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An "Ironclad Friend": Explaining Cambodia's Bandwagoning Policy towards China

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Abstract

In this article, drawing from both interviews and secondary sources, we examine why Cambodia welcomes the rise of China when other states appear to be less enthusiastic. Despite the alarm in the region at China's assertiveness, Cambodia, unlike some other nation states, has chosen to bandwagon with China. While some states in the region are pursuing a mixed strategy of economic engagement with China on the one hand and security alignment with the United States on the other (i.e. hedging), which allows such states to be on good terms with both the United States and China, Cambodia has embraced China almost exclusively. Situating the issue within the IR literature of bandwagoning, balancing, and hedging, this article presents four variables explaining the motivations behind Cambodia's bandwagoning policy towards China. Towards the end, we offer some suggestions for Cambodia to move forward.

Keywords

Cambodia, bandwagoning, China, hedging, Southeast Asia

Introduction

In this article, we examine why Cambodia has embraced a rising China when other states in the region seem to pursue more of a hedging strategy, with the ostensible purpose of such states being to gain what they can from the Chinese economy, while also being

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concerned about China's military. While the topic of Chinese assertiveness has received ample attention and concern in Asia, Cambodia has decided to charter a different route, one that bandwagons with China despite such alarm in the region. Why is it the case that when other states in the region are pursuing a mixed strategy of economic engagement with China on the one hand and security alignment with the United States on the other (i.e. hedging), which allows such states to be on good terms with both the United States and China, Cambodia has decided to shun the United States and embrace China? Put differently, while some view the rise of China as a threat to either their national security, economy, or democracy, Cambodia, in contrast, has been enthusiastic about such phenomenon.

To answer our research question (i.e. what explains Cambodia's foreign policy with China?), we conducted semi-structured interviews in Cambodia during the summer of 2018 with eleven Cambodian scholars and government officials – one former ambassador, one former personal assistant of late King Sihanouk, four professors, one researcher at the Royal Academy of Cambodia, three government officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, and one former adviser to the Minister of the Ministry of National Defense. We used messenger, WeChat, and email to contact our interviewees. Given that the people we interviewed either have or had prominent positions in the Cambodian government or are academics who are very familiar with why the government is acting in certain ways, this allows us to attain a closer view to the decision-making processes and compare our interview findings with the secondary sources that we examine here. In short, the combination of the interviews with elites and our examination of secondary sources enables us to draw concrete inferences through triangulation.

Our case study here represents something larger than just the case of Cambodia. It represents what a state that is similar to Cambodia (e.g. one that does not have a border or territorial dispute with China and at the same time is a poor country looking to develop economically without political conditions attached to investment projects) can look like. Given that Cambodia does not have such a territorial dispute with China, there is no pressing challenge or threat from China to Cambodia that other states in the region (e.g. Vietnam or the Philippines under Aquino) face from China. As a result of this, Cambodia seeks to prioritise its economic gain by engaging China. Moreover, given its authoritarian regime, it has decided to not follow the direction of other Asian states in hedging, that is, engaging China for economic gains and engaging the United States for security reassurances. We hypothesise that this case here can be applied to other countries in which the leaders have similar objectives, that is, authoritarian leaders who are looking to develop their economies and would rather work with China due to the lack of criticism of their political system. In this article, we contribute to the underdeveloped scholarship on the topic of China–Cambodia relations by considering this topic from the viewpoint of Cambodia.

The rest of the article proceeds as follows. First, we provide historical background regarding Sino-Cambodia relations. Then, in section two, we focus on Cambodia's strong support for China. Section three examines the literature on small states regarding hedging, balancing, and bandwagoning. In section four, which contains numerous

subsections, we present our main argument. Section five presents our ideas regarding how Cambodia should conduct its relations with China. The last section offers a conclusion.

Historical Background of Sino-Cambodia Relations

The bilateral relationship between Cambodia and China can be traced back to as early as the twelfth century when the Chinese Emperor Temur sent the envoy to the Khmer Kingdom, known as Cambodia today. However, the diplomatic relationship began in 1955 when King Sihanouk, then president of Cambodia, met Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai at the Bandung Conference. At that time during the Cold War, there were two competing groups in Cambodia: one supportive of King Sihanouk and aligned with China and the other group, led by Lieutenant General Lon Nol, was aligned with the United States. With the US support, Lon Nol organised a coup to oust Sihanouk from office in 1970.

Facing such hardship, Sihanouk fled the country and lived in exile in China, with all the support provided by the Chinese leader. In his quest to fight back, Sihanouk announced that all Cambodian people should unite with the Khmer Rouge, also known as the Pol Pot regime. The personal connection between Sihanouk and Chinese President Mao Zedong was essential for early Chinese support for Pol Pot with various strategic commodities such as military equipment and political technical advisers (Chanda, 2002).

The Pol Pot regime was defeated in 1979 when a group of liberators, including Hun Sen, launched an attack with Vietnamese support. Subsequently, Vietnam installed a new government. However, given the close ties between Pol Pot and Beijing, this invasion, or liberation as some would claim, prompted the Chinese to attack Vietnam both as revenge and as a countering measure to prevent the Vietnamese from expanding influence in the region more broadly. China did not support the new Hun Sen government, as Hun Sen had the support of Vietnam. Instead, China continued to support and aid Pol Pot and his allies. Because of the tense ties that his government had with China at that time and for years after, Hun Sen described China as "the root of all that is evil in Cambodia" in 1988.

Even though Vietnam withdrew its troops from Cambodia in 1989, the internal civil war still went on until 1993, the year in which the internal conflict was solved with the first general election organised under the auspices of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia. This first election ended up having two prime ministers: Norodom Ranariddh as the first prime minister and Hun Sen as the second. Due to his discontent and the thirst for power, Hun Sen launched a bloody coup against Ranariddh in 1997. Because of the mounting pressure that Hun Sen faced from the West in 1997, he shifted his perception about China. Reflecting the improvement in ties between Cambodia and China, in 2000, Chinese President Jiang Zemin visited Cambodia and provided a large amount of aid, followed by several other Chinese top leaders in the following years. Since then, Cambodia under Hun Sen has maintained good relations with China.

Cambodia's Strong Support for China

In demonstrating how the Hun Sen government has demonstrated strong support for China's preferences over the years, the Cambodian government ordered the closing of Taiwan's de-facto embassy in Phnom Penh in 1997. In 2009, Cambodia deported twenty Uyghurs back to China using a special plane sent by China, knowing that these individuals would be executed (Human Rights House, 2010). As chairman of the 2012 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Summit, Cambodia failed to issue a joint communiqué for the first time in 45 years, because the joint communiqué contained strong criticism towards China's actions in the South China Sea. A similar case of the joint ASEAN communiqué occurred again in 2016, in which Cambodia blocked a strong statement condemning China's actions in the South China Sea. In reflecting its support for the "One China Policy," and thus one of China's main priorities, the Hun Sen government refused to allow the Taiwanese flag to be displayed anywhere in Cambodia in early 2017 (Phan, 2017). In mid-2019, Cambodia was the first country in Southeast Asia to issue an official statement regarding the Hong Kong political crisis, expressing its unbreakable support for the "One China Policy" in favour of Beijing.

In addition, while China's influence is rapidly growing, Cambodian-US relations are deteriorating. The United States, since Cambodia's first election in 1993, has consistently pressured the Cambodian government regarding its record of human abuses and declining democracy (interview with Cambodian government official, 2018). In response, Cambodia decided to postpone a joint military exercise with the United States, known as Angkor Sentinel, and to end the Seabees, also known as the US Navy Mobile Construction Battalion with the aim to build schools, hospitals, and the like. Moreover, Cambodia accused the United States of conspiring with the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) to secretly organise a "colour revolution" and forced the closure of the operation of National Democratic Institute (NDI) in the country. Based on the statements that the US government has issued in condemning Cambodia on human rights issues and democracy, the Cambodian government perceives this as a threat to its desire to remain in power. As such, the Cambodian government has decided to shift more towards a country (i.e. China) that does not issue such criticisms of its human rights policies (interview with Cambodian academics and government officials, 2018). In stark contrast to how Hun Sen described the Chinese government in 1988, he described China as "an ironclad friend" in 2019.

Literature Review

The rise of China has sparked several scholars to contend that the strategies of balancing and bandwagoning are not viable in small states' foreign policy and they argue that the way forward for these states is "hedging" (see Goh, 2005; Hiep, 2013; Kuik, 2008; Leng, 2017; Medeiros, 2005). For these scholars, hedging refers to the mixed approach that enables small states to seek a middle path to navigate through security uncertainty while maintaining economic incentives through engagement with great powers. Kuik sums up the hedging of ASEAN states as developing economic and foreign policy ties with China

to obtain gains, while at the same time maintain foreign policy ties with others states (e.g. the United States) in the event relations spiral downwards with China (2016: 507). Different scholars, as pointed out earlier, use the same term with different elements. For example, Kuik (2008) argues that Malaysia's hedging strategy against China includes "limited bandwagoning," "binding engagement," "economic pragmatism," "dominance-denial," and "indirect-balancing."[1] Hiep (2013) argues that Vietnam's hedging strategy against China entails "economic pragmatism," "direct engagement," "hard balancing," and "soft balancing,"[2] while Leng (2017) argues that Cambodia's hedging strategy against Vietnam encompasses "economic pragmatism," "limited bandwagoning," "binding engagement," and "soft balancing." The variety of hedging's tools depends on the fluctuation of the bilateral relationship between small states and great powers and the power shift in the international system (Hiep, 2013).

But we argue that bandwagoning with China, which goes beyond the dual pronged attempt of hedging, remains an option for some small states. Bandwagoning can be defined as "clear attempts to curry favor with a state through military alliances or economic and diplomatic cooperation" (Kang, 2009: 7). But other scholars do not see the significance of incorporating the economic and diplomatic aspects in defining this term (Acharya, 2004 [2003]; Roy, 2005). Since bandwagoning is part of small states' strategy, economic, political, and diplomatic aspects should be incorporated into the analysis (Manicom and O'Neil, 2010). Regarding bandwagoning, some posit that there are two forms: "pure bandwagoning" and "limited bandwagoning" (Kuik, 2008). The difference between the two is that the former refers to the situation in which a smaller state aligns with one bigger power and gradually distances itself from another power, while the latter denotes a situation in which a smaller state aligns with a bigger power while simultaneously trying to maintain its relations with another bigger power (Kuik, 2008). Along the line from limited bandwagoning to pure bandwagoning, there exists "comprehensive bandwagoning," which refers to small states' attempts to align with one bigger power in all dimensions – military, economic, political, and diplomatic – but does not aim at a particular power and does not completely distance itself from another bigger power. This behaviour seeks to underpin a bigger power's power ascendancy.

The previously mentioned scholars of hedging lack precision in applying the concept to the foreign policy of Southeast Asian small states. For example, is the foreign policy of small states considered as a hedging policy if limited bandwagoning or dominance-denial does not exist? The term itself seems to be ambiguous. We believe that if two or more components of hedging are absent, then foreign policy of small states is not a hedging policy. This fits the argument that Cambodia does not hedge against China. First, on the concept of limited bandwagoning, over time Cambodia has supported various Chinese actions and initiative, as pointed out in the earlier section. These instances suggest instead that Cambodia does not pursue limited bandwagoning, but rather a comprehensive one. Second, on the concept of dominance-denial, a policy that aims at "preventing and denying the emergence of a predominant power that may exert undue interference on smaller states" (Kuik, 2008), Cambodia does not have any action plan to keep the Chinese influence at bay. In contrast, it embraces such influence. In short, it is important to examine the underlying logic behind such a strategy so as to

understand why a state such as Cambodia still adheres to this risky policy in dealing with a great power.

As a small state sandwiched between both two more powerful states than itself (i.e. Vietnam and Thailand) and the region's great power (i.e. China), it is important to examine why Cambodia aligns with China. Through alignment, a small state expects to gain security guarantee, which is likely provided by the great power (see Holst, 1985). Holsti (1983) notes that domestic upheaval is of small states' concern that triggers the alignment with the great power so as to gain support that could maintain internal stability. This is what Randal Schweller (1994) calls "bandwagoning for profit," meaning the motivations to seek gains from great powers drive small states to adopt a bandwagoning policy. Furthermore, small states seem to pay attention to its neighbour's increasing power rather than the ascending power of the strongest one, which it is not its neighbour (Wei, 2006). Small states make a careful calculation about how it could play one against another for its own survival, as their own resources are not enough to be turned into defence capability (Rothstein, 1969).

Cambodia does not share a border with China and therefore has a different relationship to some other ASEAN states that are involved in maritime disputes with China. Moreover, the Chinese government, unlike the US government, does not criticise the Cambodian government's authoritarian political system, which is also reassuring to the Cambodian government (interviews with Cambodian academics and government officials, 2018). Walt's balance of threat is applicable to the case of Cambodia's relations with China, as Cambodia does not perceive China as a threat, the Cambodian government thus aims to have good relations with China. In contrast to China, US policy towards Cambodia – with the United States criticising Cambodia on human rights and democracy – is perceived as a threat to regime survival and thus explains why Cambodia seeks strong relations with China. If the US behaviour continues, we should expect Cambodia to continue in such a trajectory. This helps to explain why Cambodia has engaged in joint military exercises with China in recent years.

The fact that some small states in Southeast Asia have been adopting a hedging policy – mostly in the security domain – also reflects the ways in which the Association of Southeast Asian Nations work to provide security insurance to protect member states from any invasion. For example, Vietnam cannot depend on ASEAN to deliver security insurance amid rising Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea. Instead, Vietnam has sided with the United States on security issues (Tuan and Thuy, 2016) and, to a lesser extent, forged security cooperation with Japan and India to balance against China (Hiep, 2017; Vo, 2017). The "ASEAN Way," which is different from NATO's style of collective security, cannot buy trust in security insurance from its members. For example, if a member state of NATO is attacked, it means it that NATO as a whole will respond as a collective unit. But if a member state of ASEAN is attacked, it is not clear whether ASEAN will act as a single collective security entity against the aggression. So it is reasonable that small states, unlike bigger powers, need to seek a security alternative from great powers like China or the United States in ensuring their own survival.

Steven David (1991) coins a term "omnibalancing" to portray the foreign policy behaviours of Third World countries, of which he believes most are authoritarian

governments. He argues that the desire to stay in power drives these leaders to please the secondary threatening states while concentrating their resources on containing the immediate pressing adversary. In other words, Third World leaders tend to bandwagon with an external power, often posing less eminent dangers, than balancing against it, because they can concentrate their resources on balancing against more serious threats at home (David, 1991). Such a decision is made, most of the time, for the interest of the elites, and it comes at the expense of the state's interest. This is also applicable in explaining Cambodia's relations with both China and the United States.

This article is distinct from and seeks to build upon the previous literature on Sino-Cambodia relations in two ways. First, the article engages IR theory to explain the motivations behind Cambodia's bandwagoning policy towards China. Second, the article looks at the issue purely from the Cambodian perspectives. The existing literature, such as Ciorciari (2015), Burgos and Ear (2010), and Heng (2012), does not employ the theoretical discussion of bandwagoning, balancing, and hedging. In addition, these scholars basically study the security, economic, and political aspects of the bilateral relationship. While Ciorciari (2015) uses an international patron–client framework, Ear (2010) and Heng (2012) use a political economy framework to study Sino-Cambodia relationship. While these existing scholarly works illustrate why Cambodia bandwagons with China, they lack a comprehensive analysis of the factors behind such bandwagoning.

Motives behind Cambodia's Bandwagoning Policy towards China

While some countries in Asia, such as Vietnam, Malaysia, and Singapore, view hedging as a practical foreign policy tool, the case of Cambodia's foreign policy is worth delving into regarding the various motives of its bandwagoning towards China. Based on the literature review above, we extract four explanatory variables. We argue that Cambodia's bandwagoning policy towards China consists of the following primary components, which we present in order of importance: (1) Hun Sen's regime survival,[3] (2) economic rewards, (3) security guarantee against Cambodia's former aggressor Vietnam, and (4) the ineffectiveness of the ASEAN to provide security protection to its small member states. In the subsections below, we explain each of the previously stated components.

Hun Sen's Regime Survival

With support from Vietnam in the late 1970s, Hun Sen rose to power by defeating the Pol Pot regime. The civil war continued until the special agency of the United Nations (United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia) organised the first election in 1993. During his tenure in office, the Hun Sen government faced tremendous domestic political challenges. One of the most notable challenges is how he can be voted out of office due to the rising public discontent. Such sentiments were expressed during the 2013 election in which the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) won only 68 of 123 seats, whereas in 2008, the CPP obtained 90 seats.

Accordingly, Hun Sen has employed various strategies to remain in power. Bandwagoning with China to secure support is one of his tactics. With Chinese support, Cambodia's economy keeps growing, which means that the Cambodian people can enjoy the fruits of this growth. The main assumption here is that those who benefit from Chinese support will further support Hun Sen, and thus prolong his regime. China remains a pecuniary target to which Hun Sen could turn when he is under pressure from the international community to implement political reform on the issues stated above (see Ear, 2012). Consequently, people who are satisfied with the present economic performance tend to vote for the ruling party, the CPP. Below are some prominent instances.

In 1997, Hun Sen led a military coup against Prince Norodom Ranariddh, who was at that time the co-prime minister. In response to the coup, Western states discontinued aid to Cambodia and ASEAN halted Cambodian membership. Hun Sen faced a crossroad because two-thirds of the country's annual budget of US$782 million was funded by foreign aid (Human Rights Watch, 1997). In contrast to Western states, China recognised the legitimacy of Hun Sen's new regime, advised the West not to interfere in Cambodia's domestic politics, and provided Cambodia with military vehicles such as trucks and jeeps, at a value of just under US$3 million (Jeldres, 2012). It was a good opportunity for China because Cambodia could serve as a springboard for Chinese action in the region, which could magnify its influence (Storey, 2006).

Another case was the government's forced eviction of people residing around Boeung Kak Lake, an area needed for commercial development and city landscape. The 4,000 families in this development area required to leave their home were given with three options: (1) receive US$8,500, (2) resettle twenty kilometres away from the city, (3) or receive a flat on the development site in five years with US$500 (Fu, 2014). Such development prompted tremendous discontent and protests because the majority of the residents in that area were not satisfied with how the matters were resolved. This issue prompted the World Bank, one of Cambodia's biggest creditors, to withdraw the annual loan of around US$70 million to force the Cambodian government to resolve the dispute in late 2011 (BBC, 2011). In a furious response, Phay Siphan, a government spokesman stated that the loans from the World Bank were longer appreciated (BBC, 2011). What was behind such a bold statement was that the unlisted firm, the Inner Mongolia Erdos Hongjun Investment Company, pledged to invest US$3 billion into the project (BBC, 2011). This represents what Gabriel Fauveaud (2017) calls "the violent process of capital accumulation."

One more recent example was the government's crackdown on the CNRP, free press and civil society. In late 2017, opposition leader Kem Sokha was arrested and charged with treason and conspiring with the United States to clandestinely organise a "colour revolution." Moreover, the NDI, a pro-democracy and US non-profit organisation, was expelled from the country with the charge of working with Kem Sokha (Saunders, 2017). In this related case, 15 other radio stations were forced to shut down and Radio Free Asia and the Voice of America were forced to go off the airwaves (Saunders, 2017). The local English newspaper, the *Cambodia Daily*, was also forced to close its operation because of the accusation of not paying over US$6 million taxes (Saunders, 2017).

Holding power for over three decades, Hun Sen has the experience to know that the path he has taken is prone to criticism and even sanctions from the West, but at the same time, China consistently supports his actions. In response, the United States issued a visa ban for certain top government officials and their family members, cut aid to the National Election Committee (NEC), and drafted more sanctions, one of which could be one step further to freeze the assets of the government officials involved in undermining the democratic process in Cambodia (Soth and Nachemson, 2018). By contrast, China pledged to offer more assistance to the NEC to guarantee the smooth, fair, transparent elections with accountability. The donations from China include computers, printers, photocopiers, cameras, ballot boxes, and voting booths (RFA's Khmer Service, 2017). Chinese companies even pledged another US$7 billion to invest in many big projects amid the crackdown on democracy (Asian Correspondent, 2017). In addition, as Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi told the Cambodian Foreign Minister Prak Sokhon, "China supports the Cambodian side's efforts to protect political stability and achieve economic development, and believes the Cambodian government can lead the people to deal with domestic and foreign challenges, and will smoothly hold elections next year" (quoted in Blanchard, 2017).

Economic Rewards

China's economic rewards are so massive that a small state like Cambodia finds it very difficult to resist. We argue that economic gain is the second reason why Cambodia has bandwagoned with China. For a small, cash-hungry state like Cambodia, the more it politically embraces China, the more economic benefits China is ready to offer.[4] This model is becoming the approach of China's relations in Asia and beyond.

China is Cambodia's largest trading partner, foreign investor, and aid provider. On bilateral trade, there is on average a 26 per cent increase annually. The total volume of bilateral trade was US$4.8 billion, of which Cambodia's exports accounted for US$830 million and China's imports reached US$3.9 billion (Kunmakara, 2018). Cambodia's exports to China are comprised predominantly "of agricultural products, primarily rice, cassava, cashew nuts, semi-processed palm oil and rubber. Imports from China were mainly cars, motorcycles, construction material, fabric for garment factories, cigarettes and fertilizers" (Kunmakara, 2018). China has also pledged to import more agricultural products from Cambodia to meet the demand of Chinese consumers and both sides are striving to increase their bilateral trade to reach US$6 billion (Yee, 2018).

Regarding foreign investment, the amount of Chinese investment in Cambodia has increased from 20.69 per cent in 2012, which was about US$600 million of the total investment of US$2.9 billion to 29.92 per cent in 2016, equivalent to around US$1 billion of the aggregate investment of US$3.9 billion (Council for the Development of Cambodia, 2017). Chinese investors in Cambodia are both state-owned enterprises and private entities, focusing on specific sectors such as "agriculture and agro-industry, industrial sector, physical infrastructure and services, and tourism" (Chheang, 2017).

As for the agriculture and agro-industry, Chinese investment has bolstered the modernisation of Cambodian agriculture products through advancing the product

standard and enabling it to have access to the larger market. The approximate amount of thirty Chinese investment projects in these sectors has occupied a huge landmass of around 237,406 hectares with twenty-one projects in force on 173,904 hectares but the cultivated land is around 42,081 hectares (Chheang, 2017). One of the most significant Chinese agriculture investment projects is the Special Economic Zone at Kampong Speu province, located in the western part of Cambodia, with an investment of US$2 billion.

As for the port investment, the Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone (SSEZ), which is China's first special economic zone outside of China is jointly operated by the Cambodia International Investment Development Group and Jiangsu Taihu Cambodia International Economic Cooperation Investment. The zone has 108 registered enterprises and companies with an aggregate investment capital of approximately US$306 billion (Chheang, 2017). Such development is likely to bring about benefits for Cambodia, such as providing job opportunities for Cambodians. In an interview with the *Phnom Penh Post*, Cao Jianjiang, general manager of SSEZ said that with the current number of 16,000 employees, the zone is targeted to have 80,000 to 100,000 workers and it is likely to be the "Shenzhen" of Cambodia (McGrath, 2017).[5]

Regarding energy, Cambodia is dependent on importing electricity from neighbouring countries such as Thailand, Vietnam, and Laos. In 2010, Cambodia experienced a 40 per cent increase in imports of the country's total energy. While Cambodia obtains much of its energy from its neighbours, the supply of electricity from those countries is not sufficient and it is expensive. As such, obtaining energy from China is critically important (Grimsditch, 2012). Chinese investment in the energy sector in Cambodia centres on the building of hydroelectric dams and coal power plants. Chinese investors have invested approximately US$1.8 billion in five hydroelectric dams, including the controversial Kamchay dam, Kirirom III dam, Stung Tatay dam, Russei Chrum Krom dam, Stung Atay and Lower Sesan II dam.[6] As for coal power plants, Chinese firms have financed two of three, with a total investment of US$732 million (Heng, 2015). The first one, located at Stoeng Hav Industrial Zone, has a capacity of 270 megawatts and has been in operation since 2014. Another one in Kampot province has a capacity of 300 megawatts, which was completed in 2015 (Heng, 2015).

With the huge financial need of around US$500 to US$700 per annum to accelerate infrastructure development, infrastructure construction in Cambodia comes in the form of Chinese investments, concessional loans, and grant aid. China has so far assisted Cambodia with construction and rehabilitation of more than 2,000 km of roads, twenty major bridges with the cost of almost US$1 billion, Phnom Penh Autonomous Port (PPAP), and new Siem Reap International Airport (Sum, 2016). For example, China has provided the concessional loan of US$28.2 million to the PPAP, which is Cambodia's largest freshwater port to construct a new container terminal that is able to receive up to 180,000 cargo containers (Nguon and Mao, 2018). The 190-kilometer long Phnom Penh-Preah Sihanouk Expressway is being constructed with Chinese loans and aid, costing US$1.9 billion (Sum, 2016). Such improvement of the physical infrastructure will facilitate Cambodia's trade with other countries and help accelerate the integration of Cambodia's economy into the region and other parts of the world, making Cambodia more competitive. Improved infrastructure also helps Cambodian farmers transport their

agriculture products to the market with low cost, contributing to the improvement of their household income and living standards.

Regarding economic and development assistance, since February 2017, China's assistance to Cambodia has reached US$4.2 billion in the form of grants and soft loans, covering agriculture, health, education, social security and physical infrastructure (May, 2017). Furthermore, President Xi Jinping, during his 2016 official visit to Cambodia, wrote off Cambodia's debt of around US$89 million and pledged another US$600 million in aid (Prak, 2016). On Chinese aid to agriculture, in 2015, China provided the amount of US$87.5 million, together with concessional loans from the Export-Import Bank of China to fund several agriculture projects, such as the Prek Stung Keo Water Resources Development Project, Stung River Basin Water Resources Development Project, the construction of agriculture schools, and others. On health sector issues, for instance, in 2014, China provided 200 ambulances to Cambodia (People's Daily, 2014) and provided a grant of approximately US$65 million to improve the Preah Ket Mealea military hospital in 2017 (Ven, 2017). Regarding education, by the year 2016, China had provided more than 2,000 scholarships to Cambodian students (Xinhua, 2017).

As Cambodia moves politically closer to China, China is more willing to economically reward Cambodia. Cambodia's outspoken president of the Royal Academy of Cambodia, Sok Touch, commented that Cambodia's acceptance of China's actions in the South China Sea, together with the alignment of interest, pushed the two countries together, adding that "As we know, foreign policy has no friends or enemies, but only exists because of [states] interests. So perhaps [it] is because of the South China Sea that Cambodia receives US$600 million . . . " (Sok, 2016). Prime Minister Hun Sen has also consistently offered positive comments regarding China, saying that China provides economic assistance to Cambodia with "no strings attached." This assistance addresses the urgent need for development in Cambodia (Ek and Sok, 2008). Such trade, investment, and aid have greatly contributed to the socio-economic development of Cambodian political elites and less so the general public (Chheang, 2017; Heng, 2012; Un, 2009).

Not every Cambodian benefits from economic interaction with China. One way to look at this "win–lose scenario" is to comprehend the patronage of Cambodia's domestic politics. As Un and So (2009: 123) argue, "Cambodia's political configuration is dominated by interlocking patron-client networks that require a leader to capture and maintain the loyalty of key sections of the politico-commercial elite by fulfilling their material aspirations throughout the distribution of perquisites." Within this patronage network in relation to the economic incentives provided by China, Cambodian elites stand to benefit more while the powerless poor have confronted more challenges. These challenges include, but are not limited to, the degradation of the environment, the worsening governance system, the perpetuating corruption, and forced eviction from their land (Ear, 2012; Po and Heng, 2019).

Cambodia between China and Vietnam

The geopolitical condition – that is, sandwiched between its two former adversaries, that is, Thailand and Vietnam – and the historical memory of invasion by these regional

powers are two of the determining factors in Cambodia's China alignment policy. In this context, Cambodia seems to have three options. The first is to align completely with either Thailand or Vietnam; the second is to seek third-party support like China and the United States; and the third is to play the two off against each other while seeking external support (Marr, 1990). As for Thailand, domestic politics matters most in its foreign policy towards Cambodia since the incumbent government usually appeals to the border dispute with Cambodia in order to get popular support back home (Var, 2017).

Unlike Thailand, many Cambodian people and elites view Vietnam as an "existential threat" because of unresolved border disputes and the issue of Vietnamese residents in Cambodia, many of whom are not legally registered (see Frewer, 2016). For example, in late 2017, the Immigration Department identified more than 10,000 Vietnamese residing in Cambodia without proper legal documents (Kong and Nachemson, 2017). The top Cambodian political elites of the CPP, which was once installed by Vietnam, have been cautious about Vietnam's historical invasion of Cambodia. Moreover, such elites are aware that the huge number of illegal Vietnamese immigrants, together with the memory of Vietnam's historical invasion, is perceived as a threat that requires preventative measures (Pang, 2017b). That said, the government has taken active measures against illegal Vietnamese migrants living in Cambodia. Based on available data, between 2010 and 2014, there were 160,000 Vietnamese migrants residing in Cambodia. Between 2015 and 2016, 8,400 illegal migrants were deported back to Vietnam (Leng, 2016).

The continued Chinese military assistance serves as a security confidence builder for the worst-case scenario. This has led Cambodia to recalibrate its foreign policy, especially amid the fast-changing regional security landscape due to the rapid rise of Vietnam and China. As Terrence Chong (2017) notes, facing the dilemma of its geopolitics, in the strategic calculus of the Cambodian political elites, siding with China seems to be a viable option at least for the time being in order to obtain the security protection that could serve as a "hedging" tool against Vietnam and to strengthen Cambodia's defence capability. This endeavour could be called "soft balancing," which is one component in a broader hedging policy (see Leng, 2017).

Since the 1990s, China has become Cambodia's most important partner in terms of security and bilateral defence cooperation has tightened remarkably (Var and Po, 2017a). China has upgraded its military cooperation with the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF) by offering loans and military accoutrements, including aircraft, trucks, and helicopters; constructing military training and medical equipment; and donating uniforms to the RCAF (Var and Po, 2017a). In addition, because of the US$17 million-defence agreement signed in 2012, hundreds of Cambodian military personnel have gone to China for training, and Cambodia received colossal Chinese donations, such as military equipment, coaches, and Chinese language instructors (Thayer, 2013). In May 2014, China's plan for Cambodia's military capacity building was enlarged to grant Cambodian military officers over 400 scholarships to be educated in China (Vong, 2014). Moreover, China provided nine patrol boats to Cambodia, and the naval base at Ream was also modernised (Thayer, 2013). Such patrol boats were a grant from the Chinese government, which cost US$60 million.

Joint military exercises between China and Cambodia have increased. Steve Chan (2010) observes that such tightened partnership emanates from "increasing trust, reciprocal adjustment and decreasing perception of Chinese threat." For instance, both sides conducted a naval exercise in late February 2016. Then, in March 2019, the two sides conducted the joint "Golden Dragon" military exercise, which involved 2,542 Cambodian troops, 252 Chinese troops, tanks, helicopters, and armed personnel carriers (Khuon, 2018; Yamy, 2019).

The Ineffectiveness of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations

ASEAN's effectiveness is the subject of heated debate among scholars who focus on the region. Since its inception of ASEAN, there has been relative peace in the region, so Mabhubani and Sng (2017) argue that ASEAN deserves a Nobel Peace Prize. Some of the leaders of ASEAN member states, however, such as Hun Sen, still view ASEAN as an ineffective regional organisation regarding some areas like, for instance, the conflict settlement of its members. In other words, we argue that while ASEAN is perceived as being effective in some sectors, it may not be effective in other sectors, such as security.

The Thai–Cambodia border dispute and the feud over the ownership of the Preah Vihear temple led Hun Sen to embrace the view that ASEAN is ineffective on the security front. The dispute erupted in June 2008 as hundreds of Thai soldiers moved into the area about 300 meters away from the temple and later extended to occupy another temple, Ta Moan, which Cambodia perceives as its own sovereign territory. Cambodia sought to have the case discussed at ASEAN's 18th annual summit, but it was fruitless. After ASEAN's ineffective action on this case, some analysts commented that ASEAN does not have a mechanism for dispute settlement (Chong, 2017). As one Cambodian scholar put it, "If ASEAN cannot address a dispute between two-member states, it is certainly not the platform to deal with China over the South China Sea where there are multiple parties involved" (quoted in Chong, 2017). Thus, Cambodia's foreign policy is directed towards alignment with the great powers because of ASEAN's ineffectiveness on the security dimension (Chanborey, 2017).

For Hun Sen, the weakness of ASEAN lies with its "consensus-based" approach. It is evident from his speech at a meeting with garment workers in February 2018 that he would boycott the ASEAN-Australia Special Summit in Sydney if Cambodia met with pressure or resistance (Ben and Nachemson, 2018). Hun Sen stated that "If there is no Hun Sen, there will be no ASEAN. This means Australia won't be able to hold the meeting. If there is no consensus it is impossible" (Ben and Nachemson, 2018). Because of the consensus-based scenario, Hun Sen has the liberty to veto any ASEAN statement. In short, Hun Sen knows how to manipulate ASEAN to his own advantage, even though he has relentlessly been condemned by the West for doing so.

Implications and the Way Forward

Due to the fact that China has not pressured Cambodia over human violations, its deteriorating, or non-existent, democracy and rule of law, which is in contrast to US

policy towards Cambodia, it is more convenient for Cambodia to side with China. An official who works for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation told us: "Cambodia wants to be friends with all. Cambodia wants to have good relations with the US, but it depends on the US. Due to the current political situation in Cambodia, the US doesn't want to be a good friend with Cambodia." Thus, Cambodia has to look elsewhere due to the United States' lack of willingness to work with Cambodia. Largely echoing the points made by the previous interlocutors, another academic told us:

> At this point, unlike as in the Cold War, Cambodia is not forced to choose one over another. Therefore, it is in Cambodia's interest to maintain good relations with both China (for investment/aid) and the US (export market and future investment). It is also important to have good ties with other regional powers like Japan, South Korea and ASEAN. Over-reliance on China may look like a good short-term strategy for aid/investment, but will result in an erosion of sovereignty in the long run.

Another government official who works at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation provided the following statement to us:

> It's not true that we tilt exclusively towards one over another. We try to have good relations with the West because we can have a lot of benefits from them. Cambodia should tilt towards everyone in the region, intra-region, and the world in order to have more benefits. If one country gives one million dollars and we have six countries that we are working with, then we can have six million dollars. This is what we do. But the relationship with the US has never been good since the past. This is because the US doesn't have much interest in Cambodia. However, our government tries.

In moving forward, it is essential for Cambodia to avoid uncertain risks derived from bandwagoning with China. It is wise for Cambodia to diversify its sources of economic and security survival. This means strengthening or improving relations with the regional institutions, such as ASEAN and the European Union (EU), and other major and regional powers, such as the United States, Japan, India, Australia, Thailand, and Vietnam (this view is also embraced by scholars such as Chanborey, 2016; Chheang, 2016; Var and Po, 2017b, and by many of the government officials we interviewed).

Although bandwagoning with China has brought about various short-term benefits, it may not be a beneficial policy in the long term because it may become too dependent on China as the suspected case of China building a military airstrip in Cambodia demonstrates. If Cambodia comprehensively bandwagons with China, then Cambodia will not be able to maximise benefits from interacting with other countries (interviews with Cambodian government officials). In reflecting a rather realist view, one interviewee who is a Cambodian academic told us: "States are cold monsters; they abandon you at the first opportunity when their higher interests are jeopardized by their relationship with you."

Conclusion

A small state like Cambodia has always been at the mercy of the great power. As its foreign policy towards the great power and the regional power moves in the wrong

direction, the tragedy of the history of Cambodia will likely be repeated. In our article, we examined why Cambodia aligns with China, which is a re-emergent great power in the region, while the other countries have chosen not to. We have presented four motives to account for this.

First, domestic politics remains relevant in the study of small state's foreign policy and is one of the determinants of Cambodia's embrace of China. For Hun Sen, an authoritarian leader who has ruled Cambodia for over thirty years, the survival of his regime is the main priority. Our study argues that as long as China acts as a big brother and a guardian of this regime, one should expect more of Cambodia's support for China regarding key strategic and security fronts.

Second, the rise of China is momentous and the economic rewards for Cambodia are significant. Confronting such carrots, the small rabbit may find it irresistible to be ensconced in the giant's embrace because much of the positive effects of these economic rewards can be felt by the top political elites and also the ordinary people. For instance, the bridges and roads built with Chinese aid and loans could reduce the costs of transporting goods and products from one place to another, increasing Cambodians' income. The average 7 per cent annual growth of Cambodia's economy since the early 2000s owes much to Chinese economic assistance, trade, and investment (Lowe, 2018).

Third, the perception of the Vietnamese threat exists. Hitherto, Vietnam has been viewed by the majority of Cambodians as an enemy, often seeking to encroach on the sovereign territory of the kingdom. In addition, the massive number of unregistered Vietnamese immigrants can be regarded as a soft approach employed by the Vietnamese government to take over as much of Cambodian land as possible (Beban and Gorman, 2015; Board, 2017). In this context, China serves a powerful check on Vietnam if it chooses to pursue the expansionist policy.

Fourth, the ineffectiveness of ASEAN gives rise to Cambodia's bandwagoning strategy towards China. ASEAN's inaction to solve the Thai-Cambodia border dispute and the conflict over the ownership of the ancient Preah Vihear temple has intensified the perception of Hun Sen that this regional organisation is not just a collection of states working as a team but a body of self-interested states.

The elaboration above exhibits some theoretical implications. First, the increasing literature on small states' foreign policy options has endeavoured to shed light on another alternative, which is called "hedging." The relevance of the "bandwagoning" concept can be the fact that domestic politics, the economic incentives, state's geopolitical dilemmas, and the ineffectiveness of the regional institutions still matter in world politics. The case of Cambodia may be perceived as unique to some scholars. However, the similar pattern of these pervasive factors can be found elsewhere, such as in Laos (see Pang, 2017a, 2017b), Myanmar, and Thailand (see Han, 2018). Second, the case of Cambodia presents the need for further research to theorise small states' foreign policy. This raises several questions: if ASEAN becomes somewhat similar to the EU, does Cambodia's foreign policy remain neutral? Do the economic incentives of the great power really compel small states to adopt the alignment/bandwagoning policy? If the leadership transition in an authoritarian regime is moved to a perceived democratic

leader, will the foreign policy of a small state be changed? There are a lot of gaps that need to be filled.

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Notes

1. For the further discussion of these key terms, please refer to Kuik (2008: 165–171).
2. For the further discussion of balancing, see Waltz (1979) and Walt (1985) and of soft balancing, see Paul (2005) and Pape (2005).
3. Regime survival means that Hun Sen aims to do whatever it takes to stay in power. Having China as his backup could ensure such survival. The perceived threats to the Cambodian government's staying in power are derived from both internal and external sources. For internal threats, it is derived from the opposition party and the fear of the ruling party that it will be defeated at the polls. For the external dimension, Western democracies such as the United States have been critical of Cambodia's political situation and have been advocating democracy promotion in the country, which could then be embraced by local activists. This is similar to the argument offered by various constructivists on the boomerang effect of rhetorical entrapment (Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Risse et al., 1999).
4. This is also demonstrated in the case of China's relations with the Philippines since Duterte became president (see Primiano, 2017).
5. Shenzhen went from being a small fishing village at the start of China's economic reform period to an advanced economic city.
6. With the construction of such dams, there has been displacement of locals with little compensation. In addition, the flooding caused by such projects can destroy an entire village.

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