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Japan's Vital Role in Cambodia's Strategic Reconfiguration

Cheunboran Chanborey / Share: [f](#) [t](#) [G+](#) [p](#)

Since early this year, commentators and the public alike have spent a great deal of time and effort to analyze Cambodia-US relations against the backdrop of the recent US-ASEAN Summit. Less focus has been made on one of the most important bilateral relationships of Cambodia – ties with Japan.

Cambodia and Japan share a long history of diplomatic ties dating back to the Angkor era. The two countries have maintained close dialogue and cooperation at various levels to that point that leaders of both countries describe this as a “heart-to-heart relationship.”

Since the Paris Peace Agreements in 1991, Japan has played a crucial role in building peace in Cambodia as well as development. Since 1992, Japan has been one of the biggest donors to Cambodia, providing more than \$2 billion in official development assistance, focusing on a broad range of areas, including rehabilitation and reconstruction of infrastructure, poverty alleviation, good governance and rule of law, human resource development, human security and the integration of Cambodia into the region and the world.

Diplomatically, Cambodia and Japan have maintained and promoted cordial bilateral

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ties through frequent exchanges of high-level visits and mutual support at regional and international fora. More noticeably, Cambodia and Japan upgraded bilateral relations into a “strategic partnership” in December 2013. “Strategic” means cooperation should be long-term and stable, bearing in mind the larger picture of the relations. “Partnership” means cooperation should be equal-footed and mutually beneficial.

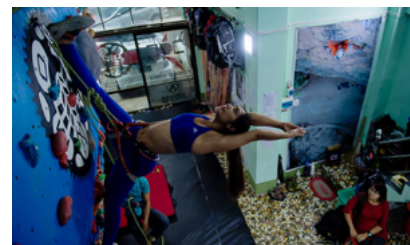
In practice, however, strategic partnerships are a new form of political and security alignment whose nature, function, and dynamics remain less clear than the literal definition. What is clear is that a strategic partnership is not a military alliance but an alignment, which entails a relationship between two or more states involving mutual expectations of some degree of policy coordination on political and security issues under certain conditions in the future.

At a glance, the promotion of the Cambodia-Japan relationship is the by-product of a shift of Japan's foreign policy under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in order to prevent any further deterioration of his country's geopolitical role, partly due to the rise of China. As of 2015, Japan has concluded 10 strategic partnerships, including with two regional organizations: ASEAN and the European Union.

As for Cambodia, the establishment of a strategic partnership with Japan goes beyond Japan's significant economic role in the Kingdom. It also reflects diplomatic, political and strategic reconfiguration. First, in the aftermath of Cambodia's chairmanship of ASEAN, particularly the failure of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Phnom Penh in July 2012, Cambodia has been unfairly seen as a “proxy” or a “client state” of China in Southeast Asia. In response, Cambodian leaders have repeatedly defended the country's neutrality and non-alignment, both domestically and internationally, arguing that Cambodia enjoys full foreign policy autonomy. Therefore, the strategic partnership with Japan, announced days after China declared its Air Defense Identification Zone over the East Asia China in December 2013, might be part of Cambodia's diplomatic efforts to rectify its image.

Second, Phnom Penh has closely observed Beijing's apparent hedging strategy toward political developments in Myanmar since 2011. Beijing has been engaging various actors in Myanmar's political landscape, including then-opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. The objective was to hedge its bets on the country's political future, which has been proved to be a right strategy due to the National League for Democracy's landslide victory in last year's elections. In this respect, Prime Minister Hun Sen and his advisors might have been concerned about the future international political support, which is an important source of legitimacy.

After Cambodia's elections in July 2013, Beijing immediately recognized the results and congratulated Prime Minister Hun Sen for the victory of his Cambodian People's Party (CPP). However, as anti-government protests led by the opposition Cambodian National Rescue Party grew in subsequent weeks, China largely remained silent. Therefore, it is clear that diversifying Cambodia's foreign relations, particularly with Japan, might ensure international political backing. It also helps the ruling CPP avoid alienating domestic political forces that are relatively critical of China's growing influence in the Kingdom.



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Last but most importantly, the new partnership with Japan fits with the long-term strategic vision for Cambodia. By all accounts, as a small state, Cambodia has to confront strategic dilemmas from its asymmetric relations with China. On the one hand, Cambodia needs China for economic development and security protection both from traditional and non-traditional threats.

By strengthening ties with Beijing, Cambodia might run risk of an erosion of foreign policy autonomy and alienating neighbors (for example, Vietnam and other ASEAN members with claims to the South China Sea) and major powers engaged in strategic competition with rising China – in particular the US and Japan.

To address this strategic predicament, Phnom Penh has reprioritized ASEAN's role. Bilaterally, while still considering China the most important strategic partner, Cambodian leaders have begun to diversify, rather than realign, the country's foreign policy towards other major powers in order to reduce dependence and thus domination by China. Japan was chosen to be first strategic partner.

It is expected that Cambodia will and should have more strategic partners in the future, without upsetting China. To this end, Cambodia's future strategic partners should be India – an emerging key player in Asia – as well middle-powers such as Australia and South Korea.

However, having close strategic relations with many major powers at the same time does not guarantee their unwavering commitment to assist the threatened small state in question. Therefore, Cambodia needs to prioritize strategic alignment.

By and large, alignment preferences of a small state like Cambodia are influenced by geographic proximity, threat assessment across issue areas, historical experiences, the distribution of power in the region, the political, economic, and diplomatic weight of targeted major powers as well as their commitment to address the security concerns of the small state in question. (Mr. Chanborey is a PhD candidate in International Political and Strategic Studies at Australian National University.)

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