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Rethinking Cambodia: A New Strategic Interest

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Author: Shaoyu Yuan, February 2020.



“ For years, the government of the U.S. has overlooked the strategic significance and economic interests of having Cambodia on our side. Although Cambodia has long sided with the opposite of Western ideology, as the status quo of the world changes and the weight of Southeast Asia increases, it is time for the U.S. to reconsider its courses of action and shift some of its strategic focus to the region.”

Image from U.S. Indo-Pacific Command.

On January 8th, Cambodia and the U.S. marked **70 years** since the two countries established diplomatic relations in 1950. For years, the government of the U.S. has overlooked the strategic significance and economic interests of having Cambodia on our side. Although Cambodia has long sided with the opposite of Western ideology, as the status quo of the world changes and the weight of Southeast Asia increases, it is time for the U.S. to reconsider its courses of action and shift some of its strategic focus to the region.

Overlooking or not putting enough effort into the region first resulted in the victory of the Khmer Rouge in the Cambodian Civil War that led to one of the most horrifying genocides in human history. Although the Johnson administration did deliver some **aid** and support, those were far from enough. The Khmer Rouge victory pushed Cambodia closer to the Communists, paving the road to its future collaboration with China.

After China announced its One Belt One Road Initiative and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, Cambodia was among **the first participants** that embraced the “Chinese Model.” In the South China Sea Arbitration, an arbitration case brought by the Philippines against China concerning the legality of China’s Nine-dash line, and many other territorial disputes that include China, Cambodia has been the **only** Southeast Asian country that sided with China (except Brunei on the Arbitration), further boosting China’s influence in the region. For example, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was unable to reach an agreement on the maritime disputes in the South China Sea after Cambodia again **blocked** any language related to the contentious South China Sea issue from appearing in an ASEAN joint statement.

It is clear that Cambodia is a **supporter** of China; however, Cambodia is not an ally of China. Additionally, it is essential to realize that only the current Cambodian government, controlled by Prime Minister Hun Sen and his party Cambodia People’s Party, supports China; the people of Cambodia do not necessarily support or advocate for China. In reality, an increasing number of Cambodians are starting to **resent China** for its increasing and dominant participation in the Cambodian economy and its previous action of supporting the Khmer Rouge, which enabled the genocide. In Cambodia, **public anger** is rising over issues such as skyrocketing household debt, resentment at an influx of Chinese influence, and a lack of jobs. Cambodia’s youth – almost two-thirds of Cambodians are under 30 years old – begrudge Hun Sen and his

adherents for [the lagging development](#) and corruption. Perhaps in the foreseeable future, there will be surging demand for freedom and democracy.

In terms of economic development, having Cambodia on the U.S' side is certainly beneficial as the trade war with China continues. The country is hungry for investment; Cambodia's skilled textile industry and food production can surely replace a portion of Chinese exports to the U.S., not to mention the country's cheap workforce and tax policy. Winning the Cambodian market will not only undermine China's ability to retaliate but also benefit the U.S. and alleviate the damage done from the trade war. Strategically, having Cambodia on the U.S' side could be the ultimate step to a successful China containment policy.

If the U.S. eventually made Cambodia a closer friend, we may witness a reach of consensus on opposing and condemning Chinese expansion in the South China Sea, which will put significant international pressure on China; after all, Cambodia is a member of ASEAN and a coastal nation in the South China Sea. Further, Cambodia would be the perfect location for the U.S. to establish another military base, considering its geopolitical situation. To its west, the base in Cambodia can be used to balance the influence of India or Pakistan. To its east, the base could play the role of intimidator to the rest of Southeast Asia, especially to Vietnam. Most importantly, if a U.S. military base were to be established in Cambodia, a more completed and aggressive-oriented island chain to contain China will be formed, combined with increased international pressure, and China's expansionist actions will have to be postponed indefinitely. The phrase, "two birds with one stone" cannot describe this move more accurately.

As the U.S. and Cambodia celebrate their 70th anniversary of diplomatic ties, a shift of strategic focus to the region may just benefit the U.S. to counterbalance China in the region and bring an eventual democratic change to Cambodia. It is important, therefore, that American relations with Cambodia advance for the United States to achieve its strategic goals in the region, which includes preventing the increasing influence that China has in the South China Sea.

Shaoyu Yuan is the author of "Panda Not Dragon: Why The Rise of China is not a Threat". Yuan's works have appeared on multiple scholarly journals and conferences with topics including the conflict between China and Japan over the Senkaku islands, South Korea's cultural influence on Modern China, etc. He is currently completing his doctoral degree at Rutgers University. Yuan received his B.A. from Centre College and his M.S. from Northeastern University.

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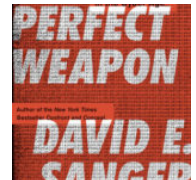
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