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Soft Power as Smart Diplomacy for Cambodia

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Executive Summary

- ❖ Soft power is a new concept in modern diplomacy that allows small states to utilise their resources to their advantage.
- ❖ Soft power is smart diplomacy for Cambodia to promote its national interest in the international arena. Based on the country's resources and contexts, Cambodia can achieve soft power by enhancing cultural, economic, peace, and digital diplomacy.
- ❖ Cultural diplomacy harnesses the potential of Cambodia's rich historical and cultural heritage and makes them well-known domestically and internationally. Economic diplomacy refers to the government's effort to diversify the markets for Cambodia's exports. Peace diplomacy refers to Cambodia's participation and contributions to keeping global peace. Digital diplomacy involves strengthening digital literacy among youths, diplomats, and government officials, essential to promoting Cambodia's soft power in the digital era.

សេចក្តីសង្ខេបអង្គបទ

- ❖ អំណាចទន់គឺជាគំនិតថ្មីមួយនៅក្នុងផ្នែកការទូតទំនើប ដែលផ្តល់ឱកាសច្រើនសម្រាប់រដ្ឋតូចៗ ក្នុងការប្រើប្រាស់ធនធានរបស់ពួកគេទៅជាគុណសម្បត្តិសម្រាប់ប្រទេស។
- ❖ អំណាចទន់គឺជាការទូតឆ្លាតវៃមួយសម្រាប់កម្ពុជា ក្នុងការលើកកម្ពស់ផលប្រយោជន៍ជាតិរបស់ខ្លួននៅលើឆាកអន្តរជាតិ។ ដោយផ្អែកលើធនធាន និងបរិបទរបស់ខ្លួន ប្រទេសកម្ពុជាអាចសម្រេចបានអំណាចទន់ តាមរយៈការពង្រឹងការទូតវប្បធម៌ ការទូតសេដ្ឋកិច្ច ការទូតសន្តិភាព និងការទូតឌីជីថល។
- ❖ ការទូតវប្បធម៌ ប្រើប្រាស់នូវសក្តានុពលប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រ និងបេតិកភណ្ឌវប្បធម៌ដ៏សម្បូរបែបរបស់កម្ពុជា ហើយធ្វើឱ្យមានភាពរុងរឿងល្បីល្បាញទាំងក្នុង និងក្រៅប្រទេស។ ការទូតសេដ្ឋកិច្ចសំដៅលើការប្រឹងប្រែងរបស់រដ្ឋាភិបាលក្នុងការធ្វើពិពិធកម្មទីផ្សារសម្រាប់ផលិតផលនាំចេញរបស់កម្ពុជា។ ការទូតសន្តិភាព សំដៅលើការចូលរួមរបស់កម្ពុជាក្នុងកិច្ចប្រឹងប្រែងរក្សាសន្តិភាពជាមួយសហគមន៍អន្តរជាតិ។ ការទូតឌីជីថល គឺជាតម្រូវការក្នុងការពង្រឹងអក្ខរកម្មឌីជីថលដល់យុវជន អ្នកការទូត និងមន្ត្រីរដ្ឋាភិបាល ដែលសំខាន់ក្នុងការលើកកម្ពស់អំណាចទន់របស់កម្ពុជានាសម័យឌីជីថលនេះ។

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Introduction

In the period of complexity and change from traditional diplomacy to modern diplomacy in international relations, the concept of power has gradually shifted from only hard power to soft power. Traditionally, power was often referred to only tangible forms of power such as military, territorial size, population, etc. Although hard power remains important in international politics, soft power has emerged and gained prominence. It has increasingly become a significant form of power for small states to prosper and achieve their goals. Although small states are limited in size or resources, they can be psychologically tactical to empower themselves (Chong 2010). Therefore, great powers or big states are no longer the only crucial actors in international politics.

For some small states, soft power plays a more prominent role than hard power. Soft power enables small states to be smart and creative in their diplomatic strategies to enhance their power in the international arena. For example, Cambodia is a small country that can rely on its rich historical and cultural resources to expand soft power. Nevertheless, the country lacks the art of enlarging its presence in the global arena and lacks operational strategies to turn those national resources into soft power to gain other countries' attention.

For this reason, building on existing studies on Cambodia's soft power, this article uses the concept of small-state soft power strategies to discuss Cambodia's potential to enhance its soft power by seeking to answer the question: How can Cambodia as a small state strengthen its soft power?

To address the research question, this study examines two main aspects: 1). models of small states that have successfully exercised soft power, and 2). cultural, economic, peace, and digital diplomacy as smart diplomacy to enhance Cambodia's soft power. In addition, the study relied on two important methods in data collection and analysis: case study analysis of Singapore and document analysis of existing research.

Theoretical Framework

This article uses the concept of soft power by Joseph S. Nye, Jr., who believes that soft power is just as important as hard power for a state's survival, to define the attributes of soft power. Although soft power is indirect and hard to notice, it is an effective and powerful source of power. Moreover, soft power is not limited to big countries or great powers. Small countries also have the potential to possess soft power. He argues that the emergence of soft power is due to five factors: economic interdependence, transnational actors, weak state nationalism, the growth of modern technology, and political issues (Nye 1990).

His work, *Public Diplomacy and Soft Power*, defines soft power as the ability to influence others to achieve the outcomes one wants through persuasion or attraction rather than coercion (Nye 2008, 95). However, he believes that soft power is far more than an influence. A country's soft power is based on three main elements: attractive cultural values, political values, and foreign policies (Ibid). Culture has both intrinsic and instrumental value. It is an important aspect of every country because it represents their identities and values. Cultural values refer to how a country can derive from its culture to exercise the influence that allows others to willingly follow or bring attractions (Nye 1990). Political values are a set of beliefs that a country upholds, whether at home or abroad, such as liberal democracy, peace-building

strategies, and sovereignty (Nye 2008). Foreign policies refer to a state's interaction with other states where it is seen as legitimate because when the state can make its power legitimate or align with the interests of others, it will have less risk and resistance (Nye 1990). This theoretical framework is relevant to the purpose of this research study, as it offers different strategies that allow us to explore various key aspects of soft power and find what can be best suited to Cambodia's context.

Furthermore, relationships are an important source of power achieved through interactions, allowing small and big states to co-exist. However, relationships are unequal in terms of power. The established literature by Yaqing Qin, *A Relational Theory of World Politics*, explains that Relational Theory sees the world as a horizontal line full of ongoing interactions between states. Thus, small states have more room to manoeuvre and make more relations. The theory focuses on power in terms of soft power, relationship, and intimacy between states which emerges from the practices of culture, history, and ways of life that link states in relationships with one another (Qin 2018). It explains that states are no longer rational actors but relators, important in spreading or strengthening power within their relational circle (Ibid). Thus, states can build multiple layers of relational circles in economic and security spheres, allowing them to achieve certain goals. This framework is important to explain Cambodia's case since the country is in the middle position between two great powers. It also allows Cambodia to have more operationalised smart and flexible strategies to ensure its survival and receive greater benefits from the international system by expanding and diversifying cooperation without being too dependent on one great power.

Model of Small State's Soft Power for Cambodia

Small states are defined as states with an overall population of under 30 million. They are geographically small and limited by vulnerability and resource shortages (Vital 1967). Another definition suggests that small states have "little or less government involvement in society or the national economy" (Fukuyama 2004, 40). Singapore is categorised as a small country in Southeast Asia that has successfully utilised its soft power to expand itself in international politics.

Soft power for small states can be varied from one country to another depending on their different contexts. For example, Cambodia can be innovative and smart based on its resources and practical circumstances to defy its small condition and expand its soft power to gain international standing. Therefore, this article uses Singapore's soft power enlargement model to show an example of a small state's successful soft power expansion.

Singapore is small in territorial size and population, and it has diverse ethnic compositions. However, the country has become the most economically influential city-state and an important trading hub in Asia and the world. Its people have a high standard of living.

Singapore harnesses soft power from different sources, and its leaders have a strong vision for its future development. One source of its soft power is economic prosperity, a cohesive government framework, and the Singapore Model of Development (SMD) that some countries have selectively adopted into their developmental plans (Chong 2010). For example, China has adopted SMD in its industrial park projects. Vietnam has also used the model in its industrial park projects and governmental reforms.

In addition, Singapore's diplomatic mediation plays a significant role in its soft power expansion in this multipolar system. Singapore binds itself to international organisations to establish a relational circle that earns benefits. Its membership in ASEAN allows the country to expand its peaceful cooperation and multilateral trade with neighbouring countries (Chong 2010). Additionally, Singapore has doubled its efforts in bilateral free trade agreements with many countries, such as New Zealand, the US, India, South Korea, and Japan (Ibid). The diplomatic mediation also involves contributing to the UN peacekeeping missions, allowing Singapore to earn a reputation as a good international citizen (Ibid).

Besides its successful economic development and trade, the country is considered one of the most modern and sustainable cities to travel, live, and conduct business. Singapore is a land of opportunity, connecting with Asia and the world (Marchant 2021). This business-friendly environment also attracts many foreign direct investment to the country. Moreover, Singapore's attractive infrastructure is not only about modern buildings but also the greenery surroundings that make it Asia's greenest city (Ibid). It has done a wonderful job balancing urban development and the environment, contributing to sustainability and quality of life. Gardens by the Bay and Marina Bay Sands are the perfect examples to demonstrate smart and environmentally-friendly buildings in Singapore.

Furthermore, Singapore's education is another major form of soft power. One of Asia's highest-ranked universities of public policy is in Singapore, named after Lee Kuan Yew (Kong 2017). In addition, the country has offered scholarships for international students and indigenous people, enhancing its reputation internationally (Burke and Saramago 2018). However, it is not just education alone that produces soft power. The experiences students can share and immerse themselves in Singapore's society also promote soft power.

Moreover, Singapore is a technocratic-and-meritocratic-based society, where the population is well educated and keeps up with new digital technology, portraying Singapore as a fair society in education and work. Overall, soft power has contributed an enormous advantage that allows Singapore to become prosperous as it is today.

Observing Singapore's soft power expansion model, we could adopt some strategies to apply to Cambodia based on its resources and contexts. The Kingdom requires more infrastructure development to foster soft power and attract foreign direct investment. Cambodia could follow Singapore's model of a green and sustainable city by enhancing its vision and mission for development. The government, especially the Ministry of Environment, should encourage more tree planting and green garden projects around the city and adopt green building standards. In addition, it needs to focus on improving pedestrian sidewalks and developing reliable and convenient public transportation services to ensure a better urban living standard. Through this infrastructure development, Cambodia will make itself more visible internationally as a country with a conducive business environment, a resilient city, and an attractive place for tourism.

Furthermore, Cambodia can adopt Singapore's technocracy and meritocracy model based on the development of the education system and careers. Therefore, Cambodia must strengthen the quality of education and make the workplace and state institutions places where everyone can grow based on their talents, skills, and knowledge. These improvements will boost Cambodia's reputation and enhance its resilience to future changes in the world.

Soft Power as Smart Diplomacy for Cambodia

Cambodia is transitioning from traditional to modern diplomacy in this new era (Chheang 2022). With this transition, Cambodia must consider enhancing soft power smart diplomacy by incorporating cultural, economic, digital, and peace diplomacy, as well as historical and youth resources to promote its national interests.

Cultural Diplomacy

Cultural diplomacy is an essential tool to promote soft power, particularly for small states with military inferiority and limited economic resources. Soft power theory outlines that if a country's culture is appealing, it will attract other countries to follow (Nye 1990). Cambodia is a country rich in culture and history, which puts it in an advantageous position to harness its cultural diplomacy. However, there is still a lack of operational strategies to utilise culture for enhancing soft power. Its culture is not yet as extensively known as other foreign cultures among foreigners.

- **Promoting historical and cultural heritage sites and eco-friendly tourism**

Cambodia has many ancient temples with impressive architecture. Angkor Wat and Preah Vihear temples are well known and represent the soul and identity of the Cambodian people. Therefore, they are the ideal tourist destinations. However, promoting cultural heritage sites should expand beyond Angkor Wat and Preah Vihear to cover other temples, coastal areas, and eco-friendly tourist places. A report shows that there has been an increase in tourists to ecotourism sites in Cambodia, which indicates that those areas can be further expanded to diversify the tourism industry (Maurice et al. 2020). For instance, Chi Phat and Koh Rong could be attractive tourist destinations because there are mangroves, waterfalls, a variety of tropical fruits, activities, and many affordable eco-tourist lodges. Therefore, the government should preserve and invest more in those areas to improve infrastructure and hospitality services and increase popularity for domestic and international tourists.

Besides, urban cultural heritage sites should be more preserved, such as historical buildings, museums, and art and national archives centres. UNESCO commended the Cambodian government for preserving an urban heritage building (Sochan 2021). Urban heritage is a resource that plays an important role in improving the quality of life in urban areas and promoting economic development (Ibid). However, it requires more effective promotion strategies since some places are unknown to the city's people and foreign tourists. Therefore, youths can actively promote those places by spreading the word or making content on various social media platforms that allow them to reach more audiences. In addition, youths could work on projects that aim to raise cultural awareness, such as cultural festivals.

- **Food diplomacy**

Food is Cambodia's significant intangible cultural heritage and could serve as an effective tool for nation branding (Chhem and Chhem 2020). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation has made food diplomacy key to the Economic Diplomacy Strategy 2021–2023. There are plenty of natural ingredients in Cambodia that offer a variety of ways to create dishes, but our culinary tradition needs more advertisement to become more well-known. Cambodia needs to conceptualise and promote its national dishes and culinary heritage while, at the same time, incorporating a variety of international food because food diplomacy is more than just promoting the country's dishes. For example, in Chinatown and night markets in Thailand, one can find various types of Thai food and food worldwide in just one place.

The government can also encourage more innovative food-related projects, such as festivals where food from all ASEAN countries is exhibited in one place. Moreover, food diplomacy involves more actors, such as chefs, celebrities, and kids, through creative-related culinary Television shows (Chhem and Chhem, 2020). Celebrity cooking shows and master chef junior shows in Thailand or America, where kids are involved in cooking competitions, are good examples. Moreover, gastrodiploamacy promotes Khmer cuisine abroad through diplomats' overseas missions (Chheang 2022). Diplomats are trained in a cooking class to promote the national dishes. The government needs to encourage more of this kind of training for more Cambodian diplomats and Cambodian students studying overseas because they are the actors that can promote Cambodian soft power in foreign countries.

- **Expanding film and music industry to neighbouring countries**

The film and music industry is important to cultural diplomacy and soft power strategies. However, cultural diplomacy should not always be about Cambodians; it should also be more outward-looking by exposing Cambodia to the world. While preserving Cambodian culture, the country has to consider more innovative ideas to promote the influence or accessibility of its culture to others.

ASEAN is an important relational circle for Cambodia to strengthen itself. Therefore, Cambodia should use this relationship as an advantage to seek the opportunity to collaborate its film and music industry with the neighbouring countries and export the film and music production abroad. Many inspiring young talents have the potential to work internationally and boost the country's image. Therefore, Cambodia should invest more in young talents to plant more seeds of capable artists to bring Cambodia's entertainment industry to the international stage. However, to achieve this goal, Cambodian people must be less stereotypical and more open to cultural collaborations between Cambodian artists and foreign artists.

- **Cultural exchanges between youth in international programmes**

Cambodia is a country with most of the population being youth. Along with the prosperity in cultural resources, it can enhance soft power through cultural exchanges and youth programmes (Vann and Heng 2020). One of the most important diplomatic roles youth can perform is through cultural exchange programmes to promote the country's beautiful scenery and rich culture to the world (Ibid). International Youth exchange programmes are important in promoting Cambodia's soft power and diversifying its networks. When youths are allowed to study abroad, they are the country's cultural ambassadors to the world. Through this role, youths can showcase and exchange culture with others through national costume fashion shows, national food and arts exhibitions, Khmer language teaching, and presentations on Cambodia (Ibid). In addition, they can contribute to Cambodia's cultural enrichment by writing blogs and short videos and posting content on social media, allowing Cambodia's culture and national identities to become more widespread.

Economic Diplomacy

Economic power has become as crucial as military power in this century and can produce soft power behaviour (Nye 2011). The Cambodian government has prioritised economic diplomacy for Cambodia's foreign policy to further promote its national prestige and protect its core interests (Economic Diplomacy Strategy 2021, 6). It will help the Kingdom to become a higher middle-income country by 2030 and a high-income country by 2050.

The Economic Diplomacy Strategy 2021–2023, published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, identified several challenges in effectively implementing Cambodia’s economic diplomacy. Those challenges include the lack of an institutional framework to set policies and strategies, qualified human resources, financial resources, effective information-sharing platforms, marketing campaigns, and lobbying activities (Economic Diplomacy Strategy 2021, 9).

Cambodia must diversify its relational economic circles at regional and international levels through a hedging strategy. ASEAN member countries, China, Japan, and South Korea are important economic partners for Cambodia (Chheang 2021). However, Cambodia should reduce its economic dependence on China. It should advance economic engagements with the Southeast Asian region, Japan, and South Korea, which are also potential economic partners for the country.

To achieve the goal of economic diplomacy, the Cambodian government needs to invest more in human capital development by providing relevant capacity-building programmes for government officials across sectors. The government should also double its meritocratic recruitment efforts in state institutions and other sectors.

Besides, startups have significantly increased due to young people having innovative business ideas. By the end of 2021, there were already 90 startups registered with the Startup Cambodia National Program (Cambodia’s Startup Developing Rapidly 2022, 6). Therefore, the government should support small startups with good ideas but lacking the resources to implement the ideas.

In addition, improving infrastructure development is one way to promote economic diplomacy. Cost-effective infrastructure development, such as cheaper electricity and good road and transportation networks, creates an attractive business environment, elevating the country’s reputation and attracting more foreign direct investment. In addition, the government should improve the quality of domestic goods, which will increase local purchases and expand the international market for our local products.

Peace Diplomacy

Contributing to maintaining peace with the international community is one way that Cambodia can expand its soft power. Cambodia has supported the United Nations peacekeeping missions by providing troops for peace operations and demining activities (Chan 2019). Since 2006, Cambodia has sent 5,783 soldiers to peacekeeping missions in Sudan, Central Africa, Syria, Chad, and other countries (Ibid). The United Nations plays an important role in world development. Thus, Cambodia should continue its involvement in the international agenda of promoting peace, stability, and humanitarian assistance (Ibid).

As argued by Joseph Nye, a nation's foreign policy can become soft power when it is seen as legitimate in the eyes of others (Nye 2008). Therefore, Cambodia’s contribution and involvement in peace missions should be promoted internationally and clearly stated in the national defence strategy for people to acknowledge Cambodia’s commitment as a post-conflict society to promote international peace and stability (Chan 2019).

Furthermore, the government should engage with the media to shape the narratives of how the country is framed internationally to promote its positive image (Ibid). Cambodia’s efforts in

peacekeeping operations will strengthen its soft power by encouraging the world to view Cambodia as an active member of the international community, a peacemaker, and a good global citizen.

Digital Diplomacy

In the age of digitalisation and Industry 4.0, Cambodia needs to prioritise digital diplomacy to secure itself in the international arena (Vann and Heng 2020). As mentioned above, youths can leverage soft power through digitalisation and the internet. Therefore, youths must be digitally literate to effectively implement these strategies. The government should push for digital literacy in the education system and improve access to the internet to ensure that youths are keeping up with the rapid changes in the digital world. Young people must become digital citizens compatible with others in the region (Ibid).

Cambodia is transitioning to modern diplomacy. Thus, diplomats need to be more active and digitally literate. Digital diplomacy based on technology and innovation, such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, can effectively maximise soft power. Cambodian diplomats can use their social media platforms to gain popularity, build the country's positive image, and maintain good relationships with the international community. Because digital Diplomacy is now one of the pillars of Cambodia's modern diplomacy (Vann and Heng 2020), Cambodia needs to provide more training and relevant digital skills to diplomats and civil servants at all levels in all state institutions to upgrade their skills and familiarise them with using the internet and digital technology to promote Cambodia's soft power.

Conclusion

This study aims to provide operational strategies to enhance Cambodia's soft power. It has showcased Singapore as a model of a small state's soft power that allows the country to gain national prestige and maximise its interests in the international arena. The article has also provided suggestions for Cambodia to achieve its soft power through different forms of diplomacy that can be implemented based on the country's resources and circumstances.

Soft power is an important dimension of power and smart diplomacy that allows small states to gain international standing and survive and thrive in this self-reliance system. Singapore's model has offered various strategies for Cambodia to enhance its soft power. It includes diplomatic mediation with the international community, green and sustainable city development, and technocracy-and-meritocracy-based society. In addition, cultural, economic, peace, and digital diplomacy will empower Cambodia to defy the limits of its territorial, economic, and military inferiority by harnessing and promoting soft power as a form of smart diplomacy.

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