

# PERSPECTIVE

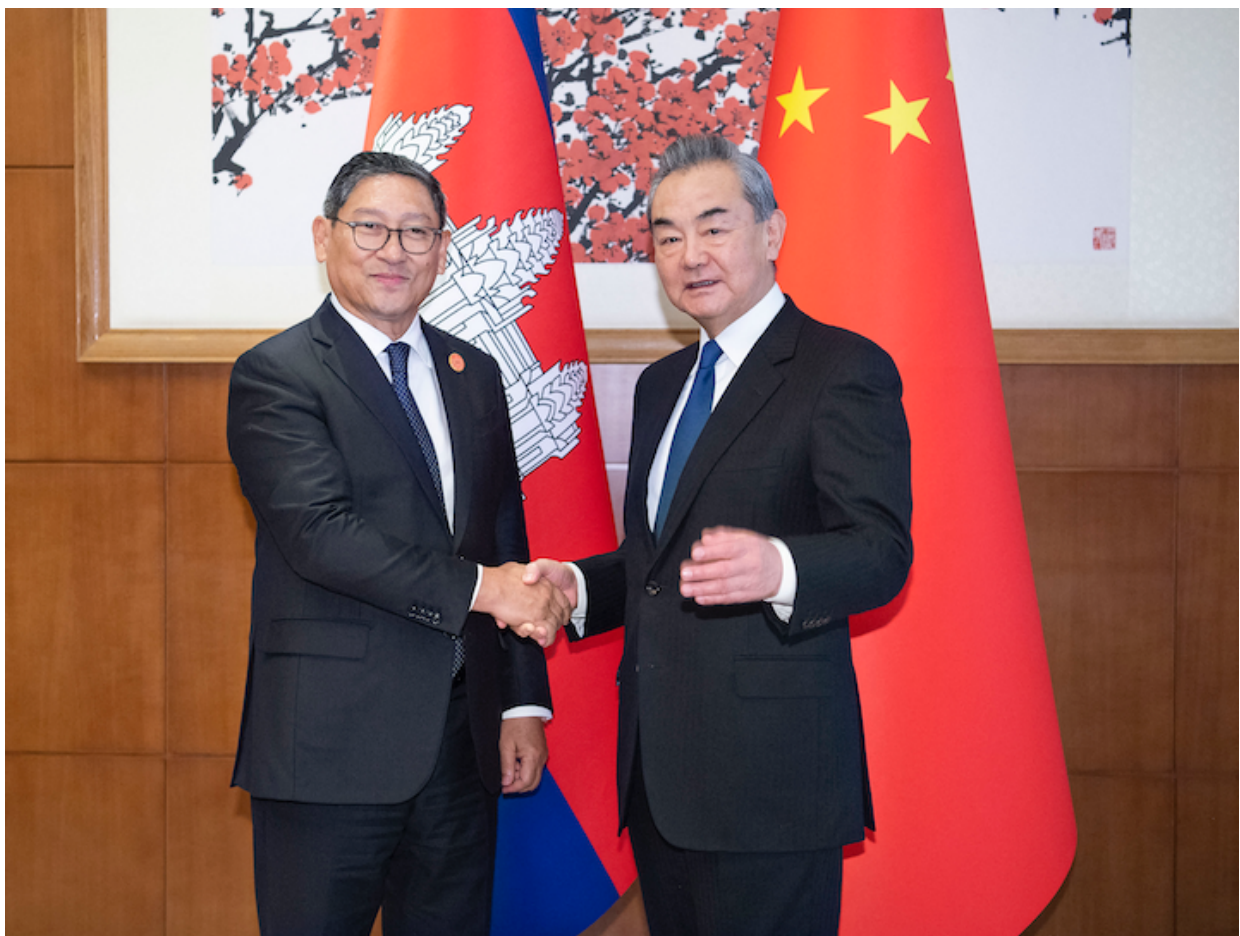
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## Reviewing China's Elite-Centric Approach in its Relations with Cambodia

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*Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi meets with Cambodian Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Sok Chenda Sophea, who was attending the eighth Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) Foreign Ministers' Meeting, in Beijing on 7 December 2023. Photo by Li Tau/XINHUA/Xinhua via AFP.*

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In engaging Cambodia, China puts a strong emphasis on fostering ties with the ruling elites of the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) and backs their regime legitimacy while having limited interactions with grassroots communities or the local population.
- This elite-centric approach is manifested in Beijing's efforts to forge political trust and to support the CPP's political and economic development goals. Its financing focus is on hard infrastructure instead of basic social needs and human development, and its diplomacy targets government institutions and CPP youth leagues.
- This elite-centric approach has incentivised the Cambodian government to support China's foreign policy agendas, promote China's discourse power and embrace China's new concepts/initiatives on global governance.
- However, this approach has yet to generate the same level of favourability and trust towards China among the general population in Cambodia. Establishing credibility and trust among local communities is crucial for China to project its soft power and foster a more meaningful and enduring relationship with Cambodia.

## INTRODUCTION

This year, China and Cambodia celebrate the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their bilateral diplomatic relations, something acclaimed by both sides as an “ironclad friendship”. China-Cambodia ties are built upon deep political trust between their leadership and a strong convergence of geopolitical and economic interests. China exerts predominant influence in the Cambodian economy via trade, foreign direct investment (FDI), official development aid (ODA) and infrastructure financing. Apart from inter-governmental coordination, the Cambodia-China relationship is undergirded by the close ties that exist between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the ruling Cambodian People’s Party (CPP).<sup>1</sup>

China has adopted an elite-centric approach that invests heavily in abetting the regime security and bolstering the legitimacy of the CPP-led government through aid, investment and finance, and rendering political support to the CPP in the face of Western criticisms. In return, the Cambodian government has supported China’s key foreign policy agendas and embraced China’s concepts and initiatives on global governance. This *Perspective* examines how China’s elite-centric approach in its relations with Cambodia is prominent in three aspects: (i) forging political trust and bolstering the CPP’s legitimacy; (ii) prioritising hard infrastructure over soft infrastructure; and (iii) elite-focused youth engagement. The article argues that the elite-centric approach has helped Beijing advance its strategic interests with Phnom Penh, but its neglect of meaningful engagement at the grassroots level has dented its credibility among ordinary Cambodians.

## STRONG TIES AMONG LEADERS

### *Forging political trust and bolstering the CPP’s legitimacy*

China’s elite-centric approach in its diplomacy is characterised by heavy investment in cultivating good ties with the ruling elites of foreign countries while having limited emphasis on engaging grassroots stakeholders. Arguably embedded in China’s statist political system and political economy, the elite-centric focus is a longstanding tradition in China’s foreign relations, not least with Cambodia. The Chinese side often recalls the deep friendship between China’s elder-generation leaders, i.e., Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, with Cambodia’s King Father Norodom Sihanouk, who called China his “second home”.<sup>2</sup>

Today, cementing political trust with the CCP-led government is the top priority in China’s engagement with Cambodia. Of note, since Xi Jinping became President, the party has been at the frontline of China’s foreign policy apparatus, and CCP bodies which are in charge of external affairs have been empowered. These include the International Liaison Department (ILD), the Propaganda Department and the United Front Work Department (UFW).<sup>3</sup> Party-to-party diplomacy has accordingly assumed greater prominence in China’s foreign policy,

with the ILD actively fostering ties with politically like-minded nations such as Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos.<sup>4</sup> Party-to-party channels have been instrumental in facilitating China's engagement with the political elites of these countries and nurturing personal rapport and mutual trust.<sup>5</sup>

Cambodia-China ties feature a high level of reciprocated political support. By cultivating ties with the Cambodian ruling elites, lending support to their regime legitimacy and emphasising the principle of non-interference, China has tapped on their shared grudges against the West's liberal democracy agenda. The US and Western countries have often expressed their concerns over Cambodia's democratic backsliding in the past decade. Washington described the 2023 elections in Cambodia with the CPP's landslide victory as "neither free nor fair" and even imposed visa restrictions on some individuals and suspended certain foreign assistance programmes.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, China promptly conveyed its congratulatory message in which Xi praised "the correct leadership of the royal government of the country headed by CPP President Hun Sen", and pledged China's continued support for Cambodia "in pursuing a development path suited to its national conditions."<sup>7</sup> In return, Hun Sen conveyed that the incoming government would maintain its existing foreign policy stance towards China.<sup>8</sup>

Cambodia and China have the most frequent high-level visit exchanges, compared to other Southeast Asian states. Between 2014 and 2019, there were 24 high-level visits of the CCP's leaders and the Chinese cabinet members to Cambodia. During the same period, there were 26 visits to China by Cambodian government leaders and royal family members.<sup>9</sup> Notably, Hun Sen made a surprise visit to Beijing in March 2020 to show support for China amid the Wuhan Covid-19 outbreak. During this visit, he introduced his son, Hun Manet, the current Cambodian prime minister, to Xi Jinping, paving the way for the next generation of the CPP leadership to continue close cooperation with China.<sup>10</sup> According to the Lowy Institute Asia Power Index 2023, China is also the foreign country that has the most diplomatic dialogues with Cambodia.<sup>11</sup>

China plays a crucial role in bolstering the legitimacy of the Cambodian regime. China's economic success and poverty reduction have especially inspired the CPP leadership and incentivised them to support the China Model.<sup>12</sup> The Hun Sen government has been seeking Beijing's guidance not only on economic development but also on matters of political legitimacy and control.<sup>13</sup> In 2017, Hun Sen expressed admiration for Xi Jinping's leadership during the launch of the book *Xi Jinping: The Governance of China*, stating that it offered valuable lessons on good governance for Cambodia.<sup>14</sup>

Most importantly, strong ties with China have contributed to Cambodia's sustained economic growth, which has in turn enabled the CPP to boost its legitimacy and consolidate power. The imperative for performance-based legitimacy has led Cambodian elites to welcome Chinese influence, viewing China as a vital source of economic resources and support.<sup>15</sup> Since 2007,

China has surpassed Japan as the largest source of ODA and FDI to Cambodia. 24.8% of Cambodia's foreign trade is with China and 24.4% of foreign investment stock in Cambodia comes from China.<sup>16</sup> Construction of major China-funded infrastructure projects under the ambit of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was in progress despite the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, including the New Phnom Penh International Airport (US\$1.1 billion), New Siem Reap International Airport (US\$880 million), Phnom Penh-Sihanoukville expressway (US\$2 billion)<sup>17</sup> and Phnom Penh-Bavet expressway under the Build-Operate-Transfer-BOT-framework (US\$1.3 billion).<sup>18</sup>

Notably, China played a crucial role in enabling Cambodia's successful containment of the Covid-19 pandemic between 2020 and 2022, by providing vaccines, essential medical equipment and financial aid in a timely manner.<sup>19</sup> As a result, 2022 was the prime year of China's popularity in Cambodia. In the 2022 elite-opinion State of Southeast Asia (SSEA) survey, 84% of Cambodian respondents saw China as the most economically influential, with 70.6% welcoming this influence. Additionally, 75.3% perceived China as the most politically and strategically influential, with 54.1% expressing approval.<sup>20</sup>

Another important aspect to note is that the Cambodian government appreciates Chinese financing for meeting Cambodia's developmental needs without conditionalities on political and economic reforms, unlike Western development partners.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the lack of transparency and accountability surrounding China-funded infrastructure projects and investment deals provides avenues for Cambodian leaders and CPP's well-connected individuals to engage in lucrative business.<sup>22</sup> This has in turn allowed the Cambodian ruling elites to bolster their political and economic power base.<sup>23</sup> Numerous reports suggest that those who support Hun Sen's leadership have been rewarded with access to the country's resources such as land, forests, fisheries, mining concessions, air routes, and public construction.<sup>24</sup> This distribution of benefits primarily favours a selected group of Cambodian and Sino-Khmer tycoons, whose fortunes have grown in parallel with Hun Sen's political tenure.<sup>25</sup> For example, state-land privatisation orders in 2022 revealed that Canadia Bank (sister company of Overseas Chinese Investment Corporation-OCIC) was granted 10 hectares of land in Preah Sihanouk province's Prey Nob district, while Premier Land, a company owned by the daughter and son-in-law of the ruling-party Senator Oknha Ly Yong Phat obtained 130 hectares of land from the Sihanoukville Autonomous Port at an unrevealed price.<sup>26</sup>

### *Prioritising hard over soft infrastructure*

China's elite-centric approach is also expressed in its development financing's primary focus on hard infrastructure, with comparatively less emphasis on soft infrastructure that involves grassroots community, local governance, human resources development and basic social services such as healthcare, education, water and sanitation. According to the Lowy Institute, traditional development partners for Southeast Asia – namely the multilateral development

banks, Japan, Europe, South Korea, the US and Australia – assigned 24% of their total funding in 2015-2021 for governance and civil society and 30% for infrastructure whereas non-traditional partners (led by China) spent only 3% on governance and over 70% for infrastructure. In Cambodia, China funded only 7 projects in the governance and civil society sector in 2015-2021, compared to Japan’s 420 projects and the US’ 432 projects (Table 1).<sup>27</sup>

**Table 1. Hard and Soft Infrastructure Projects in Cambodia (2015-2021), Funded by China, United States and Japan**

Sector	Numbers of Projects		
	China	United States	Japan
<b>Hard Infrastructure</b>	36	7	430
Transport, Storage	25	-	247
Energy	9	6	6
Industry, Mining & Construction	1	1	1
Communications	-	-	38
<b>Social Infrastructure</b>	16	1700	1240
Governance & Civil Society	7	432	420
Health Service	7	975	232
Humanitarian Aid	-	19	10
Education	2	101	382
Water & Sanitation	1	6	164
General Environmental Protection	-	187	34

Source: Lowy Institute Southeast Asia Aid Map database, compiled by the author.<sup>28</sup>

### *China’s Elite-focused Youth and Educational Exchanges*

In this author’s own experience, China’s youth engagement in Cambodia tends to prioritise the elite over the general public; nominations of Cambodian participants are limited to certain targeted institutions, which raises concerns regarding transparency and fairness in the selection process.<sup>29</sup> This approach may hinder meaningful youth dialogues between the two countries. Ensuring transparency and extending opportunities to Cambodian non-elite youths in youth exchanges with China is advisable for enabling mutual understanding and improving perceptions of China among young Cambodians.<sup>30</sup>

China-supported youth groups in Cambodia also tend to be elite-centric. One example is the Youth House for Cambodia-China Friendship launched in January 2023, with the attendance of Minister Liu Jianchao, head of the CCP’s International Department, and Hun Manet, then head of the CPP’s Central Youth Wing. The Youth House aims to foster youth dialogue between the CCP and CPP. Hun Manet expressed at the inauguration event that “Cambodian

youth, particularly CPP youth, is ready to work with their Chinese counterparts to foster and further promote ties between the two countries to a new high.”<sup>31</sup>

On educational exchanges, according to the Cambodian Students Association in China, there are more than 2,000 Cambodian students currently studying in China, and at least 300 of them graduate every year.<sup>32</sup> Chinese scholarship opportunities have been expanded to include Cambodian government officials, including “online PhD programs” for officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>33</sup> In terms of Chinese language training, with the re-establishment of Chinese schools operated by the Chinese-Cambodian Federation, the Teochew Association, and other Chinese clan associations since 1992, a renewed interest in learning the Chinese language has emerged in Cambodia. Chinese language training has a strong focus on Chinese-speaking community and government officials.<sup>34</sup> There are two Confucius Institutes in Cambodia situated at the Royal Academy of Cambodia (CIRAC) and the University of Battambang, as well as 23 Confucius Classrooms across the country.<sup>35</sup> Of note, the website of CIRAC only features the Chinese version.<sup>36</sup> These Confucius Institutes have worked with Cambodian government agencies to provide Chinese language training programmes to Ministry of Interior, Ministry of National Defence, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, Ministry of Tourism, and the Ministry of National Assembly-Senate Relations and Inspections.<sup>37</sup> The Cambodian Ministry of Education recently signed a memorandum of understanding with its Chinese counterpart to establish a coordinating committee for Chinese language education and include Mandarin in the pilot curriculum in 20 public schools in Cambodia.<sup>38</sup>

## REWARDS AND SETBACKS OF CHINA’S APPROACH

### *China-Cambodia Community of Shared Future*

Years of cultivating a mutually beneficial relationship with the CPP-led government have brought significant strategic rewards for Beijing. Both countries closely coordinate with each other in developing common narratives on international issues and aligning their foreign policy objectives.<sup>39</sup> The annual SSEA survey carried out since 2019 consistently indicates that Cambodian elites – together with Laos – are the most cognisant and supportive of Chinese influence in the region. China uses the term “ironclad friendship” to refer to its very close partners such as Pakistan and Cambodia. Phnom Penh has earned that distinction by its strategic choice to be a solid friend to China on key issues of strategic significance for Beijing.<sup>40</sup> For example, all Southeast Asian countries adopt the “One-China policy” and recognise the People’s Republic of China (PRC) as the sole representative of China, but many are ambivalent on the question of China taking back Taiwan by force. Cambodia’s position on this matter is by far the most unequivocally pro-PRC with Hun Sen’s declaration that Phnom Penh “resolutely supports China’s every effort to achieve national re-unification”, which implicitly does not rule out the option of using force.<sup>41</sup> Another stark example is Cambodia’s consistent

support for China on the South China Sea disputes, so much so that Phnom Penh has been labelled as Beijing's client-state within ASEAN, even at the expense of ASEAN credibility.<sup>42</sup>

Amidst intensifying US-China strategic rivalry, China has increasingly leveraged its economic statecraft and discourse power in its relations with other countries – especially in the Global South—by offering alternative concepts and paradigms of international relations.<sup>43</sup> Cambodia has provided unwavering support for all Chinese initiatives which are intended to enhance its normative and discourse power abroad. During his visit to Beijing in February 2023, Hun Sen said that Cambodia will “actively support and participate” in China's Global Development Initiative (GDI) and Global Security Initiative (GSI), which he considers to be “of great significance to maintain world peace and promote common development”.<sup>44</sup> The joint statement of the visit says that “Cambodia supports China's proposal of GSI and stands ready to work with China on global security governance towards common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security.” This makes Cambodia the first Southeast Asian country to officially endorse the GSI, while neighbouring Vietnam and other maritime Southeast Asian states remain ambivalent.<sup>45</sup>

China's discourse power projection also promotes terms such as “ironclad friendship” and “community of shared destiny/future”, among others. It is China's common practice to insert these terms in joint documents with other countries to serve its propaganda and strategic communications. Beijing has found Phnom Penh a very receptive partner in endorsing Chinese ‘slogan politics’<sup>46</sup> with little hesitation. Cambodia is among the first foreign countries embracing the Chinese concept of “community of shared destiny/future” with the signing of the Action Plan on Building China-Cambodia Community of Shared Future (2019-2023).<sup>47</sup> The new action plan for the 2023-2028 period will be signed by this year-end. In the latest 2023 Joint Statement on Building a China-Cambodia Community with a Shared Future in the New Era, the term “community with a shared future” was mentioned eight times and Chinese slogans such as “the Chinese path to modernization”, “the second centenary goal” and “the great national rejuvenation” are also peppered across the document.<sup>48</sup>

The China-Cambodia Community of Shared Future has now rhetorically evolved into a “diamond hexagon cooperation” (钻石六边合作), a new concept coined during Hun Sen's visit to Beijing in February 2023. It represents six priority areas of political cooperation, production capacity and quality, agriculture, energy, security, and people-to-people exchanges.<sup>49</sup> In Chinese literary tradition, it connotes prestige, value, and durability. In 2023, Japan and Cambodia also celebrate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of bilateral ties with the decision to upgrade the relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Against this backdrop, one may conclude that China wishes to project its ties with Cambodia as being more “prestigious and unbreakable” than Cambodia-Japan relations.



*Limited Chinese soft power among the Cambodian public*

China plays a crucial role in Cambodia's contemporary political and economic development; Massive Chinese investments, especially in hard infrastructure, real estate and low-end manufacturing, have transformed Cambodia's landscape, contributed to the country's sustained economic growth, and provided jobs for many Cambodians. However, China's pre-eminent influence over the Cambodian economy and its leverage over the CPP government have not yet been translated into prevalent soft power in Cambodian society, especially at the grassroots level.

The rapid pace of Chinese large-scale investment projects without proper impact studies on local people and cultural understanding has undermined Chinese soft power in Cambodia. Many of these projects are undertaken by Chinese private companies but their unsustainable business activities stem in part from the lack of rigorous oversight from the Chinese government; this is compounded and abetted by Cambodia's poor governance capacity. As a result, problems of environmental degradation, land grabbing and associated loss of livelihoods are widely reported with regard to Chinese-funded projects.<sup>50</sup> The most salient example is the early-phase Chinese development in Sihanoukville, which garnered widespread criticism among the local people due to the influx of gambling industries and associated crimes, disregard of local regulations and customs, and the crowding-out of local businesses.<sup>51</sup> Massive Chinese demand for construction also led to land conflicts, with politically well-connected and wealthy Cambodians engaging in land-grabbing. In addition, few employment and business opportunities arise for local people due to the Chinese approach of importing their own labour and inputs. The 'Blue Bay' Chinese-invested real estate project is an illustrative case; It acquired land from locals, subcontracted work to Chinese companies, imported construction materials and brought labour over from China, despite Cambodia possessing a substantial labour force.<sup>52</sup>

Of note, while a majority of Cambodian elites recognise and welcome Chinese economic and strategic-political influence, they prefer Australia, the US, Europe and, to a lesser extent, Japan for their own or their children's tertiary education, according to the annual SSEA survey.<sup>53</sup> In another survey of Cambodian university students in 2017, 81.7% of the respondents recognised that China currently has closer relations with Cambodia compared to the US. However, 72.6% preferred that Cambodia developed closer ties with the US in the future.<sup>54</sup> In terms of online search, the countries that Cambodians are most interested in are Japan (32%), followed by Thailand (19.3%) and Vietnam (16.4%), and China (11.8%).<sup>55</sup>

Cambodian youth's perception of the "New Chinese", who arrived in Cambodia since the 1990s, also sheds light on how Chinese influence is by the Cambodian public. In a survey conducted in 2022 with 75.2% of the respondents being under 40 years of age, 64% acknowledged that Chinese economic influence in Cambodia is "high" and 17% perceived it

as “very high”. On Chinese political influence, 38% considered it “high,” and 15% regarded it as “very high,” indicating their awareness of China’s influence in Cambodian economy and politics.<sup>56</sup> Yet, while acknowledging Chinese predominant influence, a majority rated social tensions between Cambodians and the New Chinese as “high” (45%) and “very high” (14%), which the survey author attributed to “lack of mutual understanding and respect, language barrier and miscommunication, and the bad behaviour of some New Chinese”.<sup>57</sup> The survey also indicates reservations concerning the integration of Chinese nationals into Cambodian society.

## CONCLUSION

China-Cambodia ties have fast developed since the 2010s, coinciding with the rise of authoritarianism in China under Xi Jinping and the democratic backsliding in Cambodia that led to the monopolisation of power by the CPP under Hun Sen’s leadership. China has consistently adopted an elite-centric approach that invests heavily in abetting the regime security and bolstering the legitimacy of the CPP government; this is done through aid, investment, finance and political support in the face of Western criticism and sanctions. This elite-centric approach has brought significant strategic rewards for Beijing, including the rapid expansion of Chinese economic influence in Cambodia and Phnom Penh’s strong support for Chinese discourse power, and key foreign policy goals on issues such as Taiwan and the South China Sea disputes. However, there remain negative perceptions towards China and its expanding influence among Cambodians, especially at the grassroots level and among the young. This is partly due to China’s lack of meaningful grassroots engagement in its public diplomacy and development assistance as well as the ignoring of social, economic, and environmental impacts for local communities in the implementation of China-funded investment projects. These challenges highlight the need for China to place greater emphasis on addressing public perceptions, engaging with local communities, and fostering meaningful connections with the Cambodian people at various levels. Towards this end, China can harness its resources in supporting cultural exchange projects through existing clan associations to promote its soft power and alleviate misunderstandings among the Cambodia public.<sup>58</sup> In addition, China’s shift towards “small yet smart” approach in its BRI, encompassing 1,000 small-scale livelihood assistance projects and vocational training opportunities,<sup>59</sup> also enhance its credibility in improving the wellbeing of Cambodians.

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