

# PERSPECTIVE

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## Strong Party-to-Party Relations Cement Cambodia-China Bilateral Ties

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*A general view during the opening ceremony of Cambodia's Morodok Techo National Stadium, funded by China's grant aid under its Belt and Road Initiative, in Phnom Penh on 18 December 2021. Photo: Lon JADINA/AFP.*

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- The Cambodia-China relationship has been significantly shaped and enhanced by party-to-party engagement. The Cambodian People's Party (CPP) and the Chinese Communist Party (CPC) have played an instrumental role in forging political trust and personal ties between the leaders of the two countries.
- The two political parties contribute to the building of political trust through mutual learning and understanding, developing common strategic narratives on certain international issues and aligning certain foreign policy agenda.
- The strategic interests of the CPP in engaging the CPC include promoting performance-based legitimacy and party-building. The CPC has gained a solid political and economic foundation and strong influence in Cambodia through its comprehensive engagement strategy, which includes party diplomacy.
- Cambodia has increasingly relied on China for its economic growth, and this has given China an advantage, and it is here to stay in terms of political, economic, and social footprint and influence.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Under Prime Minister Hun Sen's leadership, bilateral ties between Cambodia and China have been continuously strengthened. In 2010, the relationship was upgraded to a comprehensive strategic partnership. From 1999 to 2022, Hun Sen made seven official visits and eight working visits to China. The latest working visit to China was in February 2022 to mark the third anniversary of his visit on 10 February 2020 to show political support for China in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. In November 2020, Chinese President Xi Jinping awarded the Friendship Medal of the People's Republic of China to Her Majesty the Queen-Mother Monineath Sihanouk.

The political parties of both countries play a critical role in forging this trust-based and result-oriented relationship. This paper sheds light on the cooperation between the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) and the Communist Party of China (CPC) and explains how party-to-party ties affect the quality of the overall bilateral relationship. It argues that the political parties contribute to the building of political trust through mutual learning and understanding, developing common strategic narratives on certain international issues, and aligning certain foreign policy matters.

## **BACKGROUND**

Cambodia-China relations have been remarkably enhanced after the signing of the comprehensive strategic partnership in 2010. Significantly, China was the country Cambodia signed its first comprehensive strategic partnership agreement with. During the fight against Covid-19 and the subsequent socio-economic recovery, Cambodia was increasingly dependent on China, which became Cambodia's top trading partner, investor and donor.

Economics explains most clearly Cambodia's foreign policy behaviour towards China, especially in infrastructure development, trade, investment, and tourism. China perceives Cambodia as a trustworthy partner and a launchpad to expand its geopolitical and geo-economic influence in the Mekong region. Meanwhile, Cambodia perceives China as its most important development partner, for providing it with significant resources to strengthen the output legitimacy of its government.

Cambodia has been supportive of China-proposed international initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Community of Shared Future. In April 2019, the action plan for forging the Cambodia-China Community of Shared Future (2019-2023) was signed by the two parties, covering a wide area of cooperation including party-to-party cooperation. Both sides have agreed to give full play to the important role of inter-party exchanges in boosting bilateral cooperation and promoting greater development of Cambodia-China relations in the new era.

The CPP and CPC formed official party-to-party ties in February 1996 during the visit of a CPP delegation to Beijing, forging a partnership based on the principles of independence,

equality, mutual respect and non-interference. From 1996 to 2020, there were more than 60 official visits made to each other. In August 2011, both parties signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on cooperation and exchange. In September 2017, another agreement was signed to deepen party-to-party ties. And most recently in February 2023, party-to-party relations were featured in the joint statement between the two countries on building a Cambodia-China Community with a Shared Future in the New Era. The statement reads that “both sides agreed to strengthen political party cooperation and exchanges in various areas and at all levels to enhance exchanges on governance and personnel training; promote cooperation between counterpart departments on supervision, organisation and publicity; and advance friendly youth exchanges.”<sup>1</sup>

Concerning human resource development and capacity building, CPC has provided scholarships and short-term training and field visits to key members of the CPP. The training programmes aim to promote personal friendship, develop a shared worldview, and share best practices in governance. From 2006 to 2019, the CPC offered more than 40 scholarships to the CPP staff members to pursue higher education at various universities in China, mainly in public administration. Moreover, from 2015 to 2019, there were five field visits to China per year. At the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, the CPC organised two online training courses. Cooperation on capacity building is expected to gain new momentum in 2023 after the removal of travel restrictions.

## **STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE**

The enhanced party-to-party ties have significantly contributed to the overall bilateral relations in three areas. Firstly, this is seen in the promoting of mutual political trust through personal ties and mutual understanding. The exchanges of visits at all levels between the two parties have cultivated personal ties and friendship between the leaders of the two parties.

At the bilateral meeting in August 2018, then-Minister Song Tao, Head of CPC’s International Department, and Prime Minister Hun Sen, President of the CPP stressed the need for broadening pragmatic cooperation in all fields.<sup>2</sup> In the meeting between Minister Liu Jianchao and Hun Sen in August 2022, China pledged to increase the import of agricultural produce from Cambodia and deepen cooperation on green energy.<sup>3</sup> Liu Jianchao also met General Hun Manet, the future Prime Minister candidate from CPP.

Notably, Hun Manet was first introduced to President Xi Jinping during Hun Sen’s trip to Beijing in February 2020. Various Chinese leaders have met Hun Manet to further promote mutual understanding and connect future generations of leadership. For instance, State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi met Hun Manet during his participation at the ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting and related meetings in August 2022, ending with a renewed commitment to advance the China-Cambodia community with a shared future and to further develop China-Cambodia solidarity and friendship.<sup>4</sup> In January 2023, a Youth House was launched to promote personal ties and mutual learning between the young leaders from the two parties. The launching event was presided over by General Hun Manet and Minister

Liu Jianchao. Indeed, China has built a solid foundation in Cambodia, in the politico-economic and the socio-cultural realms.

Secondly, bilateral ties have been strengthened where the developing shared worldviews and strategic narratives is concerned. The two parties have supported each other in socialising and diffusing common strategic concepts, norms and initiatives at various multilateral platforms. Speaking at the Leaders' Summit between the CPC and World Political Parties in July 2021, Hun Sen said "maintaining political stability and placing the happiness, prosperity and well-being of the people at the heart of major political decisions of the CPC is a good example for other political parties to learn from"<sup>5</sup>. This statement reflects the convergence of strategic interest and worldviews between the two parties.

In 2014, President Xi Jinping introduced a new Asian security concept featuring mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality and coordination. Moreover, in 2022, President Xi Jinping proposed a Global Security Initiative featuring common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security. In a similar vein, at the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus) in Siem Reap in August 2022, Prime Minister Hun Sen introduced the "harmonious security" concept featuring mutual respect, mutual understanding, mutual trust, and mutual interest. To realise 'harmonious security', Hun Sen proposed five elements, namely (a) promoting ASEAN centrality, (b) promoting open, inclusive and rules-based regional security architecture, (c) strengthening people-centred and trust-based cooperation, (d) promoting common and comprehensive security and (e) promoting cooperative security.

The Global Security Initiative concept and the harmonious security concept are complementary. The key difference here is the concept of rules-based international order. China is reluctant to use this term in its foreign policy narrative. Another difference relates to the understanding of and approaches to the new Asian security concept proposed by China with an emphasis on an Asian security that belongs to Asia. President 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".<sup>6</sup> The Cambodia-proposed harmonious security concept is more open and inclusive, and although there are slight normative differences between it and China's New Asian Security, both focus on common, comprehensive, and cooperative security.

Thirdly, we see an aligning on certain foreign policy matters. Being driven by common strategic interests, the two political parties have aligned their foreign policy agenda, especially within the frameworks of CPC-led multilateral platforms such as BRICS Political Parties, Think Tanks and Civil Society Organisations Forum,<sup>7</sup> CPC in Dialogue with Political Parties from Southeast Asia,<sup>8</sup> and World Political Parties Summit. Moreover, Cambodia and China work closely within the framework of the International Conference of Asian Political Parties (ICAPP), the world's largest political organisation consisting of more than 300 political parties from the Asia Pacific region. Cambodia supports China's efforts in promoting a new model of international relations by fostering a new model of party-to-party relations in which "political parties seek common grounds while shelving differences, respect and learn from one another."<sup>9</sup> This is also in line with Cambodia's foreign policy objective of promoting mutual respect, mutual understanding, mutual trust and mutual interest for peace and prosperity (M4P2).

It is worth noting that the CPP firmly adheres to the “One-China” policy and has been a strong advocate of Chinese international initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the new Asian security concept, the Community with a Shared Future, the Global Development Initiative (GDI), and the Global Security Initiative (GSI).<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the CPP and CPC share similar views on promoting South-South cooperation and the Non-Aligned Movement. Hun Sen, in particular, strives to revitalise the spirit and momentum of these movements to protect the legitimate interests of developing countries.<sup>11</sup> Due to this strategic convergence of interests and worldviews, Cambodia is generally seen as a “natural ally” of China.

## **CPP’S STRATEGIC INTERESTS**

The CPP’s strategic interests in engaging the CPC include the enhancement of the party’s performance legitimacy,<sup>12</sup> and party-building. China is Cambodia’s top trading partner as well as investor. In 2021, the total fixed-asset investment from China hit USD 2.32 billion and the bilateral trade volume reached USD 11.2 billion. China has provided a grant of USD 2.06 billion to Cambodia from 2001 to 2022. Moreover, China accounts for more than 40 percent of Cambodia’s foreign debt, which topped USD 10 billion in 2021.<sup>13</sup> China sold more than 40 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines and donated 13.3 million doses to Cambodia. It has also expressed its support of a development path for Cambodia best suited to its national conditions,<sup>14</sup> indicating that China will not interfere with Cambodia’s domestic affairs.

Although Cambodia is increasingly reliant on China on economic and security matters, it does not mean that Cambodia has compromised its strategic autonomy and independence. For instance, Cambodia is the first Southeast Asian country to openly register support for Japan’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific and to co-sponsor UN resolutions to condemn Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.<sup>15</sup> Cambodia’s position on Ukraine has helped it to forge closer strategic ties between Cambodia and the US and its allies in Europe and Asia. These choices are expressions of Cambodian autonomy. Additionally, the CPP Congress held on 28-29 January 2023 articulates CPP’s foreign policy and its focus on independence and international law.<sup>16</sup>

Party building constitutes a key pillar in party-to-party relations. Party building requires theory development and modernisation, organisational capacity and leadership, and discipline and proper conduct to win the hearts and minds of the people. The CPP has adopted the approach of “reflecting in the mirror, taking a bath, rubbing off dirt, taking a treatment, and undergoing a surgery” as a systematic reform process.<sup>17</sup> However, the reform results are limited. Cambodia remains one of the most corrupt countries in the world. In 2021, it was ranked 157 out of 180 countries in the Corruption Perception Index, with a score of 23 out of 100.<sup>18</sup>

As part of the party-building process, the young generation of the CPP leadership tends to prefer centrist politics. Suos Yara, the spokesperson of the CPP, suggested adopting centrist democracy as the political ideology of the party.<sup>19</sup> Centrist democracy is the middle path between the extreme left and extreme right. Centrist democracy stresses the values and principles of social market economy in which a free-market economy goes hand in hand with social and environmental protection and the promotion of humanity. The CPP believes that state intervention is necessary to ensure that the fruits of growth are shared in a just and fair

manner. Moreover, being inspired by the success story of the CPC in poverty reduction, the CPP is similarly pursuing a people-centric development strategy to ensure that the people are the owners of the development and that they fairly receive the fruits of development and progress.<sup>20</sup> However, corruption and the mismanagement of state resources remain the core governance issue in the Kingdom.<sup>21</sup>

Both parties have exchanged views on governance-related issues such as the development of socialist democracy, consultative democracy, and social market economy. Indeed, these governance concepts are in line with the CPP's development strategy as outlined in its five-year development strategy. The CPP is drafting another five-year plan for 2023-2028 by focusing on five pillars, namely human capital development, economic diversification, private sector development and employment, resilient, sustainable and inclusive development, and digital economy and society. At the centre of the five pillars, the plan features governance reforms aimed at attaining institutional building, clean public services, an effective and clean justice system, efficiency in governance, and private sector governance.

## CONCLUSION

The Cambodia-China relationship has been shaped by the quality of party-to-party cooperation. The CPP and the CPC have been instrumental in cementing political ties. After forming an official relationship in 1996, the two acted in a wide range of cooperation areas such as exchange of visits at all levels, sharing of experiences in party building and state governance, and human resources development. Moreover, both parties have formed shared worldviews and strategic narratives on certain international issues, while coordinating foreign policy postures. The CPC's party diplomacy towards Cambodia has been proactive and robust.

The CPP regards the CPC as a key source of performance legitimacy, especially in infrastructure development and the promotion of investment, trade, and tourism. It is argued that Cambodia increasingly relies on China for economic growth. Such power asymmetry gives China leverage over Cambodia in terms of political, economic, and social influence. CPP-CPC ties will continue to shape, if not define, the overall bilateral relationship between the two countries and their people.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Cambodia, <https://www.mfaic.gov.kh/posts/2023-02-11-Press-Release-Joint-Statement-between-the-Kingdom-of-Cambodia-and-the-People-s-Republic-of-China-on-Building-a-Cam-09-16-11>.

<sup>2</sup> Xinhua News, "Cambodia, China vow to broaden cooperation", Xinhua News, 30 August 2018, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-08/30/c\\_137430584.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-08/30/c_137430584.htm)

<sup>3</sup> Ry Sochan, "CPC's Liu lauds Kingdom's growth", Phnom Penh Post, 24 August 2022, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national-politics/cpcs-liu-lauds-kingdoms-growth>.

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- <sup>4</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjzb\\_663304/wjzbz\\_663308/activities\\_663312/202208/t20220804\\_10734215.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjzb_663304/wjzbz_663308/activities_663312/202208/t20220804_10734215.html).
- <sup>5</sup> Remarks by Samdech Techo Hun Sen at the Leaders' Summit between the Communist Party of China and World Political Parties on 6 July 2021, <https://pressocm.gov.kh/en/archives/70940>
- <sup>6</sup> Remarks by President Xi Jinping at the Fourth Summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia, 21 May 2014. [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/zyjh\\_665391/201405/t20140527\\_678163.html#:~:text=China%20advocates%20a%20new%20security,positive%20role%20in%20regional%20affairs.](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/201405/t20140527_678163.html#:~:text=China%20advocates%20a%20new%20security,positive%20role%20in%20regional%20affairs.)
- <sup>7</sup> This is part of BRICS Cooperation Mechanism, consisting of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.
- <sup>8</sup> This is part of China-ASEAN cooperation framework. The first China-Southeast Asia Political Party Meeting took place virtually in 2021.
- <sup>9</sup> The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 1 December 2017, [http://english.scio.gov.cn/topnews/2017-12/01/content\\_50081262.htm](http://english.scio.gov.cn/topnews/2017-12/01/content_50081262.htm).
- <sup>10</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx\\_662805/202205/t20220509\\_10683416.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202205/t20220509_10683416.html).
- <sup>11</sup> Chheang Vannarith, "Cambodia hedges", East Asia Forum, 13 September 2022, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2022/09/13/cambodia-hedges/>.
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- <sup>18</sup> Transparency International, <https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/cambodia>.
- <sup>19</sup> Suos Yara, "Centrist democracy's compatibility with CPP's political doctrine", *Khmer Times*, July 17, 2018, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/512470/centrist-democracys-compatibility-with-cpps-political-doctrine/>.
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- <sup>21</sup> *Camboja News*, "Cambodia ranked most corrupt in the region- juridical system the main cause", 26 January 2022, <https://cambojanews.com/cambodia-scored-the-lowest-in-the-region-as-the-corrupt-country-juridical-system-found-the-main-source-of-corruption/>.

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