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## **Cambodia's Disastrous Dependence on China: A History Lesson**

**Overdependence on China undermines Cambodia's national security. We know because it's happened before.**

By Chansambath Bong

In May 1965, then-Prince Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia terminated diplomatic relations with the United States. In so doing, he altered his strict adherence of neutrality in foreign policy to align with the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Sihanouk was in part acting in response to a derogatory article by Bernard Krisher for Newsweek that accused his mother, Queen Sisowath Kossamak, of running a bordello, along with an air raid by an American plane on a village in Kampong Cham province, which killed one teenage boy and injured a few others. Although these events may be viewed as the last straws that pushed Cambodia-U.S. ties to the breaking point, other factors — such as Pathet Lao's victory at the Plain of Jarres in 1961, the downfall of Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963, and America's alleged sabotaging efforts against his conference proposal — all played parts in the debacle.

Sihanouk's decision to opt for close alignment with China had a number of implications for Cambodia's national security. Internally, suspension of American aid in 1963 stirred contention among the rank and file of the Cambodian armed forces close to General Lon Nol and the commercial elites, both of whom had fed on U.S. largess and economic benefits since 1955.

Moreover, the halt pushed Cambodia's aid-dependent economy into a tailspin. The nationalization of banking and trade industries created opportunities for corrupt officials to benefit from illegal rice sales at the expense of the general public, who were bearing the brunt of economic hardship.

Externally, alignment with China created both short- and long-term impacts on Cambodia's foreign policy. For one thing, Cambodia's alignment with China allowed Beijing to take advantage of Sihanouk's unbalanced foreign policy. Chinese officials pressured the prince to allow Viet Cong supply lines to run through Kompong Som port up to the Ho Chi Minh trail. That turned out to be an unofficial invitation for American B-52 Stratofortress bomber runs, and Cambodia is still feeling the effects of this today.

In the short term, Sihanouk's choice also pushed Cambodia into deeper diplomatic isolation with no friend to rely on as the decision to break off ties with the United States in 1965 came just as that the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution was about to sweep across China. Once the Red Guards occupied the PRC's foreign affairs ministry in mid-1966, China's foreign policy radically shifted from Pancha Shila or the five principles of peaceful co-existence to exporting revolution abroad. Prince Sihanouk became increasingly suspicious of China's intentions after rumors that Beijing was secretly exporting its revolutionary ideas through the Cambodian-Chinese Friendship Association spread across the country.

The last straw came when Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai, who was a target of the Red Guards at this point, openly asked Cambodia to allow the ethnic Chinese community to pledge their allegiance to Communism and Chairman Mao, a move that broke with Beijing's long-held tradition of Pancha

Shila. These developments greatly unnerved Sihanouk, who had previously expected that China would stand behind him through thick and thin without trying to impose its ideology on Cambodia.

The rapid radicalization of Chinese foreign policy made the monarch feel like he had painted himself into a corner. He had alienated the American the previous year and now it looked like the Chinese were about to flip on him as well. It would be nothing short of diplomatic suicide for Cambodia if Beijing reneged.

Although Sino-Cambodian relations gradually went back to normalcy in 1968, Chinese officials appeared to cross the line when, according to one account, Kang Sheng, who was a member of the Gang of Four, visited Khmer Rouge's liberated region in 1968. This could suggest that part of the Chinese government had begun working with the Khmer Communists behind Sihanouk's back before the 1970 coup. It's not surprising, then, that Beijing threw its full weight behind the Khmer Rouge when it took over Kampuchea in April 1975.

In response to deteriorating ties with China, Prince Sihanouk made a sharp U-Turn with his U.S. policy and extended an olive branch to Washington by personally accommodating Jacqueline Kennedy's 1967 visit to Cambodia. He even erected the J. F. K. Boulevard to honor her late husband, whose assassination in 1963 he once cheered for.

Furthermore, Sihanouk agreed to collaborate with U.S. VESUVIUS intelligence package as a measure to counter Viet Cong guerrillas and promised U.S. envoy to India Chester Bowles that he would accommodate a "limited American incursion" in Cambodia "under certain condition."

Even though his rapprochement with the United States yielded fruits in 1969 when the two countries reestablished diplomatic ties, his re-balancing strategy between East and West came a little too late to stop the tide that was slowly turning against him domestically.

Economic malice, growing resentment among the populace directed at Vietnamese migrants, and encroaching Viet Cong guerrillas along with domestic instability resulting from the United States' "Menu" bombing campaign, which had started since March 1969, created the opportunity for right-wing Prime Minister General Lon Nol and his deputy, Prince Sisowath Sarik Matak, to conspire against Sihanouk.

Eventually, the Lon Nol-Sarik Matak-Cheng Heng clique orchestrated a coup through a vote in the National Assembly and ousted the Prince while he was overseas on March 18, 1970. This event unfolded almost exactly one year from when the first American bomb fell on Cambodia during the Breakfast sorties. The coup effectively ended Cambodia's centuries-old monarchy and pushed the small country into the all-engulfing war in Vietnam.

Five years later, when the Khmer Rouge took over in 1975, China stood aside and did nothing to stop the brutalities inflicted upon the Cambodians. Instead, Beijing abetted the massacre by supplying this ruthless regime with aids, arms, and morale.

There are two lessons we can learn from this very brief dose of history. One, as a small state Cambodia should never be dependent on a foreign patron, because doing so will expose it to the risk of being subjected to the powerful will of its bigger, more powerful peer.

Two, there are no permanent friends, only permanent interests in international politics. This conventional wisdom cannot find a better expression than the example of China. When its interests are at stake, Beijing does not mind swapping old friends for new ones. China did it in 1975–1979 when it stood aside to see its old friend, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, placed under house arrest by

the Khmer Rouge. There is no reason not to believe that it will not do it again in the future. Cambodia must take good note of this.

### **Is History Repeating Itself? Or Will It?**

If there is one history lesson that Cambodian foreign policy makers should keep in mind, it is that overdependence on a foreign patron, namely China, is counterproductive for a small and weak state like theirs. Although the current marriage of convenience with the PRC yields economic benefits today, this trend could potentially drag Cambodia into Beijing's geopolitical tutelage and, as a result, threaten its national security interest in the long run, if not properly strategized.

Internally, the recent influx of Chinese immigrants in places like Preah Sihanoukville province has fueled criminal activities such as homicide, kidnapping, online money extortion, and prostitution, and alienated local and foreign tourists from other countries.

Meanwhile, the inflow of deep-pocketed Chinese spenders has exacerbated corruption among local officials and resulted in incidents where Chinese nationals misused cars with police and military license plates for personal reasons.

Corruption also leads to inadequate quality inspections of Chinese-owned construction projects, which then creates a hazardous working environment for local workers. This was exemplified in the building collapse that killed 28 people in June 2019.

In the meantime, the reckless usage of Khmer language on advertisement billboards set up by Chinese businessmen have added fuel to growing anti-Chinese sentiment across Cambodia.

To protect its economic interests, China orchestrated a cyberespionage campaign through a group of state-linked hackers that targeted local politicians, diplomats, human rights activists, and public institutions to try to interfere in Cambodia's 2018 general elections. This is a serious abuse of trust between friends.

Economically, Cambodia is now one of several countries around the world whose debt to China amounts to more than 25 percent of their gross domestic product (GDP), according to the latest report by Germany-based Kiel Institute for the World Economy.

Although its current level of public debt owed to Beijing is lower than some other countries, Cambodia must be conscious not to fall into China's debt-trap diplomacy, whereby it uses debt alleviation as a geoeconomic tool to coerce insolvent borrowers into making concession of strategic facilities, such as a deep-water port and air hub in the cases of Sri Lanka and Zambia.

Diplomatically, Cambodia's reputation on the world stage has suffered a number of setbacks in recent years. For instance, its bid to become a nonpermanent member of the UN Security Council in 2012 fell flat after concerns were raised about its troubling human rights record, which is often linked to China's backing of the current government in Phnom Penh.

In that very same year, Cambodia graduated as China's faithful ally when ASEAN, under its chairmanship, failed to produce a joint communique for the first time in its 45-year history. This incident led scholars to label Cambodia as China's vassal state or an extension of the PRC's foreign policy. These are troubling labels that damage Cambodia's diplomatic credibility in the global arena and antagonize fellow ASEAN members, both claimants and non-claimants in the South China Sea, who have grown increasingly concerned about China's assertiveness in Asia and the Pacific region.

A recent report by the Wall Street Journal claiming a secret military agreement between Cambodia and China in Ream Naval Base is another sign of Phnom Penh's unhealthy drift to Beijing. If true, this naval outpost will put Cambodia in an uncomfortable position vis-à-vis neighboring Thailand and Vietnam, who have beefed up their armed forces in recent years. Moreover, it will impact the existing regional security architecture in Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific as a whole.

All of these developments have unfolded at the same time the European Union and the United States are threatening to impose punitive economic or political sanctions — or both — on the Cambodian government in response to recent developments in its domestic politics.

These are some examples of the costs Cambodia has to pay for its increasing dependence on China. Compared to 1965, when the Cambodian leader cut off ties with the West to align with the PRC only to find himself thrown under the bus by Beijing later on, today's situation is less dangerous than that of the Cold War — but it bears stark similarities that deserve immediate attention.

Although Cambodia's growing dependence on China has become a concern for many of its people and states in the region, it is not irreversible.

As a small state in a post-Cold War world, Cambodia has more diplomatic tools at its disposal to reverse the aforementioned trends; to navigate through the power transition between the status quo power, the United States, and the rising power, China; and to safeguard its national security interests of domestic stability, sustainable and inclusive economic growth, and peaceful relations with all nations, big or small – and all without having to jump on the bandwagon with either one of these superpowers.

First, robust diversification of political and economic ties with other like-minded small- and medium-sized powers who seek peace, free and fair trade, and cooperation should help Cambodia offset its existing reliance on China.

Second, Cambodia needs to reinvigorate its ties with the United States, which have been in a downward spiral since 2017. This recalibration will help Cambodia rebalance its position between Beijing and Washington. There are already some encouraging signs on this front.

As a weaker power, Cambodia is vulnerable to evolving geopolitical shifts among major players in the international system. Given the high-stakes, high-risk strategic competition in Asia today, dependence on China and alienation of the United States (and its EU ally) can lead to grave consequences for its national security.

Cambodia needs to learn the fatal lesson of its dependence on China in the 1960s and must do everything in its power to avoid walking down the same path again.

Cambodia should be neither pro-China nor a puppet of any country. Cambodia should always be pro-Cambodia.

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