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ABN # 65 648 097 123



Background Briefing:

Cambodia's Ties with China and Vietnam: Not Zero Sum

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January 8, 2018

We are writing a report on the changing relations between Vietnam, China and Hun Sen. We request your insight into the following issues:

Q1. There has been a lot written about the value to China of winning Cambodia to its side. From Beijing's perspective the region presents a visage of potentially hostile countries. Keeping Cambodia on-side also helps Beijing thwart ASEAN from adopting policies that are inimical to China interests. But are potential ASEAN policies really a major concern to China? How important is keeping Cambodia on-side to Beijing?

ANSWER: In order to understand the present relationship between Cambodia and China the historical legacy of their past relations should be kept in mind. After Cambodia became independent in 1953, Norodom Sihanouk pursued a neutral foreign policy during the Cold War. China and Cambodia attended the Afro-Asian conference in Bandung in April 1955. In July 1958, Cambodia recognized China and this added to the small number of countries that had diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China after 1949. And in 1961, Cambodia became a member of the Non-Aligned Movement.

When Lon Nol overthrew Sihanouk in 1970, China provided Sihanouk sanctuary and support. Sihanouk returned to Kampuchea after the Khmer Rouge took power and survived due to patronage from Beijing. When Vietnam invaded Cambodia, China backed the Khmer Rouge in their resistance and once again provides support and sanctuary to Sihanouk. After the Cambodian conflict ended in 1991, China backed Sihanouk as head of the Supreme National Council.

After the UNTAC elections in May 1993, China gave its support to the coalition government. It was at this time that Cambodia adopted a One China policy and diplomatic relations with Taiwan were cut.

Ever since Cambodia became a member of ASEAN, in April 1999, it has received backing from China.

To summarize, Cambodia has been instrumental to Chinese foreign policy over time in differing ways providing a means to legitimize and validate China's role in the region.

Q2. Is Cambodia geo-strategically important to China, or is it just of diplomatic value? There have been concerns raised from time to time about the Chinese building a

military port in Koh Kong province. Is Cambodia actually of any importance to China and Beijing's long-terms designs for Asia?

ANSWER: Although Cambodia does not border China, it has intrinsic strategic value because of its location bolstered by the historical legacy of close relations. Obviously during the Khmer Rouge period Cambodia provided a second front to curb what China viewed as a hostile Vietnam. After 1993, and with China's economic rise, Cambodia became important for its natural resources. In the contemporary period, Cambodia is one of a number of stepping stones for Chinese influence in the region (including Myanmar and Laos). After Cambodia's admission into ASEAN, and particularly after maritime tensions became to rise in the South China Sea, Cambodia became a valuable diplomatic surrogate for Beijing.

Today, Cambodia has been included in China's Belt and Road Initiative. Cambodia will continue to hold importance for China as long as other regional states resist Chinese suzerainty. Cambodia can be touted by Beijing as an example of "win-win" cooperation and China's putative policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries. Cambodia's importance will diminish relatively as other more powerful regional states accommodate to China.

Q3. The Vietnamese are pragmatic and know Hun Sen well; he was their man for so long. Do you think there could ever be a point when Hanoi starts to fear they have lost him, and he has become too closely tied to their major regional rival in China? Is there anything tangible Vietnam could do in the future -- or threaten to do -- to keep its interests in Cambodia from being eroded by China?

ANSWER: Indeed, Vietnamese leaders and officials are pragmatic. They do not oppose close relations between Cambodia and China because Vietnam also seeks close and cooperative relations with Beijing. Vietnam has an interest in a secure border with Cambodia and domestic stability in Cambodia to curb transnational criminal activity (drug and gun smuggling, human trafficking, criminal activity etc.). Vietnam is in the for long haul. They constantly nurture relations with Cambodia's military and promote cross border trade through special zones.

Except for Cambodia's verbal stance on the South China Sea dispute in support of China, thus undermining ASEAN consensus, Cambodia does not represent an existential threat to Vietnam. It is difficult to see how closer relations between China and Cambodia would result in an increase in hostility between Vietnam and Cambodia. It is not in China's interest to polarize mainland Southeast Asia. China is not trying to destabilize Vietnam so much as to manage a bilateral relationship that is testy at times. Vietnam for its part has no interest becoming embroiled in a continuing dispute with Cambodia or China for that matter. Finally, China is promoting regional economic integration and would not encourage or support Cambodia in cutting economic and trade ties with Vietnam.

Suggested citation: Carlyle A. Thayer, "Cambodia's Ties with China and Vietnam: Not Zero Sum," *Thayer Consultancy Background Brief*, January 8, 2018. All background briefs are posted on Scribd.com (search for Thayer). To remove yourself from the mailing list type, UNSUBSCRIBE in the Subject heading and hit the Reply key.

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