

AVI COMMENTARY

Cambodia | 25 June 2024

Fostering Cambodia-Brunei Relations for Shared Growth

*YEN Samnang**

Over the past three decades, Cambodia and Brunei Darussalam have nurtured a robust diplomatic relationship. Their friendship and cooperation have flourished across multiple sectors, including politics, culture, trade, and economics. This multifaceted partnership has been formalised through various agreements and Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs), solidifying the countries' commitment to mutual growth and collaboration. Despite efforts to strengthen economic ties, trade between Cambodia and Brunei remains modest. The bilateral trade volume reached approximately \$35 million in 2022 but declined to about \$22 million in 2023.

As such, Phnom Penh and Bandar Seri Begawan can explore ways and means to expand cooperation, leveraging considerable untapped potential to maximise the economic interests of the two peoples. Hence, this article will examine the possibility of bolstering cooperation in key sectors such as agriculture, halal industry, tourism and regional partnerships to boost mutual growth for the two countries.

Agriculture Cooperation

Global food security has become a pressing concern, exacerbated by the Russia-Ukraine conflict, rising regional tensions, and climate change. In response, Cambodia and Brunei could explore agricultural cooperation to boost mutual economic growth and development.

Brunei, facing constraints in its agricultural manpower, has actively pursued regional partnerships in rice cultivation, with a focus on investments from government-linked entities to ensure food security for the country. In this sense, Cambodia emerges as the potential partner for this sectoral cooperation, aligning with the government's ambition to transform Cambodia into one of the world's top ten agricultural-producing countries. Cambodia is the hub of a vibrant young workforce with 65 per cent of its population aged between 15 and 64 years, and the agricultural sector is one of the national backbones of its economy. Last year, the agricultural sector accounted for approximately 22 per cent of Cambodia's gross domestic product (GDP).

Cambodia and Brunei can also cooperate on sustainable agriculture initiatives, including shared research projects, knowledge exchange, and eco-friendly farming techniques. This partnership aims to enhance crop yields and strengthen both nations' ability to withstand climate-related challenges. This agricultural partnership is likely to attract investment, creating jobs and expanding trade between the two countries. Enhancing food production capabilities, in this regard, supports both nations' sustainable development goals while offering economic benefits to local people.

* **Yen Samnang** is a research fellow at the Asian Vision Institute's Mekong Centre for Strategic Studies.

Halal Industry Cooperation

There is room for Cambodia and Brunei to jointly develop the halal industry and trade. The two nations can collaborate on the certification and standardisation of halal products, guaranteeing that they comply with the requirements of Muslim consumers worldwide.

Brunei is poised to become a global halal hub thanks to the country's stringent standards of halal food and strict regulations like the Public Health Act and Wholesome Meat Order 2011. In this regard, Brunei can provide a halal brand to the global market to nurture the government's concerted efforts, aiming at stimulating economic diversification for the attainment of its Wawasan 2035— Brunei's national vision aims to become a country with a well-educated, highly skilled workforce, high living standards, and a vibrant, sustainable economy by 2035.

Cambodia also has a keen interest in the collaboration of the halal industry with other countries to boost the export of Cambodian halal products in the international market. It is worth noting that as a society upholding religious harmony, Cambodia is also home to a Muslim population of around 800,000 people. Between 2017 and 2022, there were 123 companies obtaining certificates of compliance with halal standards for 823 products.

As a result, the collaboration in developing the halal industry will open a window for both sides to boost their economic diversification as well as enhance the market access for their halal product export.

Tourism Cooperation

Having a connecting flight between both countries will surely facilitate a seamless connection for tourists to travel to their destinations; thus, becoming a key driver to boost tourism between the two countries.

Despite Cambodia having a Muslim population of around 5 per cent, it appears that Cambodian Muslims have less contact with Bruneians in comparison to the interactions between Malaysians and Indonesians who are also Muslims. In this sense, during the discussion between Cambodian tourism minister Sok Soken and Bruneian ambassador to Cambodia Pengiran Kasmirhan Pengiran Tahir early this year, they highly considered the possibility of encouraging tourism cooperation to promote people-to-people ties and cultural exchange between the two nations. This will not only enable the two countries to foster their socio-economic progress but also promote greater understanding and friendship between the peoples of both countries.

Given the current circumstances, the two nations should explore the possibility of establishing a connecting flight service. This initiative could serve as an interim measure to boost tourist traffic between the countries, particularly if direct routes are not yet feasible. Such a move would likely facilitate smoother travel for visitors, potentially catalysing growth in both countries' tourism sectors.

Regional Cooperation

As small states, Cambodia and Brunei share a “common perception” of today's world challenges. With that said, it is necessary for Phnom Penh and Bandar Seri Begawan along with other member states to work together within the framework of ASEAN on issues pertinent to security, counterterrorism, disaster management, and environmental sustainability. This cooperation will help strengthen regional peace and stability.

Additionally, these concerted efforts will enhance the region's ability to address emerging threats, improve the emergency response capabilities, protect diverse ecosystems and address climate change for the region at large.

Furthermore, both governments should leverage ASEAN to advance their longstanding partnership for regional development, greater prosperity and security. Through this regional framework, they can bilaterally build upon their achievements and prioritise the immense importance of peaceful coexistence and well-being of their peoples.

Conclusion

As the relations between the two countries hold great promise for mutual benefits, Phnom Penh and Bandar Seri Begawan should seize the opportunity to deepen their partnership in various sectors to fully capitalise on the unlocked potential. Undoubtedly, this will map out a course toward shared prosperity and peace not only for the respective countries but also for the region.

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