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**Title:** As Cambodia Approaches China Over the US, It Should Remember Machiavelli's Lessons

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## As Cambodia Approaches China Over the US, It Should Remember Machiavelli's Lessons

Cambodia approaches China, leaving the United States in the dust. Can it retain its freedom?

By Cheunboran Chanborey

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As part of the United States' 'pivot' to Asia, the Obama Administration has taken further steps to broaden engagement with Cambodia, primarily in response to China's rapidly growing influence in the country and in the broader Lower Mekong region.



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Diplomatically, U.S. high-level officials have started visiting Cambodia more frequently. For instance, in 2012, a series of U.S. leaders engaged with Cambodia's leadership, including President Barack Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, and U.S. Trade Representative Ron Kirk—all this while Cambodia was hosting the ASEAN-U.S. Leaders' Meeting and other ASEAN-related meetings. Two major visits occurred earlier this year in Phnom Penh—the minority leader of the U.S. House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi in March 2015, and Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Asia Pacific Daniel Russel in January. U.S. First Lady Michelle Obama also visited Cambodia in March 2015.

Militarily, the U.S. government has maintained a small but sustained level of engagement with the Cambodian military, which includes naval port visits, joint exercises, and military assistance. From 2007 to 2012, eight U.S. naval ships made port calls in Cambodia and engaged in joint military exercises with the Cambodian armed forces. Cambodia and the U.S. also jointly conducted the bilateral Angkor Sentinel peacekeeping exercises four years in the row, beginning in 2010. As of 2014, the U.S. allocated \$0.45 million to an "International Military Education and Training" program to help Cambodian military officers with their English-language skills, leadership training, military professionalism, human rights awareness, and counterterrorism practices.

Economically, the U.S. is the largest foreign market for Cambodian goods, accounting for about half of the country's garment exports—an industry that employs approximately 400,000 workers in the kingdom. Cambodia is also the fifth-largest recipient of U.S. foreign aid in Southeast Asia after Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Myanmar. In 2014, the U.S. provided assistance worth \$70.9 million, mostly to non-governmental organizations and humanitarian programs in Cambodia.

At the sub-regional level, the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI)—launched by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in 2009—is a regional foreign assistance effort, amounting to \$425 million for 2009-2011 period. It aims to help lower Mekong countries, such as Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam, in the areas of agriculture and food security, connectivity, education, energy security, the environment and water management, and health. In 2014, the State Department provided an additional \$14.3 million for the LMI.

Although the relationship has recently been strengthened, there are a number of impediments for Cambodia and the United States in developing deeper bilateral ties.

### Trust Deficit Between Phnom Penh and Washington

Apparently, mutual suspicion and misperception exist between the leadership in Phnom Penh and Washington. Most top leaders of Cambodia, including Prime Minister Hun Sen, joined the underground communist movement against the U.S.-supported Khmer Republic. Therefore, so-called “anti-American imperialism” is their political background. Hun Sen’s regime was isolated and embargoed by the West from 1979-1991. In addition, Cambodia’s historical memories of its colonial past and foreign powers’ intervention during the Cold War might have left Cambodian leaders very respectful of their country’s sovereignty. In their worldview, therefore, the U.S. is a bullying superpower that is willing to interfere in the domestic affairs of small states.

Meanwhile, in the eyes of the political elite in Washington, Hun Sen’s government is, in the words of Republican lawmaker Steve Chabot during a Congressional hearing in July 2013, leading an “authoritarian, corrupt political system.” Such a perception exists within White House’s foreign policy establishment, which explains why invitations for an official visit to the U.S. have never been extended to Prime Minister Hun Sen or even to Foreign Minister Hor Namhong. It is worth noticing that Hor Namhong’s visit to Washington in June 2012 was a working visit, not an official one, while Cambodia assumed the ASEAN chairmanship.

Moreover, Phnom Penh and Washington remain at odds on a number of issues that have added more mistrust to an already substantial trust deficit. First, the U.S. has always pressured the Cambodian government to strengthen its democratic practices, including its protection of human rights, the rule of law, and good governance. This has resulted in frequent diplomatic tensions. For instance, in response to a comment by the U.S. Ambassador to Cambodia on a controversial draft Law on Associations and the Non-Governmental Organizations (LANGO) in a local newspaper in May 2015, the Cambodian foreign ministry said that “the words expressed by the foreign ambassador to Cambodia are extremely insolent, even if he is a representative of a big country.”

Second, the two countries disagree on Cambodia’s debt of approximately \$450 million, owed by the Lon Lon government in the early 1970s. Calling it “dirty debt” for fueling the country’s civil conflicts, Phnom Penh has sought debt cancellation and foreign aid. While expressing a willingness to reschedule loan payments, U.S. officials have demanded that the Cambodian government first sign a bilateral debt agreement, acknowledging its obligation, and begin making payments before negotiations on the terms of its debt begin. In the eyes of officials in Phnom Penh, the debt has been a political tool that Washington keeps playing up to pressure the Cambodian government to support its regional agenda.

### **Bureaucratic Politics of the US**

The Obama Administration has been constrained by American bureaucratic politics in dealing with Cambodia, presenting it with a conundrum: how can we promote human rights and our strategic interests? For example, in the wake of Obama’s visit to Cambodia in November 2012, a dozen U.S. lawmakers sent a toughly worded letter to call on the U.S. president to publicly address human rights issues in his meeting with Prime Minister Hun Sen. Some human rights groups even urged the president not to meet with Prime Minister Hun Sen. In the end, President Obama only briefly met with Prime Minister Hun Sen. While U.S. officials called the meeting “usual protocol for a U.S. President on the sidelines of an EAS summit,” Obama reportedly focused on human rights issues, urging the Cambodian leader to release political prisoners and allow opposition parties greater freedom.

In the aftermath of the 2013 election, U.S. lawmakers and human rights activists were pushing for a cut in the more than \$70 million in annual U.S. aid to Cambodia if Prime Minister Hun Sen would extend his rule in what they called “unfair elections.” In the extreme, U.S. Congressman Ed Royce, Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, issued a statement that “Hun Sen has brought Cambodia to the brink. No longer content to marginalize the opposition, the Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) is now killing peaceful protesters. It’s time for Hun Sen to end his three-decade grip on power and step down. The people of Cambodia deserve far better.” In a similar tone, Congressman Dana Rohrabacher said that, “Hun Sen is a corrupt, vicious human being, who has held that country in his grip for decades,” adding that “It’s time for Hun Sen to go.”

Obviously, those statements reflect complicated political trends in the U.S., where interest groups, including think tanks and human rights activists, are quite influential. Moreover, the Cambodian Americans who are generally critics of Hun Sen’s government are a strong political force that American politicians cannot ignore, particularly in states with large number of Cambodian-Americans. Based on the 2013 U.S. census, there are around 320,000 people of Cambodian descent living in the U.S., primary concentrated in the states of California, Massachusetts and Washington.

### **China: Best Strategic Option for Cambodia?**

The Obama Administration's engagement with Cambodia has taken place amid rapidly increasing Chinese influence in the country. As of 2014, China has become Cambodia's largest foreign investor and economic benefactor, with cumulative commercial investments reportedly worth \$10 billion and development assistance totaling over \$3 billion. In recent years, Beijing has also provided military assistance and equipment, including trucks, helicopters, and aircraft to the Cambodian armed forces. It has furthermore built military training and medical facilities, and donated uniforms. In May 2014, China announced that it would provide over 400 training scholarships for Cambodian military officers.

Strategically, given the history of animosity in the region and recent border disputes Cambodia has endured with its neighbors—with Thailand in 2008-2011 and ongoing tension with Vietnam—Phnom Penh might opt for alignment, rather than alliance, with China. Cambodian leaders might buy into the old saying that “a nearby friend is more reliable than a friend from afar.” Noticeably, while Phnom Penh was hosting the Cambodia-Vietnam Joint Border Commission Meeting in July 2015, Cambodian Defense Minister Tea Banh visited Beijing. During a meeting with Tea Banh, Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission Xu Qiliang said China and Cambodia offered firmly mutual support on issues of sovereignty, security, and development.

Sam Rainsy, the leader of the opposition Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP), has been known as a close friend of the West, especially the United States. However, when it comes to foreign policy, his views are more complex. In a TV interview in January 2014 he said, “CNRP is an ally of China. CNRP fully supports China in the assertion of her sovereignty over [the] Xisha and Nansha islands in the South China Sea... We are not allying with the US because it supports Vietnam. The presence of China is necessary to counterbalance against the influence of Vietnam [in Cambodia]. Now, Vietnam has many allies—the U.S. and Japan—in order to confront with China. But CNRP stands with China.”

Obviously, between the U.S. and China, Cambodia's choice is China. China seems to be seen as a trustful friend that Cambodia can rely upon to ensure its sovereignty, territorial integrity, and protect its pursuit of prosperity.

However, for small states like Cambodia, Machiavelli's advice remains relevant that “A prince ought never to make common cause with one more powerful than himself to injure another, unless necessity forces him to it ... for if he wins you rest in his power, and princes must avoid as much as possible being under the will and pleasures of others.”

Therefore, although Cambodia's relationship with great powers might be weighed differently depending on circumstances, Cambodia must never close the door of friendship and cooperation with any major power. According to the first and most influential Foreign Minister of Singapore S. Rajaratnam, “Like the sun, the great powers will, by their very existence, radiate gravitational power. But if there are many suns, then the smaller planets can, by judicious balancing of pulls and counter-pulls, enjoy a greater freedom of movement.”

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