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Hun Sen and the Formulation of Cambodia's Foreign Policy

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Prime Minister Hun Sen, the longest serving Prime Minister of Cambodia and the region, is the key architect of Cambodia's foreign policy. His worldview has been solidly formed over decades of practical experiences. His accumulated knowledge of foreign affairs and diplomacy has been integrated into Cambodia's foreign policy vision and strategic approaches.

The prime minister has been inspired by the late former King Norodom Sihanouk's nationalist and pragmatic foreign policy, which prioritised national independence and practical international cooperation. In the essay published in the Foreign Affairs in 1958, Sihanouk asserted that neutrality was a matter of necessity for Cambodia.

Amid heightening geopolitical rivalries, Hun Sen considers reviving the spirit of Bandung by initiating a new tool for peace incorporating the principles of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the South-South cooperation to build new momentum for the Global South to form a goodwill coalition against foreign interference as well as to protect the legitimate interests of the developing world.

He does not buy into a hegemonic order or a unipolar world order. He does not want to be trapped in between the two superpowers. The decline of the West and the rise of the East will inevitably lead to the establishment of a multiplex world in which small states can survive and thrive. The Cambodian leader believes that small states must be active in finding their space and standing in the international system.

At the World Economic Forum in Davos in May 2022, he confidently said that Cambodia was not interested in taking sides regardless of mounting pressure from major powers. However, he acknowledged that Cambodia faced challenges and dilemmas caused by complex and volatile geopolitical rivalries.

Concerning regional initiatives in the Indo-Pacific, Prime Minister Hun Sen supported those initiatives that promote peace and prosperity in the region, complement and support ASEAN Centrality, and do not create an alliance or coalition against a third country. The leader stressed that ASEAN Centrality was the cornerstone of peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region and that the operationalisation of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) with the support of all dialogue partners was crucial. Therefore, instead of asking ASEAN to support various Indo-Pacific initiatives, those who initiated the initiatives should support the AOIP.

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Pragmatism informs Hun Sen's worldview and foreign policy, as he prioritises practical cooperation and concrete outcomes. When opportunity knocks, grasp the chance. He believes that, as an open and small economy, Cambodia must be connected and integrated into the region and the world for survival and progress. Therefore, international integration is one of the key foreign policy goals of the Kingdom.

Cambodia considers ASEAN a shield protecting its national interests and a springboard for the country to enhance connection and integration. In addition, ASEAN helps its members to cushion against foreign intervention, especially from superpowers.

Hun Sen believes Cambodia's peace and prosperity are very much intertwined with those in Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific region. Hence, Cambodia must be a responsible and active member of regional organisations.

This year, Cambodia has chaired ASEAN for the third time since it became a member of this regional grouping in 1999. Under the theme "ASEAN A.C.T.: Addressing Challenges Together", Cambodia strives to enhance ASEAN unity and centrality and promote the spirit of working together to address emerging challenges facing the region.

Notwithstanding these good intentions, Cambodia has suffered an international image issue. It has been allegedly seen or portrayed as a 'trojan horse' or a 'client state' of China. Moreover, Cambodia has been alleged of hosting a Chinese naval base in Ream, Sihanoukville.

These ill-intentioned allegations and strategic narratives are harmful. They do not reflect the realities. Cambodia is not a client state of China or any other country. On the contrary, it is pursuing an independent foreign policy by delicately crafting and implementing a hedging and diversification strategy. Here are some facts illustrating Cambodia's hedging behaviour.

Firstly, Cambodia is the first country from Southeast Asia that openly registered its support for the Japan-proposed Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) because it believes that the initiative complements ASEAN-led regional mechanisms. During the visit of Lt. Gen. Hun Manet to Japan in February 2022, both sides agreed to strengthen defence and security cooperation under the framework of the FOIP. Furthermore, during the visit of the Japanese Chief of Staff in April 2022, both sides emphasised specific areas of cooperation, including peacekeeping operations, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and educational exchange. Japanese Self Defence Forces and the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces will work more closely together to address challenges in the region to realise a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific".

Secondly, economic diversification is in full swing. A year after signing the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with China in October 2020, Cambodia reached another FTA with the Republic of Korea in October 2021. In addition, the country is exploring opportunities to negotiate bilateral FTAs with other potential partners such as Japan, India, and the Eurasian Economic Commission.

The United States and the European Union remain the two main export markets for Cambodian products, especially textile products. Against this backdrop, Cambodia is trying to maintain preferential market access to these two markets without compromising its sovereignty.

Thirdly, Cambodia intriguingly co-sponsored the UN resolution to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine although it knew that its action would anger Russia, which could take measures to punish Cambodia in response. The decision was made based on the principle of international law. Cambodia used to be a victim of invasions and bullies by bigger neighbours. Hence, it views the violation of any independent state's sovereignty and territorial integrity as unacceptable.

Cambodia had bitter experiences with superpowers, as it used to be the victim of great power politics during the Indochina Wars and the Cold War. Learning from past experiences, the country will not give in to foreign intervention and pressure. To Prime Minister Hun Sen, nothing is more valuable than independence and self-determination.

As a pragmatist, He works with all international friends and partners based on mutual respect and common interests. There are no ideological constraints or limitations. He maximises opportunities stemming from international cooperation and partnership, guided by the slogan: "Reforming at Home, Making Friends Abroad Based on Independence".

In the context of rising fluidity and multiplicity of the international system, Cambodia has certain strategic space to manoeuvre, as it is continuously adjusting its foreign policy posture to adapt to and navigate the fast-changing geopolitical landscape and trend.

Maintaining independence and strategic autonomy will be an uphill struggle for this small state. Indeed, Cambodia is navigating uncharted waters, as the world is entering a new era of volatility. Therefore, national unity and visionary, transformative leadership are of utmost critical for the survival and progress of the Kingdom.

The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Asian Vision Institute.