

China in Vogue, But Vietnam Still Hun Sen's Lifeline

Has Hun Sen's embrace of Beijing loosened the CPP's relationship with Vietnam?

By Alex Willemyns
June 26, 2018

If the secret to notoriety in Cambodia's fast-vanishing pro-opposition news media has long been to publish stories critical of Vietnam, the unwritten rule of the tightly government-controlled television news media has been to steer as wide as possible of them.

With every terrestrial station owned either by top officials from the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) or their allies, it's a norm that those looking to stay in the good graces of leaders installed by Hanoi in January 1979 have done their best to heed.

That changed June 13 when Soy Sopheap, a well-known "fixer" for Prime Minister Hun Sen, used his chat show on on **BTV News** — a dedicated news station owned by Hun Sen's daughter Hun Mana — to air the idea of anti-Vietnam protests.

Noting **the recent protests in Vietnam** against 99-year land concessions given to Chinese firms, Sopheap complained of **the presence of similar Vietnamese-owned 99-year land concessions in Cambodia** of "nearly 30,000 hectares" and even accused Vietnam's foreign minister, Pham Binh Minh, of "looking down" on Cambodia.

In a **12-minute monologue**, Sopheap, who is also the editor-in-chief of the pro-CPP **Deum Ampil news site** and a founder of Hun Sen's favorite news source, **Fresh News**, asked why Phnom Penh had not seen similar protests launched against Vietnam.

"When Vietnam opposes China, they are brave enough to speak out about it, but we are never brave enough to speak out as we're forever scared of Vietnam," Sopheap said. "Now I am going to speak out, I am going to criticize, and I am going to protest."

"This is the very same issue we saw explode into protests in Vietnam — and Cambodians need to reflect on that," he said. "Cambodians have the right to protest too."

For some, it would have come as a surprise. But for many others, it was just the latest piece of evidence in a slow burn of reports over the past year suggesting that Hun Sen's close embrace of Beijing has **loosened the CPP's relationship** with Vietnam.

A March 27 report in the *Asia Times*, which appeared under the headline "**Hun Sen willing to risk losing oldest ally**" and was penned by Alan Parkhouse, the recently departed editor-in-chief of Phnom Penh's pro-government *Khmer Times* newspaper, even suggested that Vietnam itself had begun to turn on Cambodia's prime minister.

"Hun Sen was told by the Vietnamese very bluntly that he'd been in power too long and it was time to go," Parkhouse quoted an anonymous senior Cambodian government official as saying. "The two issues that annoyed the Vietnamese the most were his close ties to China and the deportation of Vietnamese citizens from Cambodia."



Vietnamese Communist Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, right, poses with Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen for a photo prior to a meeting at Peace Palace in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, Thursday, July 20, 2017.

Image Credit: AP Photo/Heng Sinith

Yet if Hun Sen's 40-year friendship with Vietnam has been souring due to the prime minister's recent turn to Beijing, and Phnom Penh's work on behalf of China to undermine ASEAN's solidarity on the South China Sea, it's been kept mostly under wraps.

From the regular cheery state visits in both directions to the opening of high-quality Vietnamese hospitals and schools in Phnom Penh, Cambodian and Vietnamese relations have seemed to weather events that typically cause strains on diplomatic relations.

"Vietnamese leaders and officials are pragmatic," explained Carl Thayer, an emeritus professor at the Australian Defense Force Academy (ADFA) and a specialist in Sino-Vietnamese relations. "They do not oppose close relations between Cambodia and China, because Vietnam also seeks close and cooperative relations with Beijing."

Thayer, who was also an official observer for Cambodia's 1993 U.N.-run elections, said Vietnam's military newspaper *Quan Doi Nhan Dan* still carries "repeated stories" about Cambodian officers graduating from Vietnamese military schools, and that Vietnam continues to provide free medical care to many visiting Cambodian military personnel.

Hanoi was "in it for the long haul," he said, and prioritized "domestic stability in Cambodia," believing it had to coexist with — rather than combat — Beijing's rising influence. "In other words," he said, "however concerned Vietnam may be about China's growing influence in Cambodia, Vietnam has not adopted a punitive stance towards Phnom Penh."

Hun Sen himself has also shown few signs of breaking with Hanoi — even if media sycophants like Soy Sopheap have recently found new liberties in criticizing Hanoi.

Only weeks after the close June 2017 commune council elections, the prime minister notably publicly celebrated the 40th anniversary of his defection into Vietnam from the Khmer Rouge **by reliving his dangerous passage across the border** four decades before, recounting how no other countries came to Cambodia's aid at the time.

With his three sons in tow, the premier held a ceremony on the Cambodian side of the border before reliving his crossing on foot and then driving to another ceremony hosted by Vietnam government officials across the border. Notably, the journey into Vietnam was later **turned into a propaganda film aired on prime-time television**.

A month later — almost exactly on the anniversary of the day in July 2016 that **Cambodia again nixed a joint ASEAN statement** against China's activity in the South China Sea — the then-new secretary-general of the Vietnamese Communist Party (CPV), Nguyen Phu Trong, came to Phnom Penh on one of his first trips abroad as leader.

During the trip, Trong **announced that Vietnam would fund a \$25 million new administrative building** inside the National Assembly in Phnom Penh as a "souvenir" of good relations between the two countries. Yet another Cambodian-Vietnamese Friendship Monument was inaugurated days later in the port city of Sihanoukville.

For any budding strains, it was hardly the makings of a developing break-up.

Writing in this year's *Southeast Asian Affairs*, Steven Heder, a longtime Cambodia expert and a research associate at London's School of Oriental and African Studies, draws on Vietnamese and Cambodian media reports to suggest that this is because relations between Hanoi and Phnom Penh transcend regular diplomatic concerns.

The piece, titled "**Cambodia-Vietnam: Special Relationship against Hostile and Unfriendly Forces**" argues that Cambodia and Vietnam's long-ruling parties, with their common communist backgrounds, have stayed unusually close because of shared ideological concerns about each other's territory being used by perceive party "enemies."

The ties are therefore best understood, Heder says, not through the lens of regular nation-to-nation affairs but instead through the party-to-party links of Hun Sen's CPP and its historical "big brother" in the CPV — or through the links between the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF) and the Vietnamese People's Army (VPA).

"Two overarching themes of VPA-RCAF cooperation are that, historically, 'always at the most difficult times, there has been only Vietnam helping Cambodia,' and that, currently, the VPA is ready to assist the RCAF 'in all circumstances,' including at any time 'when the CPP is encountering difficulties,'" Heder writes.

“Hun Sen has described bilateral relations like one of ‘lips and teeth,, with a basis in a ‘political relationship’ between the countries armed forces. In historical Asian Communist parlance, the notion of a lips and teeth relationship has referred to one of militant solidarity in wartime against a common enemy,” he says.

Indeed, the fact that **Hun Sen paid an official state visit to Hanoi** just days before the January 2014 **brutal crackdown on opposition protesters** in Phnom Penh was not lost on the Cambodian opposition or its supporters (**who protested his departure**) — and neither was the Vietnamese premier’s **trip to Phnom Penh visit a few days later**.

To crystallize Vietnam’s perspective on Phnom Penh, Heder pits the CPP, which regularly stresses its gratitude for Hanoi’s 1979 overthrow of Pol Pot, against Hun Sen’s nemesis in the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), whose leaders still hold Vietnam responsible for the rise of the Khmer Rouge in the first place.

Most significantly for Vietnam, the CNRP represents a “dangerously irredentist” but widespread strain of Cambodian political thinking that **has refused to give up historical claims** on Vietnam’s territory, often leading to **border disputes**. (The CNRP’s Sam Rainsy has even said the party **supports China’s claims in the South China Sea**).

Heder notes that after one **December 2016 meeting with Hun Sen in Hanoi**, Vietnamese President Tran Dai Quang “affirmed ‘a consistent policy of always supporting the CPP’ and appreciated Cambodia’s ‘steadfastness ... in not allowing any hostile force to use its territory to undermine the peace, security and stability’ of Vietnam.”

Quang “counselled [Hun Sen] to carry out ‘preventative work, not allowing extremist forces to provoke national animosity or to break up or sabotage the relations of cooperation and friendship’ between the two countries” — a clear allusion to the growing popularity of the CNRP in the wake of Cambodia’s disputed 2013 national election.

From this context, Vietnam’s longstanding reliance on the CPP for stability inside Cambodia had in many ways become institutionalized. It had taken on a “psychological and potentially operational significance as an armed alliance against political change that would bring hostile forces of unfriendly elements to power in Cambodia,” Heder says.

The value this brings to Hun Sen — not least in terms of elite military training and health care for his own followers, not to mention the domestic power-projection value of having a large and sympathetic standing army next door — is itself nothing to sneeze at.

For his part, Council of Ministers spokesman Phay Siphon, who was **once a commando** in the fight against North Vietnamese intrusions into Cambodia, has explained the relationship as one where both sides thoroughly trust each other to solve disputes.

“Both sides have experience to solve problems since 1979,” Siphon **told *The Cambodia Daily*** two months after the failed July 2016 ASEAN declaration, which had been conspicuously followed by a gift of **\$548 million in aid from Beijing to Phnom Penh days later**. “Neighboring countries always have some differences,” he said.

Ultimately, Thayer said, Vietnam’s leadership too has its own pro-China and anti-China voices, and those leaders understand the situation faced by Hun Sen in balancing his historical (if unpopular) ties to Hanoi with the lucrative benefits of turning to Beijing.

“Except for Cambodia’s verbal stance on the South China Sea dispute in support of China, thus undermining ASEAN consensus, Cambodia represents no existential threat to Vietnam,” he said. “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 still not impossible to imagine how Hun Sen’s growing reliance on China may one day strain relations with Hanoi, and allow appeals such as Soy Sopheap’s to ring louder.

Yet so long as the CPP remains in power, the two will be hard to winch apart.

Alex Willemyns is a journalist based in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.
