



RESTRICTED BANDWAGONING? CAMBODIA'S ALIGNMENT WITH CHINA  
AND ITS RIPPLE EFFECTS ON REGIONAL SECURITY DYNAMICS

BY

VANNMONY SVAY

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS (ASIA PACIFIC STUDIES)

THAMMASAT INSTITUTE OF AREA STUDIES

THAMMASAT UNIVERSITY

ACADEMIC YEAR 2025

COPYRIGHT OF THAMMASAT UNIVERSITY

RESTRICTED BANDWAGONING? CAMBODIA'S ALIGNMENT WITH CHINA  
AND ITS RIPPLE EFFECTS ON REGIONAL SECURITY DYNAMICS

BY

VANNMONY SVAY

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS (ASIA PACIFIC STUDIES)

THAMMASAT INSTITUTE OF AREA STUDIES

THAMMASAT UNIVERSITY

ACADEMIC YEAR 2025

COPYRIGHT OF THAMMASAT UNIVERSITY

THAMMASAT UNIVERSITY  
THAMMASAT INSTITUTE OF AREA STUDIES  
THESIS

BY

VANNMONY SVAY

ENTITLED

RESTRICTED BANDWAGONING? CAMBODIA'S ALIGNMENT WITH CHINA AND ITS RIPPLE  
EFFECTS ON REGIONAL SECURITY DYNAMICS

was approved as partial fulfilment of the requirements for  
the degree of Master of Arts (Asia-Pacific Studies)

on December 15, 2025

Chairman



(Associate Professor M.L.Pinitbhand Paribatra, Ph.D.)

Member and Advisor



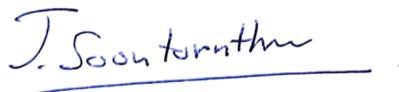
(Associate Professor Jittipat Poonkham, Ph.D.)

Member



(Assistant Professor Pasakorn Thammachote, Ph.D.)

Director



(Assistant Professor Thanyaporn Soontornthum, Ph.D.)

Thesis Title	RESTRICTED BANDWAGONING? CAMBODIA'S ALIGNMENT WITH CHINA AND ITS RIPPLE EFFECTS ON REGIONAL SECURITY DYNAMICS
Author	Mister Vannmmony Svay
Degree	Master of Arts (Asia-Pacific Studies)
Major Field/Faculty/University	Master of Arts (Asia-Pacific Studies) Thammasat Institute of Area Studies Thammasat University
Thesis Advisor	Associate Professor Dr. Jittipat Poonkham, Ph.D.
Academic Year	2025

## ABSTRACT

Amid growing Sino-American tensions, Cambodia's foreign policy has oblique significantly towards China. Cambodia has received economic aid, trade, investments, and even political support. Cambodia's alignment with China has reshaped regional dynamics in Southeast Asia, raising concerns about ASEAN unity, regional security, and geopolitical stability. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the factors that influence Cambodia's deepening relationship with China and examine its profound implications for regional dynamics in Southeast Asia. To achieve this objective, the paper will employ an exploratory qualitative approach, incorporating thematic analysis, archival research, content and historical analysis, and interviews with Cambodian experts. The paper uses neoclassical realism as its guiding theory and examines Cambodia's foreign policy decisions through the lens of systemic pressure, domestic politics, and leadership perceptions while addressing the questions of how such decisions impact Southeast Asia's regional security dynamics. It explores how Cambodia's alignment with China is classified as restricted bandwagoning, and is influenced by political, economic, and strategic considerations, and how such decisions affect regional stability and ASEAN cohesion. Using the designed framework and collected data, the paper argues that Cambodia's alignment has triggered significant ripple effects across the region. It also reviews how Cambodia-China ties

affects Cambodia-Vietnam relations, illustrating how Vietnam perceives this alignment as a challenge to its regional influence, particularly within ASEAN's collective security framework. Cambodia's support for China, including its 2012 veto of ASEAN's joint declaration on the South China Sea, has further strained ASEAN unity and reduced the organization's effectiveness in dealing with pressing security issues. Furthermore, Cambodia's increasing dependence on China raises concerns about its ability to maintain diplomatic flexibility, as its foreign policy decisions become increasingly influenced by China's strategic objectives. By integrating political, economic, and security dimensions, this paper fills a critical research gap in the literature by moving beyond Cambodia-China bilateral relations to broader regional dynamics. The paper highlights how Cambodia's restricted bandwagoning contributes to ASEAN fragmentation while exposing how small states face challenges when navigating great power competitions. The paper contributes to the understanding of Cambodia's strategic choices and their broader implications for regional security and diplomatic stability in Southeast Asia.

**Keywords:** Cambodia-China relations, Ripple effects, Foreign policy, China's influences, Regional security, Neoclassical realism, Restricted bandwagoning, Cambodia

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to everyone who supported me throughout the journey of completing this thesis. This work would not have been possible without the guidance, encouragement, and patience of many people.

First and foremost, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to my advisor, **Associate Professor Dr. Jittipat Poonkham**, whose patience, expertise, and thoughtful guidance shaped the direction of this thesis from the very beginning. His willingness to listen, provide detailed feedback, and challenge my ideas pushed me to think more critically and strengthened the quality of my work.

I would also like to acknowledge the faculty members, professors, and staff at Thammasat Institute of Area Studies. Throughout my studies, they have not only equipped me with academic knowledge but also inspired me to approach research with curiosity and integrity. Their dedication to teaching and mentorship has had a profound impact on my growth as a student and researcher.

To my classmates and peers, thank you for the many discussions, both academic and casual, that helped me refine my ideas and stay grounded. The sense of community we built together made the difficult parts of this journey more bearable and the joyful moments even more meaningful. I am grateful for the encouragement, shared resources, and the simple check-ins that reminded me I was not working alone.

Lastly, a special note of appreciation goes to my family and my fiancé, whose unconditional love and support have been the foundation of all my achievements. Thank you for your understanding during late nights of writing, for the words of encouragement during stressful moments, and for being the constant source of strength that kept me moving forward. Your belief in me has always been my greatest motivation.

This thesis is a reflection of collective support, and I am truly thankful to have had such people in my life. To all of you, I extend my heartfelt appreciation.

Mr. Vannmony Svay

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	(1)
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	(3)
LIST OF TABLES.....	(6)
LIST OF FIGURES .....	(8)
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS.....	(9)
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION, LITERATURE REVIEW, AND METHODOLOGY .....	1
1.1 Research Background .....	1
1.2 Problem Statement and Research Questions.....	4
1.3 Significance of Study .....	5
1.4 Literature Review.....	5
1.4.1 Terms of Analysis.....	6
1.4.2 Overview of Cambodia-China Relations.....	8
1.4.3 Economic Statecraft and Asymmetric Dependence .....	14
1.4.4 Cambodia's Alignment with China and Vietnam's response .....	16
1.4.5 Literature Gap and Contribution .....	18
1.5 Theoretical Framework: Neoclassical Realism .....	22
1.6 Conceptual Frameworks.....	26
1.7 Data Collection .....	30
CHAPTER 2 ASSESSING CAMBODIA'S ALIGNMENT WITH CHINA.....	32
2.1 Systemic Pressures: Great-Power Competition .....	33
2.1.1 Historical Context of US-China Rivalry in Southeast Asia.....	34
2.1.2 US and China's Competing Approaches to Cambodia.....	36

2.1.3 Cambodia's Strategic Calculations .....	40
2.1.4 Implications for Regional Stability and Cambodia's Sovereignty.....	43
2.2 Domestic Factors.....	45
2.2.1 Regime Survival and Legitimacy.....	45
2.2.2. Economic Dependence on China .....	49
2.2.3. Domestic Political Landscape and Foreign Policy .....	53
2.2.4 Public Perception and Social Impact.....	55
2.3 Leaders' Perceptions on China.....	58
2.3.1 Hun Sen's Legacy and Views.....	58
2.3.2 Hun Manet's Continuity and Policy Priorities .....	60
2.4 Conclusion .....	62
CHAPTER 3 THE RIPPLE EFFECTS ON REGIONAL SECURITY DYNAMICS.....	63
3.1 ASEAN's Strategic Cohesion and Cambodia's Disruptive Role .....	65
3.1.1 Cambodia's Role in ASEAN.....	65
3.1.2 ASEAN's Unity in Crisis: Consensus vs. Competition .....	70
3.1.3 Cambodia's Balancing Dilemma .....	75
3.2 Regional Power Dynamics Beyond ASEAN .....	78
3.2.1 Ream Naval Base and Maritime Tensions.....	78
3.2.2 Strategic Realignment and the Rise of Minilateralism .....	82
3.3 Conclusion .....	85
CHAPTER 4 THE RIPPLE EFFECTS ON CAMBODIA-VIETNAM RELATIONS .....	88
4.1 Vietnam's Threat Perceptions and Strategic Calculations .....	90
4.1.1 Strategic and military threats.....	90
4.1.2 Economic Vulnerabilities and Strategic Concerns .....	93

4.1.3 Risks of ASEAN disunity and diplomatic isolation.....	97
4.1.4 Strategic Calculation: balancing and restraints.....	99
4.2 Vietnam-Cambodia Bilateral Relations.....	102
4.2.1 Historical Cooperation vs. Suspicion .....	102
4.2.2 Current Political and Diplomatic Relations .....	104
4.2.3 Economic Interdependence and Soft Power.....	107
4.2.4 Security Cooperation and Border Management.....	111
4.2.5 Vietnam's Attempts to Counterbalance China's Influence in Cambodia.....	115
4.3 Vietnam's Regional Strategy and Hedging Behavior.....	118
4.3.1 Military Modernization and Defense Partnerships .....	119
4.3.2 Multilateral Security Strategy and ASEAN Frameworks .....	122
4.3.3 Vietnam's Hedging Strategy .....	125
4.4 Conclusion .....	128
CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION .....	130
5.1 Key Findings Summary.....	130
5.2 Limitations of the Study and Prospect for Future Study .....	134
REFERENCES .....	138
APPENDICES .....	163
APPENDIX A CHINESE-FUNDED PROJECTS IN CAMBODIA (As of 2025) .....	164

## LIST OF TABLES

Tables	Page
2.1 Competing U.S. and Chinese approaches toward Cambodia	40
2.2 Cambodia-China Trade Indicators	52

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figures	Page
1.6 Conceptual Frameworks	30
2.1 Neoclassical realist framework explaining Cambodia's alignment with China	33

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviations	Terms
ADMM	ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting
AI	Artificial Intelligence
AOIP	ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific
ARF	ASEAN Regional Forum
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AUKUS	Australia-United Kingdom-United States (security partnership)
BIDC	Bank for Investment and Development of Cambodia
BLO	Border Liaison Office
BOT	Build-Operate-Transfer
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CAVA	Cambodian Alumni Association of Vietnamese Universities
CCFTA	China-Cambodia Free Trade Agreement
CKFTA	Cambodia-Korea Free Trade Agreement
CLV-DTA	Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Development Triangle Area
CNRP	Cambodia National Rescue Party
CoC	Code of Conduct
CPP	Cambodian People's Party
CSIS	Center for Strategic and International Studies
DOC	Declaration on the Conduct of Parties (in the South China Sea)
EAS	East Asia Summit
EBA	Everything But Arms (scheme)
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GDCE	General Department of Customs and Excise (of Cambodia)
IMF	International Monetary Fund
LMI	Lower Mekong Initiative
MoFAIC	Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (of Cambodia)

NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
ORF	Observer Research Foundation
PLA	People's Liberation Army
QUAD	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue
RCEP	Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership
SEZ	Special Economic Zone
SLOC	Sea Lines of Communication
SSEZ	Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone
UDG	Union Development Group
UN	United Nations
UNTAC	United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia
US/U.S.	United States
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VNA	Vietnam News Agency

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION, LITERATURE REVIEW, AND METHODOLOGY

#### 1.1 Research Background

"We don't have to choose between the US and China; there is no need to do so. Whether you force me to take one side or not, I will refuse," stated the former Cambodian Prime Minister, Samdech Hun Sen. The rising competition between the US and China has prompted Cambodia to clarify its position amid increasing international scrutiny regarding its close ties with China. He further emphasized that Cambodia's policy aligns "hand in hand with that of ASEAN." The country commits to three key principles: first, peace and development; second, taking no one as an enemy; and third, respecting ASEAN Centrality (Ry, 2022). These statements reflect Cambodia's official commitment to neutrality and multilateralism within ASEAN, particularly amid intensifying great-power rivalry.

However, Cambodia's actions on controversial issues, including the South China Sea, often contradicted its stated adherence to ASEAN's principles. For instance, as ASEAN Chair back in 2012, Cambodia vetoed attempts to mention the South China Sea issues in the joint declaration of the summit, which rendered it a historic failure of the regional body (BBC, 2012). This episode is often used to show how Cambodia is increasingly aligning its policies with China, especially when regional interests clash with China's strategic goals.

Another example came from the China-funded Funan Techo Canal project funded by China which started its construction in August. This project allows Cambodia

to reduce its long-term reliance on Vietnamese strategic ports in importing raw materials from China and exporting finished goods to the United States and Western markets. It strongly concerned Vietnam's economy, as Cambodia could depend on its waterway transportation. At the same time, the project shows how Cambodia is becoming more dependent on Chinese funding and infrastructure support, while Vietnam's influence in Cambodia's economic connections is decreasing. These developments suggest potential implications for Cambodia's future positions in regional and international affairs, which also include issues related to the South China Sea dispute (Brancaccio, 2024).

Over the past two decades, Cambodia's foreign policy choices have undergone a significant shift, marked by a noticeable tilt towards China. This shift indicates a gradual change from a balanced foreign policy that involved engagement with Vietnam, ASEAN, and the United States, moving instead toward a preference for China, rather than a sudden or total change. Since 1997, there has been a noticeable increase and consolidation of bilateral ties. The two nations' relationship was upgraded to a "**Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Cooperation**" in December 2010 (Cheunboran, 2018). As a result of this cooperation, Cambodia has benefited from economic assistance and aid, trade investment, and political support from China, while also expressing its favor towards China's positions on contentious regional issues, especially the South China Sea disputes.

This study argues that Cambodia's foreign policy toward China represents a pattern of restricted bandwagoning, shaped by both systemic pressures and domestic constraints. Rather than completely giving up its foreign policy independence, Cambodia chooses to align with China selectively to gain economic and political advantages while still engaging with ASEAN and steering clear of formal alliances. At the same time, this pattern has raised concerns that go beyond the Cambodia-China bilateral relationship and have an impact on ASEAN cohesiveness and regional security dynamics.

The **ripple effects** of Cambodia's alignment refer to the indirect and cascading consequences of its foreign policy choices across political, security, and institutional dimensions. These effects are most evident in ASEAN unity, regional security cooperation, and Cambodia-Vietnam relations. As Cambodia strengthens its ties with China, the power dynamics in Southeast Asia are increasingly influenced by issues like building consensus within ASEAN, trust among member states, and the reactions of neighboring countries, especially Vietnam. The influence of great-power competition on Southeast Asia's geopolitical order, ASEAN's role in resolving disputes, and regional stability are all seriously called into question by these ripple effects. By looking at political, economic, and strategic aspects, this thesis seeks to investigate how Cambodia's alignment with China has shaped regional dynamics, providing a comprehensive understanding of Southeast Asia's evolving geopolitical landscape.

## 1.2 Problem Statement and Research Questions

Cambodia's growing alignment with China has significant implications for regional stability in Southeast Asia. Although Cambodia gains politically and economically from this cooperation, ASEAN member states are concerned about regional cohesion, security cooperation, and geopolitical balance. The decision-making dynamics and security framework of ASEAN have been impacted by Cambodia's growing economic reliance on Beijing and its support for China's position on important issues like the South China Sea. Nevertheless, the majority of current research concentrates on Cambodia-China ties alone, with little examination of how this alignment influences more general regional connections. This disparity emphasizes the necessity of a thorough analysis of how Cambodia's strategic positioning with China affects Southeast Asia's geopolitical landscape, ASEAN unity, and regional security.

While many analyses depict Cambodia as fully bandwagoning with China, this thesis argues that Cambodia's behavior is better seen as a form of '**restricted bandwagoning**'. This approach represents a calculated and selective alignment where Cambodia collaborates closely with China for political and economic benefits while also setting limits to maintain its sovereignty, domestic legitimacy, and regional flexibility. By adopting this perspective, the study aims to reveal how Cambodia's restricted bandwagoning not only reshapes its relationship with China but also creates ripple effects for regional dynamics, especially regarding its relations with Vietnam and ASEAN's overall unity.

The thesis thus asks two central research questions:

- (1) *What factors influence Cambodia's alignment with China?*
- (2) *How does Cambodia's alignment with China influence Southeast Asian regional security dynamics?*

### 1.3 Significance of Study

This study fills a critical gap in the literature by analyzing how Cambodia's alignment with China affects regional dynamics in Southeast Asia, going beyond bilateral relations to a broader geopolitical perspective. By examining the factors that influence Cambodia's foreign policy decisions and their regional ramifications, the study advances the theoretical discussion of neo-classical realism. Lastly, the study has practical significance for scholars and policymakers by offering insights into the implications of Cambodia's alignment with China for ASEAN cohesion, regional security, and the shifting balance of power in Southeast Asia.

### 1.4 Literature Review

This literature review explores the ripple effects of Cambodia's growing alignment with China on regional alignment in Southeast Asia. Cambodia's foreign policy choices in recent years, particularly its deepening ties with China, have garnered significant scholarly attention. Although Cambodia-China ties have been extensively studied, little study has been done on how this alignment affects power dynamics in Southeast Asia, ASEAN cohesion, and regional stability in general. Understanding these

dynamics is crucial for comprehending the evolving geopolitical landscape of Southeast Asia and the strategic responses of neighboring states.

The literature review assists in defining, discussing, and synthesizing the body of current literature, which helps identify the knowledge gap that the study will attempt to fill. It proceeds with the following actions.

#### 1.4.1 Terms of Analysis

Alliances in international relations take on various forms depending on a state's perception of external threats, strategic interests, and the prevailing geopolitical climate. Scholars have long debated the mechanisms driving weaker states to align with stronger ones, identifying key patterns such as **balancing**, **bandwagoning**, **hedging**, and **patron-client relations**. Balancing is often employed to counteract a dominant power by either **strengthening internal defense capabilities** or **seeking external allies with shared security concerns** (Walt, 1987). This strategy, however, varies in intensity in which **high-intensity balancing** fosters adversarial relationships, whereas **soft balancing** relies on diplomatic coalitions and alliance reinforcement (Roy, 2005). Bandwagoning, by contrast, entails aligning with a dominant power, either out of fear of aggression or in pursuit of economic and political benefits (Schweller, 1994). While this approach offers strategic advantages, it often leads to **unequal dependencies**, where weaker states must accommodate the interests of their stronger allies, sometimes at the cost of their sovereignty (Walt, 1987).

Building on this, recent studies indicate that small states rarely engage in complete bandwagoning; instead, they often pursue restricted bandwagoning. In this framework, alignment with a dominant power is selective, conditional, and limited by domestic, regional, and legitimacy factors. This concept clarifies how states like Cambodia aim to gain economic and political benefits from China while striving to retain a degree of autonomy and flexibility within ASEAN. This perspective is adapted from neoclassical realist reasoning as discussed by Rose (1998) and Taliaferro et al. (2016).

Beyond these two strategies, **hedging and patron-client relations** offer alternative approaches to alliance formation. Hedging involves **maintaining strategic flexibility by fostering relations with multiple powers** to minimize risks and maximize future options (Roy, 2005). This approach has been particularly relevant in the post-Cold War era, where many states, including ASEAN members, have sought to balance relations between major global powers. Meanwhile, **patron-client relations** establish asymmetric relationships in which a weaker state gains economic aid and security guarantees in exchange for diplomatic, military, or economic concessions (Ciorciari, 2014). While such arrangements provide short-term stability, they may also **erode domestic legitimacy and restrict foreign policy autonomy**. These theoretical frameworks form the foundation for analyzing Cambodia's evolving foreign policy choices. As a small state navigating the influence of China, Cambodia's alignment decisions reflect broader regional trends and the complexities of power asymmetry in

Southeast Asia. The framework of restricted bandwagoning is central to this study's analysis, as it captures the nuanced manner in which Cambodia aligns with China while constraining that alignment to protect regime stability and maintain regional flexibility.

#### **1.4.2 Overview of Cambodia-China Relations**

In terms of survival, small states are more aware than the big powers. Small states tend to align with major powers to secure political, economic, and security benefits (Elman, 1995). As a small state, the option for survival is not to compete for power but to align with the powers. This behavior is especially prominent in Southeast Asia, where nations like Cambodia navigate great-power competition through strategic alignments. Cambodia's historical ties with China, including economic assistance and political cooperation, offer a critical lens for understanding its current foreign policy behavior.

Cambodia's alignment with China has garnered significant scholarly attention, emphasizing its role in shaping Cambodia's foreign policy and regional position. The relationship between Cambodia and China also provides a lens to widely examine the small states' behavior as they face external security threats. Traditional theories suggest that small states employ strategies like bandwagoning or forming patron-client relations with dominant powers to ensure their own survival in the international system. Recent literature expands this view, discussing the small state's intermediary approach towards major power through hedging (Leng, 2017). These small states' behaviors, it is a core reflection of how Cambodia interacts with China from its

historical context until the present political landscape through its mixed approach for its survival.

Similarly, Chen and Yang (2013) outline three choices of strategy which include, soft-balancing, bandwagoning, or hedging, that is often employed by small states; particularly in Southeast Asia, when China begins to assert its influence in the region. These small states adopted or blended these strategies due to two important factors: the perceived degree of threat and the economic opportunities that they might obtain. Cambodia's alignment with China reflects a mix of these strategies, particularly bandwagoning, to secure political support and economic benefits. This approach has enabled Cambodia to align with China while maintaining some autonomy in its foreign policy.

Ciociari (2014) provides a further explanation of Cambodia-China relations by characterizing their ties as a patron-client relationship rather than bandwagoning. He describes it as an asymmetric exchange where Cambodia gains political and economic support in return for strategic alignment with China on issues like the South China Sea. He has observed this idea from a wide range of scholars, including Scott (1972), Keohane (1986), Walt (1987), Carney (1989), Schweller (1994), and Kang (2010) among others, who provide the explanation on the function of this kind of relationship that the patron provides protection, whereas a client provides support and adhere to the patron's 'diplomatic agenda and economic interest'. In the case of Sino-Cambodia

relations, China was generously offering Cambodia significant benefits including economic support (aid) and security protection without any strict conditions. Adversely, Cambodia while enjoying its advantages over China, also opened up access for this rising power to capture certain resources and conduct certain development operations in Cambodia's soil; the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project is key evidence of this. Furthermore, the key advantage that China has received from Cambodia is the alignment on geopolitical issues. For instance, Cambodia expressed its support for China's position on the South China Sea, ignoring its fellow ASEAN members which face international criticism and hinder cooperation among its neighboring nations. In addition, Ciorciari argues that China has interaction with Cambodia reflected a broader strategy of fostering alliances through "non-binding" patron-client ties. In contrast to conventional hierarchical relationship models, China's interactions place a high value on flexibility, enabling Cambodia to gain advantages without being perceived as completely obedient. China's adherence to the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, which place a strong emphasis on mutual benefit and non-interference, is indicative of this. As a result, even though Cambodia closely aligns with Beijing, its foreign policy has maintained some autonomy.

As mentioned, rather than focusing on the impact of Cambodia's foreign policy choices toward other states in the region, existing literatures offer insight mainly into how Cambodia has navigated its asymmetric relationship with China during these recent decades that primarily fall into two-dimensional groups. These dimensions

explain one of the reasons why Cambodia made its alignment choice and what factors pushed Cambodia to favor China. The first provides a ‘political/security’ dimension. James (2023), the study argues that a deep and genuine camaraderie exists between Phnom Penh and Beijing, fueled by factors such as ‘political trust, geopolitical considerations, and global uncertainties.’ The political aspect of relations between China and Cambodia reveals the strategic considerations that led to Cambodia's alignment with China in a changing geopolitical environment. A comprehensive study by Jing Jing Luo provides an analysis of Cambodia's alignment choice which reflected on the political dimension. The scholar claims that Cambodia has pursued a foreign policy called, limited bandwagoning which shows greater political alignment with China, as Cambodia secured political backing from China that reinforced its sovereignty claim. Chandy Doung, William Kang, and Jaechun Kim also politically claim that Sino-Cambodia relations have improved deeper due to domestic political concern when Cambodia's ruling party CPP chose to align with China for regime survival following the dissolution of its key opposition party as well as facing perceived threats from the United States which further pushed them towards closer tie with China. In this area, Bradley J. Murg agrees on the same ground to which Cambodia employs a limited bandwagoning to align with China as a result of threats by the US and needed political backing to maintain its stability arising from domestic political challenges. In addition, the scholar further explores Cambodia's strategic choice in navigating a ‘fine line’ between China and its neighboring country, Vietnam by acknowledging the historical

complexities between Cambodia and Vietnam and analyzing the way Cambodia maintains a nuanced relationship with Vietnam while deepening relations with China from time to time that posed concerns towards Vietnam's political, economic, and strategic positions in the region. Bunthorn Khath explains that due to its historical dispute with its neighboring countries, mainly Thailand and Vietnam, the relations between the two have deepened over the years, and has been observed that their bilateral tie is a form of quid pro quo. Literature goes deeper into the evidence to show this mutually beneficial relationship. For instance, while Cambodia achieving political back against its neighboring countries, it continues to publicly declare its support towards China's regional interest within ASEAN, one of which is opposing the South China Sea dispute.

Second, this group of literature explains the economic dimension that was and currently plays an important role as a factor in the patron-client ties relations between Cambodia and China. In the economic dimension, Chinese aid as well as trade and investment are mainly found in the vast majority of literatures. As Pheakdey (2012) has mentioned in his paper, China is Cambodia's top foreign investor, a major donor, and an increasingly important trading partner. Cambodia warmly welcomes China's foreign aid and economic support. One significant area of focus is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), through which China has invested heavily in Cambodia's infrastructure. Han & Lim (2021) examine the complexities associated with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Cambodia. While the BRI has maintained strong bilateral government relations, the

study reveals growing societal concerns surrounding Chinese involvement, highlighting the mixed impact of Chinese investments, and acknowledging positive effects on infrastructure and economic growth while expressing worries about debt sustainability, environmental implications, and potential threats to Cambodian sovereignty. However, former Prime Minister Hun Sen stated that ‘Cambodia's strong economic growth in past years has owed a great deal to China's investment and steady technical and financial assistance’ (China Daily, 2012). While Cambodia is achieving sustainable economic growth, many analysts and observers believe that China has a hidden agenda. As written in the China White Paper on Foreign Aid (2011), Chinese aid was characterized based on non-political conditions being imposed on its recipient countries, compliance with mutual benefits, and emphasis on substantial consequences. With these features, China aimed to achieve three objectives which include, establishing friendly economic relations with developing countries, enhancing south-south cooperation, and contributing to development. Therefore, these implications resulted in Cambodia's trust and has always sought China's support to help develop its economy in recent years. With such support from China, Cambodia could eventually gain assistance during the period of crisis, and later, both parties realized their key partnership became stronger and Cambodia placed more trust in China. In such an area, Neak and Sok (2021) delve into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Cambodia-China relations. They reveal how Cambodia, facing economic challenges due to supply chain disruptions and shrinking global demand, strengthened its ties with China through

various fiscal and monetary measures. On the other hand, Kusuma and Carollina (2019) indicated key concerns over such economic dependency and Cambodia's action within the ASEAN region resulting from this cooperation. These scholars mentioned that the two parties' economic relationship can stabilize Cambodia's infrastructural development; however, supporting China and the geopolitical imbalance, particularly concerning the South China Sea issues, could raise questions and criticism about Cambodia's integrity as an ASEAN member.

#### **1.4.3 Economic Statecraft and Asymmetric Dependence**

Beyond traditional alliance theories, scholars in international political economy highlight economic statecraft as a key way for major powers to influence smaller states. Economic statecraft involves the strategic use of economic tools like aid, loans, trade, investment, and infrastructure development to affect political outcomes in recipient countries (Baldwin, 1985). Instead of using direct coercion, it relies on incentives and long-term dependencies, enabling major powers to exert influence while still formally respecting the sovereignty of smaller states.

In the context of China's engagement with developing countries, economic statecraft has emerged as an important framework for analysis. Scholars suggest that China uses a mix of development assistance, concessional loans, and major infrastructure projects to build political goodwill and strategic alignment, especially through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Jones & Zeng, 2019). These economic approaches often create an imbalance in interdependence, where recipient

countries gain growth and infrastructure but, in turn, find their foreign policy autonomy increasingly limited.

Applied to Cambodia, studies indicate that Chinese economic assistance has played a crucial role in supporting Cambodia's development goals, while also strengthening its diplomatic backing for China on regional and international matters, especially within ASEAN (Ciorciari, 2014; Pheakdey, 2012; Neak & Sok, 2021). However, the literature suggests that economic dependence does not always result in complete compliance. Instead, it often leads to selective or limited alignment, where recipient countries aim to maximize benefits while retaining some autonomy reflecting restricted bandwagoning and the expectations of neoclassical realism (Rose, 1998; Taliaferro et al., 2016; Murg, 2016).

However, much of the existing literature views economic statecraft mainly as a bilateral issue between China and Cambodia, emphasizing aspects like aid effectiveness, infrastructure outcomes, and debt sustainability (Han & Lim, 2021; Kusuma & Carollina, 2019). There is less focus on how China's economic leverage over Cambodia creates broader regional impacts, particularly concerning ASEAN cohesion and Cambodia's relations with neighboring countries like Vietnam. By incorporating economic statecraft into a regional analytical framework, this study enhances the understanding of how economic dependence serves as a vital mechanism connecting Cambodia's alignment choices to wider regional consequences.

#### **1.4.4 Cambodia's Alignment with China and Vietnam's response**

One of the most direct ripple effects of Cambodia's alignment with China is its impact on Cambodia-Vietnam relations. Cambodia and Vietnam have a complicated relationship that is affected by historical periods of conflict and collaboration, as well as by economic linkages, historical legacies, and geopolitical competitiveness. Vietnam views Cambodia's close relations with China as a threat to its regional dominance and security, especially in light of ASEAN decision-making procedures and South China Sea issues. According to Ciorciari (2014), Vietnam's presence during the Khmer Rouge period (1975–1979) left a legacy of mistrust in Cambodia, since many Cambodians saw Vietnam's actions as hegemonic rather than humanitarian. China has taken advantage of the gap left by this mistrust by positioning itself as Cambodia's more trustworthy ally. However, in contemporary politics, Thearith Leng argues that Cambodia has been applying a hedging strategy towards Vietnam to maintain a peaceful bilateral relationship. Cambodia's hedging towards Vietnam stands on its unique features of 'economic pragmatism, limited bandwagoning, binding engagement, and soft-balancing', as added by Leng (2017). In this case, Suyheang Kry and Terith Chy have provided their views on both countries' ongoing border conflict but still, maintain good relationships due to mutual benefits in terms of economic and security as well as shared traditions that both parties were currently maintaining. The ongoing conflicts regarding their border have also become a rising issue and Cambodia coupled with Vietnam's historical dominance, reinforces Cambodia's desire to counterbalance

Vietnamese influence by leveraging its relationship with China. As Bradley J. Murg has stated, the relationship between Cambodia and Vietnam is better suited to the term 'Distinct Relationship' than 'Special Relationship' because both are bound together by geographic proximity, economic complementarities, partially shared interests in the future of the Mekong River, and close military ties, as well as gradual, measured and intentional improvements in people-to-people relations.

Vietnam's security and geopolitical policy in Southeast Asia are greatly impacted by Cambodia's increasing alignment with China. Vietnam's attempts to forge a cohesive ASEAN position are directly hampered by Cambodia's backing of China's position on divisive regional issues, especially the South China Sea. The study by Veasna Var pointed out that, to advance their strategic objectives, ASEAN nations, other players, and Cambodia are in a difficult strategic position as a result of China's increasing aggressiveness in the South China Sea. They must strike a balance between China and the US. Therefore, by aligning with China, Cambodia could gain proper support, which has helped it resolve its domestic political issues and disputes with its neighbors, especially Vietnam. In return, as China's client, Cambodia has always supported China's agenda and policy within the region and ASEAN. Cambodia's actions during the 2012 ASEAN Summit, blocking a joint statement critical of China were a turning point that complicated Vietnam's regional policy and undermined ASEAN's unity.

#### 1.4.5 Literature Gap and Contribution

The existing literature provides significant insights into Cambodia's alignment with China, focusing on the political and economic dimensions that underpin their partnership. Many scholars have studied Cambodia's motivation for aligning with China, including infrastructural development, economic assistance, sovereignty claims, and political support. Studies also point to the advantages China derives from this partnership, such as Cambodia's backing of its regional agenda on issues like the South China Sea. Many important gaps still exist, though, especially in our knowledge of how this alignment affects Cambodia's interactions with neighboring countries and the broader regional dynamics.

First, the majority of the studies focus on Cambodia's foreign policy decisions and its direct engagement with China, frequently ignoring the consequences of its bilateral ties with neighboring countries and ASEAN as a whole. Although Cambodia enjoys security assurances and economic incentives, nothing is known about the wider geopolitical implications, such as how other ASEAN countries will react. This gap limits a full understanding of Cambodia's strategic position and its impact on the regional order.

Second, in the context of regional stability, the integration of political and economic components in Cambodia-China relations is still not well understood. The literature frequently discusses both aspects separately, concentrating either on Cambodia's economic reliance on Chinese help and investments or on its political

alliance to protect regime survival and sovereignty claims. However, there are important, overlooked implications for ASEAN's unity and collective decision-making from the interaction of these elements how economic incentives strengthen Cambodia's political alignment and vice versa.

Third, although Cambodia's support for China's regional policies such as its opposition to the South China Sea agreement among ASEAN nations is widely discussed, less focus is placed on how these actions impact ASEAN's long-term strategy. ASEAN has traditionally relied on multilateral consensus to counterbalance great-power influence. This equilibrium is upset by Cambodia's pro-Chinese position, which makes regional diplomacy more challenging. Existing studies do not fully assess the long-term impacts of this disruption on ASEAN integration and regional power dynamics.

Fourth, there has been little research done on the response of ASEAN members (in this case, Vietnam's perceptions will be analyzed) reactions to Cambodia's increasing ties with China. Although some studies recognize concerns among ASEAN and within its member states with Cambodia's close links to China, they do not go far enough in examining ASEAN members' approaches to dealing with these issues. For example, there is insufficient analysis of how Vietnam (one of the ASEAN members and Cambodia's closest neighbors) modifies its economic policy, bilateral diplomacy, or regional involvement to counter the threats posed by Cambodia's

alignment. Understanding these countermeasures is essential to grasping ASEAN's evolving role in shaping Southeast Asia's security and economic architecture.

Finally, current research does not adequately examine the wider regional ramifications of Cambodia's alliance with China. The complicated regional relationships involving ASEAN, external players, and broader geopolitical rivalries are typically overlooked when analyzing Cambodia-China relations as a bilateral issue. A more thorough examination is required to determine how Cambodia's alignment impacts Southeast Asia's regional power dynamics in light of economic competition, security concerns, and strategic realignments.

This thesis addresses these gaps by examining Cambodia's alignment with China through the lens of restricted bandwagoning, while emphasizing the regional ripple effects on ASEAN cohesion and Cambodia-Vietnam relation. It will also offer a comprehensive viewpoint that connects the political, economic, and economic alignment of Cambodia with the regional factors influencing ASEAN's strategic reactions. By filling up these gaps, the study aims to provide a thorough understanding of how Cambodia's positioning influences Southeast Asia's geopolitical landscape.

This study is motivated by three main goals. First, it looks at how Cambodia's foreign policy decisions are being influenced by its increasing political and economic ties to China, especially when it comes to divisive topics like the South China Sea and regional infrastructure initiatives. Second, it examines how ASEAN members respond to

Cambodia's ties to China, examining the political, economic, and security measures they employ to safeguard regional balance. Third, the study situates Cambodia's role within the broader framework of ASEAN's regional dynamics, investigating how Cambodia's alignment disrupts ASEAN unity and impacts Southeast Asia's balance of power.

The study also introduces key terms to conceptualize Cambodia's foreign policy behavior and ASEAN and its members' strategic responses. Cambodia's strategic decision to align with China is defined as 'restricted bandwagoning', a strategy that closely aligns with Chinese interests while securing political and economic advantages. By using multilateral procedures to counterbalance unilateral impacts, ASEAN states, on the other hand, use a combination of engagement and balancing techniques to traverse regional security concerns.

This thesis's ultimate goal is to integrate political, economic, and security aspects to study the changing dynamics of Cambodia-China-ASEAN relations. This study places Cambodia's alignment with China into the larger Southeast Asian geopolitical context, highlighting its ramifications for ASEAN and regional stability, rather than presenting it as an isolated phenomenon. This analytical method adds to the conversation on regional security and small-state foreign policy strategies by highlighting the intricacies of small-state behavior in an area where great-power competition predominates.

### 1.5 Theoretical Framework: Neoclassical Realism

Since foreign policy is a complicated result of both internal and external forces, it needs a theoretical approach that takes into account several levels of analysis. This study uses neoclassical realism as its main analytical framework because it effectively links systemic pressures with domestic constraints in shaping foreign policy behavior. Neoclassical realism combines elements of neorealism and classical realism, going beyond the structural determinism of neorealism by highlighting how state-level factors influence the translation of systemic incentives into actual policy decisions. This method makes it possible to comprehend why governments may adopt various foreign policy approaches even when they have identical structural circumstances in a more sophisticated way (Rose, 1998).

Fundamentally, neoclassical realism recognizes that although the international system establishes the framework, state action is shaped by how policymakers see external possibilities and risks in addition to internal limitations. According to Rose (1998, p. 146), a state's material might and standing in the international system largely determine the extent and goals of its foreign policy. He does, however, also emphasize the importance of intervening elements that affect how systemic pressures are converted into tangible actions, such as political institutions, societal influences, and leadership judgments. Scholars like Taliaferro, Ripsman, and Lobell (2009, 2016) have further developed this interaction between internal and external elements, highlighting

the crucial role that leadership cognition plays in negotiating the international system's uncertainties.

Neoclassical realism provides a more robust explanation by accounting for domestic constraints that structural realism tends to overlook. Cambodia's alignment with China is shaped not just by China's increasing regional influence, but also by domestic factors like regime security, development needs, and institutional limitations. These intervening variables help filter systemic pressures, leading to a pattern of restricted alignment instead of full bandwagoning which is a dynamic that structural realism alone fails to adequately explain (Ripsman, Taliaferro & Lobell, 2016). Given how crucial domestic-level analysis is to comprehending foreign policy action, this awareness is especially helpful when examining situations in which governments seem to behave in ways that defy structural expectations.

Its capacity to explain the disparities in state reactions to comparable systemic forces is one of neoclassical realism's unique characteristics. Structural realism assumes that states act as rational, unitary actors responding directly to changes in the balance of power, leading to outcomes like balancing or complete bandwagoning (Waltz, 1979). However, Cambodia's foreign policy does not fit neatly into these predictions. Despite strong incentives to align with China, Cambodia's actions are more selective and conditional rather than wholly subordinated. This inconsistency underscores the limitations of structural realism when applied to small states dealing with asymmetric power relations.

According to scholars like Chandra (2017) and Rose (1998), views of leadership, internal political systems, and the larger global environment are important determinants of foreign policy decisions. According to Chandra (2017), decision-makers interpretations of external risks and opportunities are strongly influenced by leadership perception, making it frequently the most important of these factors. Additionally, Rose (1998) divides theories of foreign policy into four schools, each with a unique focus. For example, Innenpolitik's theory emphasizes the importance of domestic elements in determining state action, such as political systems, ideologies, and social circumstances. Conversely, offensive realism suggests that nations act aggressively to maximize their power and primarily relates foreign policy decisions to systemic pressures. This viewpoint is moderated by defensive realism, which contends that systemic forces only affect certain facets of state conduct. Lastly, neoclassical realism provides a perfect framework for comprehending the complex nature of foreign policy decisions since it incorporates both systemic and domestic factors (Rose, 1998, pp. 145–146).

Compared to other theoretical approaches, neoclassical realism is more suited to the goals of this study. Liberal institutionalism focuses on norms, institutions, and cooperation within ASEAN but tends to underestimate the impact of power imbalances and material dependence on state behavior (Keohane & Nye, 1977; Keohane, 1984). While ASEAN norms are important, they do not effectively limit Cambodia's strategic alignment with China. Constructivist approaches are useful for exploring identity and

discourse but offer limited insights into alignment choices driven by material incentives and security concerns (Onuf 1989; Kratochwill, 1989; Wendt, 1992). In contrast, neoclassical realism integrates power dynamics, interests, and domestic constraints, making it particularly relevant for analyzing the behavior of small states in the context of great-power competition.

This study adopts neoclassical realism as its primary analytical lens due to its holistic approach to foreign policy analysis. It specifically pulls from three main facets of the theory: domestic influences (political and institutional structures), leadership cognition (perceptions and biases), and systemic factors (the external environment). The study intends to offer a thorough understanding of the foreign policy choices made by governments confronting external threats by looking at how these factors interact.

Building on this framework, this research uses the concept of “**restricted bandwagoning**” to explain Cambodia’s behavior toward China. This study adapts the notion of **restricted bandwagoning** from the broader literature on limited or soft bandwagoning (Kuik, 2008; Schweller, 1994) to describe Cambodia’s alignment with China. **Restricted bandwagoning** is when a smaller state aligns with a dominant power for material and security benefits but sets limits to keep its autonomy and avoid full dependence. Unlike full bandwagoning, where the weaker state fully accepts the dominant power’s influence, restricted bandwagoning allows for selective cooperation in areas like aid, military, and investment while maintaining some independence in

other areas. In Cambodia's case, this study argues that its relationship with China illustrates restricted bandwagoning where Cambodia gains strategically and economically from China but avoids total subordination by engaging with ASEAN and keeping limited ties with Vietnam and Western countries.

This study employs neoclassical realism as the analytical framework to explore Cambodia's alignment with China and its impact on regional dynamics. The framework assists in analyzing how Cambodia's alignment affects neighboring countries' responses and participation in regional forums by concentrating on systemic factors (regional dynamics), leadership perceptions (ASEAN leaders' perspective of Cambodia's alignment), and domestic influences (political and economic factors in both states). The combination of internal and external factors in neoclassical realism offers a sophisticated method for answering the research questions. Therefore, restricted bandwagoning serves as the central analytical concept linking Cambodia's foreign policy behavior to the broader theoretical foundation of neoclassical realism.

### **1.6 Conceptual Frameworks**

The study's conceptual framework combines the fundamental ideas of neoclassical realism with the particular dynamics of Cambodia's alignment with China and its effects on regional dynamics. This paradigm offers an organized method for examining how domestic political factors, systemic forces, and interactions at the state level affect foreign policy choices.

The framework is designed to address the main research question:

*(1) What factors influence Cambodia's alignment with China?*

*(2) How does Cambodia's alignment with China influence Southeast Asian regional security dynamics?*

To achieve this, the conceptual framework is built around three interconnected dimensions: **systemic pressures**, **domestic factors**, and **bilateral/regional interactions**.

#### A. Systematic Pressures

Systemic factors are crucial to understanding Cambodia's alignment with China and its broader regional implications. The impact of great power competition, especially between China and the United States, on small-state conduct in Southeast Asia is conceptualized in the study as systemic pressures. In response to the opportunities and challenges presented by this competition, Cambodia has aligned itself with China to respond strategically to these external pressures.

Key Concepts:

- **Threat Perceptions:** The geopolitical competition between China and the United States affects Cambodia's foreign policy decisions, particularly in areas such as economic cooperation, security partnerships, and diplomatic alignments.

- **Regional Power Dynamics:** The examination of regional ramifications takes into account the function of ASEAN and its fragmentation as a result of Cambodia's affiliation with China.

## B. Domestic Factors

Systemic Foreign policy decisions are heavily influenced by domestic political factors. Cambodia's internal needs for political unification, regime security, and economic growth have an impact on its alignment with China.

### Key Concepts

- **Political Calculations:** Cambodia's foreign policy decisions are influenced by its dependence on China for infrastructural development, economic assistance, and regime survival.
- **Leaders Perceptions and Decision-Making:** The role of Cambodia's leadership in shaping its alignment with China, influences by historical ties, economic incentives, and security assurances.

## C. Regional Interactions

Cambodia's alignment with China has broader implications for regional security dynamics. Its foreign policy choices influence ASEAN's collective stability, security architecture, and diplomatic engagements.

### Key Concepts:

- **Bilateral Relations:** Cambodia's affiliation with China serves as a lens through which to examine the changing dynamics of Cambodia-Vietnam relations.
- **Regional Implications:** The study looks at how these bilateral exchanges affect Southeast Asia's overall security framework as well as ASEAN's unity.

This study employs the conceptual framework to analyze the following:

1. **Factors Influencing Cambodia's Alignment:** How systemic pressures and domestic factors shape Cambodia's decision to align with China.
2. **Regional Security Dynamics:** Cambodia's alignment with China affects Southeast Asian stability, ASEAN cohesion, and broader security concerns.
3. **Effects on Cambodia-Vietnam's Relations:** How Cambodia-China heighten relations, could affect Cambodia-Vietnam ties which needed Vietnam to adapt its foreign policy to counterbalance Cambodia-China relations while maintaining bilateral ties with Cambodia.

This study offers a thorough examination of how internal and external factors influence Cambodia's strategic orientation in the area by utilizing neo-classical realism. The paradigm provides a comprehensive view of Cambodia's place in the geopolitical landscape of Southeast Asia, going beyond discrete evaluations of political, economic, or security factors.

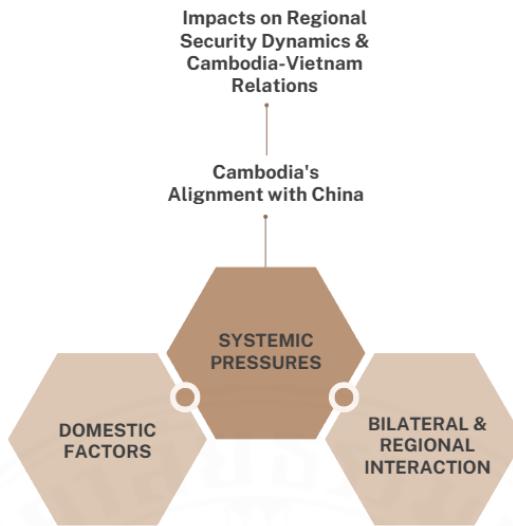


Figure 1.6: Conceptual Frameworks

## 1.7 Data Collection

The research methodology section of this study outlines the approach and procedures employed to investigate the ripple effects of Cambodia's alignment with China on regional dynamics. This section provides an overview of the research design, data collection methods, and data analysis techniques involved in the study.

The research is qualitative research of available literature and sources on the topic.

Qualitative data will be collected through 2 methods, including:

- a. **Documents Analysis:** The research will be based on secondary data: books on foreign and security policy, articles on the same topic from journals on international relations, articles from newspapers presenting information on the US-China tensions and Cambodia-China relations, electronic sources such as think tank reports on Cambodia's foreign policy and other states relations with the US or China, regional issues and Prime Ministerial/Presidential speeches.

The bibliography consists of different sections, including, the books section focuses on the literature presenting different views on Cambodian foreign policy and explaining its theoretical foundations; the national security aspects are also covered with a focus on the positions while facing the midst of US-China tension. The articles section includes literature explaining the theoretical foundations of Cambodian foreign policy, presenting and analyzing different aspects of its relations towards major powers and the neighboring ASEAN nations. The think tank reports provide the points of view of foreign policy analysts.

**b. Case Studies:** To enhance comprehension of these changing dynamics, this study will examine case studies that provide light on the complex consequences of Cambodia's alignment with China. These case studies will examine particular initiatives, occasions, or tactical alliances with an emphasis on the ramifications for politics, the economy, and security. For instance, to comprehend the possible advantages and disadvantages of China's Belt and Road Initiative, a case study can look at the Expressway development project, a significant Chinese investment project in Cambodia. An additional case study can examine the relations between Cambodia and Vietnam, and how Vietnamese leaders respond to Cambodia-China ties. By examining these concrete examples, the research will provide a nuanced perspective on the

complex interplay between Cambodia's foreign policy choices and the broader geopolitical landscape of Southeast Asia.

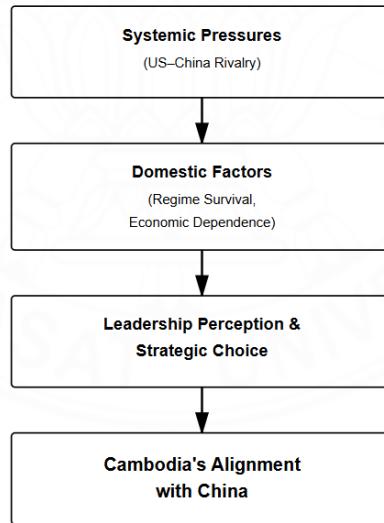
The collected data will be analyzed using qualitative analysis techniques. The qualitative data from document analysis, and case studies will undergo thematic analysis, where recurring themes, patterns, and perspectives will be identified and interpreted to generate meaningful insights. The present research is a multidisciplinary study comprising aspects of international relations, international security, foreign policy, and economics. Focusing on Cambodian foreign policy that is used to define Cambodia's action in favoring China in recent years, international relations and security part will be an important element of this research. While foreign policy and economics part present the ripple effects occurring towards other Southeast Asian countries deriving from Cambodia closing its tie with China.

## CHAPTER 2

### ASSESSING CAMBODIA'S ALIGNMENT WITH CHINA

This chapter examines the factors influencing Cambodia's alignment with China. It aims to provide an answer to the first main research question, "What factors influence Cambodia's alignment with China?" Within the framework of the neoclassical realism theory as a base for the exploration of the factors of such alignments, this paper centers on three main aspects such as systemic pressures or great-power competition, domestic factors in shaping Cambodia's foreign policy choices, and the leaders' perception in favoring China.

The study argue that Cambodia's alignment with China emerges from a mix of systemic pressures, internal political calculations, and leadership perceptions. Therefore, the following sections will demonstrate in detail of how the systemic or external pressures (great-power competition) shaped Cambodia's foreign policy to align with China, domestic calculations to ensure survival and achieve economic development, and leadership perception in considering China as their strategic partners. Amid the evolving geopolitical landscape in Southeast Asia, this study will provide a nuanced understanding of Cambodia's strategic positions by analyzing the collected data taking into account the theoretical framework and conceptual frameworks described in the previous chapter.



*Figure 2.1: Neoclassical realist framework explaining Cambodia's alignment with China*

## 2.1 Systemic Pressures: Great-Power Competition

The exploration of the key factors that Cambodia align with China includes the systemic pressures derived from the rising great-power competition in Southeast Asia.

In this regard, this study identifies the US and China as the great powers and Cambodia as a small state navigating this competition within the region. It will examine the root cause of this great-power competition that shaped Cambodia's strategic alignment choice.

### **2.1.1 Historical Context of US-China Rivalry in Southeast Asia**

The ongoing rivalries between the United States and China have historically occurred due to shifting power dynamics and the strategic importance of Southeast Asia. As evidenced during the Cold War, Southeast Asia was a battleground for a US-China proxy war by competing to assert ideological influence in the region. While China supported the revolutionary movement, the US tended to create a security partnership to contain the spread of communism (Pongsudhirak, 2022). The end of the Cold War does not mean the US and China proxy war in the region also ends. Currently, China is driving its economy by positioning itself as a key player contributing to the region's trade and economic development in some Southeast Asian countries, while establishing a rivalry with the US, notably during the US's 'Pivot to Asia' during the Obama administration.

Southeast Asia is considered important due to its strategic location, a hub for global trade, with the light of the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea facilitating over 5\$ trillion in maritime commerce each year (Chhaya, 2025). As projected, Southeast Asia will become the fourth-largest economy in the world by 2030 (ASEAN, 2022), which has attracted competition from major powers for infrastructure

investment, diplomatic alliances, and control over the market. Even though Cambodia is a small state, it plays a key role in the region, especially giving a positive sign as it needs economic development due to the civil wars that lasted for certain decades.

Cambodia has access to the Gulf of Thailand and is close to the disputed South China Sea due to its central location in mainland Southeast Asia, which borders Vietnam, Thailand, and Laos. Because of its location, it has historically served as a buffer state during hostilities like the Vietnam War and a gateway for regional trade. This geography is now more significant than ever as China looks to ensure naval access and broaden its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), while the US wants to counteract Chinese influence through alliances like the Lower Mekong Initiative (Var, 2015; Po & Primiano, 2020).

Cambodia's support for China has had a significant impact. Particularly when Western help was stopped off after Hun Sen's 1997 coup, Phnom Penh has become more and more dependent on Beijing for political and economic support since the 1990s (Strangio et al., 2024). US demands for democratic reforms stand in stark contrast to China's non-interference policy and infrastructural projects, like as the \$2 billion Phnom Penh-Sihanoukville Expressway (Po & Primiano, 2020). Because of this dynamic, China's ability to influence smaller states through economic statecraft has been put to the test in Cambodia.

In the 2010s, the US-China competition in Cambodia intensified. Beijing's militarization of the Gulf of Thailand has sparked regional worries due to China's

support of Cambodia's authoritarian government, which includes military enhancements to the Ream Naval Base (Khmer Times, 2025). In the meantime, the US has worked to strengthen its relations with ASEAN nations like Vietnam and the Philippines, who see Cambodia's pro-Chinese posture as threatening regional cohesion, especially when it comes to matters like the South China Sea disputes. One example of how Cambodia's alignment erodes the bloc's cohesion is the country's frequent obstruction of ASEAN consensus declarations that are critical of China, such as in 2012 and 2016 (Yang & Mu, 2023).

### **2.1.2 US and China's Competing Approaches to Cambodia**

Cambodia faces difficult decisions in balancing with either the United States or China to secure the most possible benefits out of this rivalry (Var, 2015). The competitions between both major powers in Cambodia can be considered as a strategic approach to the small state by exposing different priorities and values. The United States focuses solely on human rights, democratization, governance, and conditional aids when they engage with Cambodia. In contrast, China pursue different approach by providing aid for infrastructure development, and economic cooperation, while respecting Cambodia's sovereignty and strictly adhere to its non-interference policy when engaging with Cambodia (Ehrlich, 2024). The diverse approach by both superpowers makes Cambodia's foreign policy decisions more difficult, especially leading to changing of regional dynamics in Southeast Asia.

Traditionally, the U.S. engagement with Cambodia occurred through the notions of promoting democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. In this regard, the U.S. assistance that was provided to Cambodia since the 1990s was always considered as a 'conditional aid'; an aid that was tied with certain conditions that restrict Cambodia from upholding its position in the U.S. political agenda in Cambodia to secure their interests. For example, the government-to-government aid provided to Cambodia has been banned by the U.S. Congress following the coup conducted by Hun Sen in 1997, which allows Cambodia to access the aid from only non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and humanitarian programs, with an attempt to pressure the Cambodian government to democratize (Lum, 2008 & 2023). Until today, this aid policy continues to impose on Cambodia. Cambodia's actions on sovereignty, politician freedoms, and civil society rights were a major concern for the U.S. leading to more pressure imposed on Cambodia which include not just aid limitation but also certain sanctions including the sanction of Cambodian business tycoon, Ly Yong Phat, accusing of serious human rights violations (U.S. Department of Treasury, 2024). Such conditions that are being imposed as part of its engagement with Cambodia reflect the U.S.'s strong adherence to its policy of supporting good governance.

Additionally, the U.S. has also been involved in improving Cambodia's economic development as well as regional integration. For instance, the injection of \$182 million by the U.S. in supporting the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) that was launched in 2010, among the Mekong countries, including Cambodia (Var, 2015).

However, the competition of the major powers in Cambodia kicked off when the U.S. views Cambodia as China's supporting partner, as well as how Cambodia ignores its conditional aid. Recent evidence can be seen through the termination of USAID projects in Cambodia, including the projects on child literacy and nutrition programs, while Cambodia has then welcomed the initiatives by the Chinese government, which provide Cambodia with identical projects to those that have been terminated by the U.S. (Sen, 2025).

China's approach to Cambodia has distinctly contrasted with the U.S. China's main objectives when engaging with Cambodia consist of economic development through major infrastructure projects, as seen through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and all of which is without any political conditions (Ehrlich, 2024). Between 1993 and 2013, China invested approximately \$10 billion in Cambodia, mainly in agriculture, mining, infrastructure, hydropower, and the manufacturing sector, as well as around \$3 billion in concessional loans have been given by China since the early 1990s (Var, 2016). Since the BRI entered Cambodia, there has been a strong acceleration of development in infrastructure through Chinese investments. Therefore, Cambodia has achieved the development of roads/expressways (e.g., Phnom Penh-Sihanoukville expressways), bridges, hydropower plants, seaports, and special economic zones in certain provinces, all of which have significantly boosted Cambodia's economic growth and connectivity (Xinhua, 2023). For example, the Special Economic Zone in Sihanoukville has landed many Cambodians tens of thousands of jobs resulting from

the investment of numerous companies that were attracted by this Chinese investment (Xinhua, 2023).

Unlike the U.S., China's engagement with Cambodia upholds its policy of non-interference in Cambodia's internal affairs. China does not urge Cambodia to adhere to any conditions, just like Western donors and the U.S. have been doing (Var, 2016). The assistance from China is always direct to the Cambodian government without any conditions that allow the government to use such resources with minimal external scrutiny (Var, 2016). With a kind-hearted policy by China, they win Cambodia's heart and easily manage to earn Cambodia's respect and support for China's agenda without any pressure.

To sum up, the U.S. and China's engagement with Cambodia reflects their broader strategic goals within Southeast Asia. The U.S. gives prioritization towards human rights promotion, governance reforms, etc., which lead to the establishment of conditional aid when engaging with Cambodia, while China has focused on investment in infrastructure and support for Cambodia's economic development in order to assert influence over Cambodia. Thus, Cambodia has sought support from China, shifted away from the U.S., which indicates how this small nation favors economic incentives and political support, then challenges the U.S. efforts in promoting democracy and human rights that lead to the changing balance of power in Southeast Asia and within ASEAN.

Dimension	United States	China
Aid type	Conditional	Unconditional
Governance focus	Human rights, democracy	Non-interference
Key instruments	Sanctions, LMI	BRI, concessional loans
Political impact	Pressure on the regime	Regime support

*Table 2.1: Competing U.S. and Chinese approaches toward Cambodia*

### **2.1.3 Cambodia's Strategic Calculations**

In the complex geopolitical landscape, Cambodia navigates itself within the US-China rivalry by exploring opportunities from this competition and at the same time pursues a balancing act towards both major powers. It can be noted that Cambodia has welcomed the presence of China in recent years, viewing it as a supportive partner for economic growth and political backing, while viewing the U.S. as interfering in its internal affairs, causing instability and criticism.

The strategy employed by Cambodia aims to maximize benefits while minimizing the vulnerabilities in a region that is an arena for US-China competition. Cambodia has long pursued and claimed its strategic calculations by balancing between the U.S. and China without overreliance on either of these major powers (Ear, 2014). Even though Cambodia has tilted towards China but the Cambodian leader still maintains the country's position between the US and China. During his recent public speech at the inauguration of the International Tourism Port in Kampot, one of the recent projects developed and built by a Chinese company, Prime Minister Hun Manet

has reiterated that Cambodia does not favor China solely but upholds good relations with any country, especially maintaining good relations with both major powers (Torn, 2025). However, it is looking more likely that Cambodia pursued better relations with China due to the Chinese support of Cambodia's economic development while being pressured by the U.S. diplomatic agenda that interferes with Cambodia's politics. For example, the blocking of ASEAN consensus statements on the South China Sea dispute during the ASEAN Summit in 2012 and 2016 emphasized the prioritization of Chinese generosity over regional solidarity (Yang & Mu, 2023). Similarly, the Chinese BRI project has given Cambodia better incentives without any conditions, which urged the country to favor this Chinese project over the U.S.-led initiatives like the LMI, etc. (Var, 2015).

Cambodia has perceived the engagement with the U.S. as conditional and destabilizing. As discussed, the U.S. has provided aid and diplomatic support to Cambodia, but under conditional terms by pushing the Cambodian government to improve its human rights situation, enhance democracy, and conduct more effective anti-corruption measures. This issue has started since the aftermath of the 1997 coup staged by PM Hun Sen, when the U.S. suspended direct aid, which Cambodia considered as repressive interference to its sovereignty (Strangio et al., 2024). Then, moving to the most pressing issue happening in 2017 when the U.S. was involved in criticizing Cambodia's democracy after the ruling party dissolved its opposition party, the National Rescue Party (CNRP) (Lum, 2023). Later in 2020, the U.S. continued to pressure the Cambodian government by putting sanctions on the Chinese investment

company, UDG (Union Development Group) in Cambodia by accusing them of building a Chinese military facility in the Cambodian sea town called Dara Sakor, under the Global Magnitsky Act that was enacted back in 2012 (Bismonte, 2020). Thus, these actions have caused concerns for the Cambodian government and regard the U.S. as a threat to regime stability as well as an unreliable partner.

China's approach, without any strings attached, has positioned it as Cambodia's core strategic partner. In terms of economic support, China has been Cambodia's largest trading partner and investor for 13 consecutive years, with bilateral trade reaching \$17 billion in 2024 increase of around 20% from the previous year (Xinhua, 2025). The development of infrastructure projects like the Phnom Penh-Sihanoukville Expressway and the industrial projects like the Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone have bolstered Cambodia's connectivity and industrialization, which is solely aligned with the Cambodian ruling party CPP's agenda (Ben, 2025). Politically, China has offered critical support for regime survival. For example, China has provided a \$10 million loan to offset Western aid suspensions after the 1997 coup, ensuring their commitment to the Cambodian government led by PM Hun Sen (Strangio et al., 2024).

With this alignment trait, Cambodia has followed in China's footsteps by adopting similar governance models and the distrust of Western interventionism. By supporting China's presence, Cambodia gains significant economic resources, political legitimacy, and military support, especially the recent modernization of Ream Naval Base, which enhanced Cambodia's defense capabilities (Rim, 2022). However, as

Cambodia approaches even more closely towards China, it causes concerns about ASEAN cohesion, which could be weakened by such dependency, as noticed in the South China Sea dispute.

In summary, the strategic calculations of Cambodia expose the cost-benefit analysis that they seek Chinese support for economic growth and political stability over the U.S. conditional engagement. Such engagement illustrates how Cambodia's restricted bandwagoning has a potential ripple effect on the region's geopolitical landscape, which increases the Chinese influence in the region over the U.S. presence in promoting democracy.

#### **2.1.4 Implications for Regional Stability and Cambodia's Sovereignty**

The decision to align with China has significant implications for regional stability and sovereignty, reshaping the geopolitical landscape of the region amid the US-China rivalry. The strategic alignment with China produces economic incentives and gains political support, but it incurs risks that affect both Cambodia's autonomy and the broader regional order.

As we already know, the Cambodia-China partnership has resulted in substantial benefits. Recently, President Xi Jinping has paid an official visit to Phnom Penh, which then both nations successfully signed 37 cooperation agreement that include trade, infrastructure, renewable energy, digital economy projects which helped push Cambodia towards more fruitful development as well as achieve integration into regional supply chain (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of

Cambodia, 2025). The economic gains that Cambodia received helped enhance the country's capacity, supporting its agenda in becoming upper upper-middle-income country by 2030 (Xinhua, 2025).

Politically, Cambodia's regime stability has been supported by such prosperous engagement from China. Unlike the Western and the US agenda, China's approach to Cambodia was viewed as supportive and non-threatening to its sovereignty (Strangio et al., 2024; Datta, 2025). As mentioned before, the support given to the Cambodian government during the aftermath of the 1997 coup is crucial to the relationship between Cambodia and China, especially strengthening the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) hand on power until now (Tana et al., 2025). Additionally, with Chinese assistance in developing the Ream Naval Base is another example of how China taking into account the importance of security cooperation with Cambodia; however, raising regional security concerns as they believe that this action gave China a strategic foothold in the Gulf of Thailand, where the Ream Naval Base is located (Flynn, 2025).

In this regard, benefits are not always there, because risks also occur. Cambodia's growing alignment with China could also pose risks to its sovereignty, which can be a major concern. Cambodia's dependency on Chinese loans and investment raises questions on debt sustainability and potential loss of policy autonomy (Neak, 2025). Even though Cambodia has begun to manage its fiscal risks by halting the flow of Chinese loans, the strong economic ties between both nations restrict Cambodia's ability to switch its diplomatic and economic approach (Tana et al., 2025). The key

issue is that, when Chinese begin to assert influence to Cambodia with their generous approach, it somehow raising potential disruption of relations between Cambodian and other ASEAN neighbors, mainly Vietnam and the Philippines, who considered Cambodia's action as harmful to ASEAN unity especially after Cambodia's support China on the South China Sea dispute (Yang & Mu, 2023; Hutagalung, 2024).

Cambodia's position within ASEAN indicates this dispute. Besides being proactive in regional initiatives and being a chair of the ASEAN summit in 2022, ASEAN still shares concerns over its centrality as Cambodia still pursues a strong relationship with China, which affects collective security, which already happened in 2012 and 2016 respectively (Yang & Mu, 2023). Therefore, it creates questions regarding ASEAN's efforts in managing maritime disputes and the great-power competitions in their region. Besides these challenges, Cambodia always mentions its firm position in staying neutral when engaging with major powers and other nations. In this case, Cambodia pursues a hedging strategy with major powers and regional powers, such as the US and Japan, to balance China's influence and avoid any criticism over their relations, while also trying to diversify its economic and security relationship with those countries besides China (Luo, 2024).

## 2.2 Domestic Factors

### 2.2.1 Regime Survival and Legitimacy

Under Prime Minister Hun Sen's leadership, the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) has strongly upheld its power by pursuing alliances with major powers and

control over political institutions. As we mentioned several times in this paper, the beginning of this momentum was held back in 1997. While this coup and sanctions imposed by Westerners have already passed, the impacts of such events still occur on regime legitimacy and Cambodia's foreign policy alignment strategy, which requires a thorough analysis.

The consequences of the 1997 coup have significantly reshaped Cambodia's relationship with the international community. Cambodia was suspended from accessing foreign aid after being accused of violent acts to achieve power (Po & Primiano, 2020). However, this action also creates a positive outcome for Cambodia. Cambodia had a chance to get closer to China and received unconditional support and without interference from China. The \$10 million loan from China after that coup is very crucial for Cambodia's development after the withdrawals of Western aid, which allowed PM Hun Sen to continue his power grip without any pressure from China to conduct political reforms like what the Westerners demanded (Storey, 2006).

With such strong support from China, it has created implications for regime survival and the legitimacy of the ruling Cambodia People's Party (CPP). PM Hun Sen could counter international criticism and domestic dissent, thanks to the help offered by China through the provision of economic aid and diplomatic protection. It later helped Cambodia promote a notion of sovereignty and resistance to any foreign influence, which mirrors the Chinese agenda, meanwhile, Cambodia still praises China for its support by calling China a 'trustworthy friend' (Strangio et al., 2023). This

message guarantees the population that has always been aware of outside interference, boosting the regime's legitimacy despite conducting authoritarian practices.

Despite economic support, China also asserts influence on Cambodia's political and security. Considerably, the Chinese investment in infrastructure projects has had a positive impact on living standards in Cambodia, which has then increased further support from the citizens (Sam, 2025). Militarily, China has provided support for Cambodia's military by conducting training and military aid provision that allows the country to strengthen its regime's ability in order to maintain order and tackle domestic dissent (Tan et al., 2023). This extensive support from China led Cambodia to follow Chinese footsteps in adopting the model of authoritarian resilience in leading the country.

The most significant footstep in gripping power by the CPP has happened through the systematic repression of the political opposition. The dissolution of the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) before the national election in 2018 allows the ruling party to continue standing firms in the position to uphold power without any strong electoral challengers (Um, 2018). There are criticism ongoing to such action saying that the country's politic has became monopolize by viewing Cambodia's government as restrictive towards media, judiciary, and the beginning of the integration of elites that aligned with Chinese governance model (Kowalski, 2025).

Essentially, the 1997 coup and the long-lasting support from China, paved way for new foreign policy alignment for Cambodia as a small nation. China's presence and Cambodia's dependence on them has only led Cambodia to mainly focus on economic development and regime security which are their core objectives after the period of civil wars, neglecting the democratic reforms that urged by the US and the Westerns. Then, the Chinese reliance still persists, allowing China to take lead role in developing its infrastructure and increase the arrival of Chinese investments into the country (Xinhua, 2022). Thus, with the growth achieved through such dependency, Cambodia's sovereignty might be a key concern for the near future.

To sum up, we can identified the 1997 coup as a starting for regime change of Cambodia by encounter foreign pressures while pursuing authoritarian consolidation with the unconditional support from China. As China numerous supports in various field, particularly politic or security and economy, the ruling CPP's regime still continue to prosper as well as allowing it to escape from any domestic challenges and conditional support from either the US and Westerners. Therefore, this show the linkage between domestic authoritarianism and external support even without proper democracy as the legitimacy of such regime has been backed by the outside supporter. In such regard, Cambodia must balancing themselves with the risks resulting from their dependency on China by becoming overdependence and might lead to lose of sovereignty.

### 2.2.2. Economic Dependence on China

In this section, we will discover how great is Cambodia's dependency on China which has been ongoing dramatically for the past two decades, making this small nation as the closest ally of China in Southeast Asia. We have been covered so far about the Chinese involvement through infrastructure projects like the BRI, but China has gone beyond this. This section argues that economic dependence functions as a key domestic constraint shaping Cambodia's foreign policy choices, rather than merely reflecting economic cooperation.

What is significant about this relationship is that China has now become Cambodia's largest trading partner and also a foreign investor, thereby creating structural incentives for policy alignment. Both nations' trade volume has reached \$15.18 billion, and Cambodia's export value to China rose to \$1.75 billion, as per a report by the General Department of Customs and Excise of Cambodia in early 2025 (Sum, 2025). Meanwhile, in terms of foreign direct investment, China channeled nearly \$550 million into the industrial sector as of early 2025 (Nhean, 2025). Additionally, the bilateral trade volume that was achieved is a result of the China-Cambodia Free Trade Agreement (CCFTA), which provide Cambodia with goods preferential access to China's consumer market (Sgueglia, 2025; Lay, 2025). From a neoclassical realist perspective, this economic reliance restricts Cambodia's flexibility by raising the political cost of policies that could upset China. Cambodia's major exports including agricultural goods, textiles, and bicycles are increasingly linked to Chinese demand, while imports of

machinery, electronics, and construction materials deepen Chinese supply chains in Cambodia's economy (Wren & Sam, 2023).

Infrastructure, manufacturing, and real estate are the core sectors that Chinese investments have been extremely concentrated on. For example, during the first quarter of 2025, China has conducted 172 projects resulting in \$2.5 billion that are expected to create around 120,000 jobs. The important projects like the BRI and Sihanoukville SEZ are the core developers for this trend. The SSEZ project has attracted investors to develop in the country which turned Cambodia into a manufacturing hub for textiles, automotive parts, and electronics which contributed to 14% of annual increase in industrial output (Wren & Sam, 2023). These projects not only boost economic growth but also strengthen regime legitimacy by providing visible development benefits to the population.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has modernized Cambodia's transportation networks through Chinese infrastructure investments but also limited financial dependence. As reported by the Ministry of Economy and Finance in the Cambodia Public Debt Statistical Bulletin as of March 2025, Cambodia has zero debt with China in 2024 while they expose China as financial supporter through the BRI project. For example, 70% of Cambodia's roads, railways and bridges are finances by China which include the newest development of Phnom Penh-Poi Pet railway project, connecting Cambodia to Thailand that could further enhance regional trade (Thang, 2025). This

project has been funded through the BOT agreement (Build-Operate-Transfer) which the future revenues from this railways will be used as loan repayment; thus, creating long-term financial obligations that may constrain future policy autonomy (IMF, 2025).

Despite actively involved in infrastructure project, China has asserted its influence to various key sectors in Cambodia. In the industrial sector, as of October 2024, Cambodia has 2,326 industrial factories, with 1,273 receiving investments from China, amounting to 9.086 billion U.S. dollars, or 45.49 percent of Cambodia's total investment capital (Xinhua, 2024). In the statement made by President Xi Jinping during his visit to Cambodia, he stated that Chinese experts have been actively involved in helping Cambodia develop modern agricultural development plans by conducting field trips in Cambodia regularly. This has happened due to the cooperation through the Diamond Hexagon Development Framework (MFA of China, 2025). These frameworks increase interdependence and incorporate Chinese preferences into Cambodia's long-term development plans.

However, it is still a concern for Cambodia's sovereignty as it mainly depends on China in many different sectors. Regarding the loan agreement and BOT deals provide further risks for this nation in having its autonomy in the near future. In order to mitigate risks, Cambodia is trying to diversify its partnerships. These frameworks enhance interdependence and include Chinese preferences in Cambodia's long-term development plans.

Recognizing these risks, the Cambodian government has been actively involved in core initiatives in ASEAN as well as negotiating trade agreements with other nations like South Korea and the European Union. For example, Cambodia has achieved its first meeting under the joint committee of the Cambodia-Korea Free Trade Agreement (CKFTA) and agreed to negotiate trade, services, and investments to maximize the benefits from the agreement (Sum, 2024; Hin, 2025). However, diversification efforts are still limited compared to Cambodia's economic ties with China.

Indicator	Value	Source
Total bilateral trade (2024)	\$15.19 bn	General Department of Customs and Excise (GDCE) of Cambodia
Cambodian exports to China (2024)	\$1.75 bn	
Imports from China (2024)	\$13.44 bn	
Trade deficit (2024)	~\$11.69 bn	
Share of total Cambodia trade (2024)	~30 %	
Bilateral trade Jan–Jul (2025)	~\$11 bn	
Cambodian exports Jan–Jul (2025)	~\$888 m	
Imports from China Jan–Jul (2025)	~\$10.11 bn	

Table 2.2: Cambodia-China Trade Indicators

Sources: Phnom Penh Post, 2025; Kampuchea Thmey, 2025

In summary, Cambodia's economic dependence on China acts as a domestic factor that strengthens alignment behavior. Economic growth, job creation, and regime legitimacy from Chinese engagement make Cambodia less willing to challenge Chinese

interests, especially in regional forums. This dynamic shows how economic dependence impacts foreign policy alignment, laying the groundwork for the regional ripple effects discussed in the following chapters.

### **2.2.3. Domestic Political Landscape and Foreign Policy**

In this section, we are going to explore the Cambodia's domestic political landscape under the Cambodian People's Party (CPP). The ruling party has held power for decades which they do not favor any actions that are harmful to the citizens and politics in the country. According to Human Rights Watch, Cambodia has been viewed as a state run by a single party in which CPP obtain power over their opposition (Hassan, 2024). With this regard, the Westerns and the US see Cambodia as an authoritarian country and always urging Cambodia to reform its democracy. With this political landscape, it led Cambodia to shift its foreign policy especially towards the country who provide support without conditions on governance or human rights reform.

The Khmer Rouge has had a strong influence over legitimacy and public perceptions of Cambodian politics. This history was once very important, and the foundation of legitimacy of the CPP was built through their successful actions of overthrowing this regime, but now many young Cambodians who were born after the Cold War do not feel as connected to it. They care more about what the government is doing now, like improving the economy and social welfare, rather than what happened in the past (Hale, 2025).

Nowadays, the CPP's core strategy is mainly to focus on economic development rather than creating another war. In this sense, economic development becomes a central pillar for CPP and the government, which allocates significant resources mainly to infrastructure and growth initiatives as a rebuilding mechanism after a long period of civil wars. As Medina (2025) has mentioned, a \$9.32 billion budget was approved for 2025, with the main portion given to infrastructure development, including energy projects and increasing water supply capacity in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap. In order to counter criticism of the regime's authoritarian methods, this economic focus aims to strengthen its base of support by providing noticeable increases in living conditions and connections. This developmental program heavily relies on foreign investment, especially from China, which strengthens Cambodia's foreign policy stance toward Beijing.

Moreover, the governance approach of CPP is considered to be an adoption of a co-optation strategy. PM Hun Sen has been employing coercive tactics in order to neutralize political threats, notably following the opposition surge in 2013 (Noren-Nilsson, 2022). The CPP was able to strengthen its hold on political space while maintaining an image of responsiveness by incorporating opposition policy suggestions into government initiatives like social welfare increases. The successful dynastic succession to Hun Manet, who carries on the regime's emphasis on political stability and economic growth, was the result of this twin policy.

The succession of current Prime Minister Hun Manet from his father, Hun Sen, was recognized as continuity rather than governmental change. Phorn & Loughlin (2025) provided an analysis of PM Hun Manet's first year of leadership by having his father as a powerful backbone, influencing the party and other state institutions. Additionally, the paper also indicates that, under PM Hun Manet, he continues to prioritize close relations with China while carefully balancing with the US and other partners. We will discuss this leadership further in the next sections.

Despite being criticized for becoming an authoritarian government, the CPP continues to place sovereignty and national pride as top priorities. In Cambodia's Pentagonal Strategy, the government outlines its ambitions to transform the country's status over the next 25 years (RGC, 2023). The regime's rejection of outside pressure for political reforms is bolstered by this narrative, which also explains its close ties with China, which respects Cambodia's sovereignty and avoids political terms.

#### **2.2.4 Public Perception and Social Impact**

The deepening relationship between Cambodia and China has garnered economic and social impacts, triggering public perceptions in certain ways. The Chinese investments and trade have benefited Cambodia in various sectors, which foster strong appreciation by Cambodian citizens who are benefiting from urban and infrastructure development, as well as the increase in jobs in urban areas. However, some public opinion raises concerns about the cultural influence, Chinese influx, and long-term

impacts on economic dependence. Thus, we will examine in detail such perceptions on Cambodia-China relations among the public.

The presence of Chinese investments comes with extensive development in the country. The consequences of such relations can be seen through the increasing bilateral volume between Cambodia and China of nearly 35% compared to 2022 (Neth, 2025). Also, China is still a leading investor and trading partner of Cambodia, especially with its BRI project that focuses on building infrastructure, one of which is the flagship Phnom Penh-Sihanoukville Expressway that is being widely used by Cambodians and considered to be a great development by the citizens. It can be noticed that these developments have gained significant support from Cambodian citizens, especially workers who are being employed by Chinese-owned factories and also residents that are benefiting from the infrastructure development.

Beyond infrastructure, such relations also expand tourism to another level. Chinese tourists, who ranked as the third largest foreign investor to Cambodia, have also been a part of allowing Cambodian citizens to earn more income, especially during this Covid-19 recovery period (Sam, 2025). An important initiative that contributed to this surge in Chinese tourists is the designation of 2025 as the ‘Cambodia-China Year of Tourism’, which focused on the people-to-people relations between the two nations and allows the flow of tourists into Cambodia and vice versa (Kin, 2025).

Although Cambodia gains significantly from Chinese investments, challenges and risks on China's presence continue to persist. The influx of Chinese workers and businessmen are among the reasons that cause local communities to react negatively towards their presence, saying that they are the ones who create a chaotic atmosphere in the communities, while the Chinese businesses receive preferential treatment that considered unfair to the locals. Besides that, there is tension between Cambodian and Chinese workers over the difference on their wages. Cambodian workers earn between \$8-\$15 per day, while Chinese workers earn higher which resulting in resentment (Keeton-Olsen & Yon, 2021).

Politically, the Chinese elite's centric approach enhanced the relationship with the Cambodian leader but estranged ordinary citizens. According to a 2022 survey, 75% of Cambodians blame China's involvement on security and crime problems, denouncing land-grabbing and opaque projects (Lim, 2024). Moreover, many activists are worried that surveillance technology, like the over 1,000 CCTV cameras set up by Chinese companies in Phnom Penh, threatens civil liberties (SCMP, 2022).

However, both countries actively engage in sectors like agriculture to counter negative perceptions. For instance, the Fish and Rice Corridor Initiative was established to modernize agriculture and boost rural incomes. Under this initiative, there is a joint training program conducted in Jiangsu province in China, focusing on sustainable farming, which is an important effort to align the Chinese investment with the local

needs (Cang, 2025). There is still disagreement among the public: in 2017, 49.6% of university students in Cambodia had a positive assessment of China's involvement, but 19.4% associated it with self-interest (Heng et al., 2017).

To sum up, Cambodia's relationship with China features economic growth alongside social inequality, political repression, and cultural tensions. Balancing partnerships with elites and involving local communities is essential for sustainable development and regional stability.

### **2.3 Leaders' Perceptions on China**

Based on neo-classical realism, this section analyzes how Cambodia's leadership has interpreted and responded to China's rise within the framework of broader systemic and domestic constraints. Instead of viewing leadership perceptions as the sole drivers of foreign policy, this analysis positions them as intervening factors that influence how external pressures and economic considerations are translated into specific policy outcomes.

#### **2.3.1 Hun Sen's Legacy and Views**

Mr. Hun Sen has held power from 1985 to 2023. His strategic approach to China has been one of the vital achievements, yet it has raised criticisms from the opposition. In his power, his approach was mainly in regime survival, economic pragmatism, and navigating geopolitical pressures, and the need to navigate evolving geopolitical pressures. By pivoting to China, it was not solely a result of personal intention by PM Hun Sen, but rather influenced by the pressures from the US and

Westerns sanctions, especially the criticism over human rights issues. This pressure contributed to shift toward China that provided political and economic support with fewer political conditionalities. This relationship has allowed Cambodia to progress to achieve critical infrastructure development and political support over the past decades.

Mr. Hun Sen, named China as a ‘trustworthy friend’ that always adhere to non-interference policy when engaging Cambodia, which contrast with what Western has always interfering into Cambodia’s domestic affairs (Ry, 2024). Under his leadership, Cambodia experienced increased Chinese involvement through the BRI projects leading to development of key infrastructure such as the Phnom Penh-Sihanoukville Expressway, the \$4 billion reparation of Phnom Penh-Poi Pet railway and especially, the building of Morodok Techo National Stadium, which indicates the relationship as ‘strong as brick’ (The Phnom Penh Post, 2023). These developments not only modernize Cambodia’s infrastructure, but also were associated with strengthen regime legitimacy through these development outcomes.

In terms of politics, Hun Sen has benefited from China’s political support to neutralize external threats, most importantly, his own opposition. A key example is noticed when China provided support and protected Cambodia from Western sanctions and criticism at the United Nations and other international stages, following the dissolution of the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) in 2017. With such

support, PM Hun Sen maintained his grip on power until now as he became the Senate president and continues to endorse China and Cambodia relations as an ‘Ironclad Friendship’ (Niem, 2024).

From a neoclassical realist perspective, Hun Sen’s policies can be seen as a pragmatic response to domestic legitimacy concerns and the systemic pressures resulting from great power competition. Cambodia’s closer engagement with China has secured essential resources for political stability while mitigating vulnerabilities to Western pressure, rather than merely reflecting a leader-driven strategic choice.

### **2.3.2 Hun Manet’s Continuity and Policy Priorities**

The leadership has changed in 2023, when new Prime Minister Hun Manet came into office. As the son of former Prime Minister Hun Sen, Hun Manet is considered in this paper an important leader who continues rather than fundamentally reshapes Cambodia’s approach toward China. He is believed to uphold his father’s legacy of cooperation with China while also placing a greater emphasis on balancing relations between the U.S. and China in light of changing regional and global dynamics.

In his balancing act, PM Hun Manet still pursues stronger relations with China. Upon entering office as the new Prime Minister in late August 2023, his first official foreign visit is by traveling to China. During his visit, he reaffirms Cambodia’s position and commitment to strengthen the ‘Ironclad friendship’ with China, expand bilateral trade and investment, especially further endorse the BRI projects (Yuji & Yukio, 2023).

Consequently, this visit reflected policy continuity rather than a strategic shift, as China remains Cambodia's largest trading and investment partner.

His key policy priorities is economic diversification. He began to promote industrial development and technology in order to attract higher-value manufacturing and innovation-driven industries, and avoid being overreliance on agricultural and garment sectors. The Fish and Rice Corridor project is a key example that shows his leadership as favoring technological advancement as part of the development while still welcoming support from China (Xinhua, 2025). This initiative also reflects a broader strategy to reduce urban-rural disparities and ensure inclusive growth.

Under Hun Manet's leadership, Cambodia's foreign policy aims to protect its national interests through maintaining sovereignty, fostering international friendships, promoting economic diplomacy, supporting multilateralism, and enhancing the capacity of its diplomatic corps (MoFAIC, n.d.). Regarding to this, PM Hun Manet's core policy doctrine highly undermine independence, multilateralism, international law, and regard Cambodia first. In his speech to the 78th UN General Assembly, he restated Cambodia's steadfast and unwavering position that it will not allow its territory to be used against a third party or host foreign military sites on its grounds. ASEAN remains the cornerstone of Cambodia's foreign policy, underscoring a strategic emphasis on regional cooperation and stability. These positions align with Cambodia's long-standing

policy principles rather than signify a departure from previous strategies (Chheang, 2023).

Despite these continuities, Cambodia's economy remains heavily dependent on China, particularly following the tariff removals under the China-Cambodia Free Trade Agreement established during the previous leadership (Mom, 2024). Concerns over inequality, sovereignty, and economic concentration persist. In response, PM Hun Manet has reaffirmed Cambodia's neutral stance, using the metaphor of "taking beef and cabbage" to indicate balanced relations with China, the United States, and other partners (Teng, 2025; Fresh News Asia, 2025). .

#### **2.4 Conclusion**

This chapter explores the factors shaping Cambodia's restricted bandwagoning with China through neoclassical realism, revealing that global pressures, domestic politics, and leadership perspectives influence this alignment. As the US-China rivalry intensifies, Cambodia, as a smaller nation, has chosen to deepen its ties with China to gain economic and political benefits while minimizing outside interference; a form we understand as restricted bandwagoning. The ongoing competition enables Cambodia to leverage China's non-interference and investment initiatives, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as a counter to conditional Western aid. Domestically, the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) views Chinese support as crucial for stability and legitimacy, particularly after the 1997 coup. Leadership dynamics, with former Prime Minister Hun Sen relying on Chinese backing and his successor, Hun Manet, continuing

this strategy, further reinforce this alignment. However, overdependence on China reraises concerns about national sovereignty, ASEAN unity, and domestic inequality, leading to public criticism over social tensions and wage disparities. Ultimately, while Cambodia's alignment with China offers development benefits and political backing, it requires careful management to avoid geopolitical pitfalls and ensure national and regional stability.

### CHAPTER 3

#### THE RIPPLE EFFECTS ON REGIONAL SECURITY DYNAMICS

The growing alignment between Cambodia and China is reshaping regional security dynamics in Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific. This strategic partnership, marked by significant economic, military, and diplomatic ties, signals a shift in the regional balance of power that challenges existing institutions and tests established security frameworks. Cambodia's position as China's most reliable partner within ASEAN undermines the organization's ability to act collectively on key security issues, particularly at the leaders' and summit level, especially regarding the South China Sea. By consistently blocking joint statements critical of Beijing and withdrawing from sub-regional frameworks like the Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Development Triangle Area (CLV-DTA), Cambodia illustrates how individual state alignments can fragment multilateral cooperation. This fragmentation is most visible in high-level political consensus-building, occurring at a time when regional unity is crucial for navigating great power competition and maintaining Southeast Asia's autonomy.

Beyond internal challenges within ASEAN, Cambodia's alignment with China has broader implications for regional stability and trust. The development of Chinese military capabilities at Cambodia's Ream Naval Base illustrates how this partnership can shift how countries perceive threats. Vietnam, for example, is concerned about being encircled by China through Cambodia, a worry shared by other Southeast Asian nations regarding China's growing military presence. This changing power dynamic in Southeast Asia reflects global competition, as China's economic and military growth challenges the roles of traditional external powers. Cambodia's integration into China's Belt and Road Initiative shows how economic ties can enhance geopolitical influence, reshaping regional order and prompting other countries to find new strategies for maintaining their independence.

This chapter will explore these dynamics through two interrelated frameworks. The first section examines ASEAN itself, focusing on how Cambodia's restricted bandwagoning with China affects institutional cohesion and decision-making processes. This analysis reveals how individual member states can undermine collective action and fragment regional responses. The second section widens the scope, assessing how Cambodia's alignment fits into broader patterns of strategic competition and regional order transformation. Understanding these dynamics is essential for policymakers and regional stakeholders seeking to navigate today's increasingly contested regional environment. The Cambodia-China relationship serves as a critical example of how

great power competition shapes regional contexts, with implications extending beyond Southeast Asia.

### **3.1 ASEAN's Strategic Cohesion and Cambodia's Disruptive Role**

#### **3.1.1 Cambodia's Role in ASEAN**

Cambodia's relationship with ASEAN is complicated and cannot be easily labeled as either a positive force for cooperation or just a tool for outside powers. Since joining ASEAN as its 10<sup>th</sup> member in 1999, Cambodia has shown moments of strong diplomatic leadership but has also acted in ways that undermine collective action. This mix of achievements and controversial actions has posed real challenges to ASEAN's ability to make decisions based on consensus.

The journey of Cambodia in joining ASEAN highlights its complicated stance on multilateral cooperation. In 1967, Indonesian Foreign Minister Adam Malik approached Prince Norodom Sihanouk to join the organization, but the Prince firmly refused by preferring to maintain Cambodia's neutrality and non-aligned status, which he wanted Cambodia to be "Switzerland of Asia" amid the Vietnam War (Merican, 2007). This early pattern of cautious independence would shape Cambodia's approach to ASEAN, with national sovereignty frequently taking priority over regional unity.

Cambodia finally decided to join ASEAN in 1999, allowing the organization to complete its membership from all Southeast Asian nations (MoFAIC, n.d.). Such an important decision came after the UNTAC elections in 1993, which also included the signing of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in 1995, and also acted as an ASEAN

observer before accessing its full membership (Merican, 2007). This gradual integration showed Cambodia's real commitment to regional participation while still aligning with its core interests.

Cambodia's three terms as ASEAN chair, in 2002, 2012, and 2022, highlight its ability to lead regionally, while also exposing the challenges of balancing its national interests with collective responsibilities. 2002 marked the first year of Cambodia chairmanship, when it produced significant achievement, especially adopted the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea-DOC, which has been a cornerstone of ASEAN-China cooperation to ensure that the South China Sea remain peaceful and stable (Kao, 2025).

In 2012, Cambodia hosted another summit when controversy arose as ASEAN failed to issue a joint communique. However, the Phnom Penh Agenda for ASEAN Community Building and the start of negotiations for the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), now the largest free trade area in the world, covering 30% of the global population and GDP, showcase Cambodia's ability to promote meaningful regional integration (ASEAN, n.d.).

The 2022 chairmanship under the theme "ASEAN A.C.T.: Addressing Challenges Together" showcased Cambodia's diplomatic maturation. Despite facing the complex Myanmar crisis and intensifying great power rivalry, Cambodia successfully managed multiple challenging negotiations. The adoption of three ASEAN Regional Forum statements involving 27 countries with competing positions, including managing

discussions between China, Russia, and the United States at the same table, illustrated sophisticated diplomatic capabilities. Hun Sen's co-chairing of summits with President Biden and European Council President Michel further demonstrated Cambodia's ability to bridge different constituencies.

The most recent chairmanship happened in 2022 under the theme "ASEAN A.C.T: Addressing Challenges Together," which showcased Cambodia's diplomatic maturity. Despite dealing with the complicated Myanmar crisis and rising great power tensions, Cambodia successfully navigated several difficult negotiations. The adoption of three ASEAN Regional Forum statements involving 27 countries with differing views, including discussions between China, Russia, and the United States, showcased Cambodia's advanced diplomatic skills (Khmer Times, 2022). Prime Minister Hun Sen's co-chairing of summits with President Joe Biden and European Council President Charles Michel also highlighted Cambodia's ability to connect and engage various constituencies (Sim, 2023).

However, Cambodia's most controversial contributions to ASEAN have centered on its consistent blocking of joint statements critical of Chinese activities in the South China Sea. These controversies were concentrated at the summit and foreign ministers' level, while cooperation in functional and technical ASEAN bodies largely continued. The 2012 failure to issue a joint communiqué for the first time in ASEAN's 45-year history marked a watershed moment that damaged both Cambodia's reputation and ASEAN's credibility. Cambodia's refusal to include references to the Philippines-China

Scarborough Shoal dispute reflected what many viewed as prioritizing Chinese interests over regional solidarity.

However, Cambodia's most controversial contributions to ASEAN have been its consistent blocking of joint statements that criticize Chinese activities in the South China Sea. The 2012 failure to issue a joint communique for the first time in ASEAN's 45-year history marked a pivotal moment that harmed both Cambodia's reputation and ASEAN's credibility (DW, 2012; Kung, 2015).

Another repeated scenario happened in 2016, when Cambodia blocked references to the UN-backed Permanent Court of Arbitration that rejected China's maritime claims (MoFAIC, 2016). Despite the Philippines winning an emphatic legal victory, Cambodia's objections prevented the regional bloc from endorsing this significant development in international law (Medina, 2017).

Cambodia justified these positions by arguing that ASEAN should not interfere in bilateral sovereignty disputes and that the organization "**is not a court to give verdicts**" (DW, 2012). This stance reflected a principled commitment to the principle of non-interference. However, Cambodia's positions often came right after big announcements of Chinese aid. This raised concerns about whether Cambodia was making independent decisions. For example, the \$600 million aid package announced before the 2016 ASEAN meeting highlighted this issue (Sok, 2016).

The change from former PM Hun Sen to Hun Manet has brought new dynamics to Cambodia's involvement with ASEAN. Hun Manet has a more balanced diplomatic

style and studied in the West, which helps him rethink Cambodia's regional relationships (Rim, 2023; Lim & Ly, 2024). He aims to diversify partnerships while still maintaining important connections, moving away from his father's more confrontational approach.

Hun Manet's attendance at the 2023 Jakarta Summit as the new Prime Minister showed his desire to build his diplomatic reputation. He met with over twenty heads of state and international organizations, including important talks with ASEAN partners, which suggests a more active approach (Khim & Ung, 2023). However, ongoing domestic political issues and strong Chinese economic influence limit how much he can change policies.

The recent controversies occurred when Cambodia's current Senate President, Hun Sen, leaked a phone call with Thai Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra, which is believed to be an action of breaching ASEAN's non-interference principle (Hunt, 2025; Lam, 2025). These actions break ASEAN protocol in ways we have never seen before and highlight how domestic politics can outweigh diplomatic caution.

Cambodia's role in ASEAN is complex, as it has shown strong leadership through successful chairmanships and contributions to regional integration, such as the DOC and RCEP negotiations. However, its obstruction of ASEAN's positions on the South China Sea and alignment with Chinese interests raise concerns about its commitment to collective action and suggest external influence affecting its decision-making. This balancing act creates challenges for Cambodia as a middle power, jeopardizing regional

solidarity and prompting critics to see it more as a disruptive force within ASEAN instead of a constructive member.

### 3.1.2 ASEAN's Unity in Crisis: Consensus vs. Competition

Discussing about Cambodia's vetoed attempt regarding the South China Sea in 2012 and 2016, explain how a member of this organization that chose to align with external power, could hinder collective actions ASEAN. As we know, the consensus principle implementing within ASEAN is intended to promote equal representation but turned out to be a tool for disruption, especially when Cambodia prioritize Chinese interests over regional unity. This action created breakdown to diplomacy at the leaders' level, after intense negotiations both behind the scene and an emergency session (Al Jazeera, 2012). A Southeast Asian diplomat has characterized Cambodia's behavior as "hostage-taking" (Parameswaran, 2016).

The repeated exploitation on the ASEAN consensus that structurally required granting each member "**de facto veto power**", is definitely exposed during 2012 disruption of the joint communique and then 2016 statement following the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling against China's maritime claims (Po & Sreng, 2024). With such veto privilege under the consensus voting system, Cambodia obstructs ASEAN at the political-decision level from recognizing significant legal development. Therefore, to avoid further deadlock and ensure some level of progress within ASEAN, the Philippines had to abandon its references to these important legal developments (Al Jazeera, 2016).

The foundation of decision-making through consensus assumes that “all parties must share the same concerns and be willing to sacrifice part or all of their interests for the common cause” (Nguyen, 2012). With such assumptions in place, Cambodia’s action reveal loopholes in such decision-making procedures. It can be seen that, when national interests arise on top of everything, a country could ignore collective regional interests and favoring external power to gain its own interest, which then make consensus truly impossible within the region. There is also a suggestion by academics that ASEAN should develop its decision-making process towards “non-absolute consensus”. Unlike a strict consensus model, which allows any member to veto decisions, a non-absolute consensus allows for collective action without the risk of one member's dissent paralyzing the entire organization. This means that while input is valued, it does not prevent progress (Nguyen, 2012).

The South China Sea dispute triggers ASEAN’s institutional coherence primarily in high-politics domains, exposing ASEAN members that are being divided into maritime and mainland member states, which it considers ASEAN’s failure to abide by international law when it faces external pressure. While this dispute persists, ASEAN’s ability to unify member states to protect maritime security has been an unsuccessful route, leading to the weakening of its credibility as a regional security frontman as well as its neutrality in dealing with great-power competition. At the same time, ASEAN’s ministerial meetings, economic cooperation, and technical working groups continue to operate, suggesting that institutional paralysis is selective rather than systemic.

Mainland states like Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand increasingly align with China, while the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei confront direct territorial threats from Chinese assertiveness. This "mainland-maritime split" complicates consensus, as non-claimant states often prioritize economic ties with China over solidarity with affected ASEAN partners. The Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei are the members who confront China over the South China Sea disputes, while nations like Cambodia, Laos, and even Thailand increasingly align with China (Tan, 2025). Such a "mainland-maritime spit" makes consensus complicated and impossible, as non-claimant states are not favoring their fellow ASEAN members by choosing China to gain their national interests (Chap, 2023).

As mentioned, the failure of ASEAN in referencing the 2016 arbitration ruling has critically hindered the organization's legitimacy (Parameswaran, 2016). Observers criticize ASEAN for not actively taking action to issue a joint statement after this important ruling as well as excluding the case from other relevant official documents, which clarify ASEAN fragmentation (Pham, 2025). In addition, ASEAN has failed to finalize the Code of Conduct (CoC) with China, which explains ASEAN's inability to assert collective influence in terms of negotiations with major powers. Since the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of the Parties, the CoC has been doubted to be completed as there are still disagreements on key issues, and certain members are favoring China, especially Cambodia (Sangtam, 2023). Without a united front, China feels little pressure to change its behavior. It knows how to influence individual ASEAN

states through trade and diplomacy, which makes it even harder for the organization to respond with a clear and collective voice (Chap, 2023).

With the failure of the consensus on solving major issues, external powers have reevaluated their security cooperation policy, mainly shifting to minilateral arrangements, which provide them with more efficiency and strategic coherence (Charles, 2025). Such options reflect how external powers seek other frameworks like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and Australia-United Kingdom-United States Security Partnership (AUKUS) for security-sensitive issues, rather than ASEAN, as they tend to lose confidence in its ability to act decisively at the political level (Ha, 2022). These coalitions target specific issues and respond to them swiftly, which bypasses ASEAN's consensus complexities. For instance, AUKUS reiterates its concerns over ASEAN's limitations because they have not received any significant consultation with ASEAN during its formation, which indicates the inability to solve pressing issues in the region (Choong & Storey, 2021).

ASEAN's diminishing role in security matters is part of a larger trend that threatens its overall influence in regional governance. During the Myanmar Crisis, ASEAN failed to execute the Five-Point Consensus while its members adopted a **“parallel diplomacy”** through bilateral and minilateral approaches to solve the issue (Lam, 2025). As key decisions on security, technology, and infrastructure are increasingly made outside of ASEAN meetings, the organization risks becoming less influential in shaping these critical areas (Charles, 2025). The growing reliance on

unilateral arrangements contributes to eroding confidence in ASEAN's centrality in regional governance. Member states may question the organization's ability to effectively address shared challenges.

ASEAN faces the challenge of reconciling its institutional structures, designed for a different era, with the contemporary geopolitical realities marked by intense strategic competition and transnational challenges. The organization's founding principles of consensus and non-interference, known as the "ASEAN Way," seem increasingly inadequate for addressing modern security issues. The gap between ASEAN's proclaimed "centrality" and its fragmentation is evident, as its inability to respond effectively to the Myanmar crisis or manage South China Sea tensions highlights a disconnect between formal endorsements of its leadership and the practical undermining of its authority.

ASEAN is attempting to reconcile its frameworks and processes to address the current geopolitical landscape complexities, which are characterized by intense competition and multifaceted global issues. In this section, we reiterate that the foundational principles of consensus and non-interference, which are referred to as the "ASEAN Way", are viewed as inadequate to addressing potential modern security issues. There is a notable gap between ASEAN's claim of "centrality" and the reality of its fragmentation (Valockova, 2025). This disconnect is evident in its inability to effectively respond to crises, such as the ongoing situation in Myanmar and tensions in the South China Sea.

In order to adapt to such challenges, ASEAN needs to dig deep into its foundational principles, which are also an obstacle to amendment. With a consensus mechanism allowing exploitation by its member states, ASEAN also takes alternative actions to solve it. The reform, like “**ASEAN Minus X**” and the “**non-absolute consensus**,” allows members to pursue initiatives without agreeing to it unanimously, which is already in place but needs to be extended (Nguyen, 2012; Ng, 2021). Emphasizing economic integration through the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 can serve as a unifying force (Tanalal, 2025). Strengthening economic ties among member states may help mitigate the effects of political fragmentation and foster cooperation. Additionally, maintaining core values while adapting to contemporary realities will allow ASEAN to take effective action in a complex regional landscape, addressing both economic and security issues.

### **3.1.3 Cambodia’s Balancing Dilemma**

Cambodia has always pertained to practiced “**friend-to-all, enemy-to-none**” diplomacy, but Cambodia’s actions eventually indicate its intention to slide deeper into China’s influence. This section will examine whether Cambodia is definitely hedging, how Cambodia’s alignment with China may erode trust among fellow ASEAN member states, questioning Cambodia’s commitment towards collective security, and why an image of overreliance on China limits Cambodia’s diplomatic flexibility.

Cambodian officials often indicate the country’s partnership with various countries, including South Korea, Japan, the EU, and even the US, and imply as a

hedging strategy that counters criticism of dependency on China (Kelliher, 2024).

Cambodia and South Korea reached “Strategic Partner” status in 2024, when Cambodia received investment from South Korea worth US\$5 billion and agreed to promote joint peacekeeping training (Yen, 2024). This action shows diversification beyond China, by engaging with various countries as evidenced above.

Despite such diversifications, China remains Cambodia’s largest investor, creditor, and builder in Cambodia, as we have discussed multiple times in this paper. Chinese firms have around 90% of garment factories in Cambodia, and are involved solely on projects built under Chinese BRI initiatives such as the Phnom Penh-Sihanoukville Expressway, Special Economic Zones, Phnom Penh-Bavet Expressway (Project worth US41.37 billion is under construction), and the famous Funan Techo Canal (Sun & Noy, 2023; Mom, 2024; Liu & Clark, 2024). Military cooperation between Cambodia and China is significantly more substantial compared to that with the United States. China's funding and upgrades to the Ream Naval Base indicate a deepening military partnership (Kelliher, 2024). The annual “Golden Dragon” military exercises between Cambodia and the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) further illustrate the growing military ties (Panyue, 2025).

Meanwhile, Cambodia enhances its selective outreach to project an image of neutrality while also expanding structural dependency, which strengthens its relations with China. This parallel acts by Cambodia reflects a complicated balancing strategy in foreign policy. Analysts observe that Cambodia’s hedging strategy is at stake, favoring

China through endorsement of the one-China policy and also on the South China Sea disputes, which hindered ASEAN cohesion (Po & Primiano, 2020; Niem, 2025). Such actions expose Cambodia's behavior in appearing to prioritizing China over neutrality within the region.

Furthermore, this perceived favoritism has resulted in a deepening trust deficit within ASEAN. Claimant states in the South China Sea indicates the veto power that Cambodia has employed, which they considered it China's use of veto power in ASEAN via Cambodia. Some officials in Southeast Asian suggested that ASEAN will not function effectively if Cambodia continues to enjoy this veto authority (Florick, 2021).

This section reiterates that Cambodia's evolving role in ASEAN exemplifies the tension between national interests and regional collective security. While Cambodia also acts positively by engaging in mature diplomatic ways with various countries, consistent alignment with China has fractured ASEAN's unity, especially on issues like the South China Sea. In terms of ASEAN, its consensus decision-making model has been exposed as weak by Cambodia and erodes trust among members. Despite attempts at reform and diversifying partnerships, Cambodia's diplomatic strategy tends to favor China, undermining its ability to maintain a balanced approach among regional powers. If ASEAN's internal dynamics do not improve, the organization risks being sidelined in crucial regional security dialogues. This could limit its ability to address pressing security issues effectively, and external powers might seek alternative frameworks.

### 3.2 Regional Power Dynamics Beyond ASEAN

#### 3.2.1 Ream Naval Base and Maritime Tensions

While Ream Naval Base is being upgraded in Cambodia through Chinese support, it has become an important ground fuel discussion over regional maritime security. As the previous section discussed Vietnam's concerns, the broader implications of such development extend beyond the Cambodia-Vietnam bilateral relations. The presence of a foreign military partner near the Gulf of Thailand creates concerns about how these alignments influence regional stability and challenge the balance of power in Southeast Asia and even the wider Indo-Pacific.

Beyond the bilateral dimension explored in the previous chapter, the Ream Naval Base becomes a critical point in Indo-Pacific geopolitics, which indicates how such support from China's BRI could develop into strategic military positioning. Geographically, this base is located on the Gulf of Thailand, which is 200 kilometers from Thailand's eastern coasts and just 30 kilometers from Vietnam's Phu Quoc Island, placing it at the intersection of critical maritime routes connecting the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean (Sanglee, 2023; CSIS, 2025). This geographic positioning allows China to assert naval power into uncontested waters while also complicating freedom of navigation operations that hindered regional stability for many years.

While Vietnam has voiced concerns about Ream Naval Base, Thailand's quiet positioning and broader US-China naval competition in the Gulf deserve attention. Thailand has pursued a cautious approach regarding China's military enhancement at

Ream, which reflects its balancing strategy between the US and China while protecting its influence. Thailand has opted for a “quiet diplomacy” by refraining from criticizing any activities conducted by China in the area, which could help them avoid upsetting both major powers (Sanglee, 2023). This move is considered to be in line with its “bamboo bending with the wind” policy, even though China’s current presence would challenge its maritime effectiveness (Kislenko, 2002). However, Thailand took an approach to further modernize its naval capacity. The Royal Thai Navy is upgrading facilities on Thap Lamu Port within the Phang Nga Naval Base on the Andaman Sea, which recognizes potential threats of China’s presence at Ream, while also seeking defense cooperation with the US. Thailand’s recent participation in US-led exercises like CARAT 2025 has indicated the complexities of Thailand’s position in the region (Moore, 2025).

Southeast Asia's middle powers are fully aware of the militarization of Ream and adjust their strategy following China's growing presence in the area. As discussed, Vietnam has taken direct engagement with Cambodia by focusing on military modernization and cooperation with Cambodia while also diversifying its alliances. Other countries also employ different approaches in response to this concern. Indonesia, even though it is not a claimant state to the South China Sea, has shared concerns about foreign military bases in the region by stressing the need to abide by ASEAN's nuclear-weapon-free zone and prevent great power competition (Pou et al., 2023). Malaysia also took steps to balance its territorial disputes with China against the

risk of destabilization from increased Chinese military presence. Singapore, as a vital maritime hub, allows access for both U.S. and Chinese naval vessels while promoting rules-based regional security. Japan is strengthening defense ties with Vietnam and the Philippines, recognizing these nations as key partners in balancing regional dynamics against China's assertiveness (CSIS, 2025). The March 2025 visit by a Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force vessel to Ream serves as a practical demonstration of this strategy (Torn, 2025). It symbolizes Japan's commitment to reinforcing regional security partnerships and its interest in maintaining a presence in the area.

This situation highlights a bigger problem. Some ASEAN countries are becoming so tied to China through Belt and Road projects that it is affecting how the whole organization functions. Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar, for instance, rely heavily on Chinese investment and often side with Beijing in international discussions (ORF, 2023; Sayavongs, 2023). In Laos, Chinese-funded infrastructure has led to serious debt, limiting the country's ability to make independent foreign policy choices (Lin, 2023). In Myanmar, the ongoing political crisis has made it easier for China to gain influence (Garagarza, 2023). Because of these close ties, ASEAN struggles to take a clear, united stance on regional security issues (Bajpaee, 2022). When a few members consistently back China, it is hard for the organization to respond firmly to things like growing tensions in the South China Sea. That is why countries like the Philippines and Vietnam are working together outside the ASEAN framework, doing joint patrols and strengthening defense ties (Lim, 2024). Indonesia and Malaysia are doing something

similar by increasing military cooperation (Da Costa, 2025). These smaller partnerships show that countries are starting to look elsewhere when ASEAN cannot deliver a strong, collective response.

Ream's militarization reflects China's strategy to extend naval reach through land-based infrastructure, enabling sustained operations in contested waters. The base's capacity for large Chinese vessels indicates Beijing's commitment to maintaining a naval presence in the Gulf of Thailand, complicating U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, which relies on alliances and forward-deployed forces.

With this land-based infrastructure being influenced inside certain Southeast Asian countries, it makes way for China to extend its naval reach, with Ream's case as an example. This strategy is core to China's commitment to maintaining and increasing the naval presence in the Gulf of Thailand while complicating the US Indo-Pacific strategy, which mainly relies on alliances and forward-deployed forces. Such emergence of the Chinese navy at Ream produces new variables for the US operational planning, especially on Taiwan and the South China Sea issues (Grossman, 2024). US naval operations now have to factor in the possibility of Chinese surveillance or interference from Ream, as the base gives China a strategic position that could support wider military activities, even reaching into the Indian Ocean.

Turning Ream into a Chinese military base is more than just a local issue, it marks a shift in how power is working across Southeast Asia. It raises real questions about whether countries can keep economic ties with China separate from growing

security concerns. China has managed to build a military presence in Cambodia while keeping strong economic partnerships, and that puts pressure on others in the region to reassess how they handle both. For middle powers, this means making tough choices. They have to figure out how to keep developing their economies without giving up too much control over their security or getting caught between major powers. Ream is becoming a key example of what happens when those lines start to blur. If China's presence there proves durable and influential, other countries might respond by moving away from relying on ASEAN and forming smaller, more flexible security partnerships with countries that share similar concerns. What happens in Cambodia could end up setting the tone for how other smaller states deal with China's growing footprint, especially when it comes to the balance between money and military power in the region.

### **3.2.2 Strategic Realignment and the Rise of Minilateralism**

We tend to see a shift in Asia's security landscape nowadays. Instead of relying on big, slow-moving organizations like ASEAN, countries are forming smaller, more flexible security partnerships to deal with specific threats. These "minilateral" groups are changing how the region handles security challenges.

ASEAN has always prided itself on making decisions by consensus, but this approach is backfiring when it comes to China's growing assertiveness. The cracks started showing during the South China Sea disputes in 2012 and then in 2016, as we discussed multiple times in this paper. These incidents revealed a fundamental

problem that when you need everyone to agree, and some members are being pressured by outside powers, you end up unable to act at all. This paralysis pushed countries to look for alternatives. The concept of minilateralism is not new (academics were writing about it in the 1990s), but it is become much more popular recently. The basic idea is simple, in which small groups of countries working together on specific issues can move much faster than large organizations trying to please everyone (Wilt, 2025). Unlike formal military alliances, these partnerships let countries collaborate on particular problems without signing broad treaties or making big political commitments. This flexibility is perfect for Southeast Asia, where countries have complicated relationships and often prefer to hedge their bets.

Vietnam offers a perfect example of how this works. The country has a “**Four Nos**” defense policy that sounds pretty isolationist with no military alliances, no picking sides against other countries, no foreign military bases, and no threatening anyone (Minh, 2023). But within these constraints, Vietnam has quietly built up impressive security partnerships. With Japan, Vietnam has received patrol boats and surveillance equipment. Since 2015, Japan has provided high-speed patrol boats and satellite monitoring systems (Mi, 2015). India has supplied coastal patrol boats and training through credit arrangements (Parameswaran, 2019). In April 2024, Vietnam signed agreements with the Philippines for coast guard cooperation and joint exercises (Strangio, 2024). All of these partnerships help Vietnam push back against Chinese pressure while technically maintaining its non-aligned stance.

The Philippines has faced even more direct pressure from China, especially from harassment by Chinese coast guard ships. ASEAN's slow response times just did not work when dealing with these kinds of immediate threats. Therefore, the Philippines has turned to smaller groups. In 2024, the Philippines joined Japan and Australia for freedom of navigation operations in the West Philippine Sea (Johnson & Benoza, 2024). They have done separate anti-submarine warfare drills with Japan and regular exercises with the US, Australia, and New Zealand (Reuters, 2024). These flexible arrangements let the Philippines respond quickly to Chinese gray-zone tactics without getting bogged down in ASEAN's consensus-building process.

Japan and India have both seized the opportunity to expand their influence in the region through these smaller partnerships. Japan has been promoting its “**Free and Open Indo-Pacific**” vision through defense dialogues and agreements like the Reciprocal Access Agreement with the Philippines (Gutierrez, 2025). Japanese warships have been making port visits to Cambodia and the Philippines, directly competing with the Chinese naval presence. India, following its “**Act East**” policy, has renewed maritime cooperation with Indonesia and Singapore and is negotiating port access deals, including at Sabang Island (Sharma, 2025).

While these smaller partnerships offer clear benefits like faster decision-making, joint patrols, and better training programs, they also create some problems. The biggest risk is that they might undermine ASEAN's central role in regional security. Countries like Cambodia and Laos, which are closely tied to China, could find

themselves isolated from these new frameworks (Ha, 2022). Having multiple overlapping partnerships could also create confusion and reduce transparency about who is doing what with whom (Alles & Fournol, 2023).

The shift toward smaller security partnerships represents a fundamental change in how the Indo-Pacific handles security challenges. As competition between great powers intensifies, countries are choosing practical, focused partnerships that deliver real results over traditional consensus-based approaches. Vietnam, the Philippines, Japan, India, and Australia are leading this trend, creating new coalitions to keep sea lanes open and deter aggressive behavior. While this approach improves responsiveness to immediate threats, it also raises questions about ASEAN's future role and regional unity. Moving forward, the challenge will be finding ways to balance the efficiency of these smaller groups with the broader unity that multilateral organizations like ASEAN are supposed to provide. The region needs both quick responses to immediate threats and long-term stability, and figuring out how to maintain both will be crucial for peace in an increasingly contested part of the world.

### 3.3 Conclusion

This chapter has examined how Cambodia's restricted bandwagoning with China is fundamentally reshaping regional security dynamics in Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific. The analysis reveals two interconnected patterns of transformation that extend far beyond bilateral relations to challenge established security frameworks and institutional arrangements.

Cambodia's role within ASEAN exemplifies the tension between individual state interests and collective regional security. While Cambodia has demonstrated diplomatic leadership during its three chairmanships and contributed to significant regional initiatives like the Declaration on Conduct of Parties and RCEP negotiations, its consistent obstruction of ASEAN positions on the South China Sea has exposed critical vulnerabilities in the organization's consensus-based decision-making, particularly at the summit and leaders' level. The 2012 and 2016 incidents, where Cambodia blocked joint statements critical of Chinese activities, marked watershed moments that damaged both ASEAN's credibility and its ability to respond effectively to security challenges. Cambodia's veto power under the consensus system has transformed what was intended as inclusive decision-making into a tool for external influence, allowing China to effectively shape ASEAN positions through its most reliable regional partner.

The militarization of Ream Naval Base represents the physical manifestation of this strategic realignment, with implications extending across the Gulf of Thailand and into broader Indo-Pacific geopolitics. China's enhanced naval presence at Ream creates new variables for regional powers, forcing Vietnam, Thailand, and other middle powers to recalibrate their security strategies while managing economic dependencies on China. The base's strategic location demonstrates how Belt and Road Initiative projects can evolve into military assets, blurring the lines between economic cooperation and security alignment.

These developments have accelerated a broader shift toward minilateral security arrangements, as countries like Vietnam and the Philippines pursue flexible partnerships outside ASEAN's consensus constraints. The rise of smaller, issue-specific coalitions reflects growing frustration with traditional multilateral approaches that have proven inadequate for addressing contemporary security challenges. While these partnerships offer greater responsiveness and operational flexibility, they also risk fragmenting regional unity and marginalizing ASEAN's central role in security governance.

The Cambodia-China relationship thus serves as a critical case study of how great power competition is reshaping the regional order in Southeast Asia. As economic interdependence increasingly translates into security alignment, middle powers face difficult choices between maintaining autonomy and securing development partnerships. The challenge moving forward will be balancing the efficiency of emerging minilateral arrangements with the broader stability that inclusive multilateral institutions like ASEAN are supposed to provide, ensuring that regional responses to great power competition enhance rather than undermine collective security. However, this does not indicate a complete breakdown of ASEAN, as lower-level cooperation in economic, technical, and functional areas remains largely intact.

While this chapter has focused on the regional and institutional consequences of Cambodia's alignment with China, these ripple effects extend beyond the ASEAN level. The erosion of ASEAN cohesion and the emergence of minilateral security responses

have uneven impacts across member states, with Vietnam being the most directly affected actor. As a frontline claimant in the South China Sea and Cambodia's immediate neighbor, Vietnam perceives these regional shifts not only as abstract institutional weaknesses but also as concrete strategic and security challenges. The inability of ASEAN to act collectively amplifies bilateral sensitivities, transforming regional alignments into direct pressures on Cambodia–Vietnam relations. Chapter 4 thus narrows the analytical lens from regional security dynamics to the bilateral level, examining how Cambodia's alignment with China reshapes trust, threat perceptions, and strategic interactions with Vietnam.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE RIPPLE EFFECTS ON CAMBODIA-VIETNAM RELATIONS

In the complex geopolitical landscape of Southeast Asia, a series of alliances and rivalries have shifted among neighboring countries, affecting not only bilateral relations but also the broader regional order. In this chapter it focuses on how Cambodia's relations with China will affect Cambodia–Vietnam relations by employing Vietnam's reactions as key evidence of the ripple effects of Cambodia's restricted bandwagoning with China. This chapter thus extends the analysis from Chapter 3 by tracing how regional-level disruptions within ASEAN, most evident at the summit level, cascade into Cambodia–Vietnam bilateral relations across strategic, political, economic, and security dimensions.

Cambodia's dependence on China poses direct concerns for Vietnam. Both nations share a complex and often deeply rooted history, marked by conflicts that are often ways of communicating mistrust and border disputes. Vietnam is highly attuned to any rise in Chinese influence in Cambodia due to its historical competition with China and the painful memories from the Khmer Rouge period, when Chinese backing for the regime led to severe repercussions for both Vietnam and the region (Khim, 2020). Until today, the growing dependence of Cambodia on China has hindered its security and economic cooperation with Vietnam and could alter the strategic balance along the shared border with Cambodia (Nguyen, 2023).

By analyzing through the neo-classical realism lens, this chapter will expose the layered influences from systemic pressure like China's assertiveness and great power competition to domestic factors including nationalism and party legitimacy, as well as the cohesion alignment problem within ASEAN, which shape the strategic calculation of Vietnam and also its relations with Cambodia. Cambodia's alignment with China is shaped by an intensifying rivalry between the US and China as well as China's assertiveness in Southeast Asia. The efforts made by China to increase influence through diplomatic engagement, military modernization, and economic development have attracted Southeast Asian states to align with China to gain such benefits. At the same time, Vietnam's response to these pressures is shaped by its internal situation, especially nationalism and the need for the Communist Party to stay legitimate. Such

Vietnam's domestic calculations are being considered as reactions to Cambodia's external alignment.

Regional issues are complicated by divisions within ASEAN, where member countries disagree on important security and economic topics, as well as ongoing tensions between Cambodia and Vietnam. Disputes over borders, ethnic minorities, and political interference continue to strain their relationship, making the handling of Chinese influence in Cambodia a very sensitive issue for Vietnam and a cause of regional instability (Huynh & Mai, 2024). Therefore, this chapter demonstrates that such developments mentioned above stem from Cambodia's restricted bandwagon towards China and impact Cambodia-Vietnam relations. While these ripple effects first manifest at the ASEAN summit level as demonstrated in the South China Sea crisis of 2012 and 2016, they subsequently filter down to ministerial coordination, bilateral mechanisms, and operational cooperation, where Vietnam feels their practical consequences most directly.

#### **4.1 Vietnam's Threat Perceptions and Strategic Calculations**

##### **4.1.1 Strategic and military threats**

Cambodia's decision to strengthen its security relationship with China, particularly China's involvement in modernizing the Ream Naval Base, has become a significant factor in shifting Cambodia-Vietnam relations. The Ream Naval Base is located under 160 kilometers from Vietnam's southern coast, which is quite close in military terms (Horta, 2022). If China establishes a naval presence there, it could easily

block off Vietnam's southern coastline. This proximity means Cambodia's cooperation with China directly affects Vietnam's perception of its own security environment. Such fears of "encirclement" undermine how Cambodia's strategic alignment contributes to Vietnam's caution of geopolitical vulnerability (Hutt, 2022).

Vietnamese security experts and policymakers refer to this developing situation as a "pincer movement," raising fears of being encircled. If Chinese naval forces establish a presence at Ream, along with their control of islands in the South China Sea, it would greatly shift the power dynamics. This would weaken Vietnam's usual defensive buffer and expose its vulnerabilities from multiple directions. This change in power dynamics demonstrates how Cambodia's choices indirectly constrain Vietnam's defense and reshape their bilateral security relationship. These constraints are exacerbated by the lack of effective ASEAN consensus discussed in Chapter 3, which limits Vietnam's ability to address emerging security concerns through regional institutions.

In the case of maritime security, such Chinese encirclement disrupts Vietnam's critical sea lines of communication and port access points, which are crucial for trade and military logistics. While China is also being assertive in the South China Sea, and the dispute remains unresolved, Vietnam must take action to protect its exclusive economic zone and offshore energy platforms, which are starting to hinder its capacity (Thuy, 2013; Boon & To, 2025). Cambodia's facilitation of Chinese maritime access therefore, compounds Vietnam's existing challenges in safeguarding its maritime

sovereignty, linking regional disputes to bilateral strain. The modernization of Ream symbolizes Cambodia's preference for deepening maritime cooperation with China rather than with Vietnam, revealing how Cambodia's choices undermine long-standing security trust between the two countries. (Murg, 2022).

Meanwhile, on land defense, Vietnam's traditional security priority of protecting its northern border is now being complicated by the growing Cambodia's alignment with China. The historically tense relationship between Cambodia and Vietnam is driven by border disputes, ethnic minority issues, and past conflicts influenced by larger powers. This situation is now made more complicated by Cambodia's close ties with China, which is seen as Beijing's ally in the area (Ang, 2024). Thus, Cambodia's external alignment revives old fears and further politicizes unresolved border sensitivities in bilateral relations. This historical situation raised fear and concerns for Vietnam when China increased its influence in various sectors in Cambodia, which could erode its capacity to enforce border security and reduce its influence over Cambodia, as well as seeing it as a way for China to exert pressure on Vietnam indirectly through Cambodia (Murg, 2022). This demonstrates that Cambodia's cooperation with China not only empowers China but also weakens the traditional balance of influence between Cambodia and Vietnam.

Therefore, this new situation requires careful handling. Vietnam needs to be ready for threats from multiple sides while also trying not to provoke China into increasing its military presence. From a bilateral perspective, this delicate balance

reflects Vietnam's cautious approach to managing the consequences of Cambodia's policy shift. The fear of being surrounded is not just a military issue; it's also a way for China to discourage Vietnam from building stronger ties with other countries. Overall, Cambodia's growing alignment with China has become a central variable that reshapes not only Vietnam's threat perception but the entire framework of Cambodia-Vietnam strategic relations.

#### **4.1.2 Economic Vulnerabilities and Strategic Concerns**

Vietnam's economic weaknesses related to Cambodia's ties with China go beyond just security issues. They include complex challenges that could harm Vietnam's economic stability and influence in the region. These vulnerabilities show up in ways like **trade disruptions, loss of investments, and changing economic dynamics**, all of which undermine Vietnam's strategic position in Southeast Asia. These economic shifts reflect how Cambodia's growing dependence on China indirectly reduces Vietnam's economic influence and leverage in bilateral relations

Cambodia's merchandise deficit with China has reached \$4.7 billion in early 2025, showing that Cambodia has import more than exports, as Chinese goods made up of 53.5% of Cambodia's imports, which surpass those from Vietnam and Thailand, highlighting China dominant role in Cambodia's trade landscape (Bimo, 2025). This growing trade imbalance illustrates Cambodia's increasing economic tilt toward China, which erodes Vietnam's traditional position as one of Cambodia's key trading partners.

Despite a two-way trade between Cambodia and Vietnam that reached \$10 billion in 2024, Cambodia deficit from Vietnam has decreased from \$753 million to \$480 million (Nguyen, 2025). Such deficits showing that Cambodia is favoring Chinese goods than import it from Vietnam. This suggests that Cambodia's import preferences now align more closely with China's economic sphere, gradually weakening Vietnam's market share and interdependence with Cambodia. However, Vietnamese firms remain the largest investors in Cambodia, with a total of investment of \$3.5 billion. However, the influx of Chinese investment is still notable. In January 2025, China invested \$550 million in Cambodia industry accounted for 73.3% of all approved capital in that month, bypassing Vietnamese project which indicates a major shift towards Chinese influence (Nhean, 2025). This shift highlights a structural transition where Chinese capital displaces Vietnamese economic influence, limiting Vietnam's ability to use investment as a tool of soft power in its bilateral relationship with Cambodia.

The Cambodia-China Free Trade Agreement is one of the key components contributing to strong Cambodia-China economic relations. This agreement has eliminated 97% of tariffs on Cambodian exports to China and 90% Chinese exports to Cambodia (Sao, 2025). This significant reductions in trade barriers facilitates increased trade between both nations. Chinese firms can use Cambodia's Sihanoukville port to trans-ship components. This means they can reroute goods through Cambodia to avoid U.S. penalties, allowing them to offer lower prices than Vietnamese manufacturers

(Sao, 2025). Such practices indirectly disadvantage Vietnamese exporters, as Cambodia's cooperation with China offers Beijing a backdoor into regional markets at Vietnam's expense. This strategy helps Chinese companies maintain market access while navigating international trade restrictions. Meanwhile, projects under the Belt and Road Initiatives account for 70% of Cambodia's public infrastructure investment (Suy, 2020). With improved highways, ports, and special economic zones are designed to enhance connectivity and efficiency, redirecting shipping routes away from Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam) toward the Gulf of Thailand. This infrastructure reorientation reduces Cambodia's logistical dependence on Vietnam, shifting regional transport and trade patterns in favor of China and diminishing Vietnam's economic centrality. This shift can significantly impact regional trade flows. Also, the minimum wage in Vietnam increased to 18% contributing to higher labor costs. Supported by Chinese investment and preferential trade frameworks, Cambodia's lower-cost manufacturing environment becomes even more attractive, indirectly challenging Vietnam's industrial competitiveness (Nguyen, 2025).

In September 2024, Cambodia announced their exit from the Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Development Triangle. This is a forum which Vietnam used to facilitate border growth and prevention of Chinese influence (Nguyen 2024; Rim, 2024). Cambodia's withdrawal from this mechanism signals a diplomatic and economic distancing from Vietnam, further aligning its development agenda with China. Within ASEAN, Cambodia

often prevents statements that criticize China's trade practices, making it hard for Vietnam to rally a united response. This behavior demonstrates how Cambodia's economic reliance on China extends into regional diplomacy, constraining Vietnam's efforts to maintain economic solidarity within ASEAN. Financially, Cambodia owes China about \$3.96 billion, which is 38.7% of its external debt, due to loans for infrastructure projects like power grids and airports (Neak & Lim, 2025). With its debt-to-GDP ratio close to 32%, any sudden loss of revenue could push it to 40% (Chheang & Heng, 2021). Such dependency gives China leverage over Cambodia's fiscal and policy decisions, which in turn weakens Vietnam's ability to maintain balanced cooperation with Cambodia. This situation gives China leverage over important financial decisions, affecting tax breaks, project contracts, and currency swaps that impact the entire Mekong region. As Cambodia aligns more tightly with China's financial orbit, Vietnam's influence over regional economic initiatives in the region continues to decline.

These interconnected challenges put Vietnam's export earnings, supply chain stability, and influence over Indochina's development at risk. They also reflect how Cambodia's alignment choices, though domestically motivated, produce tangible economic ripple effects that reshape its bilateral relationship with Vietnam. To counter this, Vietnam needs to diversify its markets, improve domestic logistics, and build stronger partnerships for water and trade governance. This will help mitigate China's economic influence in Cambodia. If Vietnam does not take these steps, it might find

itself trapped in an uneven economic situation that limits its growth and independence.

#### **4.1.3 Risks of ASEAN disunity and diplomatic isolation**

Cambodia's deepening alignment with China has heightened Vietnam's concern about ASEAN fragmentation, not only as a regional problem but as a direct constraint on Vietnam's bilateral leverage vis-à-vis Cambodia, as Cambodia's actions often weaken regional consensus on sensitive security matters. Cambodia's repeated blocking of ASEAN statements on the South China Sea exemplifies how its pro-China stance prevents the bloc from issuing unified responses to China's assertive behavior. (Hul, 2016; Zhang, 2016).

This pattern first became evident in 2012, when Cambodia's opposition to references to the South China Sea disputes led ASEAN, for the first time in its history, to fail to issue a joint communiqué, despite resistance from Vietnam and the Philippines (BBC, 2012). This failure shocked the region and highlighted how Chinese influence was weakening ASEAN unity. The same thing happened in 2016 at the meeting in Laos. Cambodia again blocked references to a UN ruling that rejected China's claims in the South China Sea (Campbell, 2016). Although the Philippines had won a significant legal victory, Cambodia's objections meant the ruling was not included in the joint statement, weakening ASEAN's response. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi even thanked Cambodia for its support, showing how China could manipulate ASEAN's decision-making process (Al Jazeera, 2016).

Cambodia's repeated attempt in blocking anti-China measures set by ASEAN, shows how the nation is economically reliance on China. This relationship is being exposed by PM Hun Sen when he announced the loans and aid from China, which tied to diplomatic support regarding the South China Sea disputes. Mr. Hun Sen made it clear that Cambodia would not support any ASEAN statement endorsing the arbitration tribunal's decision, calling it "politically motivated". He warned that such statements could create division within ASEAN and strain relations between ASEAN and China (Xinhua, 2016).

Such obstruction directly undermines Vietnam's diplomatic strategy, as Vietnam depends on ASEAN unity to exert collective pressure on China over maritime disputes. Cambodia's effective veto often forces Vietnam to accept diluted joint statements or risk diplomatic stalemate, diminishing Vietnam's influence in ASEAN decision-making. (Florick, 2021; Epstein, 2024). Cambodia's withdrawal from the Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Development Triangle Area (CLV-DTA) in September 2024 further diminishes Vietnam's influence in Indochina (Rim, 2024). This decision not only distances Cambodia from Vietnam but also reduces the prospects for coordinated Indochinese responses to Chinese strategic pressure.

For Vietnam, the erosion of ASEAN unity may threatens the bloc's '**centrality**', its ability to act as the primary platform for regional security cooperation (Vietnam Law Magazine, 2025). Amid rising great-power competition, Vietnam sees ASEAN fragmentation as a direct challenge to the organization's relevance and its own

regional strategy. Without unity, ASEAN members, especially Vietnam, become more vulnerable to Chinese influence and lose collective bargaining power in regional affairs (Lin, 2023).

#### **4.1.4 Strategic Calculation: balancing and restraints**

Vietnam's response to Cambodia's growing alignment with China reflects a cautious balancing strategy, one that safeguards core interests while avoiding confrontation with either Cambodia or China.

Rather than openly criticizing Cambodia's pro-China stance, Vietnam employs 'subtle diplomatic pressure' to avoid escalation that might push Cambodia even deeper into China's orbit. Vietnamese officials raise concerns about Chinese activities in the South China Sea and Mekong River through multilateral platforms, carefully framing issues in regional terms instead of targeting Cambodia directly (Vietnam News, 2025). This restraint reflects Vietnam's recognition that overt pressure could backfire, strengthening Cambodia's dependence on China and undermining Vietnam's image as a constructive regional actor.

To offset Cambodia's obstruction within ASEAN, Vietnam builds closer ties with other claimants like the Philippines and Malaysia, forming informal coalitions to coordinate responses to Chinese actions (Epstein, 2024). Vietnam also works with external partners, notably the United States, to counterbalance China's influence while maintaining a neutral, ASEAN-centered posture \*Dung & Ho, 2025). This approach

allows Vietnam to maintain its strategic autonomy while building a wider coalition against Chinese encroachment.

Vietnam's strategic choices are greatly influenced by the need for **domestic legitimacy**, which shapes how the country perceives and responds to external threats. The legitimacy of the Vietnamese Communist Party relies on several factors: economic performance, nationalist credentials, and maintaining independence from foreign control (Dung, 2022; Hayton, 2024). These domestic priorities create both opportunities and limits for Vietnam's foreign policy.

Nationalist sentiment compels Hanoi to react strongly to perceived Chinese encroachment, but it must balance these reactions carefully to avoid jeopardizing relations with neighbors like Cambodia (Caporale, 2022). This tension drives Vietnamese leaders to assert sovereignty firmly yet cautiously, mindful that overreaction could destabilize ties with both China and Cambodia.

**Consensus among the Vietnamese Communist Party's elite** is crucial for maintaining a consistent strategy, even with internal disagreements (Wells-Dang, 2024). The party's collective leadership ensures that major foreign policy decisions reflect a broad agreement among top officials, minimizing the risk of erratic changes (Shoji, 2024). While this consensus-building can be slow, it leads to more sustainable policies that can endure domestic political pressures and external challenges.

Economic imperatives further shape Vietnam's restraint, as maintaining growth requires stable relations with both China and neighboring Cambodia (Dung & Ho, 2025).

Thus, Vietnam manages a delicate balance, maintaining productive ties with China while avoiding policies that could damage economic or political relations with Cambodia (Trinh & Huyen, 2024). This balancing act between security concerns and economic needs reinforces Vietnam's preference for hedging strategies rather than fully aligning with either China or the United States (Lan, 2024; Zeberlein, 2024).

Vietnam's approach shows strategic patience shaped by historical experience and geopolitical realities (Caporale, 2022; Yin, 2023). Vietnamese policymakers acknowledge that their geographic and power asymmetry with China demands strategic caution, especially as Cambodia's cooperation strengthens China's regional presence.. This understanding influences Vietnam's preference for multilateral solutions, legal frameworks, and gradual capacity-building rather than dramatic policy shifts.

The principle of "cooperation and struggle" guides Vietnamese foreign policy, allowing the country to work with China on shared interests while firmly opposing actions that threaten Vietnamese sovereignty (Dung, 2022). In the case of Cambodia, this principle enables Vietnam to maintain diplomatic relations with Phnom Penh while countering Chinese influence through other means. Vietnam's response to Cambodia's China tilt embodies neo-classical realism — filtering external pressures through internal constraints like nationalism, regime legitimacy, and development priorities (Dung & Ho, 2025). Ultimately, Vietnam's balancing approach seeks to protect national interests and sustain long-term autonomy, even as Cambodia's pro-China orientation reshapes the regional equilibrium (Dung, 2022; Lan, 2024; Zeberlein, 2024).

In summary, Vietnam's strategic restraint demonstrates a pragmatic recognition of shifting regional realities. As Cambodia deepens its alignment with China, Vietnam adapts through quiet diplomacy, coalition-building, and economic hedging to maintain influence without provoking confrontation. These strategies not only define Vietnam's broader foreign policy posture but also shape its evolving relationship with Cambodia, where geopolitical, economic, and security interests increasingly intersect.

#### **4.2 Vietnam-Cambodia Bilateral Relations**

##### **4.2.1 Historical Cooperation vs. Suspicion**

The relationship between Vietnam and Cambodia is shaped by both cooperation and deep suspicion, rooted in a long history of territorial disputes and cultural conflicts. This history creates ongoing tension between working together and mistrust. These patterns continue to influence how Cambodia positions itself today, especially as it strengthens relations with China to balance Vietnam's dominance.

Modern relations began in the 1970s when Vietnam intervened militarily in December 1978 to remove the Khmer Rouge regime. This intervention stopped the genocide that killed millions of Cambodians and led to lasting Vietnamese influence in Cambodia (Chandler, 2008). Vietnam occupied Cambodia from 1979 to 1989, helping to establish the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) in power. Many Cambodians saw this as a puppet government controlled by Vietnam (Deth, 2009). While the occupation helped rebuild Cambodia, it also reinforced fears of Vietnamese expansionism that date back centuries.

The roots of suspicion extend even further back. The Nam Tien movement saw Vietnamese expansion into southern territories, leading to the loss of what Cambodians call "Kampuchea Krom" (the Mekong Delta) (Nguyen, 2023). This loss, along with French colonial policies that favored Vietnamese people in Cambodia, created lasting resentment. The French often used Vietnamese as intermediaries in governance, which many Cambodians viewed as part of a plan to absorb Cambodia.

The idea of "politics of gratitude" complicates the relationship. Vietnam promotes the narrative that it saved Cambodia from genocide, leading to expectations of loyalty from Cambodia (Huynh & Mai, 2024). While this acknowledges Vietnamese sacrifices, it can also create resentment among Cambodians who see it as patronizing. It suggests that Cambodia owes Vietnam, limiting its independence and reinforcing feelings of Vietnamese dominance. This sentiment partly explains why Cambodia increasingly turns to China, to gain independence from Vietnam's political narrative.

Anti-Vietnamese sentiment exists at various levels in Cambodia, from political leaders to everyday people. This sentiment is strong because it combines historical grievances with current concerns about territorial integrity and cultural identity (Hutt, 2016). Opposition parties often exploit these fears, portraying the CPP as Vietnamese puppets and warning of Cambodia's absorption into Vietnam. The success of the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) in the 2013 elections, where they won many seats by using anti-Vietnamese rhetoric, shows how powerful these feelings can be (Rim & Zeiner-Morrish, 2025). This domestic sentiment creates a favorable environment

for Cambodia's closer alignment with China, which Phnom Penh portrays as a partnership of equals. This contrasts sharply with its historically unequal relationship with Vietnam.

Despite these tensions, there is also real cooperation based on shared security needs and economic ties. The Vietnamese intervention saved Cambodia from destruction, and ongoing collaboration has helped rebuild the country (VNA, 2025). Both nations have worked together on border security, fighting crime, and promoting economic growth. Mechanisms like annual defense meetings and joint economic committees show that they recognize their interdependence, even with underlying tensions (VNA, 2025).

This historical background creates a situation where cooperation and suspicion coexist. Expressions of gratitude can often hide deeper resentment. As a result, Vietnam-Cambodia relations are unstable, prone to crises when historical issues arise or when domestic political pressures challenge diplomatic efforts (Hutt, 2024). These long-standing tensions now influence Cambodia's engagement with China, as the country leverages this alignment both as an economic opportunity and as a geopolitical strategy to counterbalance Vietnam's traditional dominance.

#### **4.2.2 Current Political and Diplomatic Relations**

Today, political relations between Vietnam and Cambodia are a careful mix of friendship and underlying tensions. While there are frequent high-level meetings, there are also signs of growing differences and pressures at home. Under Hun Manet's

leadership, Cambodia is seeking more independence, especially by leveraging its closer alignment with China to rebalance long-standing dependence on Vietnam.

The formal diplomatic ties are still strong, with both countries promoting ideas of “good neighbors, traditional friendship, comprehensive cooperation, and long-term stability” (Thuy, 2024). Regular high-level visits continue, such as Hun Manet's trip to Vietnam in December 2023, showing Cambodia's recognition of Vietnam's importance. The February 2025 summit in Ho Chi Minh City, where Vietnam's Politburo met with Cambodian leaders, was a significant diplomatic gesture that acknowledged the changing dynamics between the two countries (Nguyen, 2025). However, Cambodia's growing strategic partnership with China is now redefining these diplomatic exchanges. Cambodia utilizes China's support to expand its diplomatic space and reduce Hanoi's influence.

However, beneath this diplomatic surface, tensions are rising. In September 2024, Cambodia withdrew from the Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Development Triangle Area (CLV-DTA), marking a major shift in their relationship (Rim & Zeiner-Morrish, 2025). This decision, influenced by strong domestic opposition and anti-Vietnamese feelings, was a significant break from Hun Manet's father's pro-Vietnam stance (Hutt, 2024). Analytically, this moment marks the point where ASEAN-level fragmentation and Cambodia's alignment with China most clearly translate into the erosion of bilateral institutional trust between Cambodia and Vietnam. Widespread protests and arrests of

activists who opposed the agreement highlighted the domestic pressures affecting this relationship.

The change in Cambodian leadership has also shifted political dynamics. Unlike Hun Sen, who had close ties with Vietnamese leaders, Hun Manet lacks these personal connections. This generational gap allows Cambodia to pursue a more independent foreign policy, as Hun Manet is less tied to the "politics of gratitude" that bound his father to Vietnam (Rim & Zeiner-Morrish, 2025). Younger Cambodian leaders see Vietnam's historical role as less relevant to their current obligations. This generational shift reflects Cambodia's increasing strategic comfort with China, which offers the political and economic support necessary for Cambodia to diminish its visible dependence on Vietnam.

The Funan Techo Canal project has added to the diplomatic tensions, despite efforts to downplay disagreements. Cambodia views the canal as crucial for its sovereignty, hinting at a desire to reduce reliance on Vietnamese ports. Vietnam, concerned about the canal's environmental and security impacts, has faced Cambodian assertions of national pride (Trinh, 2024). The canal symbolizes Cambodia's push for independence from Vietnam, even if its economic benefits are limited.

Despite political tensions, the institutional framework for cooperation remains largely intact. Defense collaboration continues through annual meetings and joint training, reflecting shared security interests (VNA, 2025). Efforts to find the remains of Vietnamese soldiers who died in Cambodia also symbolize ongoing cooperation

(Khmer Times, 2025). Economic cooperation mechanisms, such as joint committees and trade promotion activities, offer ways to sustain practical collaboration, even when political relations are under strain (Hin, 2025). Nonetheless, the expanding partnership between China and Cambodia is beginning to eclipse these traditional frameworks, compelling Vietnam to adapt its diplomatic approach.

However, the future of these diplomatic arrangements faces significant challenges. Anti-Vietnamese sentiment in Cambodia can be a powerful political tool, especially for opposition groups. The withdrawal from the CLV-DTA shows how quickly domestic pressures can disrupt diplomatic agreements, raising questions about future reliability. Hun Manet's pursuit of legitimacy, bolstered by closer engagement with China, has expedited Cambodia's transition away from Vietnam's sphere of influence.

Overall, the current political relationship appears stable on the surface but is fragile underneath. While both countries maintain strong diplomatic contacts and cooperation, the fundamental alignment that characterized Hun Sen's era has weakened. Cambodia's partnership with China now offers alternative diplomatic and economic support, reshaping the power dynamics in Cambodia-Vietnam relations and diminishing Vietnam's political leverage.

#### **4.2.3 Economic Interdependence and Soft Power**

Vietnam's economic ties with Cambodia are crucial for maintaining its influence in the region. However, this soft power approach faces challenges from Chinese competition and Cambodia's desire for more economic independence. While the

economic partnership has grown, it is still uneven, with Vietnam being a major investor and trading partner but struggling to turn this presence into a strong political influence.

The economic relationship has expanded significantly, with bilateral trade reaching \$10.1 billion in 2024, up from just \$117 million in 1998 (VNA, 2025). Vietnam is now Cambodia's third-largest trading partner after China and the U.S., and it is the largest ASEAN investor in Cambodia. In the first half of 2025, trade amounted to \$4.34 billion, marking a 7.2% increase from the previous year (Sum, 2025). This growth shows deeper economic ties, with Cambodia supplying raw materials and Vietnam providing manufactured goods (Hin, 2025). Yet, this growth takes place in a context where Cambodia's trade structure is increasingly dominated by Chinese goods and capital.

Vietnamese investment in Cambodia totals about \$3.5 billion across 215 projects in sectors like agriculture, mining, telecommunications, and manufacturing (HIn, 2025). In 2024, Vietnam accounted for 8.1% of approved investment projects in Cambodia, making it the second-largest foreign investor after China. This investment strategy aims to establish long-term economic influence in key areas (Ngoc, 2025).

The economic relationship benefits both countries through strong sectoral complementarity. Cambodia mainly exports rice (\$468 million), rubber (\$414 million), and cassava (\$213 million) in 2023, while Vietnam exports manufactured goods and construction materials to Cambodia (OEC, 2023; Ravindran, 2025). This mutual dependence helps Vietnam enhance its soft power by making Cambodia reliant on its markets. The Bank for Investment and Development of Cambodia (BIDC), a subsidiary

of a Vietnamese bank, illustrates Vietnam's strategic use of soft power. With nearly \$1 billion in assets, BIDC promotes Vietnamese interests through social programs, including scholarships for Cambodian students (VNA, 2025). These efforts help build goodwill and influence among Cambodian leaders. Nonetheless, Cambodia's increasing economic alignment with China offers an alternative financial ecosystem that weakens Vietnam's ability to sustain its influence.

Vietnam's education outreach is also a key part of its soft power strategy. It offers many scholarships to Cambodian students, creating a network of professionals with Vietnamese educational backgrounds. The Cambodian Alumni Association of Vietnamese Universities (CAVA) helps maintain these connections and promotes understanding between the two countries (VNA, 2025). Cultural exchanges, like the annual Vietnamese Culture Week in Cambodia, also contribute to soft power, though on a smaller scale than economic ties (Khmer Times, 2024). These events promote mutual understanding but have limited reach compared to economic relationships. Vietnam's support for Cambodian cultural heritage preservation shows a subtle form of soft power that fosters goodwill.

Despite strong economic ties, Vietnam's soft power in Cambodia faces challenges. The biggest issue is competition from Chinese influence, which is much larger (Cho, 2018). China's investment in Cambodia reached \$3.43 billion in 2024, far exceeding Vietnam's contributions (B2B Cambodia, 2025). This imbalance restricts

Vietnam's ability to effectively use economic leverage, as Cambodia can increasingly turn to Chinese options for financing and investment.

Anti-Vietnamese sentiment in Cambodia is another obstacle. Economic cooperation can become politically charged, especially if it seems to increase Vietnamese control (Hutt, 2024). The withdrawal from the CLV-DTA highlighted how economic agreements can trigger anti-Vietnamese reactions, limiting Vietnam's ability to propose bold initiatives. At the same time, China benefits indirectly from these tensions, as Cambodia leverages Chinese partnerships to counterbalance Vietnam's economic presence.

Vietnam's soft power approach may also come across as paternalistic. When officials emphasize their past sacrifices for Cambodia, it can lead to resentment and a desire for independence among Cambodians. Soft power works best when it attracts rather than obligates, making narratives of indebtedness counterproductive (Huynh & Mai, 2024).

Compared to Chinese efforts, Vietnam's approach seems more sustainable but less immediate. China's large infrastructure projects create quick benefits for Cambodian leaders, while Vietnam focuses on gradual integration and institutional development, which builds long-term ties but may be less visible in the short term. Vietnam's model of soft power through economic interdependence struggles with scale. While it offers valuable partnerships and educational opportunities, it cannot compete with the transformative impacts of Chinese initiatives. This forces Vietnam to

be strategic in its soft power efforts, concentrating on areas where it can have the most political impact with limited resources. The success of this approach depends on maintaining economic relevance while avoiding backlash against perceived overreach (Cho, 2018). Ultimately, Cambodia's deeper integration with China's economy redefines the balance of interdependence, limiting Vietnam's capacity to convert its soft power into political trust.

#### **4.2.4 Security Cooperation and Border Management**

Vietnam and Cambodia's security cooperation is a complicated situation. On one hand, they have strong institutional frameworks in place; on the other hand, there are increasing tensions due to Cambodia's closer ties with China. This partnership involves traditional border management and adapting to new security challenges that reflect changing regional power dynamics.

Vietnam and Cambodia have established effective mechanisms for working together on security, achieving real results. They signed a comprehensive cooperation plan for 2025 focused on preventing transnational crime and improving border security, with regular discussions about regional security issues (Vietnam News, 2025). A significant milestone was the first Annual Conference of Ministers of Public Security and Interior held in Da Nang in March 2024, showcasing their trilateral cooperation with Laos (VNA, 2025).

A major success has been the progress in marking their shared border, which stretches 1,137 kilometers. Since 2006, they have managed to mark about 1,045

kilometers and set up 2,048 border markers, covering over 84% of the total (Thun & Sam, 2022). This accomplishment comes from decades of negotiations, starting with the 1985 Treaty on the Delimitation of National Boundaries and further agreements in 2005 and 2019.

Their cooperation in border security now addresses complex issues like drug trafficking, human trafficking, and online fraud. Both countries have improved intelligence sharing through hotlines and made Border Liaison Offices (BLOs) more effective. They have also agreed to increase joint investigations into major transnational crimes, showing that they recognize the need to work together despite political tensions (Vietnam News, 2025).

Defense cooperation continues through annual meetings and joint training programs, but the overall strategic situation has changed dramatically due to China's growing military presence in Cambodia. In November 2023, Vietnamese Defense Minister General Phan Van Giang and Cambodian Defense Minister General Tea Seiha discussed enhancing their defense relationship during talks in Hanoi (VNA, 2023). This includes personnel training and coordination to manage border security and prevent unauthorized migration.

However, China's expanding military presence in Cambodia poses significant challenges. The "Golden Dragon 2025" military exercises at the Ream Naval Base, involving nearly 900 Chinese troops and 1,300 Cambodian troops, mark a new level of military cooperation that Vietnam cannot ignore (Vinh et al., 2025). Vietnam's response

has been cautious, emphasizing the need for regional peace and cooperation while facing diplomatic challenges regarding Chinese activities.

The development of the Ream Naval Base, financed by China, is a major concern for Vietnam-Cambodia security cooperation. What was once a regional concern within ASEAN has now become a bilateral issue, with Vietnam viewing Chinese military access in Cambodia as a direct challenge to its security. Although Vietnamese naval vessels have visited the base, worries persist about potential Chinese military access, straining existing security agreements (Strangio, 2025). Despite Cambodia's assurances that the base is open to all, there are private concerns in Vietnam about a lasting Chinese military presence in the Gulf of Thailand.

A key challenge for Vietnam-Cambodia security cooperation is the decline of strategic trust, driven by Cambodia's alignment with China and internal political pressures. Prime Minister Hun Manet does not have the same historical ties to Vietnam that his father, Hun Sen, had, making Cambodia more inclined to assert its independence (Karbaum, 2024; Rim, 2024). This shift, along with ongoing anti-Vietnamese sentiment, encourages Cambodia to distance itself from Vietnam, even when security cooperation has clear benefits (Po, 2019; Phen, 2022).

While operational cooperation continues, the strategic foundations of the relationship are weakening. Analysts point out that both countries agree not to let hostile forces threaten each other, but this understanding is complicated by China's military presence. Vietnam's establishment of a new "Standing Maritime Militia Unit" in

Kien Giang province, which borders Cambodia, reflects concerns about China's military influence at Ream and the need for better maritime oversight (Aun, 2021).

Once again, Cambodia's withdrawal from the CLV-DTA in September 2024 removed a key framework for coordinating border security and development, reducing Vietnam's influence in the region. This decision, despite the framework's past successes, highlights how domestic political factors can overshadow the benefits of security cooperation (Rim, 2024).

The security cooperation framework faces additional pressures from changing regional dynamics. Cambodian scholars suggest that Cambodia views its ties with China as a way to balance against Vietnam, rooted in historical suspicions and territorial concerns (Po, 2019). This perception of Vietnam as a primary security threat shapes how both countries approach security cooperation.

Vietnam seeks to maintain diplomatic restraint while strengthening its own capabilities. Officials have avoided publicly criticizing Cambodia's alignment with China, focusing instead on mutual respect and the importance of ongoing cooperation (Nguyen, 2025). This strategy recognizes that aggressive tactics could reinforce Cambodian fears of Vietnamese dominance while acknowledging the need for continued collaboration on border management and transnational crime (Phen, 2022). The sustainability of current security cooperation arrangements faces significant challenges as both countries navigate competing priorities and external pressures that could test the foundations of their strategic relationship.

#### 4.2.5 Vietnam's Attempts to Counterbalance China's Influence in Cambodia

Vietnam is taking a thoughtful and multi-layered approach to counter China's growing influence in Cambodia. Recognizing that it needs to adapt rather than confront, Vietnam is focusing on diplomatic efforts, economic partnerships, regional cooperation, and strategic patience to protect its interests. These strategies illustrate how Cambodia's growing alignment with China has directly reshaped the parameters of Cambodia-Vietnam relations.

One of Vietnam's key strategies has been to adjust its traditional diplomatic practices to support Cambodia's desire for more autonomy. A landmark moment was the February 2025 summit in Ho Chi Minh City, where General Secretary To Lam and many top officials traveled south to meet with Cambodian leaders (Quang, 2025). This unprecedented visit highlighted Vietnam's recognition that maintaining influence means respecting Cambodia's preferences. This diplomatic engagement has led to commitments in areas like infrastructure development, cross-border trade, and a joint tourism initiative called "One Journey, Three Destinations," which includes Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos (Nguyen, 2025).

Vietnam understands that Cambodia's foreign policy is shaped by its need to navigate relationships with larger neighbors like Thailand and Vietnam (Bong, 2024). Cambodian scholars have pointed out that Cambodia views China as a way to balance against Vietnam, given their historical disputes (Po, 2019). In response, Vietnam

emphasizes equality and mutual respect, steering clear of any approach that might feel like asserting dominance.

To counter Chinese influence, Vietnam is ramping up its economic engagement with Cambodia. In 2024, Vietnamese investments in Cambodia topped \$550 million, making Vietnam the largest ASEAN investor in the country, with total investments around \$3.5 billion (Nguyen, 2025). This strategy focuses on sectors that create long-term economic ties, such as telecommunications, banking, agriculture, and manufacturing. Bilateral trade reached \$10 billion in 2024, accounting for nearly 20% of Cambodia's total trade. Notably, Cambodia's trade deficit with Vietnam shrank from \$753 million in 2023 to about \$480 million in 2024 (Nguyen, 2025). This shift allows Cambodian leaders to showcase a more balanced economic relationship compared to its larger \$8 billion deficit with China, giving them more room to assert economic independence.

Vietnam's economic strategy acknowledges that it faces significant structural challenges when compared to China's substantial economic influence. Research highlights that the limited effectiveness of Vietnam's economic initiatives largely stems from China's far greater investments in both Laos and Cambodia (Nguyen, 2024). According to Cambodia's General Department of Customs and Excise (GDCE), the bilateral trade volume between Cambodia and China reached \$4.48 billion in the first four months of 2024, reflecting a 15.1% increase from \$3.89 billion during the same

period last year. China continues to be Cambodia's leading trading partner, followed by Vietnam, the United States, Thailand, and Japan (Sgueglia, 2025).

Vietnam is also investing in cross-border infrastructure to strengthen economic ties and offer alternatives to Chinese-funded projects. For example, the Ho Chi Minh City-Moc Bai expressway, expected to be completed by 2027, will link with Cambodia's Bavet-Phnom Penh highway, cutting travel time between the two capitals in half (Devonshire-Ellis, 2022). This project not only strengthens economic ties but also supports Cambodia's development goals.

Vietnam seeks to maintain its influence through multilateral frameworks that reduce Chinese dominance while preserving cooperation. The annual defense ministers' meetings among Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos continue despite Cambodia's withdrawal from the CLV-DTA (Rin, 2025). These meetings provide essential channels for coordination. Vietnam also uses ASEAN frameworks to build a broader regional consensus against Chinese influence, although Cambodia's tendency to block anti-China statements can limit the effectiveness of this strategy (Epstein, 2024). Research indicates that Vietnam's multilateral approach recognizes Cambodia's challenging position between competing powers. Cambodian scholars highlight how difficult it can be for Cambodia to balance relationships with both Vietnam and China. Vietnam's engagement acknowledges these challenges while trying to keep communication channels open (Heng, 2021).

Vietnam's counterbalancing strategy faces important constraints that require careful management. For example, Cambodia's constitution prohibits foreign military bases, preventing Vietnam from offering security alternatives to Chinese military cooperation (Yaacob, 2024). Moreover, Vietnam's strategy to counterbalance China's influence is limited by its own relationship with China, which is Vietnam's largest trading partner. This dependence restricts Hanoi's ability to adopt more aggressive strategies against China, as maintaining stable economic ties is crucial for its own economic stability and growth (Chum, 2023; Abubaker, 2025). Scholarly analysis suggests that Vietnam's approach is one of "strategic patience," recognizing that Cambodia's ties with China may lead to contradictions over time (Bunthorn, 2022). By fostering cooperative relationships and avoiding confrontational tactics, Vietnam positions itself as a reliable partner if Cambodia decides to lessen its dependence on China.

Vietnam's patient approach seeks to maintain open channels as Cambodia deepens its ties with China, preserving the possibility of future cooperation even amid a shifting regional order. In this context, Vietnam's counterbalancing efforts highlight how Cambodia's alignment with Beijing has fundamentally transformed the traditional dynamics of Cambodia-Vietnam relations.

#### **4.3 Vietnam's Regional Strategy and Hedging Behavior**

Vietnam's regional strategy is a carefully calibrated mix of military modernization, multilateral diplomacy, economic diversification, and domestic

legitimacy. This approach aims to maintain strategic autonomy amid an increasingly polarized Indo-Pacific. Vietnam recognizes that relying solely on China or the United States is not in its long-term interests, so it pursues a multidimensional strategy that leverages various partnerships while preserving independence. This broader regional strategy is also influenced by developments in Cambodia, as its deepening alignment with China directly affects Vietnam's strategic environment along its border.

This strategic recalibration is particularly important in light of Cambodia's growing alignment with China. It illustrates the different ways Southeast Asian countries are managing power imbalances in the region. Vietnam's actions present an alternative to Cambodia's bandwagoning approach, demonstrating how a country can pursue its interests through diversification and strategic partnerships instead of simply aligning with a dominant power. This contrast highlights the complexities of regional dynamics and the various choices nations can make in response to external influences. Thus, while Cambodia's China-centered approach limits its foreign policy options, Vietnam's multidirectional strategy strengthens its ability to adapt to shifting regional power structures.

#### **4.3.1 Military Modernization and Defense Partnerships**

Vietnam's military modernization reflects a shift away from traditional suppliers toward a more diversified approach. This change is driven by evolving security threats and the need to reduce dependence on any single partner. The country's defense spending is projected to reach \$10.2 billion by 2029, growing at an annual rate of 5.6%

(Asian Military Review, 2024). This investment underscores Vietnam's commitment to credible deterrence, particularly in maritime areas where Chinese assertiveness is a direct threat. These efforts have been further intensified by regional developments, particularly Cambodia's willingness to host Chinese-funded military infrastructure, which Vietnam perceives as a potential security challenge.

One of the most significant changes has been Vietnam's pivot away from its historical reliance on Russian arms, which made up 75-80% of its military imports (Zeevi, 2025). Russia's invasion of Ukraine disrupted supply chains and raised doubts about Moscow's reliability as a defense partner. As noted by scholar Carlyle Thayer, Vietnam's arms procurement from Russia is currently on hold, pushing Vietnam to seek alternatives (Arthur, 2025).

This shift has opened doors for Western defense manufacturers. The establishment of the US.-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2023 has laid the groundwork for Vietnam to become more receptive to Western military solutions. A landmark agreement to purchase up to 24 F-16 fighter jets from the U.S. represents a significant step toward interoperability with Western systems (Burnham, 2025).

Japan has become a key defense partner for Vietnam, sharing concerns about Chinese maritime assertiveness. Their comprehensive strategic partnership facilitates cooperation in areas like cybersecurity, military training, and equipment transfers (Kim, 2024). For instance, Japan has provided search and rescue vehicles to Vietnam, marking a significant step in defense collaboration.

India is another crucial partner, with both nations signing a “Joint Vision Statement on India-Vietnam Defense Partnership towards 2030”. This collaboration focuses on enhancing the capabilities of the Vietnamese Armed Forces and securing vital sea lines of communication (SLOC) (Tourangbam, 2023). The potential for trilateral cooperation among the U.S., India, and Vietnam offers promising avenues for maritime collaboration.

Vietnam is also prioritizing the development of its domestic defense capabilities as part of its strategy for greater autonomy. The government has invested in local arms production, emphasizing research, technology transfer, and manufacturing (Zeevi, 2025). Recent laws support financial and infrastructural growth for Vietnamese defense firms, enabling them to produce military equipment rather than relying solely on imports.

Vietnam's defense policies not only bolster its domestic modernization efforts but also create a safety net by keeping multiple external support options available. This is not about aligning with just one major power; instead, it is a conscious effort to keep various avenues open while asserting its sovereignty and deterring potential threats.

Through its hedging strategy, Vietnam diversifies its defense capabilities and sends a clear message to regional players, including Cambodia, about the importance of maintaining strategic flexibility. Meanwhile, Cambodia's growing reliance on China for both defense and economic support could limit its flexibility in the rapidly changing

security landscape of the Indo-Pacific. Understanding these differences in strategy sheds light on the wider implications of Cambodia's foreign policy direction.

#### **4.3.2 Multilateral Security Strategy and ASEAN Frameworks**

Vietnam's multilateral security strategy focuses on strengthening ASEAN's institutional framework while using the organization as a platform to manage great power competition and maintain regional stability. This approach reflects Vietnam's understanding that smaller states can enhance their influence through collective action and institutions that limit the unilateral behavior of major powers. This also enables Vietnam to counterbalance China's expanding influence through countries like Cambodia, which frequently align with China in ASEAN forums.

Vietnam views ASEAN as a "strategic priority," recognizing Southeast Asian countries as close neighbors and vital partners (VNA, 2025). This commitment goes beyond mere rhetoric; Vietnam actively works to enhance ASEAN's capacity and relevance. It has outlined three main priorities to bolster ASEAN's role: driving economic growth to make it the world's fourth-largest economy by 2030, building a leading digital community, and fostering deeper people-to-people connections (Vietnam News, 2025).

Vietnam emphasizes ASEAN as a "platform for cooperation, dialogue, and strategic trust." This includes accelerating the implementation of the ASEAN Community Vision 2045, focusing on increasing intra-regional trade and investment, enhancing infrastructure connectivity, and diversifying external partnerships. Vietnam's

diplomatic efforts consistently highlight values like "unity and mutual respect" as foundational for ASEAN's success. In contrast, Cambodia's consistent support for China within ASEAN often undermines collective trust, limiting Vietnam's ability to promote regional consensus.

Vietnam's commitment to ASEAN is evident in its active participation in various institutional mechanisms. For instance, it serves as the coordinator for ASEAN-UK and ASEAN-New Zealand relations for 2024-2027, using these roles to enhance cooperation in combatting transnational crimes. Additionally, Vietnam coordinated ASEAN-Republic of Korea ties from 2021 to 2024, showcasing its ability to manage complex multilateral relationships (Vietnam News, 2024).

Amid escalating US-China rivalry, Vietnam uses ASEAN-led mechanisms to navigate the challenges of the escalating U.S.-China rivalry while preserving space for middle power diplomacy. It actively engages in key security frameworks such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM), and the East Asia Summit (EAS) (Nguyen & Luu, 2023). These platforms allow countries to exchange concerns, enhance understanding, and work towards balancing threats to peace and stability.

Vietnam's multilateral approach underscores the importance of ASEAN's centrality and unity, advocating for inclusive and sustainable development in a volatile environment. The country envisions a "truly multipolar Asia," where no single power dominates, recognizing that a multipolar Indo-Pacific relies on a multipolar Asia

(Tourangbam, 2023). However, Vietnam faces challenges in maintaining ASEAN unity on sensitive issues like the South China Sea. Cambodia's consistent blocking of ASEAN statements critical of China has limited the organization's effectiveness in addressing Chinese assertiveness (Naval, 2024). Despite these obstacles, Vietnam continues to engage within ASEAN frameworks while fostering bilateral and trilateral partnerships with like-minded nations to apply collective pressure on China to adhere to international law.

Acknowledging ASEAN's limitations, Vietnam has pursued bilateral and trilateral arrangements with key regional partners to maintain deterrence and diplomatic pressure. The country has quietly built alliances around a South China Sea code of conduct through diplomatic upgrades with nations like Malaysia, both of which have committed to ensuring peace and freedom of navigation in the region (Strangio, 2024). This approach reflects Vietnam's intent to reinforce regional norms, despite the challenges presented by Cambodia's pro-China stance.

Vietnam's coalition-building emphasizes shared interests over ideological alignment. Cooperation with the Philippines, for example, includes joint maritime patrol exercises, showcasing a united front in the South China Sea while maintaining diplomatic restraint (Myint et al., 2024). This selective cooperation allows Vietnam to apply pressure on China without escalating tensions or formalizing alliances that could compromise its strategic autonomy. The trilateral cooperation framework involving Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos persists despite political tensions, offering alternative

coordination channels even when broader ASEAN consensus is difficult. Annual defense ministers' meetings continue, reflecting Vietnam's pragmatic approach to maintaining cooperation, even when political relationships are strained (Vietnam News, 2024).

#### **4.3.3 Vietnam's Hedging Strategy**

Vietnam's hedging strategy stands out as a sophisticated method of strategic balancing in today's international relations. It reflects the country's commitment to preserving its autonomy while maximizing benefits from relationships with competing great powers. This approach, often referred to as "bamboo diplomacy," illustrates how middle powers can effectively navigate complex geopolitical landscapes through a mix of engagement, deterrence, and strategic flexibility (Dung & Son, 2022; Stojanovic, 2025). This flexibility also enables Vietnam to mitigate the effects of neighboring states, such as Cambodia, aligning too closely with a single major power.

Vietnam's hedging strategy blends realist and liberal elements, incorporating five key components: economic pragmatism, binding engagement, limited bandwagoning, indirect balancing, and dominance denial (Le, 2016; Tran & Sato, 2018; Liu, 2024). This multidimensional framework allows Vietnam to adapt its foreign policy to changing strategic circumstances while maintaining its core principles of independence and non-alignment.

The underlying logic of Vietnam's hedging reflects a rational response to systemic pressures. Small states like Vietnam can either align closely with one great

power or adopt a hedging posture (Di Lan & Vu, 2019). Vietnam chooses the latter, recognizing that neither full alignment with China nor complete dependence on the United States serves its long-term interests.

At the heart of Vietnam's hedging strategy is its "Four Nos" defense policy: no military alliances, no choosing sides, no foreign military bases, and no use of force in international relations (Nguyen, 2024). Established in Vietnam's 2019 defense white paper, these guidelines support the country's strategic autonomy while allowing engagement with various powers (Hoang, 2025). However, strategic ambiguity is introduced by the caveat that Vietnam may develop defense relations with other countries depending on circumstances. This flexibility enables cooperation with partners like the United States while technically adhering to the Four Nos principles (Huynh, 2022).

"Bamboo diplomacy," a concept articulated by former Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, symbolizes Vietnam's hedging philosophy. It highlights the country's commitment to core values while adapting to global changes. Unlike other Southeast Asian states that may align with prevailing powers, Vietnam emphasizes independence, maintaining balanced relationships with both the U.S. and China (Le, 2016; Tran & Sato, 2018; Liu, 2024). This contrasts sharply with Cambodia's reliance on Chinese support, which Vietnam views as a warning about losing policy flexibility.

Vietnam's economic ties with China exemplify its pragmatic approach. As China is Vietnam's largest trading partner, economic interdependence presents both

opportunities and vulnerabilities (Vu, 2025). However, Vietnam seeks to diversify its economic relationships to reduce reliance on China while still benefiting from these ties. For instance, its trade surplus with the U.S. demonstrates effective management of its economic relationships (Hayton, 2025).

Vietnam actively engages in multilateral frameworks like the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asia Summit, drawing major powers into institutional arrangements that limit unilateral behavior. Its comprehensive strategic partnerships with 12 countries, including the U.S. and China, facilitate access to diverse benefits while promoting responsible behavior among major powers (Di Lan, 2024).

Vietnam's hedging strategy is influenced by domestic legitimacy requirements. The Communist Party derives its legitimacy from economic growth, nationalism, and defensive stances against perceived threats (Thayer, 2009; Caporale, 2022; Dung & Ho, 2025). This necessitates a careful balance in foreign policy, ensuring Vietnam does not fully align with either China or the US.

Vietnam exhibits strategic patience, understanding the need to coexist with a more powerful China while preserving autonomy. This "intelligent hedging" maximizes benefits from multiple relationships while minimizing risks. The flexibility in its hedging framework allows Vietnam to adapt its approach based on changing circumstances (Liu, 2024).

Vietnam's hedging strategy faces challenges from intensifying US-China competition, which could pressure it to choose sides. However, the country's balanced

relationships with both powers provide alternatives that reduce vulnerability. As long as Vietnam can maintain its strategic relevance to both the US and China without threatening their core interests, its hedging strategy remains a viable model for navigating great power competition while preserving autonomy and maximizing national interests (Tran & Sato, 2018). This approach also positions Vietnam as a counter to Cambodia's alignment with China, influencing the evolving balance of power in Southeast Asia.

#### 4.4 Conclusion

This chapter presents a picture of how Vietnam has responded to Cambodia's restricted bandwagoning with China, and how such a response is primarily shaped by deep-rooted historical concerns, evolving regional dynamics, and the great power competition. Building on the regional analysis in Chapter 3, this chapter shows how Vietnam has responded to Cambodia's restricted bandwagoning with China at the bilateral level. This response is mainly shaped by historical concerns, changing regional dynamics, and great-power competition. This chapter has discovered that Vietnam has perceived various threats to its national security and regional influence through such alignment. Those threats come from China's military presence in Cambodia and Cambodia's favoring of China at the expense of ASEAN (e.g., South China Sea disputes).

Vietnam has pursued a smart response without any sort of coercion. They chose to adopt a layered strategy as a way of responding to Cambodia's alignment with China. Continuous cooperation with Cambodia regarding security and border

management explains the way Vietnam's efforts to assert influence on Cambodia, despite the erosion of their relationship due to China's presence. If Vietnam neglects the importance of building its relations with Cambodia, Vietnam believes that it could pave the way for China to become a sole partner for Cambodia.

Looking beyond Cambodia, Vietnam is also focusing on upscaling its defense capabilities and expanding its security partner networks. The purchasing of military weapons, investing in the domestic defense industry describe Vietnam's strategy in boosting self-reliance as well as increasing its regional power. These actions are indirectly shaped by Cambodia's alignment with China, which heightens Vietnam's sense of strategic urgency.

Vietnam's strategy also focuses on multilateral engagement, with ASEAN central to its diplomatic efforts. Even when faced with challenges, like Cambodia blocking statements on the South China Sea, Vietnam continues to engage bilaterally and through minilateral channels with countries such as the Philippines and Malaysia. These actions help build a coalition of like-minded nations to collectively counter unilateral moves by larger powers.

Vietnam's balancing and hedging strategies have allowed it to stay flexible and maintain its autonomy. However, challenges persist. Cambodia's close ties with China are unlikely to change any time soon, and ASEAN's internal divisions remain a hurdle. As a result, Vietnam will need to continue and possibly expand its careful diplomacy to navigate these issues effectively.

Going forward, Vietnam is expected to strengthen partnerships, modernize its military, and take a more active role in Mekong and Indo-Pacific discussions. Its approach of leading quietly, without resorting to confrontation, allows it to influence the future of Southeast Asia, especially as tensions between the US and China increase. This subtle approach not only maintains Vietnam's strategic independence but also positions it as a stabilizing counterbalance to Cambodia's growing alignment with China.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

#### 5.1 Key Findings Summary

This study looked at how Cambodia's strategic partnership with China creates ripple effects that go far beyond just these two countries. Using neoclassical realism as a framework, we can see that Cambodia's alignment with China is not only about ideology or geography. It is the result of global pressures, domestic political needs, and how leaders see their options, all playing out against the backdrop of regional tensions that affect ASEAN's ability to stick together. By applying a neoclassical realist perspective, this research emphasizes how Cambodia's foreign policy reflects the interplay between systemic forces, such as great-power rivalry, and domestic factors like regime security and leadership perception. This multi-level explanation goes beyond structural realism by demonstrating how domestic politics influence Cambodia's alignment choices, rather than viewing alignment as just a systemic response.

The research started by looking at the big picture forces shaping Cambodia's foreign policy choices. The growing US-China rivalry in Southeast Asia has put small countries like Cambodia in a tough spot. The United States pushes an agenda focused on human rights and democratic reforms, often tying political conditions to foreign aid. China, on the other hand, offers economic help and political support without strings attached, following a hands-off policy when it comes to internal affairs. Under these conditions, Cambodia's alignment appears as a strategic response to unequal pressure rather than a choice based on norms or ideology, especially after relations with the West soured following the 1997 coup and the 2017 dissolution of the main opposition party.

The economic benefits of partnering with China are hard to ignore. China has become Cambodia's biggest investor and trading partner, funding major infrastructure projects through the Belt and Road Initiative. Projects like the Phnom Penh-Sihanoukville Expressway, Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone, and the modernization of Ream Naval Base have brought real development, jobs, and better regional connections. However, these developments have also created increased economic dependence, raising worries about debt exposure, policy leverage, and public pushback due to inequality and local displacement. This highlights the two aspects of Cambodia's alignment: material gains along with increasing structural constraints.

Beyond economics, domestic politics have strengthened Cambodia's ties with China. The ruling Cambodian People's Party, under Former Prime Minister Hun Sen and now Prime Minister Hun Manet, has focused on staying in power and maintaining legitimacy. Chinese support has let the CPP consolidate control without facing outside pressure for political reforms, allowing Cambodia to sideline opposition parties and civil society groups. The legacy of the Khmer Rouge, the trauma from civil wars, and the resulting desire for stability have made both leaders and the public more open to a pragmatic, China-friendly policy. Leaders have also framed the relationship with China as one built on trust, sovereignty, and mutual respect, ideas that resonate with Cambodia's historical sensitivity to foreign interference.

Leadership perception further shapes how this alignment is sustained. Former Prime Minister Hun Sen viewed China as a reliable ally that offered development support and political protection during Western sanctions. Under his leadership, Cambodia's shift toward China was calculated rather than unconditional. His successor, Prime Minister Hun Manet, has mostly continued the same foreign policy approach, reaffirming the "ironclad friendship" with China while making some rhetorical efforts to balance relations with the United States and ASEAN. His leadership emphasizes economic modernization, agricultural advancement, and digital transformation, goals that fit well with Chinese cooperation frameworks like the Diamond Hexagon and the Fish and Rice Corridor. This continuity suggests that the change in leadership has adjusted the tone but not fundamentally changed the direction of alignment.

At the regional level, Cambodia's alignment with China has seriously affected ASEAN's unity and Cambodia-Vietnam relations. Cambodia's repeated blocking of ASEAN consensus on the South China Sea, particularly in 2012 and 2016, has exposed internal divisions within the regional group and raised questions about ASEAN's ability to manage disputes and maintain its central role. These disruptions are most evident at the summit level, while lower-level ASEAN mechanisms still function, showing uneven institutional impact rather than a complete breakdown. For neighboring Vietnam, see Cambodia's pro-China stance as harmful to regional stability and their own strategic interests. While Cambodia and Vietnam maintain practical ties and shared economic interests, historical mistrust and geopolitical competition continue to strain their relationship.

Case studies like the Sihanoukville SEZ, Cambodia-Vietnam border tensions, and the Ream Naval Base modernization show how Cambodia's choices affect areas far beyond its borders. The presence of Chinese military infrastructure, economic zones, and digital surveillance projects raises concerns not only for Vietnam but also for other ASEAN states and outside powers like the US, Japan, and Australia. These cases show how Cambodia's foreign policy decisions act as channels through which great-power competition influences regional relations.

Overall, Cambodia's alignment with China is a multi-layered strategy driven by domestic political priorities, economic dependencies, and leadership pragmatism, all within a broader geopolitical context defined by US-China rivalry. This alignment brings

real benefits, but it also creates regional tensions, erodes strategic independence, and generates growing domestic concerns. Cambodia's experience shows the logic of restricted bandwagoning, whereby small states align selectively with a major power to gain regime stability and development while trying, though not always successfully, to maintain their autonomy. Under neoclassical realist conditions, this type of alignment is neither passive nor absolute; it is shaped by domestic needs and leadership decisions.

### **5.2 Limitations of the Study and Prospect for Future Study**

While this study provides a thorough analysis of Cambodia's alignment with China and its effects on Southeast Asia, there are several limitations that affect how broadly we can apply these findings. The study relies mainly on secondary sources like academic literature, government statements, think tank reports, and news articles. While these sources offer valuable insights, not having fieldwork, interviews, or primary data collection limits how deeply we can validate our findings. Getting perspectives from Cambodian citizens, business people, or regional policymakers, especially from Vietnam, could have added more depth to the analysis of public opinion and regional reactions.

The study focuses mainly on Cambodia's relationships with China and Vietnam, with limited coverage of how other ASEAN members or outside actors respond to Cambodia's alignment. Countries like the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, and Singapore also play important roles in shaping ASEAN's collective responses and

strategic positions. Similarly, the roles of Japan, India, Australia, and the European Union as potential counterweights to China's influence are not fully explored. Future research could expand to offer a comparative analysis of how Cambodia's alignment with China differs from other small states in the region.

While the research uses neoclassical realism as a theoretical framework, it does not extensively test its assumptions across multiple cases. The study focuses only on Cambodia and evaluates neoclassical realism through a single-country lens. Future studies could apply this framework to other ASEAN member states like Laos, Myanmar, or the Philippines to examine how global pressures, domestic politics, and leadership perceptions work together in shaping foreign policy under similar geopolitical conditions.

The time frame covered is largely contemporary, from post-1997 to 2025. While this focus allows for detailed exploration of recent developments, a longer historical analysis during the Cold War, UNTAC era, or early ASEAN formation could help put current trends in context and show how Cambodia's strategic choices have evolved. The study also does not deeply investigate the long-term implications of economic dependence on governance, civil liberties, or institutional strength in Cambodia. While it touches on public pushback, elite capture, and social tensions, a more detailed exploration of social justice, environmental concerns, and digital authoritarianism resulting from Chinese engagement would make the study more policy-relevant.

Future research could pursue several directions. Comparative case studies could examine other ASEAN small states like Laos, Myanmar, or Brunei and how they navigate Chinese influence while maintaining regional autonomy and domestic legitimacy. This would allow for theory-testing across different political systems and levels of economic development. Elite and public opinion analysis could involve fieldwork, surveys, or interviews to assess how Cambodian elites, civil society, and the general public perceive China, the US, and ASEAN. This could help explore whether there's alignment or divergence between elite strategies and what society wants.

Environmental and social impact assessments could investigate how Chinese-led projects in Cambodia affect local livelihoods, land use, biodiversity, and labor conditions, and assess whether environmental governance gets weaker or stronger under this alignment. Cybersecurity and surveillance analysis could look at the implications of Chinese surveillance technologies in Cambodia, especially regarding digital authoritarianism, civil liberties, and regional norms on privacy and cybersecurity. Multilateral responses could study ASEAN's institutional responses to disagreement among members and explore ways to rebuild consensus and trust. This could explore how ASEAN's internal governance can evolve to handle differences in alignment without undermining unity.

While this study provides an in-depth analysis of Cambodia's alignment with China and its impact on regional dynamics, there is still much to explore. The complexities of small-state behavior, great-power rivalry, and regional institutional

resilience make this an evolving field of study with ongoing relevance in international relations and Southeast Asian studies.

Theoretically, this study contributes to International Relations by refining the application of neoclassical realism to explain selective alignment and restricted bandwagoning among small states. Empirically, it enriches the Southeast Asian foreign policy literature by uncovering how Cambodia's domestic imperatives and leadership perceptions interact with systemic pressures. Together, these contributions help explain why alignment outcomes in Southeast Asia differ despite shared external pressures, highlighting ASEAN's strategic diversity instead of uniform behavior.

## REFERENCES

### Books and Book Articles

Acharya, A. (2008). Theoretical perspectives on international relations in Asia. In D. Shambaugh & M. Yahuda (Eds.), *International relations of Asia* (pp. 57-81). Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Allès, D., & Fournol, T. (2023). *Multilateralism and minimalism in the Indo-Pacific: Articulations and convergences in a context of saturation of cooperative arrangements*. Fondation pour la recherche stratégique.  
<https://www.frstrategique.org>

Ang, C. G. (2024). Vietnam–Cambodia–China relations (1950s–1975). In *The Third Indochina War: An international history* (pp. 18–41). Cambridge University Press.

ASEAN. (2022). *Investing in ASEAN 2023*. Allurentis Limited.

Baldwin, D. A. (1985). *Economic statecraft*. Princeton University Press.

Barnett, M. N. (1996). Identity and alliances in the Middle East. In P. J. Katzenstein (Ed.), *The culture of national security: Norms and identity in world politics* (pp. 400–447). Columbia University Press.

Chandler, D. (2008). *A history of Cambodia* (4th ed.). Routledge.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429495519>

Chheang, V., & Heng, P. (2021). Cambodian perspective on the Belt and Road Initiative. In *Research handbook on the Belt and Road Initiative*. Edward Elgar Publishing.  
<https://doi.org/10.4337/9781789908718.00024>

Ear, S. (2014). The China-Cambodia-US nexus. In M. Li & K. M. Kemburi (Eds.), *New dynamics in US-China relations: Contending for the Asia Pacific* (1st ed.). Routledge.

Goh, E. (2005). Meeting the China challenge: The U.S. in Southeast Asian regional security strategies. In M. Alagappa (Ed.), *East-West Center*. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep06541>

Ikenberry, G. J., & Mastanduno, M. (Eds.). (2003). *International relations theory and the Asia-Pacific*. Columbia University Press.

Le, H. (2016). Vietnam's hedging strategy against China since normalization. In *Living next to the giant*. ISEAS Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1355/9789814459648-011>

Lum, T. (2008). *Cambodia: Background and U.S. relations* (CRS Report No. RL32910). Congressional Research Service.

Lum, T. (2023). *Cambodia: Background and U.S. relations* (CRS Report No. RL32910). Congressional Research Service.

Mearsheimer, J. J. (2001). *The tragedy of great power politics*. W.W. Norton.

Ng, J. (2021). Extending the 'ASEAN Minus X' Formula. In *Contesting Sovereignty: Power and Practice in Africa and Southeast Asia* (pp. 224–252). Cambridge University Press.

Ripsman, N. M., Taliaferro, J. W., & Lobell, S. E. (2016). Neoclassical realist theory and the limits of structural realism. In *Neoclassical realist theory of international politics* (online ed.). Oxford Academic. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199899234.003.0002>

Royal Government of Cambodia. (2023). *Pentagonal strategy—Phase I: Growth, employment, equity, efficiency, and sustainability*. Royal Government of Cambodia.

Taliaferro, J. W., Ripsman, N. M., & Lobell, S. E. (2009). *Neoclassical realism, the state, and foreign policy*. Cambridge University Press.

Walt, S. M. (1987). *The origins of alliances*. Cornell University Press.

## Articles

Asif, M., & Yang, B. L. (2018). Belt and Road Initiative: A spirit of China cultural thought. *International Journal of Business and Management*, 13(12), 9-17.  
<https://doi.org/10.5539/ijbm.v13n12p9>

Bunthorn, K. (2022). Small state dilemma: Cambodia between ASEAN and China in the Indo-Pacific context. *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs*, 8(1), 116–137.  
<https://doi.org/10.47305/JLIA2281116b>

Buzan, B. (2003). Security architecture in Asia: The interplay of regional and global levels. *The Pacific Review*, 16(2), 143-173.

Carlyle, A. T. (2012). ASEAN's code of conduct in the South China Sea: A litmus test for community building? *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, 10(34), 1-22.

Cha, V. D. (2009/10). Powerplay: Origins of the U.S. alliance system in Asia. *International Security*, 34(3), 158-196. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40389236>

Chen, I. T.-Y., & Yang, A. H. (2013). A harmonized Southeast Asia? Explanatory typologies of ASEAN countries' strategies to the rise of China. *The Pacific Review*, 26(3), 265-288.

Cho, S. I. (2018). *China's soft power toward Cambodia and Vietnam: A comparative analysis* [Unpublished thesis].

Ciorciari, J. D. (2014). A Chinese model for patron-client relations? The Sino-Cambodian partnership. *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 15(2), 245-278.

Dung, P. X., & Ho, B. T. E. (2025). How regime legitimization influences Vietnam's strategy toward US–China strategic rivalry. *International Journal of Asian Studies*, 22(1), 25–44. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479591422000286>

Ha, H. T. (2022). Understanding the institutional challenge of Indo-Pacific minilaterals to ASEAN. *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 44(1), 1–30. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27130806>

H.S, George Tana, Inderjit, S., Ong Hai Liaw, J., & Kwong Fook Wen. (2025). Relations between Cambodia and China: The impact towards Cambodia's sovereignty. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, 9(3), 440-452.

Heng, K., Toch, S., Sao, C., Chet, V., & Chan, D. (2017). Perceptions of Cambodian university students on Cambodia's foreign policy toward the US and China. *UC Occasional Paper Series*, 1(1), 41-67.

Heng, P. (2012). Cambodia-China relations: A positive-sum game? *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 31(2), 57-85.

International Monetary Fund. Asia and Pacific Dept. (2025). Cambodia: Staff Report for the 2024 Article IV Consultation—Debt Sustainability Analysis. *IMF Staff Country Reports*, 2025(022), Article A003, A003. <https://doi.org/10.5089/9798400299711.002.A003>

Jones, L., & Zeng, J. (2019). Understanding China's 'Belt and Road Initiative': beyond 'grand strategy' to a state transformation analysis. *Third World Quarterly*, 40(8), 1415–1439. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2018.1559046>

Kislenko, A. (2002). Bending with the wind: The continuity and flexibility of Thai foreign policy. *International Journal: Canada's Journal of Global Policy Analysis*, 57(4), 537-561. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002070200205700403>

Leng, T. (2017). Small state diplomacy: Cambodia's foreign policy towards Vietnam. *Pacific Review*, 30(3), 328-347.

Leng, T., & Chheang, V. (2021). Are Cambodia-U.S. relations mendable? *Asia Policy*, 28(4), 24-133. <https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2021.0059>

Liu, Q. (2024). Comparison of hedging strategies between Vietnam and the Philippines. *International Journal of Social Sciences and Public Administration*, 22, 31–42. <https://doi.org/10.62051/ijsspa.v2n2.07>

Luo, J. J. (2024). Cambodia's foreign policy (re)alignments amid great power geopolitical competition. *The Pacific Review*, 38, 1-30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2024.2322041>

Medina, C. P. (2017). Legal victory for the Philippines against China: A case study. *Global Challenges*, 1. <https://doi.org/10.71609/iheid-xnxz-j239>

Nguyen, C. T. (2025). The struggle for influence: Vietnam's economic statecraft in Laos and Cambodia. *The Pacific Review*, 38(6), 1049–1079. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2025.2478031>

Phorn, B., & Loughlin, N. (2025). Cambodia in 2023 and 2024: Hun Manet rules, but his father's shadow looms large. *Asian Survey*, 65(2), 323-335. <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2025.65.2.323>

Po, S. (2019). Explaining Cambodia's and Vietnam's China policies. *Explorations: A Graduate Student Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 15, 43–56.

Po, S., & Primiano, C. B. (2020). An "ironclad friend": Explaining Cambodia's bandwagoning policy towards China. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 39(3), 444-464. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1868103420901879>

Po, S., & Sreng, S. (2024). *Stormy voyage at sea: Explaining ASEAN's options about the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea*. Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Issue No. 3.

Pou, S., Murg, J. B., & Pich, C. (2023). *ASEAN's outlook on the Indo-Pacific and U.S.-China rivalry*. Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace.

Rose, G. (1998). Neoclassical realism and theories of foreign policy. *World Politics*, 51(1), 144-172. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25054068>

Shambaugh, D. (2018). U.S.-China rivalry in Southeast Asia: Power shift or competitive coexistence? *International Security*, 42(4), 85-127. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/693696>

Storey, I. (2006). China's tightening relationship with Cambodia. *China Brief*, 6(9). The Jamestown Foundation.

Strangio, S., Li, M., & Li, X. (2024). Local rivalries, foreign entanglements: the role of domestic politics in Cambodia's Chinese embrace. *International Journal of Asian Studies*, 22(1), 66–82. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479591424000214>

Thayer, C. A. (2009). Political legitimacy of Vietnam's one-party state. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 28(4), 47–70.

Tran, T. B., & Sato, Y. (2018). Vietnam's post–Cold War hedging strategy. *Asian Politics & Policy*, 10, 73–99. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aspp.12368>

Um, K. (2018). Cambodia 2017: Plus ça change.... *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 97–112. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26492772>

## Electronic Media

Abubaker, M. (2025). Xi's diplomatic charm offensive in Southeast Asia. *The SVI*. <https://thesvi.org/xis-diplomatic-charm-offensive-in-southeast-asia/>

Al Jazeera. (2012, July 13). ASEAN talks fail over South China Sea dispute.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2012/7/13/asean-talks-fail-over-south-china-sea-dispute>

Al Jazeera. (2016, July 25). ASEAN bloc breaks deadlock on South China Sea.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/7/25/asean-bloc-breaks-deadlock-on-south-china-sea>

Arthur, G. (2025). Vietnam's defense market presents new opportunities, unique challenges for Western firms. *Breaking Defense*.

<https://breakingdefense.com/2025/05/vietnams-defense-market-presents-new-opportunities-unique-challenges-for-western-firms/>

Asian Military Review. (2024, March 5). Modernization initiatives to spur Vietnam defense budget at 5.6% CAGR over 2025–29.

<https://www.asianmilitaryreview.com/2024/03/modernization-initiatives-to-spur-vietnam-defense-budget-at-5-6-cagr-over-2025-29-forecasts-globaldata/>

Aun, C. (2021). Vietnam's new militia unit: A response to tensions with Cambodia, China. *VOA Khmer*. <https://khmer.voanews.com/a/vietnam-s-new-militia-unit-a-response-to-tensions-with-cambodia-china-analysts/5945532.html>

B2B Cambodia. (2025, January 21). Cambodia 2024 economic data in review.

<https://b2b-asianews.com/news/cambodia-2024-economic-data-in-review/>

Bajpaei, C. (2022, December 8). 'ASEAN centrality' in an era of renewed power politics. *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/12/asean-centrality-in-an-era-of-renewed-power-politics/>

BBC News. (2012, July 13). Asean nations fail to reach agreement on South China Sea.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-18825148>

Ben, S. (2025, April 9). PP–Sihanoukville Expressway drives connectivity, growth and quality of life. *Khmer Times*. <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501667127/pp-sihanoukville-expressway-drives-connectivity-growth-and-quality-of-life/>

Bimo, E. S. (2025, May 11). Cambodia's 2025 trade boom pulls it deeper into the U.S.–China crossfire. *China Global South*.  
<https://chinaglobalsouth.com/2025/05/11/cambodias-2025-trade-boom-pulls-it-deeper-into-the-u-s-china-crossfire-2/>

Bismonte, C. (2020, November 30). Cambodia and the misuse of the Global Magnitsky Act. *CSIS*. <https://www.csis.org/blogs/new-perspectives-asia/cambodia-and-misuse-global-magnitsky-act>

Bong, C. (2024, June 1). Cambodia's China policy: A balancing act for Phnom Penh. *East Asia Forum*. <https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/06/01/cambodias-china-policy-a-balancing-act-for-phnom-penh/>

Brancaccio, L. (2024, April 9). Why Cambodia's Funan Techo Canal project is worrying Vietnam. *Vietnam Briefing*. <https://www.vietnam-briefing.com/news/why-cambodias-funan-techo-canal-project-is-worrying-vietnam.html/>

Burnham, J. (2025, April 24). Bolstering defense ties: Vietnam reportedly agrees to purchase American F-16s. *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*.  
[https://www.fdd.org/analysis/policy\\_briefs/2025/04/24/bolstering-defense-ties-vietnam-reportedly-agrees-to-purchase-american-f-16s/](https://www.fdd.org/analysis/policy_briefs/2025/04/24/bolstering-defense-ties-vietnam-reportedly-agrees-to-purchase-american-f-16s/)

Campbell, C. (2016, July 25). After days of deadlock, ASEAN releases statement on South China Sea dispute. *TIME*. <https://time.com/4421293/asean-beijing-south-china-sea-cambodia-philippines-laos/>

Cang, W. (2025, April 19). Jiangsu gears up for Fish and Rice Corridor in Cambodia. *China Daily*.

<https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202504/19/WS68027a29a3104d9fd382052c.html>

Caporale, V. (2022, April 1). How Vietnamese history constrains its policy choices today. *Modern Diplomacy*. <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2022/04/01/how-the-vietnamese-history-constrains-its-policy-choices-today/>

Chap, C. (2023, September 12). ASEAN remains divided over China's assertiveness in South China Sea. *VOA News*. <https://www.voanews.com/a/asean-remains-divided-over-china-s-assertiveness-in-south-china-sea/7264923.html>

Charles, R. S. (2025, May 18). ASEAN's struggle for relevance amid minilateralism and great power rivalry. *NIICE*. <https://niice.org.np/archives/10943>

Chheang, V. (2023, September 29). Hun Manet's evolving foreign policy doctrine. *Khmer Times*. <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501368377/hun-manets-evolving-foreign-policy-doctrine-2/>

Chhaya, S. (2025, July 4). The \$5.3 trillion question: How South China Sea tensions are rewriting global trade rules. *Atlas Institute*. <https://atlasinstitute.org/the-5-3-trillion-question-how-south-china-sea-tensions-are-rewriting-global-trade-rules/>

Choong, W., & Storey, I. (2021, October 22). Southeast Asian responses to AUKUS: Arms racing, non-proliferation and regional stability. *Fulcrum*. <https://fulcrum.sg/southeast-asian-responses-to-aokus-arms-racing-non-proliferation-and-regional-stability/>

Chum, S. (2023, December 18). Why Vietnam can have it both ways with the West and China—and why Cambodia can't. *Khmer Times*. <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501408293/>

CSIS. (2025, May 5). A tale of two Reams: Questions remain at Cambodia's growing naval base. <https://amti.csis.org/a-tale-of-two-reams-questions-remain-at-cambodias-growing-naval-base/>

Da Costa, G. (2025, May 20). Indonesia, Malaysia expand defense partnership to counter transnational threats. *Indo-Pacific Defense Forum*.  
<https://ipdefenseforum.com/2025/05/indonesia-malaysia-expand-defense-partnership-to-counter-transnational-threats/>

Datta, S. (2025, March 11). From democracy to diplomacy: The new U.S. strategy in Cambodia post-USAID. *Center for Strategic and International Studies*.  
<https://www.csis.org/blogs/new-perspectives-asia/democracy-diplomacy-new-us-strategy-cambodia-post-usaid>

Deth, S. U. (2009). *The People's Republic of Kampuchea 1979–1989: A draconian savior?* [Master's thesis, Ohio University].

Devonshire-Ellis, C. (2022, November 14). China announces new ASEAN Belt & Road Initiative projects centered around Cambodia. *ASEAN Briefing*.  
<https://www.aseanbriefing.com/news/china-announces-new-asean-belt-road-initiative-projects/>

Di Lan, N. (2024, February 10). Vietnam's great power balancing act. *East Asia Forum*.  
<https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/02/10/vietnams-great-power-balancing-act/>

Di Lan, N., & Vu, T. M. (2019). The Sino-US-Vietnam triangle in a Belt and Road era. *East Asia*, 36, 229–241. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12140-019-09318-6>

Dung, P. X. (2022). Nguyen Phu Trong's Beijing trip: Safeguarding regime-state security. *9DashLine*. <https://www.9dashline.com/article/nguyen-phu-trongs-beijing-trip-safeguarding-regime-state-security-atjy6>

DW. (2012, July 13). Tensions paralyze ASEAN talks. <https://www.dw.com/en/south-china-sea-dispute-torpedoes-asean-talks/a-16094780>

Ehrlich, R. (2024, April 1). Cambodia getting a China-backed, game-changing canal. *Asia Times*. <https://asiatimes.com/2024/04/cambodia-getting-a-china-backed-game-changing-canal/>

Epstein, A. K. (2024, October 2). ASEAN still torn over security challenges. *GIS Reports*.

<https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/asean-issues/>

Florick, D. (2021, December 15). Cambodia is China's leverage point on ASEAN. *East Asia Forum*. <https://eastasiaforum.org/2021/12/15/cambodia-is-chinas-leverage-point-on-asean/>

Flynn, K. (2025, March 3). Shifting tides in Phnom Penh. *The Diplomat*.

<https://thediplomat.com/2025/03/shifting-tides-in-phnom-penh/>

Fresh News Asia. (2025, April 21). Cambodia welcomes all nations as friends in pursuit of prosperity, PM says.

<https://m.en.freshnewsasia.com/index.php/en/localnews/59387-2025-04-21-07-20-24.html>

Garagarza, E. R. (2023, April 19). China's Myanmar gambit: Seeking greater influence in the region. *Global Affairs*. <https://www.unav.edu/web/global-affairs/chinas-myanmar-gambit-seeking-greater-influence-in-the-region>

Grossman, D. (2024, September 3). The Gulf of Thailand may be the next U.S.-China flashpoint. *RAND Corporation*.

<https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2024/09/the-gulf-of-thailand-may-be-the-next-us-china-flashpoint.html>

Gutierrez, J. (2025, January 10). Envoy: Philippines-Japan defense cooperation to ensure long-term regional stability. *BenarNews*.

<https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/philippine/envoy-philippines-japan-defense-cooperation-to-ensure-long-term-regional-stability-01102025140157.html>

Hale, E. (2025, April 17). Fifty years after fall of Phnom Penh, history weighs on Cambodian politics. *Al Jazeera*.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/4/17/fifty-years-after-fall-of-phnom-penh-history-weighs-on-cambodian-politics>

Hassan, T. (2024). Cambodia events of 2024. *Human Rights Watch*.

<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/cambodia>

Hayton, B. (2024, May 9). Vietnam's political turmoil reveals a turn toward China—and away from the West. *Chatham House*.

<https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/05/vietnams-political-turmoil-reveals-turn-towards-china-and-away-west>

Hayton, B. (2025, July 10). Vietnam's tariff deal with Trump reflects balancing act between US and China. *Chatham House*.

<https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/07/vietnams-tariff-deal-trump-reflects-balancing-act-between-us-and-china>

Heng, K. (2021, January 8). Cambodia's foreign policy: Balancing China and Vietnam. *Cambodianess*. <https://cambodianess.com/article/cambodias-foreign-policy-balancing-china-and-vietnam>

Hin, P. (2025, April 7). European investors share confidence with CDC. *Phnom Penh Post*. <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/business/european-investors-share-confidence-with-cdc>

Horta, L. (2022, August 16). Vietnam eyes China's expanding presence in Cambodia. *East Asia Forum*. <https://eastasiaforum.org/2022/08/16/vietnam-eyes-chinas-expanding-presence-in-cambodia/>

Hunt, L. (2025, June 26). Cambodia's Hun Sen flouts ASEAN's doctrine of non-interference. *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2025/06/cambodias-hun-sen-flouts-aseans-doctrine-of-non-interference>

Hutagalung, S. (2024, July 11). Maintaining balance in Southeast Asia: A multifaceted approach – OpEd. *Eurasia Review*. <https://www.eurasiareview.com/11072024-maintaining-balance-in-southeast-asia-a-multifaceted-approach-oped/>

Hutt, D. (2016, October 20). The truth about anti-Vietnam sentiment in Cambodia. *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2016/10/the-truth-about-anti-vietnam-sentiment-in-cambodia/>

Hutt, D. (2022, June 30). Vietnam warily weighs a China base in Cambodia. *Asia Times*. <https://asiatimes.com/2022/06/vietnam-warily-weighs-a-china-base-in-cambodia/>

Hutt, D. (2024). Cambodian anti-Vietnamese sentiment will stalk Hun Manet beyond trade zone spat. *Radio Free Asia*. <https://www.rfa.org/english/commentaries/cambodia-laos-vietnam-hun-manet-10052024101907.html>

Huynh, T. S. (2022, April 26). Vietnam's "four no's" of defence policy are being tested. *Lowy Institute*. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/vietnam-s-four-no-s-defence-policy-are-being-tested>

Huynh, T. S., & Mai, V. T. M. (2024, June 7). How the "politics of gratitude" inflames Cambodia–Vietnam relations. *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/06/how-the-politics-of-gratitude-inflames-cambodia-vietnam-relations/>

Johnson, J., & Benoza, K. (2024, April 7). Philippines, U.S., Australia and Japan hold joint military drills in disputed South China Sea. *The Japan Times*. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2024/04/07/japan/politics/japan-australia-philippines-us-south-china-sea-exercise/>

Keeton-Olsen, D., & Yon, S. (2021, March 22). Cambodian and Chinese construction workers equal victims of the pandemic slowdown. *China Labour Bulletin*.

<https://clb.org.hk/en/content/cambodian-and-chinese-construction-workers-equal-victims-pandemic-slowdown>

Kelliher, F. (2024, June 14). How the West embraced Cambodia's new prime minister. *Foreign Policy*. [https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/06/14/cambodia-prime-minister-hun-manet-west-engagement-lloyd-austin/#cookie\\_message\\_anchor](https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/06/14/cambodia-prime-minister-hun-manet-west-engagement-lloyd-austin/#cookie_message_anchor)

Khim, P. (2020). *China–Cambodia–Vietnam relations in contemporary context*. Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace.

Khim, T., & Ung, K. B. (2023, September). What are Cambodia's achievements at the ASEAN Summit 2023? *CSEAS Commentary No. 13*, Center for Southeast Asian Studies.

Khmer Times. (2022, August 14). ASEAN Regional Forum in Cambodia sees members prioritise cooperation in counter-terrorism and defence. <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501131564/asean-regional-forum-in-cambodia-sees-members-prioritise-cooperation-in-counter-terrorism-and-defence/>

Khmer Times. (2024). Vietnam culture week opens in Cambodia. <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501493381/>

Khmer Times. (2025, May 8). EU Global Gateway support for sustainable economic growth and investment discussed. <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501680877/eu-global-gateway-support-for-sustainable-economic-growth-and-investment-discussed/>

Khmer Times. (2025). Vietnam, Cambodia strengthen cooperation in repatriation of martyrs' remains. <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501769149/>

Kim, F. (2024, August 28). Hanoi, Tokyo deepen cooperation with new defense agreements. *Indo-Pacific Defense Forum*. <https://ipdefenseforum.com/2024/08/hanoi-tokyo-deepen-cooperation-with-new-defense-agreements-equipment-transfers/>

Kin, P. (2025, April 17). Cambodia, China's enriching journey. *China Daily*.  
<https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202504/17/WS68002c16a3104d9fd381fcaa.html>

Kowalski, B. (2025, March 6). Cambodia's playing with Chinese fire. *CEIAS*.  
<https://ceias.eu/cambodias-playing-with-chinese-fire/>

Kung, P. (2015). *The South China Sea disputes: Three years after Cambodia* (RSIS Commentary No. 042). S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies.  
<https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/co15042-the-south-china-sea-disputes-three-years-after-cambodia/>

Lam, V. (2025, June 20). Myanmar and ASEAN's parallel diplomacy trap. *Lowy Institute*.  
<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/myanmar-asean-s-parallel-diplomacy-trap>

Lim, C. (2024, November 1). Lost in translation: China's elite-centric approach in Cambodia. *Lowy Institute*. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/lost-translation-china-s-elite-centric-approach-cambodia>

Lim, C., & Ly, N. (2024, April 11). Cambodia makes new friends on the international stage. *East Asia Forum*. <https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/04/11/cambodia-makes-new-friends-on-the-international-stage/>

Lim, P. H. (2024, August 9). Philippines, Vietnam conduct 1st joint drills amid South China Sea tensions. *VOA News*. <https://www.voanews.com/a/philippines-vietnam-conduct-1st-joint-drills-amid-south-china-sea-tensions/7737213.html>

Lin, J. (2023, July 5). A divided ASEAN: Will disunity derail the regional organisation? *Fulcrum*. <https://fulcrum.sg/aseanfocus/a-divided-asean-will-disunity-derail-the-regional-organisation/>

Lin, J. (2023, July 31). The myth of the 'vassal state': China's influence in Laos is waning. *9DashLine*. <https://www.9dashline.com/article/the-myth-of-the-vassal-state-chinas-influence-in-laos-is-waning>

Liu, Z. Z., & Clark, N. (2024, September 30). Why is China investing in a \$1.7 billion canal in Cambodia? *Council on Foreign Relations*. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/why-china-investing-17-billion-canal-cambodia>

Medina, A. F. (2025, February 1). Cambodia's 2025 economic outlook and investment opportunities for foreign investors. *ASEAN Briefing*. <https://www.aseanbriefing.com/news/cambodias-2025-economic-outlook-and-investment-opportunities-for-foreign-investors/>

Merican, D. (2007, February). Cambodia's engagement with ASEAN: Lessons for Timor Leste. *CICP Working Paper Series No. 14*. <https://cicp.org.kh/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/CICP-working-paper-14-Cambodias-Engagement-in-ASEAN-by-Din-Merican.pdf>

Mi, T. (2015, November 4). Japan donates 2 more patrol boats to Vietnam amid S. China Sea tensions. *VOA Khmer*. <https://khmer.voanews.com/a/japan-donates-patrol-boats-to-vietnam-south-china-sea-tensions/3035560.html>

Minh, H. (2023, August 6). Prime minister reassures Viet Nam's "four nos" defense policy. *Bao Chinh Phu*. <https://en.baochinhphu.vn/prime-minister-reassures-viet-nams-four-nos-defense-policy-11123080610460922.htm>

Mom, M. (2024, May 1). China's continuing influence over Cambodia's economy. *East Asia Forum*. <https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/05/01/chinas-continuing-influence-over-cambodias-economy/>

Moore, R. (2025, July 18). CARAT Thailand 2025 concludes, strengthening U.S.-Thailand maritime partnership. *U.S. Navy*.

<https://www.cpf.navy.mil/Newsroom/News/Article/4249825/carat-thailand-2025-concludes-strengthening-us-thailand-maritime-partnership/>

Neak, C. (2025, April 17). Shared commitment to friendship and progress. *China Daily*. <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202504/17/WS68003d9aa3104d9fd381fcc5.html>

Neak, C., & Lim, C. (2025, April 29). Cambodia recalibrates its China policy, rather than realigns. *Lowy Institute*. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/cambodia-recalibrates-its-china-policy-rather-realigns>

Neth, K. (2025). Cambodia and China's growing relationship: Balancing prosperity and regional harmony. *Khmer Times*. <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501652360/cambodia-and-chinas-growing-relationship-balancing-prosperity-and-regional-harmony/>

Nguyen, H. H. (2012, July 27). Time to reinterpret ASEAN's consensus principle. *East Asia Forum*. <https://eastasiaforum.org/2012/07/27/time-to-reinterpret-asean-s-consensus-principle/>

Nguyen, K. G. (2023). *Vietnam seeks Intimate ties with Cambodia and Laos*. ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute.

Nguyen, K. G. (2024, October 30). Triangle trouble: What's next for Vietnam's Indochina strategy? *Fulcrum*. <https://fulcrum.sg/triangle-trouble-whats-next-for-vietnams-indochina-strategy/>

Nguyen, K. G. (2025, March 13). Mending fences: Vietnam and Cambodia's diplomatic reset. *Fulcrum*. <https://fulcrum.sg/mending-fences-vietnam-and-cambodias-diplomatic-reset/>

Nhean, C. (2025, February 7). China pumps \$550M into Cambodia's industrial sector. *Khmer Times*. <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501635817/china-pumps-550m-into-cambodias-industrial-sector/>

Nhean, C. (2025, March 11). MEF reports zero debt with China in 2024. *Khmer Times*.  
<https://www.khertimeskh.com/501651781/mef-reports-zero-debt-with-china-in-2024/>

Niem, C. (2024, December 2). Hun Sen meets Chinese president Xi to strengthen "ironclad" friendship. *Phnom Penh Post*.  
<https://www.phnompenhpost.com/politics/hun-sen-meets-chinese-president-xi-to-strengthen-ironclad-friendship>

Niem, C. (2025, April 18). Cambodia reiterates adherence to 'One China' policy as Xi departs. *Phnom Penh Post*.  
<https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/cambodia-reiterates-adherence-to-one-china-policy-as-xi-departs>

Noren-Nilsson, A. (2022, January 21). Hun Sen future-proofs Cambodia's politics. *East Asia Forum*. <https://eastasiaforum.org/2022/01/21/hun-sen-future-proofs-cambodias-politics/>

ORF. (2023, April 13). Whither ASEAN centrality? <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/whither-asean-centrality>

Panyue, H. (2025, May 30). China-Cambodia "Golden Dragon 2025" joint exercise wraps up. *Ministry of National Defense of China*.  
[http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News\\_213114/TopStories/16389087.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/16389087.htm)

Parameswaran, P. (2016, July 25). Assessing ASEAN's South China Sea position in its post-ruling statement. *The Diplomat*.  
<https://thediplomat.com/2016/07/assessing-aseans-south-china-sea-position-in-its-post-ruling-statement/>

Parameswaran, P. (2019, August 19). What's in the new India-Vietnam patrol vessel project launch? *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/08/whats-in-the-new-india-vietnam-patrol-vessel-project-launch/>

Pham, N. M. T. (2025, July 11). The 2016 South China Sea ruling at nine: Where does ASEAN stand? *Fulcrum*. <https://fulcrum.sg/the-2016-south-china-sea-ruling-at-nine-where-does-asean-stand/>

Pongsudhirak, T. (2022, February 2). Southeast Asia's new-old cold war. *Project Syndicate*. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/us-china-new-cold-war-southeast-asia-by-thitinan-pongsudhirak-2022-02>

Reuters. (2024, October 7). Philippines launches naval drills with allies as regional tensions simmer. *VOA News*. <https://www.voanews.com/a/philippines-launches-naval-drills-with-allies-as-regional-tensions-simmer/7813871.html>

Rim, S. (2022, June 10). Cambodia has little to gain from hosting a Chinese military presence. *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/06/cambodia-has-little-to-gain-from-hosting-a-chinese-military-presence/>

Rim, S. (2023, September 13). Cambodia's foreign policy under new Prime Minister Hun Manet. *ThinkChina*. <https://www.thinkchina.sg/politics/cambodias-foreign-policy-under-new-prime-minister-hun-manet>

Ry, S. (2024, May 24). Hun Sen reiterates that despite leadership change, Kingdom remains 'trustworthy friend' to China. *Phnom Penh Post*. <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/politics/hun-sen-reiterates-that-despite-leadership-change-kingdom-remains-trustworthy-friend-to-china>

Sanglee, T. (2023, September 27). Cambodia's Ream Naval Base upgrade and implications for Thailand. *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/09/cambodias-ream-naval-base-upgrade-and-implications-for-thailand>

Sangtam, A. (2023, August 3). No land in sight: Prospects of a South China Sea Code of Conduct. *9DashLine*. <https://www.9dashline.com/article/no-land-in-sight-prospects-of-a-south-china-sea-code-of-conduct>

Sayavongs, M. (2023, October). How Laos and other ASEAN countries can leverage US-China competition. *U.S. Institute of Peace*.  
<https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/10/how-laos-and-other-asean-countries-can-leverage-us-china-competition>

SCMP. (2022, September 19). Activists in Cambodia fear rising surveillance from China's Belt and Road Initiative. <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3193045/activists-cambodia-fear-rising-surveillance-chinas-belt>

Sen, N. (2025, March 27). China steps in to replace USAID projects in Asia after Trump administration cuts funding. *Yahoo Finance*.  
<https://finance.yahoo.com/news/china-steps-replace-usaid-projects-233814054.html>

Sgueglia, G. (2025, March 3). China-Cambodia ties: Boosting trade, investment, and opportunities. *China Briefing*. <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/china-cambodia-trade-investment-opportunities/>

Sharma, S. (2025, January 29). India, Indonesia renew maritime security agreement for 3 more years. *India Today*. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/india-indonesia-maritime-security-agreement-3-more-years-2671663-2025-01-29>

Sim, V. (2023, January 10). ASEAN achievements under Cambodia's chairmanship 2022. *Khmer Times*. <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501216888/asean-achievements-under-cambodias-chairmanship-2022/>

Sok, K. (2016, July 15). China gives \$600m to Cambodia in exchange for international support. *VOA Khmer*. <https://khmer.voanews.com/a/china-gives-600-million-to-cambodia-in-exchange-for-international-support/3419875.html>

Strangio, S. (2024, January 31). Vietnam, Philippines sign agreements on maritime security cooperation. *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/01/vietnam-philippines-sign-agreements-on-maritime-security-cooperation/>

Sum, M. (2024, December 20). Cambodia-Korea trade reaches \$762M in 2024. *Khmer Times*. <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501611221/cambodia-korea-trade-reaches-762m-in-2024/>

Sum, M. (2025, January 21). Cambodia-China trade volume soars to over \$15B. *Khmer Times*. <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501626561/cambodia-china-trade-volume-soars-to-over-15b>

Sun, N., & Noy, H. (2023, July 5). Experts: Cambodia deepens reliance on China ahead of election. *VOA News*. <https://www.voanews.com/a/experts-cambodia-depends-reliance-on-china-ahead-of-election/7168773.html>

Tan, J. Y. O. (2025, June 10). ASEAN's path to resolving diplomatic deadlock lies in connecting the South China Sea and Mekong Delta issues. *Pacific Forum*. <https://pacforum.org/publications/yl-blog-128-aseans-path-to-resolving-diplomatic-deadlock-lies-in-connecting-the-south-china-sea-and-mekong-delta-issues/>

Tanamal, Y. (2025, June 3). Calls for institutional reform grow in response to ASEAN 2045 plan. *Asia News Network*. <https://asianews.network/calls-for-institutional-reform-grow-in-response-to-asean-2045-plan/>

Teng, Y. (2025, April 21). U.S. or China? Cambodia makes friends with all. *Cambodianess*. <https://cambodianess.com/article/us-or-china-cambodia-makes-friends-with-all>

Thang, S. (2025, April 20). Cambodia's railway network to expand to China. *Kiripost*. <https://kiripost.com/stories/cambodias-railway-network-to-expand-to-china>

The Phnom Penh Post. (2023, May 22). PM marks 10th anniversary of BRI. <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national-politics/pm-marks-10th-anniversary-bri>

Torn, V. (2025, April 21). Japanese ships make historic first port call at Ream Naval Base. *Khmer Times*. <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501672038/japanese-ships-make-historic-first-port-call-at-ream-naval-base/>

Torn, V. (2025, April 22). PM rejects claims Cambodia is aligning with China over US. *Khmer Times*. <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501672797/pm-rejects-claims-cambodia-is-aligning-with-china-over-us/>

Valockova, B. (2025, March 26). ASEAN centrality and its narratives in an evolving regional order. *E-International Relations*. <https://www.e-ir.info/2025/03/26/asean-centrality-and-its-narratives-in-an-evolving-regional-order/>

Var, V. (2015, May 20). Cambodia: Between China and the United States. *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2015/05/cambodia-between-china-and-the-united-states/>

Var, V. (2016, July 9). Cambodia should be cautious when it comes to Chinese aid. *East Asia Forum*. <https://eastasiaforum.org/2016/07/09/cambodia-should-be-cautious-when-it-comes-to-chinese-aid/>

Wilt, E. (2025, July 17). Minilateralism in Asia: Evolution, dynamics, and implications. *Hudson-Delaware Valley Forum*. <https://hdff.org/minilateralism-in-asia-evolution-dynamics-and-implications/>

Wren, D. J., & Sam, S. (2023, August 8). BRI brings profound impact to Cambodia. *Belt and Road Portal*. <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/p/06EJOOOB.html>

Xinhua. (2016, June 28). Cambodia not to support arbitration court's decision over South China Sea. *China Daily*. [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2016-06/28/content\\_25889328.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2016-06/28/content_25889328.htm)

Xinhua. (2022, April 3). Chinese investment in Cambodia rises in 2021 despite pandemic. *China Daily*.

<https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202203/04/WS6221d196a310cdd39bc8a6d4.html>

Xinhua. (2023, October 11). China's BRI has huge socio-economic impact on Cambodia, says Cambodian scholar. *State Council Information Office*.  
[http://english.scio.gov.cn/beltandroad/2023-10/11/content\\_116737241.htm](http://english.scio.gov.cn/beltandroad/2023-10/11/content_116737241.htm)

Xinhua. (2024, November 6). China's investment helps industrial development in Cambodia.

<https://english.news.cn/20241106/2aa0368bebe54f9fa0a3fac376bab3fa/c.html>

Xinhua. (2025, March 10). Cambodia's PM highlights 6 key priorities of foreign policy. *China Daily Hong Kong*. <https://www.chinadailyhk.com/hk/article/606525>

Xinhua. (2025, April 17). China-Cambodia ties set model for building community with shared future -- Chinese ambassador. *Chinese Government*.

[https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202504/17/content\\_WS680049a6c6d0868f4e8f1ce0.html](https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202504/17/content_WS680049a6c6d0868f4e8f1ce0.html)

Xinhua. (2025, April 18). China, Cambodia agree to build all-weather community with shared future in new era. *Chinese Government*.

[https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202504/18/content\\_WS68018acf6d0868f4e8f1d74.html](https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202504/18/content_WS68018acf6d0868f4e8f1d74.html)

Xinhua. (2025, May 4). Experts laud Cambodia-China relations in new era. *Lancang-Mekong Cooperation*. [http://www.lmcchina.org/eng/2025-05/04/content\\_43106749.html](http://www.lmcchina.org/eng/2025-05/04/content_43106749.html)

Yang, J., & Mu, S. (2023, October 4). The Cambodian regime is a key element in China's regional expansion strategy. *The Diplomat*.

<https://thediplomat.com/2023/10/the-cambodian-regime-is-a-key-element-in-chinas-regional-expansion-strategy/>

Yen, S. (2024, September 2). Cambodia's strategic partnership with Korea: A hedging act – Analysis. *Eurasia Review*. <https://www.eurasiareview.com/02092024-cambodias-strategic-partnership-with-korea-a-hedging-act-analysis/>

Yuji, N., & Yukio, T. (2023, September 25). Cambodian PM Hun Manet pledges stronger China ties in Beijing visit. *Nikkei Asia*.  
<https://asia.nikkei.com/politics/international-relations/cambodian-pm-hun-manet-pledges-stronger-china-ties-in-beijing-visit>

Zhang, P. (2016, July 12). Cambodia retains stance of not backing arbitration court's award. *Xinhua*. [https://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-07/12/c\\_135508168.htm](https://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-07/12/c_135508168.htm)

### Other Materials

ASEAN. (n.d.). *Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)*.  
<https://asean.org/our-communities/economic-community/integration-with-global-economy/regional-comprehensive-economic-partnership-rcep/>

China Foreign's Aid. (2011, April). *China white paper on foreign aid*.

Kao, K. H. (2025). *Opening remarks for the policy speech by Samdech Akka Moha Sena Padei Techo Hun Sen, President of the Senate, Kingdom of Cambodia*. ASEAN Headquarters/ASEAN Secretariat.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Cambodia. (n.d.). Cambodia's foreign policy direction. <https://www.mfaic.gov.kh/page/2021-02-08-Cambodia-s-Foreign-Policy-Direction>

Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Cambodia. (n.d.). *Cambodia's membership*. <https://www.mfaic.gov.kh/Page/2021-04-01-Cambodia-s-Membership>

Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Cambodia. (2016, July 9).

Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation [Press Release]. <https://mfaic.gov.kh/posts/post-3243>

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China. (2025). Together we strive, together we thrive:

Toward a stable and sustainable China-Cambodia community with a shared future in the new era.

[https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/zxw/202504/t20250417\\_11595805.html](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/zxw/202504/t20250417_11595805.html)

U.S. Department of Treasury. (2024, September 12). Treasury sanctions Cambodian

tycoon and businesses linked to human trafficking and forced labor in furtherance of cyber and virtual currency scams [Press Release].

<https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy2576>



## APPENDICES

**APPENDIX A**  
**CHINESE-FUNDED PROJECTS IN CAMBODIA (As of 2025)**

Category	Project Name	Type	Status/Details
Transportation	Phnom Penh-Sihanoukville Expressway	Highway	Completed (2022)
Transportation	Phnom Penh-Bavet Expressway	Highway	Under construction (completion 2027)
Transportation	Techo International Airport	Airport	Opened September 2025
Transportation	Siem Reap Angkor International Airport	Airport	Opened October 2023
Transportation	Cambodia-China Friendship Bridge (Kratie)	Bridge	98% complete (Set to open in April 2026)
Ports & Maritime	Funan Techo Canal	Canal	Construction began in 2024 (180 km), and ongoing construction to 2029
Ports & Maritime	Kampot Logistics and Multi-Purpose Port	Port	Inaugurated in June 2024
Defense	Ream Naval Base Modernization	Military Base	Upgrade ongoing (New 270m pier, 5,000-ton dry dock, 1,000-ton slipway)
Defense	Type 056 Corvettes	Naval Ships	2 to be delivered
Energy	Prey Veng Photovoltaic Power Plant	Solar	Contract awarded 2025
Energy	Cambodia Upper Tatay	Hydropower	Operational

	Hydropower		
Energy	Lower Sesan 2 Hydropower Plant	Hydropower	Operational
Energy	Additional Hydropower Plant	Hydropower	Operational
Energy	2 Thermal Power Plants	Thermal	Operational
Economic Zones	Sihanoukville Special Economy Zone	SEZ	Operational (202 companies)
Public Infrastructure	Morodok Techo National Stadium	Stadium	Completed (Opened 2021)
Development Aid	Mekong-Lancang Cooperation Fund 2025	Multiple sectors	11 projects (tourism, health, agriculture, education)

## BIOGRAPHY

<b>Name</b>	Mr. Vannmomy Svay
<b>Date of Birth</b>	July 28, 2000
<b>Educational Attainment</b>	<p>2023-2025: Master of Arts in Asia-Pacific Studies, Thammasat Institute of Area Studies, Thammasat University</p> <p>2021-2022: Diploma in International Economics, Institute of Foreign Languages, Royal University of Phnom Penh, Cambodia</p> <p>2017-2021: Bachelor of Arts in International Studies, majoring in International Relations, Institute of Foreign Languages, Royal University of Phnom Penh, Cambodia</p> <p>2017-2021: Bachelor of Laws in Law (English), The University of Cambodia, Phnom Penh, Cambodia</p>
<b>Work Position</b>	Legal Executive, AirAsia Cambodia
<b>Scholarship</b>	<p>2023-2025: Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research, and Innovation (MHESI) Scholarship Recipient</p> <p>2017-2021: Scholarship holder of a Bachelor's degree in Law, the University of Cambodia, Phnom Penh, Cambodia</p>
<b>Work Experiences</b>	<p>2026: Legal Executive, AirAsia Cambodia</p> <p>2025-2026: Policy Researcher (Assistant), the General Secretariat of the Digital Economy and Business Committee (DEBC)</p>

2021-2023: Administrative Officer and Speech Writer, the Union of Youth Federations of Cambodia (UYFC)

2020-2021: Legal Intern and Administrative Assistant, Sala Traju Association