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National May 16, 2016

Cambodia's Relations With Russia

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Prime Minister Hun Sen will be visiting the Russian Federation from May 17-21 to attend the Asean-Russia Commemorative Summit in the Black Sea resort of Sochi.

During the visit, the prime minister will meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin and hold talks with his Russian counterpart Dmitry Medvedev.

Noticeably, the Cambodia-Russia bilateral relationship has recently been broadened and deepened in the context of Russia's pivot to Asia.

In 2010, a year before the Obama administration announced its "pivot to Asia," President Putin declared Russia's "Turn to the East," with the objective of strengthening its economic, political and security engagement in Asia.

There are a number of motives behind Mr. Putin's pivot to Asia. First, Moscow is attempting to lessen its economic dependence on the West in the wake of the global financial and euro zone crises. Russia's pivot to Asia has been given further impetus due to falling oil prices and Western sanctions following Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014.

Second, as the global economic center of gravity has shifted to the Asia-Pacific, Russia sees the lure of Asia's growing economies, particularly China. In October 2014, Mr. Putin said that "Asia is playing an ever greater role in the world, in the economy and in politics, and there is simply no way we can afford to overlook these developments."

Mr. Putin's interest in Asia was apparent since he came to power in 2000. However, Moscow's Asia policy had been Sino-centric as Mr. Putin had a strong desire to work with Beijing to build a multi-polar world order.

However, Moscow harbors some concerns, although the Sino-Russian relationship has been strengthened to an historic high. Those include worries over intellectual property theft from its sales of high-tech weapons to China, a potential of Chinese irredentist claims in the resource-rich but under-populated Russian Far East, and China's growing influence in Russia's backyard – Central Asia.

Singapore-based scholar Ian Storey said Russian options in Asia are limited due to their

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strained relations over “Ukraine and Moscow’s decision to bolster its military presence on the disputed territories.” He added that India has recently “loosened its defense ties with Russia in favor of arms imports from America and Europe.” As a result, the Kremlin has increasingly focused its attention on Southeast Asia.

Professor Leszek Buszynski at the Australian National University argues that Russia has recognized the importance of Asia-Pacific regionalism for its development as the prosperity of Siberia and the Russian Far East “required closer integration with Asian regional institutions.

Therefore, Moscow has, rhetorically at least, praised Asean as an important partner and supported Asean’s centrality in the evolving regional architecture in the Asia-Pacific. Asean and Russia have held two summit meetings – in Kuala Lumpur in 2005 and in Hanoi in 2010.

Also, Russia has participated in almost all Asean-led regional frameworks, including the Asean Regional Forum (ARF), Asean Defense Ministers’ Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus) and the East Asia Summit (EAS).

However, pundits in Southeast Asia share a view that Russia’s influence in the region remains modest. Economically, Russia is a minor player in Southeast Asia. Aside from natural resources, energy technology and arms sales, there seems little scope for expansion in Russia-Southeast Asia trade.














Militarily, Moscow’s engagement with Southeast Asia is also limited. The most prominent aspect of Russia’s defense engagement with Southeast Asia remains arms sales to countries in the region, especially Vietnam.

As far as Asean is concerned, Ian Storey argues that Russia’s engagement with Asean is “superficial.” Moscow has not been a proactive participant in Asean-led forums due to its limited influence and its more substantive interests in other inter-state forums.

Despite criticisms about Moscow’s engagement with Asean, it is clear that Cambodia-Russia relations have been on a positive note. As Cambodia and Russia are celebrating the 60th anniversary of their relationship this year, Cambodian Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn remarked that “despite the profound and complex changes that have transformed the world over the past six decades, our ties have stood the test of time, ties that are based on long standing traditions of solid friendship, partnership, mutual trust and understanding.”

Diplomatically, frequent exchanges of high-level visits took place during the last two years. In 2015 there were many noticeable official visits of Cambodian leaders to Russia, including the visit of former Foreign Minister Hor Namhong in March, Deputy Prime Minister Sok An and Deputy Prime Minister Sar Kheng in May, and Minister of Environment Say Samal in October.

Heng Samrin, the President of the National Assembly, visited the Russian Federation from April 17-22, followed by the visit of Deputy Prime Minister Tea Banh on April 24-

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Last year also saw a number of Russian leaders visit Cambodia, including Minister of Telecom and Mass Communications Nikolay Nikiforov in July 2015 and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev in November. Mr. Nikiforov revisited Cambodia to co-chair the 9th Inter-governmental Cambodia-Russia Commission for Trade, Economic, Scientific and Technical Cooperation, held in March in Phnom Penh.

Economically, bilateral trade between the two countries has risen substantially over the last decade. While the trade volume has reached almost \$50 million in 2014, there is enormous potential to be further explored. A Cambodian-Russian Business Council will be established to assist Russian firms in close cooperation with the relevant Cambodian institutions to explore concrete economic opportunities and develop partnerships with Cambodia's private sector.

The bilateral ties have also been promoted through people-to-people contacts. More than 130,000 Russians visited Cambodia in 2014. More importantly, more than 8,000 Cambodians have studied in the former Soviet Union and Russia. Many of them now hold senior positions in the Royal Government of Cambodia.

At the regional and international level, Cambodia and Russia have extended mutual support and cooperation in many forums, especially in Asean. Cambodia has been a strong supporter of Russia's engagement in Southeast Asia, including the EAS and ADMM Plus.

Given Russia's keen interest in Southeast Asia, Cambodia stand to benefit from Moscow's "Turn to the East" policy. Amid scepticism among Asean members about Russia's engagement with the region, Cambodia should play a proactive role in effectively bringing this major power into Asean's cooperation mechanisms.

This will benefit not only Asean in its attempt to promote a central role in Asia-Pacific multilateralism, but also Cambodia's endeavor to diversify its foreign relations with major powers.

Cheunboran Chanborey is a PhD candidate in International Political and Strategic Studies at the Australian National University. He is also a research fellow at the Cambodian Institute for Strategic Studies.

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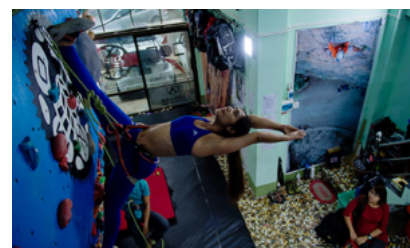
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