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Upon becoming China's new leader in November 2012, President Xi Jinping declared that he will realize the "Chinese Dream". He stressed that "fulfilling the Chinese Dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese, we must achieve a rich and powerful country, the revitalization of the nation, and the people's happiness".¹ The goals entailed in the Chinese Dream are to achieve a "well-off" society, doubling the GDP and per capita income as of 2010 by 2020, and to build up a modern socialist state by 2049.

While this dream remains ambiguous in terms of what foreign policy goals it entails, there are indications that strategies to achieve some of these have been taking shape. First and foremost, President Xi laid out a vision for Asian security promotion at the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) in May 2014. In what he termed the "New Asian Security Concept" (NASC), Xi emphasized that, "Sustainable security means that we need to focus on both development and security so that security would be durable". Strategically, NASC is seen as an attempt to challenge US supremacy in Asia, for the concept rejects Cold War-era military alliances as the basis of regional security order. Xi asserted that, "to beef up and entrench a military alliance targeted at a third party is not conducive to maintaining common security". Alarming, at least for the West, the concept raises a "Monroe Doctrine" of sorts in Asia. Xi stated that "it is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia, and uphold the security of Asia".²

Secondly, President Xi has announced grand strategies to embark on a geopolitical and economic restructuring of the Eurasian region. China's growing foreign exchange reserves of US\$ 4 trillion has enabled Beijing to launch two ambitious projects: the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, known together as the "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR). OBOR projects will connect countries in Asia to Europe, covering 55 percent of the world GNP, 70 percent of the global population, and 75 percent of known energy reserves.

To implement OBOR projects, China established the Silk Road Fund (SRF), worth \$40 billion, in December 2014. China also initiated the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) with the authorised capital of \$100 billion, of which China contributed 50 percent. With 57 nations as founding members, the AIIB commenced its operation in Beijing in earlier this month.

Despite Beijing's efforts to declare its benign intentions, it is believed that AIIB and SRF aim to challenge the existing US-led global financial institution of the World Bank, and the Japan-led Asian Development Bank (ADB). Moreover, through the newly established institutions, China seeks to promote the Beijing Consensus so as to challenge the Washington Consensus. The Beijing Consensus sees development as a function of innovation in state sectors, including financial and political controls in favour of economic growth, while the Washington Consensus advocates financial liberalization, privatization and political openness.

¹William A. Callahan, "The China Dream and the American Dream", *Economic and Political Studies* 1(2014):143-160.

²Xi's Remarks at the CICA Summit on 21 May 2014, available at:<http://www.chinausfocus.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Xi-01.pdf>

Particularly important from the Cambodian perspective is the building of the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) that will provide a new platform and opportunity for ASEAN to forge a closer ASEAN Community and strengthen its relationship and a shared future with China. During the ASEAN-China Summit in Kuala Lumpur in November 2015, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang pledged that China would offer infrastructure loans totalling \$10 billion to ASEAN countries and free assistance worth \$560 million to developing ASEAN member states in 2016.

Southeast Asia's Concerns

The grand scope and huge significance of Xi's initiatives have provoked mixed responses from Southeast Asia. While some leaders, scholars and commentators warmly welcome the initiatives, other cautiously express concerns. The concerns are rooted in a number of factors. Firstly, as the economic size and power of China have expanded tremendously relative to its Southeast Asian neighbours, the growing asymmetry worries some in the region. Maritime disputes in the South China Sea between China and ASEAN claimant states have contributed to an already growing suspicion, questioning whether China's intentions are benign or not.

Secondly, ASEAN states harbour a fear that being overly dependent on China economically might undermine their foreign policy autonomy. It is argued that Xi's initiatives are China's grand strategies to create a core-to-periphery structure of connectivity – Beijing as the hub and other countries the spokes of the system – so that smaller countries have to compromise on their interests.

Thirdly, China's growing economic and political clout might weaken ASEAN's unity and thus importance. ASEAN is a collection of middle and small powers in Southeast Asia. ASEAN's centrality – a driving force in regional multilateral arrangements, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Plus Three (with China, Japan and South Korea), and the East Asia Summit (the Plus Three countries, Australia, India, New Zealand, Russia and the US) – has been a product of the successful regional integration and unity of the Southeast Asian states. With China's growing influence over individual ASEAN members and Asia in general, countries in the region might have to bend to China's interest at the expense of ASEAN's unity, which consequently puts ASEAN's centrality at risk.

Lastly, not a few ASEAN member states share concerns over the investment practices of Chinese state-owned companies. Those companies have earned a mixed reputation with regard to labour standards, environmental protection, quality of work, and the involvement in corrupt practices with governments and local authorities. These concerns and scepticism have repeatedly been voiced, due to Beijing's lack of sincere engagement with opposition parties, independent think tanks, NGOs and civil society organizations, and the public as a whole.

These concerns are not groundless, but legitimate ones. Therefore, China has a duty to reassure smaller states of its peaceful rise as a responsible stakeholder in the international political and economic system. Beijing must convince others about its intentions through magnanimity backed by concrete actions, instead of muscle-flexing. Beijing needs to make clear to its Southeast Asian neighbours that China has much to offer the region: not just a 'money bag', but also knowledge, experience, technology and expertise, especially on infrastructure development.

Cambodia's Positions and Challenges Ahead

Cambodia has been one of the first ASEAN member states to express firm support for Xi's initiatives. In theory, the Cambodian government supports China's NASC unreservedly. In November 2015, Cambodian Defence Minister Tea Banh told his visiting Chinese counterpart Chang Wanquan that Cambodia "appreciates the security concept and cooperation initiatives" proposed by China and "stands by China's efforts in safeguarding the peace and stability of the region".³

Cambodia has also participated in China-led regional fora. For instance, in July 2015, Cambodia became a dialogue partner of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), whose members include China, Russia and four 'Stan' states in Central Asia. By virtue of its membership's geopolitical location and richness in natural resources, the SCO is the most important regional organization in the eyes of Beijing. Cambodia also became a member of CICA in 2011. Beside SCO, CICA is the second most important platform for international cooperation that does not include the US and its ally, Japan. That explains why Xi declared NASC at the 2014 CICA summit.

³Xinhuanet, "China vows to deepen military ties with Cambodia", 6 November 2015, available at: http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-11/06/c_134791587.htm

Earlier this month, Cambodia's National Assembly ratified a \$62.3 million investment proposal to the AIIB, making Cambodia one of the 57 founding members of the bank. Cambodian Minister of Commerce Sun Chanthol applauded the creation of the bank and noted that "Cambodia is proud of being one of the founding members of the AIIB".⁴ Similarly, Prime Minister Hun Sen praised the AIIB and China's Silk Road Fund for promising to play a very important role in providing financial support to developing countries.

As far as Southeast Asia is concerned, Cambodia sees Xi's initiatives as positive developments for a strengthened ASEAN-China relationship. Cambodian senior official Kao Kim Hourn argues that "ASEAN's need for capital for connectivity projects is huge, so China's pledge of infrastructure loans to ASEAN is very helpful". Therefore, he has characterized the MSR as a boon for the entire region.

It is obvious that there are enormous opportunities for Cambodia from participating in those initiatives, including seeking political support, widening diplomatic outreach, expanding markets and attracting investment and development assistance, and promoting socio-cultural exchanges.

A challenge for Cambodia, however, is how to maximize the benefits from those initiatives for the sake of the country's sustainable development, taking into consideration the negative implications on democratic values, the rule of law, as well as social and environmental issues.

Secondly, Cambodia has been unfairly accused as a 'proxy' of China in Southeast Asia. Therefore,

Phnom Penh must acknowledge concerns expressed by officials and scholars within ASEAN about Xi's initiatives and convince the region that Cambodia's active involvement in the initiatives by no means contributes to the weakening of ASEAN's unity and centrality.

Thirdly, Cambodian foreign policy makers must walk a fine line in the context of strategic competition in Asia among major powers. While China appears to be the most important partner of Cambodia, other major powers including Japan, India, the US, the EU and Russia remain crucial for the kingdom's security and economic development.

As for ASEAN and the international community, it is important that they understand and are sensitive about the security and economic needs of a poor and small state, like Cambodia. Strategically, being sandwiched by two stronger and historically antagonistic neighbours, Cambodian leaders have never taken for granted their country's security and survival. As history suggests, alignment with an external great power has been an undesired but necessary strategic option adopted by Cambodian leaders when their country's independence and territorial integrity is threatened. Economically, Cambodia remains one of the least developed countries in the region. Economic growth, job generation and poverty reduction are the priorities of the government and the ruling elite.

Sun Chanthol has simply put this as "If you don't provide me with Big Mac when I'm starving and you tell me not to eat the [Chinese] fried rice, then I'm sorry".⁶

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⁴Nikkei Asian Review, "Don't penalize us for using AIIB, says Cambodian minister", 21 May 2015, available at: <http://asia.nikkei.com/Features/The-Future-of-Asia-2015/Don-t-penalize-us-for-using-AIIB-says-Cambodian-minister>

⁵See China Daily, "ASEAN welcomes China's pledge of 10 bln USD in infrastructure loans", 23 November 2015, available at: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/201511attendsASEAN/2015-11/23/content_22509683.htm; and Xinhua, "Cambodia says China-proposed 'maritime silk road' to benefit ASEAN", 16 September 2014, available at: http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-09/16/c_133647940.htm

⁶See "Will Cambodia Become the Gateway to ASEAN's 600 Million Consumers?", available at: <http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/can-cambodia-become-the-gateway-to-aseans-600-million-consumers/>