

The World According to Cambodia's CPP

If the West truly wants to change Hun Sen's behavior, it needs to understand how he sees the world.

By Sebastian Strangio

On August 12, the European Union will finally follow through on its threat to impose a suspension of trade preferences on Cambodia. The long-awaited move, which will restore tariffs on around a quarter of Cambodia's exports, comes in response to a fierce political crackdown by the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP), which has seen it outlaw the main opposition party, jail political opponents, and run the table on the 2018 national elections — all while nuzzling up to Xi Jinping's China.

The EU's action is indicative of a broader hardening of attitudes toward Prime Minister Hun Sen's government. Members of the U.S. Congress have threatened similar trade restrictions, and the Treasury Department has targeted three of Hun Sen's cronies with sanctions. Yet these measures are unlikely to push Cambodia back onto a democratic path, nor to prize it away from China's smothering embrace. Instead, they are deepening a pattern of mutual incomprehension that has dogged Western relations with Cambodia for nearly three decades.

The primary shortcoming in Western policy has been a lack of what is sometimes termed "cognitive empathy": namely, the ability of policymakers "to [put] themselves in the shoes of the world's various actors and see how the world looks to them." As Western nations punish Hun Sen for his authoritarian turn and embrace of China, they seemingly give little thought to how their actions are viewed in Phnom Penh, nor to the broader political and ideological dynamics that have brought relations to this point.

This failure is not surprising. Cambodia is a small nation and attracts fleeting attention in Western capitals. After more than 35 years in power, Hun Sen gripes about events that are now either forgotten or deemed arcane to today's policy debates. Finally, the Cambodian leader has not helped his own cause with his Marcos-grade corruption, ruthless suppression of dissent, and rambling Castro-esque speeches.

Yet understanding how the CPP views the world is important, if only because it is central to explaining Cambodia's eager entry into China's orbit. The purpose is not to defend the CPP worldview, which contains many exaggerations and falsehoods, nor to excuse the party's corruption and repression, but rather to understand how it views its core interests, and how it is likely to respond to Western policies.

The worldview of Cambodia's senior leadership is inseparable from the country's turbulent path through the 20th century. Born in rural Kampong Cham in August 1952, Hun Sen came of age in a time of intense conflict and dislocation, as Cambodia was drawn into the raging conflict in Vietnam. In the late 1960s, as American B-52s rained their bombs down on eastern Cambodia, he joined the country's communist insurgency, known to history as the Khmer Rouge. After helping the Khmer Rouge take power in April 1975, Hun Sen served the murderous regime for two years before defecting to Vietnam in mid-1977.

In January 1979, the Vietnamese military overthrew the Khmer Rouge, and Hun Sen became foreign minister in the new government installed by Hanoi. Instead of being given credit for ending Cambodia's nightmare, however, the new administration was ostracized and embargoed by the West. Meanwhile, the surviving Khmer Rouge and two other non-communist resistance factions were offered diplomatic succor and military support from China, the United States, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

This embargo was the product of simple Cold War realpolitik: the desire of Beijing and Washington to isolate Soviet-backed Vietnam. But it fueled a further round of conflict in Cambodia and hampered the country's reconstruction. It also profoundly shaped the worldview of Hun Sen and his colleagues. This decade of isolation instilled in Hun Sen an abiding resentment about the world's lack of recognition for his government's achievements, and an inverse craving for international acceptance. It also inculcated a deep skepticism about Western governments' invocations of liberal values.

In October 1991, four Cambodian factions, including the CPP, came together to sign the Paris Peace Agreements, which were designed to end Cambodia's civil war, send refugees home, and introduce a multiparty democratic system. For the Western democracies, Paris was a watershed: It drew a line under an era in which Cambodia was victim of superpower conflict, and initiated a new era in which the world would bring a long-suffering people the gifts of peace and democracy.

The CPP saw things differently. In effective control of the country since 1979, it had the most to lose from free elections. Having helped topple the Khmer Rouge, the CPP equated its own rule with the preservation of a hard-won stability and peace. Giving any ground to its former wartime enemies — formerly allied with the Khmer Rouge and now competing as political parties — threatened a return to chaos. This justified any measure to secure its continued rule.

Beginning with the UN-organized 1993 election, which the CPP lost to Funcinpec, a royalist party, the CPP bullied and threatened its way into an equal share of power in a coalition government. In July 1997, Hun Sen used lethal force to quash the challenge posed by Funcinpec's armed wing, and seized de facto control of government. An election in 1998, conducted in a climate of fear, established Hun Sen as Cambodia's sole prime minister, a position he has held ever since.

During this period, Cambodia's domestic political struggles acquired an ideological valence. Viewing Cambodia as strategically marginal, Western governments saw it as a country where they could push values-based policies without incurring a significant political cost. Some Cambodian politicians harnessed this ideological energy for their own ends. One was Sam Rainsy, a former Funcinpec minister, who lobbied tirelessly in Western capitals, painting Cambodian politics as a simple struggle between democrats and dictators. To local audiences, meanwhile, he played on potent nationalist anxieties about Vietnam, attacking the CPP leadership as puppets of Hanoi.

After the violence of July 1997, Hun Sen came under increased American pressure, most notably from within the U.S. Congress. Republican hawks dubbed Hun Sen a "new Pol Pot," attempted to condition American aid on Hun Sen not being in power, and called openly for regime change. American-funded democracy promotion groups, including the International Republican Institute, were explicit in their support for Sam Rainsy, who was feted at conservative think-tanks in

Washington. Congressional pressure hampered attempts by American diplomats to engage productively with the CPP government.

As liberal ideology was conscripted into Cambodia's domestic political struggles, the CPP grew increasingly suspicious of American democracy promotion efforts. Given past U.S. actions in Cambodia, Hun Sen viewed Washington's criticisms about human rights as grossly hypocritical. Moreover, he chafed at being held to higher standards than more strategically important nations, like neighboring Thailand (and, later, Vietnam). The lines between democratic advocacy and regime change became muddled. Soon enough, anyone seeking to advance democracy and human rights was, by definition, opposed to CPP rule.

Enter Beijing. The Chinese did much more than the Americans to prop up the Khmer Rouge, but they expressed no opinion about how Hun Sen ruled the country. In 1997, when Western nations withheld aid, China stepped into the breach. In their dawning convergence of interests, Beijing and Phnom Penh agreed to bury their past grievances. Over the next 15 years, as Hun Sen's periodic crackdowns stoked tensions with the West, his government moved gradually closer to China.

These tensions burst forth following national elections in July 2013, when the CPP hemorrhaged support to the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), a new unified opposition party led by Sam Rainsy. The election was followed by massive street demonstrations against election fraud. In the ensuing crackdown, several protesters were shot dead. In the aftermath, the CPP government was jittery. Looking ahead to the next elections in 2018, it promised reforms, forced Sam Rainsy into exile, and tightened restrictions on Cambodian civil society.

All the while, Cambodia was attracting increasing attention in Washington. In 2017, as U.S. attitudes toward China soured rapidly under President Donald Trump, Cambodia suddenly commanded attention as a Chinese vassal-state. Rainsy, who had spent most of his career attacking Hun Sen's ties to Vietnam, suddenly began pushing an anti-Chinese line.

Paranoid about his hold on power, and fearing what the United States might do in the event of another close-run election, Hun Sen left nothing to chance. In September 2017, police arrested CNRP President Kem Sokha on charges of treason. Two months later, a CPP-controlled court banned the CNRP outright and clamped down on civil society and the independent media. Absent any real opposition, the CPP went on to "win" all 125 seats in the National Assembly.

In the aftermath, the U.S. and other Western governments decried the conduct of the election. But for the past few years, Hun Sen had watched on as a parade of right-abusing Southeast Asian leaders — from Vietnamese Communist Party head Nguyen Phu Trong to Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines to Thai junta leader Prayut Chan-o-cha — were invited to Washington. All this merely reinforced Hun Sen's view that there was one rule for Cambodia, and another for the rest of Southeast Asia. All the while, China continued to roll out the red carpet for Hun Sen on his frequent visits to Beijing.

When the EU threatened to suspend Cambodia's preferential access to the European market, Hun Sen's reaction was predictable: He decried it as a violation of Cambodian sovereignty, tightened the political space further, and leaned more heavily on China. The fact that the EU was concurrently negotiating a free trade agreement with Vietnam, a one-party dictatorship, only underlined the CPP's perception that Brussels, by threatening to cast hundreds of thousands of Cambodian workers out of work, was seeking to unseat the CPP government and tip the country

back into turmoil. Adding further fuel was Sam Rainsy, who, in between lobbying for harsh EU sanctions, called for the Cambodian people to “take to the streets to oust Hun Sen.” In July 2019, he declared that “the law-abiding international community must work to put an end to the Hun Sen regime.”

Gazing out at the world at the start of 2020, Hun Sen saw an array of hostile Western powers that would happily acquiesce in the CPP’s removal from power, if not actively seek to bring it about. Meanwhile, in the middle distance, sat a benevolent China, offering Cambodia protection from the perils of a “color revolution.” This conclusion, grossly exaggerated though it may be, was in many ways the logical outgrowth of a particular worldview: one born under the thunder of American B-52s and forged during the cruel final decade of the Cold War.

One of Cambodia’s tragedies is that it has never been seen as important enough to be taken seriously on its own terms, rather than being viewed in the light of wider ideological and geopolitical struggles. The same danger is present now, as Cambodia is drawn into the escalating rivalry between the U.S. and China. Hun Sen bears a heavy burden of responsibility for this turn of events, but it might have been forestalled somewhat had Western policymakers made an effort to contemplate the view from Phnom Penh. Such an effort will be necessary if the current tension is not to harden into permanent enmity.