Cambodia may also receive decommissioned Type 051DT destroyers and JF-17 fighter jets from China, which would further increase Cambodia's dependence on China for defense resources. Furthermore, the Cambodian military, consisting of 125,000 active-duty personnel, 70,000 reserve troops, 21 fixed-wing aircraft, 17 helicopters, 550 tanks, 300 armored vehicles, 600 artillery pieces, and 53 warships, operates with a defense budget of only \$192 million per year, which is insufficient to meet even basic needs (T.P., 2019). Therefore, China's support is crucial for Cambodia. It is for these reasons that Cambodia remains inextricably linked to China in the realm of defense.

China's significant increase in military aid to Cambodia serves as proof of Beijing's efforts to foster a dependent relationship with Cambodia and shape its stance within the country. This is evidenced by the signed agreements that highlight the growing military ties between China and Cambodia, gradually supplanting American influence. In late 2009, Cambodia deported 20 Uyghur refugees to China, triggering a partial reduction in US military aid. In response, the US halted the transfer of 200 military vehicles to Cambodia (Vu, 2015). In 2013, Phnom Penh announced the suspension of specific military cooperation with the US, following criticism from American lawmakers regarding Cambodian elections (An, 2018). Subsequently, the US Embassy in Phnom Penh criticized Prime Minister Hun Sen's government in 2018 for conducting undemocratic elections and threatened to curtail aid unless political reforms were implemented (Chi, 2019). The diminished pressure from the US and the West on Cambodia demonstrates the effectiveness of Beijing's foreign policy towards Phnom Penh, which aims at establishing Cambodia as a crucial player in its regional strategy.

Since 2016, China and Cambodia have conducted six joint military exercises called "Golden Dragon," showcasing an increasing scale in both quantity and quality of forces and equipment (Phuong, 2024). Despite the global threat of the SARS-COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Phnom Penh carried out the fourth edition of the exercise with nearly 3,000 soldiers, ten times the number involved in the 2016 exercise, as well as dozens of combat helicopters, armored combat vehicles, and troop carriers. However, Cambodia's two major annual military exercises, known as "Golden Hanuman" and

the naval exercise "Chhlam Samuth" were cancelled (Sokhean, 2020). This ongoing support for its military highlights Cambodia's growing reliance on China's involvement. In contrast, after conducting joint military exercises with the US for seven consecutive years, Cambodia cited a busy schedule due to elections and discontinued the joint military exercise in 2017. Meanwhile, the US presence in Cambodia has diminished due to Cambodia's lack of interest and indifference towards the US, causing growing concerns. Could this "playing both sides" approach, despite the risks of the great power game, have unforeseen consequences for both Cambodia and the region? Washington's concerns about the increasing closeness between Beijing and Phnom Penh are not unfounded. On October 2, 2020, The Wall Street Journal reported that satellite imagery revealed Cambodia dismantling a US-funded defense facility, the Cambodian Navy's tactical headquarters. Cambodia justified this action by stating that the facility was outdated and required expansion, with plans for a new facility to be built about 30 kilometers away (Hien, 2020). This demolition may be linked to preparations for Chinese military personnel and equipment to be stationed at the Ream Naval Base. China's funding of the renovation of the Ream Naval Base has resulted in the dismantling of facilities previously funded by the US. The US government has repeatedly warned that the Ream Naval Base is covertly being transformed into China's second overseas military base and its first in the Indo-Pacific region. Furthermore, Prime Minister Hun Sen allocated 157 hectares to the Ministry of Defense on September 15, 2022, for the development of an "air defense command and headquarters," as well as an additional 30 hectares for a "naval radar system" (Jack Brook, 2023), highlighting the significant expansion of China's military presence at Ream through the construction of large-scale facilities. This air defense system is likely to include surface-to-air missiles and reinforced shelters. Additionally, the base is connected to "space and global tracking assets" (Kumar, 2023). And the dredging of the surrounding waters to create a deep-water port indicates the capability to accommodate large naval vessels. Recently, two Chinese warships docked at the Ream Naval Base near Sihanoukville, with reports stating that Chinese vessels will test "the naval base Ream that China is building for Cambodia" (Khoa, 2024). If these reports are accurate, the Ream Naval Base, which is located less than 30 kilometers from Phu Quoc Island, Vietnam, would be particularly vulnerable to attacks from air bases and submarines in southern Vietnam. This vulnerability could be advantageous for Chinese coast guard forces, with PLA warships potentially receiving support from China's militarized artificial islands in the South China Sea. Additionally, the base could provide maintenance and repair facilities for warships, which are vital for sustaining combat operations. The base in Cambodia could accommodate PLA aircraft carriers, such as the third aircraft carrier - Fujian (Yun, 2023). This also signifies the rapid development of the Ream Naval Base over the past few years. It would also extend the endurance of Chinese long-range naval patrols and increase the flight time of Chinese fighter jets and bombers by providing logistics, refueling, repair, and other services. Similarly, it could serve as a strategically located outpost for intelligence gathering. If operating from this base, it would be China's first naval staging ground in Southeast Asia and its second overseas base in the world, following Djibouti (Howard Wang, N. Beauchamp-Mustafaga, 2024). Clearly, Cambodia is positioning itself in a precarious situation, possibly facing a future conflict between the US and China, similar to what occurred in the 1980s. In essence, China has established a significant presence in Cambodia. While Cambodia is



portrayed as a military ally, it seems to have essentially become an extension of China, even though it is geographically separate. While there may be immediate advantages, in the long term, relying on and being controlled by its "most trusted friend" will result in Cambodia having less independence regarding its internal and external affairs.

### 3. China's Growing Influence and Cambodia's Dependence: An Unequal Partnership?

In 1999, President Jiang Zemin became the first Chinese leader to visit Cambodia, marking the beginning of substantial aid packages, including in the military sector. Since then, China has strategically "ensnared" Cambodia with interest-free loans and financial aid to enhance its military capabilities. This has led to Cambodia's unwavering support for China's core interests.

So why does China choose Cambodia, a small and poor country, which is not commensurate with China's status as a major power? The real motive behind China's investment and aid in the military sector can be identified through the overall scale and diversity of its investment and support for Cambodia. China has certain strengths in the types of military support it can provide. The increase in China's defense cooperation with Cambodia in recent years is aimed at overcoming the shortcomings in its military relations with Cambodia and countering US influence. China's intentions are great, China is using charm tactics to attract supporters and seek allies. The presence and increasing frequency of China's sphere of influence outward serves as a driver to attract friends, expand influence and gain support for their upcoming rise. Therefore, the China's approach with Cambodia is to use a policy of consultation, non-interference, and non-binding to develop political and economic relations. Basically, China's military aid to Cambodia aims to achieve the following goals. First, it recognizes the geostrategic importance of Cambodia. The country has land, air and sea routes in the eastern Gulf of Thailand, making it centrally located in Indochina. China's goal is to establish a strong alliance with Cambodia, to expand its influence in Southeast Asia. This would help Beijing protect its strategic interests including trade and economic interests in the region. China's military support can also be seen as a public effort to establish a military foothold to counter current and future threats that may arise in the region. Moreover, China's military support for the Cambodian Navy is also aimed at enhancing their capabilities and ability to protect China's interests in Cambodia. This includes the ports that export and import Chinese goods as well as protecting interests such as roads, tourism and industries in Koh Kong province. China sees Cambodia as a security ring in the region (Nimol, 2024). This explains why China's current capital and aid are focused on the naval and port sectors. Through training courses and the provision of modern military equipment China aims to enhance the combat capabilities of the Cambodian Navy. This allows them to participate in and support combat operations with the Chinese military if necessary. Additionally, China has invested in two ports in Sihanoukville and Koh Kong, which will be the only two Deepwater Ports and new International Ports in Cambodia in the near future (Cong, 2017). Sihanoukville port is strategically important as a base for deploying military strength, serving as a logistics hub, refueling point, and creating maritime routes connecting ports, thus promoting maritime trade. By controlling Cambodia, China can use these military bases for its strategic

interests. Access to these ports provides an excellent foundation for establishing a "pearl" in the "String of Pearls" strategy, making it a valuable asset in that strategy.

Secondly, researchers have observed that Beijing is investing in a global network of naval bases. Alexander Wooley, a co-author of the study and director of partnerships, states that China has invested in "whole ports" through its Belt and Road Initiative spanning decades, but it remains unclear which ports will be used as naval bases in the future. The research, using publicly available data collected until 2021, identifies eight ports that could potentially be used as naval bases within the next 2 to 5 years by the Chinese Navy for sustained operations, including Ream - Cambodia, Bata - Equatorial Guinea, the Solomons, and others (Grady, 2023). With these developments, China aims to protect its maritime lines of communication, and ultimately seek a more significant naval position relative to the United States.

Thirdly, Cambodia is seen as a pawn in China's political strategy. With Cambodia's support, China gains more options to resolve conflicts with neighboring countries, such as the South China Sea issue involving Vietnam, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Malaysia, as well as disputes over water resources in the Mekong River Sub-region. Cambodia's strategic advantage plays a role here, as it can be used to increase pressure on Vietnam's southwestern flank in case of strained Vietnam-China relations. China takes advantage of this by providing aid to create economic and political dependence, pressuring the Hun Sen government to follow its strategic directives. One of China's driving forces behind the "Belt and Road Initiative" is to become a leading power in the Asia-Pacific region, and Cambodia is a key player in this plan. Cambodia could potentially serve as a launching point to approach the South China Sea dispute from various angles. Additionally, China could secure its control over the Spratly Islands and exploit the area's natural resources. Cambodia is also a strong political supporter of China when it comes to matters that align with China's core national interests. Although Cambodia does not claim sovereignty over disputed territories in the South China Sea, it consistently supports China's activities of building islands and militarizing the area (Edel, 2018). In 2012, when Cambodia held the rotating chair of ASEAN, it influenced ASEAN discussions on the South China Sea under Chinese influence, preventing regional leaders from issuing a strong statement on tensions in the area (Heimkhemra, 2020). Therefore, this base will undoubtedly strengthen China's ability to deploy naval forces in the region. The docks at the base are similar in size and design to those at China's military base in Djibouti. It will provide the PLA Navy with a base at the southern end of the South China Sea (SCS), where China claims sovereignty within the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of other countries. Strategically, it is also located east of the Strait of Malacca, through which 80% of China's energy needs are transported. In the event of any major conflict involving Taiwan, China will need to secure its sea lanes in the South China Sea and ensure that the Strait is not blocked by any power, especially the United States. Having a naval base with fuel, ammunition, and medical facilities gives China a strategic advantage.

Fourthly, another important aspect of China's strategy is its active efforts to bring Cambodia into its sphere of influence, reducing the impact of the United States or any other nation in the region. China's foreign policy aims to cultivate a peaceful and stable environment, which will facilitate its own development efforts and

internal strengthening. A stable external environment is crucial for China's successful implementation of its "peaceful rise" strategy. Beijing's objective is to draw Cambodia into its orbit and establish a dominant presence in the country. From Cambodia's perspective, strengthening military cooperation with China has become increasingly significant under Prime Minister Hun Sen's leadership. In the short term, military aid, arms deals, joint military exercises, and related activities such as counterterrorism and humanitarian assistance will enhance Cambodia's military capabilities and equipment, modernizing its defense sector. Looking back, Cambodia pursued security and national survival through close military relations with China due to the constant threat posed by its powerful neighbors, Thailand and Vietnam. Vietnam's support in the fight against the Khmer Rouge turned Cambodia into a battleground for major powers in the past. The border dispute with Thailand from 2008 to 2011 further highlighted Cambodia's need for support from an external power. Cambodia's negative perception of its neighbors led it to seek a powerful and secure patron, at least projecting the image of a close ally with a rising power. Seeking an ally who needs Cambodia as much as Cambodia needs them creates a sense of stability for the country as its neighboring countries become increasingly strong and willing to clash if necessary. Digging deeper, Cambodia may feel less apprehensive about China's influence compared to the US. The US is often accused of politically manipulating Cambodia through means such as humanitarian assistance, democracy promotion, economic sanctions, and involving Western countries in Cambodian affairs. This has pushed Cambodia further away from the US and the West. As the US imposed sanctions, China extended a welcoming hand to Cambodia, providing aid and interest-free investments, accompanied by promises and assurances of Cambodia benefiting from Chinese financial resources, creating the illusion of comprehensive development. In a speech at the online International Conference on the Future of Asia on May 20, 2021, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen dismissed criticism of Phnom Penh's excessive reliance on Beijing as "unfair." He declared, "If not China, who else? If not ask China, who else?" (Staff, 2021). This reveals the depth of Cambodia's dependence on China, even within the mindset of its leader. In reality, the relationship between Cambodia and China is unequal. Cambodia's entanglement in the harsh foreign policies of the US and Western powers, as well as its animosity towards its neighbors, created an opportunity for China to emerge as a benefactor in Cambodia's national reconstruction. This was further fueled by Cambodia's nationalist sentiment, which resonated with China's approach. As a result, a symbiotic and rather unique relationship emerged. While it may appear on the surface that there are no strings attached, in reality, Cambodia is increasingly becoming entangled in a new form of a tributary relationship, potentially posing a latent threat to its independence and sovereignty. Proofread this, improving clarity and flow. A prime example of China's expanding influence is its acquisition of extensive land along Cambodia's coastline and the construction of port facilities in the coastal city of Sihanoukville. These developments potentially serve as locations for future Chinese naval bases, giving Beijing the ability to project power not only throughout the region but also beyond. Additionally, China's establishment of a military academy in Cambodia mirrors its approach in the cultural and educational realms, such as the construction of Confucius Institutes for Chinese language learning. Through military training in Cambodia, China aims to gain influence within the Cambodian military. One possibility is that Cambodia could allow the Chinese military to use an airfield being

built at Dara Sakor, Koh Kong province by a Chinese private company, with a 99-year land lease. Even Boeing 747s and Airbus A380s, and even Chinese long-range bombers and military transports could utilize this airfield as the runway is nearly two miles long. Chinese fighter jets would be able to strike targets in Thailand, Vietnam, Singapore, and other locations from this airfield (Panda, 2022). This indicates that Cambodia's stance has shifted in favor of China on the international stage. In 2016, regarding the pivotal issue of the South China Sea, Cambodia blocked a joint statement at the ASEAN foreign ministers' summit condemning China's position in its dispute with the Philippines. Just days prior, China had pledged \$600 million in aid. Subsequently, in October of the same year, Beijing promised a \$90 million debt cancellation package, lent Hun Sen's government an additional \$60 million, and pledged an additional \$237 million in aid, along with an announcement to construct a \$16 million Parliament building in Phnom Penh. Phnom Penh's support on key issues like the South China Sea remained unchanged during Hun Sen's chairmanship of ASEAN in 2022. Prime Minister Hun Sen also sided with China on the sensitive issue of relations with the Myanmar junta. Hun Sen was the first head of state to visit and, therefore, legitimize the junta in January 2022 (Heydarian, 2022). And even with the ascension of Hun Sen's eldest son, Hun Manet, to the Prime Minister's position, China was the first country he visited on an official trip (Do, 2023). Cambodia's dependence on Chinese aid has enabled Hun Sen to maintain control of the country and build a regime where he presents himself as a savior-like king, consolidating his dominance and constructing a vast family network with tentacles reaching into all aspects of the country's politics and economy. In other words, Chinese foreign aid has bolstered the ruling elite and its surrounding circles, while also contributing to the development of the informal economy. Clearly, the closer China-Cambodia relationship allows the latter to narrow its power gap with Vietnam. As a result, Cambodia has been able to reassert its sovereignty and address sensitive issues, such as illegal immigration from Vietnam, without undue worry about retaliation from Vietnam (Jing Jing Luo, Kheang Un, 2022). Conversely, China has secured ongoing support from Cambodia, granting them significant latitude in their projects and investments. Thus, China's foreign aid in Cambodia is closely intertwined with its foreign policy goals and strategic objectives. This confirms that Cambodia is heading towards becoming a specialized dependent state. This means excessive and pragmatic dependence on another country. It not only draws Cambodia into the orbit of a major power but also turns it into a playground for competing superpowers like the US and China. This will diminish Cambodia's national security drive and, more significantly, leave Cambodia unable to determine its own destiny. Furthermore, if Cambodia fails to balance its diplomacy between these two superpowers, it will be at risk of becoming a new conflict point between them, impacting Cambodia's relations with its neighbors.

Thus, it becomes evident that China is pursuing a win-win policy, but will the benefits Cambodia receives be sufficient to sustain this imbalanced relationship in the future? In the long run, China will reap greater benefits from this relationship than Cambodia. Clearly, Cambodia is always in a reactive position in its relationship with Beijing, as it is only through Beijing that it can isolate itself from Western pressure, from its neighbors, secure its domestic security, and, most importantly, maintain the CPP government's control under Prime Minister Hun Sen. If Cambodia fails to recognize the challenges it faces, utilize a shrewdly neutral approach, and

balance its relationships with major powers to safeguard its sovereignty and benefit from these interactions, its excessive reliance on Chinese aid will only further ensnare it in China's orbit. This will also negatively impact Cambodia's relations with major powers and other countries in the ASEAN region, leading to long-term negative consequences for its national security.

#### 4. Conclusion

Cambodia's strategic embrace of China, particularly in the military domain, is a significant development with profound implications for regional stability and the balance of power. While Cambodia seeks economic and security benefits, its alliance with China risks escalating tensions with the West and impacting regional stability. The future of Cambodia's relationship with China will be crucial in shaping the geopolitical landscape of Southeast Asia.

Cambodia's foreign policy has been heavily influenced by China in its perspectives and stance on a number of regional security issues, especially concerning the South China Sea disputes and the deployment of hydropower projects in the Mekong River region, which could have far-reaching consequences for Southeast Asia's stability, further exacerbating tensions and leading to a new era of power struggle. This will negatively impact regional security and Vietnam. Even if Cambodia denies harboring any constitutional agenda, it is undeniable that by providing facilities, Cambodia has aided Beijing in pursuing its naval, air, infantry, network, and space power projection capabilities. The biggest concern is that Cambodia's stance toward China could be detrimental to ASEAN's interests as its closeness risks leading to ASEAN's disunity and generating tension within the group. At the same time, the possibility of disrupting the seemingly close relationship between Vietnam and Cambodia cannot be ruled out. In addition to the issue of Vietnamese immigration into Cambodia, some sections of the border between the two countries remain undemarcated, leading to ongoing border disputes. These are challenging issues amidst the context of an imbalanced power relationship between the two countries. Cambodia is a place where major powers are vying for influence, and it is also a place where reactionary forces often exploit opportunities to sabotage Vietnam. The issue of the limited mention of the Khmer Rouge genocide or the disagreements between Vietnam and Cambodia could also be a way for China to use Cambodia to balance or exert pressure on Vietnam in many issues, especially those related to the South China Sea.

Cambodia's overly close military ties and its support for China's strategic objectives have a negative impact on Vietnam. An unstable border security situation poses a significant challenge to Vietnam's foreign policy. Political scientist Hans J. Morgenthau once remarked that "all of history shows that those states which have been active in international politics have always been preparing for, engaging in, or recovering from organized violence in the form of war" (W. Kegley, A. Raymond, 2014). Over the past decade, China has been active in international disputes with various countries, particularly Vietnam. Therefore, Cambodia's increasing dependence on China becomes a potential danger for Vietnam. Not only has China solved the problem of reducing Vietnam's influence over Cambodia, but Cambodia has also achieved this on its own. The warming of Cambodia-China relations in the military sphere will also force Cambodia to confront a political dilemma, compelling it to choose a side, leading to a precarious situation.

Currently, Vietnam is increasingly demonstrating its leadership role within the region of Southeast Asian nations. Its growing international stature may also make Cambodia feel uneasy about its powerful and constantly strengthening neighbor, especially given their shared history of conflict. These factors may explain why Cambodia is leveraging China in matters of military strength, achieving a double benefit. Firstly, it elevates its own political standing, as Cambodia's mindset favors neutrality as a means of development. Secondly, it can counterbalance Vietnam and reduce its influence through increased military strength, ensuring its own security in a zero-sum game as per the principles of realism. However, Cambodia must be truly adept at maintaining a policy of neutrality, a genuinely neutral stance in the future, and should actively diversify its diplomatic relations with other countries, particularly the US, the EU, Japan, South Korea, etc. It should also continue to protect the relationship between China and Vietnam, preventing any collusion with China against Vietnam.

Essentially, China's growing influence in Cambodia is diminishing Cambodian support for Vietnam, especially on issues concerning the South China Sea and Mekong River water resources, and other related matters such as border demarcation between the two countries. Simultaneously, China's increasing support, provision of arms and military equipment, military training, and military presence in Cambodia will pose a security threat to Southeast Asian nations. This creates a situation that compels countries to enhance their own military capabilities through arms races or the search for alliances to protect themselves, potentially increasing regional security risks, which are already vulnerable to the influence of major powers.

For Vietnam, it is crucial to maintain strong, friendly, and neighborly relations with Cambodia, which will help alleviate any suspicions from its neighboring ally. For decades, Vietnam has proactively sought to cooperate, provide support, and build positive security and political relations with Cambodia, making a significant contribution to the defense and development of its homeland. This is critical, especially considering the unresolved border disputes or conflicts between the two countries, or issues related to Vietnamese Cambodians, which could easily escalate into a dangerous conflict.

Secondly, ASEAN holds a paramount geostrategic role in the region. However, the involvement of major powers in the region, particularly China, could cause internal divisions within the bloc and diminish Vietnam's role in ASEAN. Without ASEAN, Vietnam would face greater challenges in its relations with major powers, especially in safeguarding its maritime sovereignty, islands, water security, and addressing climate change. Therefore, a top priority in Vietnam's foreign policy at present, with a broad orientation towards unity and consensus, should be to strengthen national capabilities to assume greater responsibilities regarding shared regional issues.

Vietnam should strive to create a unified and cohesive ASEAN, prompting joint efforts, unifying perceptions, and coordinating actions concerning the security and political interests of the entire region to minimize external pressures and leverage the benefits from all parties involved in the region. This would minimize individual disputes and effectively maximize intra-bloc cooperation to maintain and enhance its space for survival. To achieve this, Vietnam should strengthen bilateral diplomatic activities with regional countries and major powers to maintain good relations, a peaceful and stable environment, avoid turning



individual issues into broader problems in Vietnam's relations with other countries, and build a stronger image and voice for Vietnam in the region.

Additionally, Vietnam needs to handle bilateral relations between Vietnam-Cambodia and Vietnam-China deftly and flexibly, while persistently advocating for unity and cooperation within frameworks like ASEAN, MRC, etc. It should also bolster people-to-people diplomacy, interactions, and the exchange of experiences between the people of the region, especially Cambodia, to create a unified voice and action among the people of these countries, thereby influencing government policymaking. Therefore, Vietnam should consider realizing and strengthening the ASEAN Community as a critical task, a core pillar of its foreign policy. For instance, the issue of Mekong River water depletion, impacting five out of ten ASEAN countries, has not yet become a central issue in ASEAN agendas. The Mekong River Sub-region is currently divided due to disagreements among the Mekong River's downstream countries, with Cambodia and Laos acting as China's "backyard", which poses economic and water security challenges for Vietnam. Therefore, Vietnam should encourage member participation in organizations, seek consensus from the ASEAN Political-Security Community, and reduce China's influence and control over the region.

Finally, Vietnam should continue to leverage its role as a bridge between ASEAN countries and partners like the US, Japan, South Korea, etc. By utilizing the interest these countries have, it should promote mutually beneficial cooperative endeavors, considering both immediate and long-term benefits, national interests, and regional interests as a whole. This way, Vietnam can minimize conflicting interests during the implementation of various strategies, create mutually beneficial spaces, particularly for ASEAN, foster a favorable international relations space for security and development, and maintain its traditional independence while enhancing its national standing within the context of international integration and globalization.

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