



ROYAL UNIVERSITY OF PHNOM PENH



CAMBODIAN YOUTH'S PERSPECTIVES ON INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

2024



IISPP
INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL
STUDIES AND PUBLIC POLICY

CENTER FOR SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

Contents

Foreword

Note on Contributors

Theme I: Bilateral and International Relations

ASEAN and the US-China Rivalry: Being Pressured to Take a Side or a Self-Imposed Illusion? Chea Peter	1
Explaining Vietnam's Multi-Pronged Approach towards the South China Sea Dispute Loeng Chetha	5
Assessing China-Philippines Relations Amidst the South China Sea Dispute Chhoeun Yutathavy	10
The Philippines-India Defense Collaboration in Countering China's Assertiveness Khim Sotheara	15
Is Australia Projecting its Baby BRI to Southeast Asia? Pheng Thean	19
Iran's Unprecedented Attack on Israel: A Dangerous Escalation and A Wake-Up Call Chum Sothealeap	23
Why have ASEAN and EU not reached a common position on the Gaza conflict? Eoeng Kanhara	27

Why Does the Funan Techo Canal Project Draw Much Attention from International Media? Song Sokvimean	32
Explaining Stakeholders' Concerns about the Funan Techo Canal Project Larch ChanMinea	37
The Funan Techo Canal Project: Explaining the Impacts Mogn Sereysovathana	41
The Funan Techo Canal Project: A Boon for Cambodia, a Worry for Vietnam? Thai Sreyvin	45
Cambodian-Thai People-to-People Relations: The Fight toward Ownership of Cultural Heritage Leng Molina	48
Cambodian Songkran's UNESCO Bid By 2025 and Its Effect on Cambodia-Thailand Relations Seat Munysontary	53
Assessing Cambodia-Thailand Relations Under New Leadership Sok Hour	56
The Fourth Leadership Transition in Singapore: What to Expect Meng Lyhor	59
Singapore's Fourth Prime Minister: Navigating Challenges Under Lawrence Wong's Leadership Soeung Phearanon	63
Singapore's New Leadership: Unpacking Lawrence Wong's Top 5 Priorities Sorn Solita	67

How does the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar affect Bangladesh? 71
Thorng Pisethvisal

How the Karen's Capture of Myawaddy affects Myanmar's Junta 75
Bon Sonavin

Cambodia and Laos Bilateral Relations on the Rise 78
Phan Phoansatya

Assessing Japan's Official Development Assistance Policy in Cambodia 83
Ann Sreynich

Theme II: Societal Issues and Emerging Trends

Chbab Srey: Verses to Promote Women's Self-Cultivation 87
Sovann Vimean

The Education Crisis in Afghanistan: A Barrier to Women's Empowerment 92
Sreng Kimnai

How Buddhism Shapes Cambodia's Politics 96
Morn Liza

Climate Change in Cambodia: Challenges, Impacts and Strategic Responses 99
Steven Kuoch

Plastic Waste Management in Cambodia: Managing Difficulty 102
Chay Bunhout

Marine Microplastics in Malaysia: Challenges and the Ways Forwards 106
Van Vannrithy

Traffic Accidents on the Rise in Cambodia: Addressing Chronic Challenges 110
Ly Rachana

Remote Working Policy in Singapore: Benefits and Potential Drawbacks 114
Sum Pichkanika

Theme III: Economic Analysis

**Revitalizing Cambodia's Economy:
Addressing the Skills Gap in the Workforce** 117
Heng Lypponnareay

Cambodia: Graduating from the Least Developed Country (LDC) 121
Seam Somontha

**The Implications of QR Code Standardization
on Japan-ASEAN Economic Relations** 124
Mey Monita

Theme IV: Governance

Dam building in the Mekong: A Double-edged Sword 128
Nguon Socheata

Assessing the Social Media's Impacts on SMEs in Cambodia 132
Bou Nisa

Reasons to Visit Cambodia Tourism: More than What You Expect 137
Chhorn Kakada

Cambodia: On Becoming a Cashless Society 140
Pech Posocheata

The Healthcare System in Cambodia: Challenges and the Ways Forward 145
Mom Jawin

**Cambodia at a Crossroads: Human Rights, Democracy,
and Economic Development** 149
Sokchanvicheka Soeun

Foreword

In a world characterized by rapid change and interdependence, the voices of young scholars are essential for fostering understanding and dialogue. This collection of commentaries by the CSEAS Young Scholars offers a timely and critical examination of issues that shape Southeast Asia and its connections to the broader global landscape.

The contributors bring diverse perspectives, reflecting their rich academic backgrounds and personal experiences. Each commentary engages with pressing topics—socio-political dynamics, cultural exchanges, or environmental challenges—inviting readers to explore the regional narratives' complexities. Their insights not only illuminate the unique realities of Southeast Asian countries but also connect these realities to wider global trends, enriching our comprehension of the interconnected world we inhabit.

These commentaries serve as a platform for emerging scholars to articulate their views and contribute to ongoing discussions. They challenge conventional wisdom, provoke thought, and encourage us to rethink existing paradigms. Through their work, the young scholars highlight the importance of inclusive dialogue in addressing the multifaceted challenges facing both Southeast Asia and the international community.

As you delve into this volume, I encourage you to embrace the diverse perspectives presented. Each commentary is not just an academic exercise but a call to engage with the issues that matter most in our interconnected world. The insights shared herein can inspire further research, discussion, and action.

In conclusion, this collection stands as a testament to the vibrant intellectual community that CSEAS fostered and its young scholars' promising contributions. May their voices resonate widely and inspire a deeper appreciation of the nuances that define Southeast Asia and beyond.

Dr. Sovinda Po

Designated Director, Center for Southeast Asian Studies
Institute for International Studies and Public Policy
Royal University of Phnom Penh

The Contributors

Editors

Dr. Po Sovinda is the Designated Director of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS) of the Institute for International Studies and Public Policy (IISPP), Royal University of Phnom Penh.

Mr. Sok Sothearak is a Research Fellow at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies and a Lecturer at the Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh.

Mr. Long Sovitou is a Junior Researcher at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies and a Lecturer at the Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh.

Ms. Meung Chansomanita is a Junior Researcher at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies and a Lecturer at the Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh.

Ms. Cheng Ousa is a Junior Researcher at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies and a Lecturer at the Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh.

Ms. Chhun Phalanady is a Junior Researcher at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies and a Lecturer at the Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh.

Mr. Keo Sokkosol is a Junior Researcher at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies and a Lecturer at the Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh.

Editorial Board Advisors

Dr. Neak Chandarith is the Designated Director of the Institute for International Studies and Public Policy (IISPP), Royal University of Phnom Penh.

Dr. Yun Kea is the Deputy Director in charge of Research and Development of the Institute for International Studies and Public Policy (IISPP).

Dr. Lak Chansok is a Senior Lecturer of International Relations and Master's Program Coordinator at the Institute for International Studies and Public Policy (IISPP).

Layout Designer

Long Sovitou

Disclaimer

The designated contributions do not necessarily reflect the opinions and views of the editorial team and the Center for Southeast Asian Studies or the Institute for International Studies and Public Policy.

Hence, assumptions made in the articles are not reflective of any other entity other than the author(s) themselves—following, they may be opinionated and subject to revision as well.

Copyrights © 2024

Center for Southeast Asian Studies of Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh

Theme I

Bilateral and International Relations

ASEAN and the US-China Rivalry: Being Pressured to Take a Side or a Self-Imposed Illusion?

Chea Peter

Southeast Asia has been the frontier for great power competition between a rising China and a reigning US. With humble beginnings, China has managed to transform itself into a great power that “understands” fellow developing countries’ struggles and aspirations, especially when it comes to its Asian neighbors. China is committed to peaceful coexistence, mutual respect, inclusivity, unity, and mutual benefits in its foreign policy.¹ In addition to various regional cooperation on security, ASEAN Member States (AMS) have been the recipients of Beijing’s development aid packages, infrastructure projects, and trade agreements boosting economic development and social welfare.

On the other hand, after a long hiatus, the US reorientated its focus back to Southeast Asia with Obama’s Pivot to Asia Policy.² Challenging China’s bid for the South China Sea (SCS), the US unveiled the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Policy, which essentially declared—albeit implicitly—that China’s rise and influence cannot be left unchecked.³ The Build Back Better World Policy is the US’s answer to China’s Belt and Road Initiative. Furthermore, in 2022, the US became ASEAN’s Comprehensive Strategic Partner immediately after China, having done so a year prior.⁴ Both have set out goals to create new initiatives to achieve higher levels of cooperation with ASEAN to entice AMS to go on their side or at least nullify the other’s efforts. Simply put, there is pressure to take either the US or Chinese side.

¹ Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Kingdom of Cambodia, “Outlook on China’s Foreign Policy on Its Neighborhood in the New Era,” October 24, 2023, http://kh.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zg/jx_1/202310/t20231024_11167268.htm.

² Kenneth G. Lieberthal, “The American Pivot to Asia,” *Brookings*, December 21, 2011, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-american-pivot-to-asia/>.

³ The White House, “FACT SHEET: Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States,” February 11, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/02/11/fact-sheet-indo-pacific-strategy-of-the-united-states/>.

⁴ State Council of the People’s Republic of China, “China, ASEAN Form Comprehensive Strategic Partnership as Xi Chairs Summit,” November 22, 2021, https://english.www.gov.cn/news/topnews/202111/22/content_WS619b8df5c6d0df57f98e54c6.html.; The White House, “FACT SHEET: President Biden and ASEAN Leaders Launch the U.S.-ASEAN Comprehensive Strategic Partnership,” November 12, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/11/12/fact-sheet-president-biden-and-asean-leaders-launch-the-u-s-asean-comprehensive-strategic-partnership/>.

That said, there are nuances to consider for this situation. First, ASEAN as an organization is not pressured directly. It is more so done at the individual member state level since they engage bilaterally with China and the US. Pressure comes from increased dependency on what those powers offer since there is a precedent to reciprocate their “generosity” in some way that demonstrates one’s good faith; otherwise, AMS may risk having their support discontinued. Some countries have allegedly succumbed to it to a certain extent. Cambodia and Laos, for instance, have been perceived by the international community as supposedly “close” to China.⁵ In exchange for foreign direct investments, assistance aids, and infrastructure development loans, Laos, for example, supported China’s stance against the “unilaterally initiated” arbitration case by the Philippines.⁶

On another note, the Philippines’ relations with the US present an alternative yet interesting case. Rather than taking sides due to being pressured through cooperation, the Philippines did so mostly in response to China’s actions and behavior. Apart from the close historical ties with the US, Manila has been compelled to seek deeper cooperation with Washington as a balancing strategy against China’s ever-increasing assertiveness in the SCS.⁷ ⁸ Nonetheless, it is important to note that each AMS receives aid and cooperation from both great powers, among many others. Still, the key point is to consider the degree to which it is skewed towards one or the other and whether or not there is an attempt to hedge back and forth to address the situation. The case of CLM countries illustrates that they are skewed to China in many aspects. In contrast, the case of the Philippines demonstrates that it is presumably skewed to the US politically and militarily, which is adequate in shifting the country’s overall position and engagements towards the US.

⁵ Pang, “‘Same-Same but Different’: Laos and Cambodia’s Political Embrace of China,” in *ISEAS Perspective 2017* (ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, 2017), https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/ISEAS_Perspective_2017_66.pdf.

⁶ State Council of the People’s Republic of China, “Lao PM Voices Support for China’s Stance on South China Sea Arbitration,” July 15, 2016, https://english.www.gov.cn/premier/photos/2016/07/15/content_281475394069446.htm.

⁷ Bernd Debusmann Jr, “Biden vows to defend Philippines in the South China Sea,” *BBC*, April 12, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-68794803#:~:text=President%20Joe%20Biden%20has%20vowed,vessels%20in%20the%20disputed%20waterway>.

⁸ The White House, “Fact Sheet: Celebrating the Strength of the U.S.-Philippines Alliance,” April 11, 2024, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/04/11/fact-sheet-celebrating-the-strength-of-the-u-s-philippines-alliance/>.

As some countries are “compromised”, their stances and interests will affect how ASEAN functions. In other words, the result is a divergence of different views and positions in the organization, and there does not seem to be any collective or united front on certain issues involving the US and China. To illustrate, in 2012, ASEAN failed to issue a joint communiqué for the first time in its history as there were disagreements and deadlocks among member states on how to address the rising tensions in the SCS.⁹ Meanwhile in 2016, Cambodia supposedly succeeded in blocking attempts to mention the 2016 arbitration case against China in another joint communiqué.¹⁰ Additionally, because the ASEAN way of decision-making is based on consultation and consensus, the outcomes of meetings on pressing issues tend to be slow progress or nothing is realized at all. The two cases mentioned benefitted China’s interests as they undermined any efforts to internationalize the SCS dispute and prevented attempts to delegitimize China’s claims.

The second nuance is that other AMS still want to hedge between the US and China. Therefore, ASEAN’s way of working presents another usage to this matter. Consultations and consensus help create a roadblock that prevents either the US or China from completely influencing the organization just by pressuring a few countries. Although they succeed in having some level of influence, it is somewhat limited, and they would need to successfully woo all ten AMS, which would be a more challenging ordeal. Hence, at the organizational level, ASEAN faces less pressure when most of it is directed at the state level, and one can expect ASEAN to be quite consistent and not do a 180-degree turn and skew toward any extreme spectrum. There is still. However, a lingering reminder of the need for ASEAN to continue its hedging policy, for the power competition will continue for the foreseeable future, and the consequences of changing the status quo may prove costly.

ASEAN being pressured from the grassroots means that it is hindered in its ability to exercise its functions and capabilities effectively. At the same time, it remains to be seen how ASEAN will go forward as Indonesia and Singapore, two of the leading countries in the region, are undergoing leadership transitions. Although current circumstances do not elicit an inevitable

⁹ Ernest Z. Bower, “China Reveals Its Hand on ASEAN in Phnom Penh,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, July 12, 2012, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/china-reveals-its-hand-asean-phnom-penh>.

¹⁰ Ankit Panda, “ASEAN Foreign Ministers Issue, Then Retract Communique Referencing South China Sea,” *The Diplomat*, June 15, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/06/asean-foreign-ministers-issue-then-retract-communicue-referencing-south-china-sea/>.

doom or any other absolutely worrying concerns, the situation may exacerbate in various aspects unless strategic maneuvers are undertaken to undo the pressure.

Chea Peter is a Young Research Fellow and research intern for the Center for Southeast Asian Studies. He is also a junior student at the Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh. The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS).

Explaining Vietnam's Multi-Pronged Approach towards the South China Sea Dispute

Loeng Chetha

The South China Sea (SCS) dispute has become more heated in recent years due to China's assertive maritime claims, encapsulated by revealing a new map, the Ten-Dash Line.¹ This claim overlaps with the territorial sovereignty of Vietnam and other neighboring countries. China's growing military presence in the region, including its occupation of the Paracel Islands and militarization of the Spratly Islands, raises significant concerns about potential conflict and threatens Vietnam's national security.² Vietnam has adopted a multi-pronged approach to manage the SCS dispute and secure its interests.³ This approach prioritizes a long-term solution to the dispute through peaceful means following the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).⁴ Vietnam also seeks support from other parties to manage the dispute through bilateral and multilateral cooperation while pursuing its engagements to ensure a stable relationship with China.⁵

¹Hiroshi Mori and Hiroshi Mori, "China's New 'Ten-Dash Line' Map Infuriates Asian Neighbors | JAPAN Forward," JAPAN Forward, September 6, 2023, <https://japan-forward.com/chinas-new-ten-dash-line-map-infuriates-asian-neighbors/>.

²Grossman Derek, "Military Build-Up in the South China Sea," *RAND Corporation*, January 22, 2020, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/external_publications/EP60000/EP68058/RAND_EP68058.pdf.

³"Vietnam Tacks Between Cooperation and Struggle in the South China Sea | Crisis Group," December 7, 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/north-east-asia/china/318-vietnam-tacks-between-cooperation-and-struggle-south-china-sea>.

⁴"Việt Nam Reaffirms Willingness to Peacefully Settle South China Sea Disputes: Foreign Ministry," *Vietnam News*, August 6, 2023, <https://vietnamnews.vn/politics-laws/1516751/viet-nam-reaffirms-willingness-to-peacefully-settle-south-china-sea-disputes-foreign-ministry.html>.

⁵"Vietnam: South China Sea," Friedrich Naumann Foundation, n.d., <https://www.freiheit.org/germany/vietnams-east-sea-strategy-balancing-sovereignty-and-stability>.



The illustration is from <https://japan-forward.com/chinas-new-ten-dash-line-map-infuriates-asian-neighbors/>

This commentary article explains why Vietnam employs a multi-pronged approach in navigating the South China Sea dispute: adherence to international law (UNCLOS), seeking support in multilateral cooperation, and continued engagement with China. It will argue that Vietnam uses these elements to gain legitimacy and support within the international rule-based order, maintain a stable relationship with China to reduce tension, and maintain regional stability.

As a smaller state than China, Vietnam needs to solidify its position in the international community by gaining legitimacy and support to guarantee its national security in the SCS dispute. Embracing multilateralism and international law remains essential in this rule-based order because it provides legitimacy, and a strong international legal and diplomatic position can pressure China to respect international law and norms. The UNCLOS provides clear rules and procedures for resolving maritime disputes. So, Vietnam aims to maintain that it has sufficient historical evidence and legal foundation in line with UNCLOS to prove the legitimacy of its sovereignty over the Paracels and the Spratlys as well as its rights to its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and continental shelf in the Sea.⁶ By following this

⁶Gleice Miranda and Valentina Maljak, "The Role of United Nations Convention on the Laws of the Sea in the South China Sea Disputes," E-International Relations, June 23, 2022, <https://www.e-ir.info/2022/06/23/the-role-of-united-nations-convention-on-the-laws-of-the-sea-in-the-south-china-sea-disputes/>.

framework, Vietnam strengthens its legal case in any international arbitration process on the SCS dispute.

By establishing legitimacy, Vietnam can convince the international community to support it, potentially leading to strategic partnerships and increased regional cooperation to counter China's claims. Vietnam leaned toward the internationalization of the issue, seeking collaboration and support from third parties to balance power against China. Vietnam has just elevated its relationship with the US and Australia to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.⁷ These elevations aim to enhance various areas of cooperation, including maritime security.⁸ Moreover, Vietnam and the Philippines also signed a naval cooperation agreement to help better manage conflicts amid the threat of China's expansionism in the South China Sea⁹. However, Vietnam still upholds its four Nos principle to avoid actions that could significantly provoke China and potentially ruin its bilateral relationship.¹⁰ This includes granting the US or other military access to its facilities.

Despite seeking external support, regional organizations such as ASEAN remain a crucial platform for Vietnam in promoting shared principles and managing the SCS dispute. Through ASEAN, Vietnam could add more weight to its voice and further solidify its legitimacy to justify its claim on the disputed water.¹¹ ASEAN statements consistently emphasize peaceful resolution, respect for international law (UNCLOS), and maintaining regional stability¹². These

⁷ Vietnam Briefing, "Australia, Vietnam Upgrade to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership," Vietnam Briefing News, April 4, 2024, <https://www.vietnam-briefing.com/news/australia-upgrades-relationship-with-vietnam-to-a-comprehensive-strategic-partnership.html/>.

⁸U.S. Mission Vietnam, "Joint Leaders' Statement: Elevating U.S. - Vietnam Relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership - U.S. Embassy & Consulate in Vietnam," U.S. Embassy & Consulate in Vietnam, December 22, 2023, <https://vn.usembassy.gov/joint-leaders-statement-elevating-united-states-vietnam-relations-to-a-comprehensive-strategic-partnership/>.

⁹Ramon Royandoyan and Lien Hoang, "Vietnam and Philippines Sign Deal on South China Sea Security," *Nikkei Asia*, January 30, 2024, https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/South-China-Sea/Vietnam-and-Philippines-sign-deal-on-South-China-Sea-security?utm_source=telegram&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=IC_telegram_channel&utm_content=telegram_channel_posts

¹⁰Viet Tuan, "Vietnam Continues 'four Nos' Defense Policy," *VnExpress International – Latest News, Business, Travel and Analysis From Vietnam*, August 3, 2023, <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/vietnam-continues-four-nos-defense-policy-4637076.html>.

¹¹Vu Hoang, "Vietnam Cheers G7 for Backing ASEAN on South China Sea Dispute," *VnExpress International – Latest News, Business, Travel and Analysis From Vietnam*, June 11, 2018, <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/vietnam-cheers-g7-for-backing-asean-on-south-china-sea-dispute-3761533.html>.

¹²"ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Statement on Maintaining and Promoting Stability in the Maritime Sphere in Southeast Asia," ASEAN, December 30, 2023, accessed May 27, 2024, <https://asean.org/wp->

principles directly challenge China's assertive actions. This collective voice, more or less, remains to deter China's expansionist act. While not enough to completely overturn its expansion, it makes it harder for China to justify its action. Therefore, embracing multilateralism and international law becomes a significant diplomatic approach for Vietnam to deter China by providing legitimacy to justify its stance and increasing support from other countries to play the international pressure to deter China diplomatically.

Vietnam, on the other hand, continues to pursue its engagement with China to maintain the stability of its bilateral relations. Vietnam intends to keep the communication channel open to address its security concerns against China. This diplomatic channel allows both sides to share information to clear security concerns. At Xi Jinping's visit last year, the joint statement of both sides stressed the need to manage better and continue the discussion of resolving maritime disputes through peaceful mechanisms.¹³ Another dialogue occurred when one Vietnamese legislator visited China recently.¹⁴ The visit provided an opportunity for dialogue on the SCS issue and stabilized relations between the two countries after China raised its concern about the growing influence of the US in Vietnam. This form of discussion and the joint statement are crucial because Vietnam acknowledges that China's military might be significantly more robust. Hence, maintaining a peaceful and stable relationship with China significantly keeps the discussion open to reduce the risk of potentially disastrous military conflict in the South China Sea, a scenario Vietnam strives to avoid.

In conclusion, Vietnam's multi-pronged approach in the South China Sea dispute can strengthen its bargaining power vis-à-vis China through power balancing and diplomatic deterrents while simultaneously preventing the risk of military conflict and political tension with China. However, the effectiveness of this approach will hinge on its ability to adapt to future challenges, especially the US-China rivalry. The US influence is needed to deter China from SCS issues. Yet, it is also essential to consider that a heightened US presence in the region could lead Vietnam to the waterfall of military confrontation with its neighbor, China. Therefore, Vietnam needs to calibrate relations with both superpowers carefully. While the US

[content/uploads/2023/12/Final-Draft-ASEAN-FMs-Statement-on-Maintaining-and-Promoting-Stability-in-the-Maritime-Sphere-in-SEA.pdf](#).

¹³ "China, Vietnam Agree to Seek Lasting Resolution of Maritime Disputes," Xinhua, December 13, 2023, accessed May 27, 2024, <https://english.news.cn/20231213/ac03562e733b4269b89802f345ca0bc8/c.html>.

¹⁴ Lien Hoang, "Top Vietnamese Lawmaker in China After President's Surprise Ouster," *Nikkei Asia*, April 8, 2024, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Top-Vietnamese-lawmaker-in-China-after-president-s-surprise-ouster>.

cooperation offers strategic benefits, maintaining stable ties with China remains paramount for its national security. Diversifying its partnerships through multilateralism could provide Vietnam with greater leverage in the great power competition and the SCS dispute.

Loeng Chetha is a Young Researcher Fellow at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS), and a Research Associate at the Cambodian Center for Regional Studies (CCRS). He is also a Junior Student majoring in International Relations at the Institute for International Studies and Public Policy (IISPP). The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS).

Assessing China-Philippines Relations Amidst the South China Sea Dispute

CHHOEUN Yutathavy

South China Sea Dispute is one of Southeast Asia's most tensional geo-political issues between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the five other ASEAN Member States, including the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia, and Vietnam, in claiming ownership rights over overlapping maritime borders. Among all disputed parties, the Philippines is the most competitive claimant state with China over the strategic interest and economic benefits due to its strong diplomatic ties with the U.S. and historical conflicts with China for centuries. This commentary examines the currents that run through China-Philippines relations as they both navigate the challenges posed by their territorial dispute and seek to steer a course toward calmer waters.

China and the Philippines have had strong diplomatic relations since 9 December 1975. The two countries' relations have been mostly friendly, as the Office of the Press Secretary described. The first few years of this relationship resulted in the signing of multiple bilateral treaties and conventions, including a bilateral investment treaty in 1992 and a double taxation treaty in 1999.¹

Despite decades of strong diplomatic relations, these two countries still have conflict in claiming their own rights in SCS, which has made their relations unstable and challenging. In 2013, when President Xi Jinping launched the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road as the two main components of its strategy, it raised a big concern for regional security and led to geopolitical tensions between these two countries as the Philippines see the potential of China in strengthening its territorial claims in SCS.²

¹ Jonina A. Fernando, "China's Belt and Road Initiative in the Philippines," December 16, 2020. <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/publications/china%E2%80%99s-belt-and-road-initiative-in-the-philippines>

² Darlene V. Estrada, "The Belt and Road Initiative and Philippine Participation in the Maritime Silk Road," April 2017. [The Belt and Road Initiative and Philippine Participation in the Maritime Silk Road | FOREIGN SERVICE INSTITUTE \(fsi.gov.ph\)](https://www.fsi.gov.ph/publications/the-belt-and-road-initiative-and-philippine-participation-in-the-maritime-silk-road)

The latest actions adopted by China in the SCS make the already hardening relationship between China and the Philippines much worse. Because of satellite images, we know that China has done most of its reclamation work on non-coastal places. It has also made the islands occupied by the Chinese military and constructed military bases and airstrips, which would lead to more aggressive tactics and increase the risk of military confrontation in the future.³ Naturally, these provocative actions amplified the anxiety and intense feelings of the Philippines, as the latter fears regarding its territorial integrity and maritime sovereignty will be left ignored, and yet China disregarded the result of The Permanent Court of Arbitration in 2016.⁴ The decision in favor of the Philippines also complicates the problem of finding a reasonably acceptable solution by both states.⁵ This would have an increased impact on the Philippines, including diplomatic friction, strained economic ties, and the need to seek support elsewhere to counter China's influence.

Nowadays, it has become common knowledge that China's South China Sea strategy has not been unrecognized by the international community and the United States. The US, which is a critical partner of the Philippines, has expressed support for Manila and has carried out freedom of navigation operations over the region to contest China's territorial claims. The possibility of the US going against its defense treaty with the Philippines would also be a possible course of action, which could lead to America's involvement in any conflict between China and the Philippines over sea territories.⁶

In 2016, the U.S. Department of State consistently released statements supporting the Philippines's position, which typically criticized China's actions and reaffirmed the U.S.

³ Oriana Skylar Mastro, "Military Confrontation in the South China Sea," May 21, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/report/military-confrontation-south-china-sea>.

⁴ Matikas Santos, July 12, 2016, <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/140358/philippines-arbitration-decision-maritime-dispute-south-china-sea-arbitral-tribunal-unclos-itlos>.

⁵ Center for Preventive Action, "Territorial Disputes in the South China Sea," Global Conflict Tracker (Council on Foreign Relations, April 30, 2024), <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/territorial-disputes-south-china-sea>.

⁶ Mathew Lee, "US and Philippines Step up Strategic Partnership as China Threats Loom in South China Sea," AP News, April 12, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/united-states-philippines-china-b8110edc6e2555190eeac4e07485d3f0>.

statement to the 2016 arbitral ruling favoring the Philippines in SCS. The U.S. also conducts joint military exercises with the Philippines, signed a mutual defense treaty that applies to the SCS, including the Philippines' Coast Guard vessels, and conducts the Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) by sending military ships and aircraft through disputed areas in the SCS.⁷

However, interestingly, the Philippines' foreign policy seems to be balanced between two global players in this geopolitical set-up, thus deciding upon the country's welfare and security issues, which aims to achieve two key goals: Gaining economic rewards from China while simultaneously maintaining a security relationship with the US. Given China's persistent territorial claims in the South China Sea, the Philippines sees China's market and investment prospects as lucrative and the US alliance as a fundamental security commitment. Thus, by enhancing these relations, the Philippines is keen to position its economic gains and national security optimally. However, the 'balancing' of these two faces has its dangers too. The Philippines might offend one superpower by becoming too friendly with the other, and their leverage with either is diminished if they do not blend with the former entirely. Altogether, the Philippines' relatively moderate approach is the correct reaction to the multifaceted situation. Nevertheless, the delicate balance between the two powers is more subtle since both friends and partners, China and the USA, could become adversaries at once.

Amid the conflicting geopolitical zones and strategic calculations, some sprouts of the peaceful dialogues between Beijing and Manila could appear where both countries have stated that they intend to deepen these dialogues to reach an agreement about those areas in which they share interests, such as the promotion of trade and investment. President Duterte's practical stance toward China suggests the understanding of both sides' respective situations opposite each other as well as remaining to defend the Philippines. During his leadership, the Duterte administration actively sought rapprochement with China, choosing negotiations over conflict over the sovereignty of territories. However, during Marcos' leadership of the Philippines, he aimed to balance security relations with its historical ally, the United States, and economic

⁷ Ned Price, "U.S. Support for the Philippines in the South China Sea - United States Department of State," United States Department of State, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-support-for-the-philippines-in-the-south-china-sea-3/>.

relations with the rising Asian power, China. Marcos has fashioned a foreign policy that “neither kowtows to the West nor begins a useless polite courting of Beijing and Moscow that does not advance the sovereign national interests of the Philippines.” This has formed what can be considered “subaltern realism,” where states that are small and relatively weaker arrange to maintain bipolar, bilateral, and multifaceted relations with the major powers that conflict with each other for the sake of their national progression. Due to the Philippines' strategic location, the United States and China have shown keen interest in strengthening their relationship with the Philippines.⁸ The pursuit of conformity, however, presumes an agreement on the South China Sea problem, which is highly contentious and goes to the heart of independence, safety, and integrity.

In conclusion, China and the Philippines' relationship dynamics due to the dispute over the South China Sea can be interpreted in the light of the intricacies, perplexities, and imperfections inherent in modern geopolitics. Indeed, the standoff goes beyond a mere encounter between the two sides as it is also a display of diverging interests and politics in the Asia-Pacific. There is a great temptation for neither party to find a diplomatic resolution, which may result in instability in the region and violation of the norms existing in the international community.

However, amid these difficulties, there are still chances for dialogue, cooperation, and trust-building steps. They can be the foundation stones for a troubles-free settlement and the region's security strengthening if they are successful. Whether the future of China-Philippines relations will be triumphant or marred depends on a precarious equilibrium of pragmatism, diplomacy, and mutual interest in enforcing the rule of law and treating each other with dignity. The way ahead for the two nations to make the most of the complex Asian-Pacific relationship can only be through mutual engagement and constructive dialogues. Such a journey would, undoubtedly, provide a more promising future for the region in terms of prosperity and peace.

⁸ Tomotaka Shoji, “The Philippines’ Policy on the South China Sea under the Marcos Administration: Recalibrating Its Distance from the United States and China | List of Articles | International Information Network Analysis | SPF,” International Information Network Analysis | SPF, 2022, https://www.spf.org/iina/en/articles/shoji_16.html.

Chhoeun Yutathavy is a Young Researcher Fellow at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS), and a Member of IISPP International Relations Club (IIRC). She is also a Sophomore student majoring in International Relations at the Institute for International Studies and Public Policy (IISPP) of the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP). The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS).

The Philippines-India Defense Collaboration in Countering China's Assertiveness

Khim Sotheara

The South China Sea is a vital Southeast Asian waterway that borders several countries, including Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia. Rich in natural resources and strategically important for global trade, the South China Sea has become a flashpoint for territorial disputes.¹ The tension in the South China Sea has become more heated, with China's expansive territorial claims clashing with those of Southeast Asian nations, particularly the Philippines. Recent incidents, like collisions between the Philippine and Chinese vessels in early March this year, highlight the urgency of the Philippines' strengthening of its strategic position.² In this context, India's rising power and expanding naval presence in the Indo-Pacific present an opportunity for closer collaboration. This commentary aims to discuss how closer collaboration between the Philippines and India could counterbalance China's assertive actions in the South China Sea region.

In 2023, a series of incidents underscored China's assertive behavior in the South China Sea, mainly directed at the Philippines. Chinese vessels targeted Philippine Coast Guard ships with military-grade lasers and engaged in 'swarming' tactics by deploying numerous Coast Guard, navy, and militia vessels. They obstructed access to vital fishing grounds like Scarborough Shoal.³ Moreover, China's militarization of disputed islands, equipped with advanced weaponry and fighter jets, poses a significant threat to regional stability.⁴ Despite international rulings against its claims, China disregards decisions like the 2016 Hague arbitration case,

¹ SCMP Reporter. "Explained: South China Sea Dispute." South China Morning Post. South China Morning Post. February 16, 2019. <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/article/2186449/explained-south-china-sea-dispute>.

² Gomez, Jim. "Philippine and Chinese Vessels Collide in Disputed South China Sea and 4 Filipino Crew Are Injured." AP News. March 6, 2024. <https://apnews.com/article/philippines-china-south-china-sea-collision-e69d9506e85d1d23685db4f220b50d71>.

³ Cabato, Regine. 2023. "Rising Philippines-China Tensions in South China Sea: 5 Moments from 2023." Washington Post, December 11, 2023. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/12/11/philippines-china-south-china-sea-incidents/>.

⁴ "China Has Militarised Islands in South China Sea, Says US Admiral." 2022. South China Morning Post. March 21, 2022. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3171203/china-has-fully-militarised-islands-south-china-sea-threatening>.

which deemed them baseless.⁵ This dismissal of international law suggests China's potential for further expansion and raises regional stability and security concerns.

In response to these escalating pressures, the Philippines has been prompted to strengthen cooperation and seek new partners like India. The Philippines, facing increasing pressure on its access to vital resources due to China's expansive claims, recognizes the importance of strategic alliances. India is similarly concerned about China's assertiveness in the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea and shares the Philippines' commitment to maintaining a free and open maritime environment.⁶ Both nations have a vested interest in regional stability and security, so their cooperation signals a proactive response to China's aggressive tactics and a commitment to safeguarding their shared interests in the Indo-Pacific region.

These converging interests have paved the way for a more robust partnership between the Philippines and India. India, aiming to be a major arms exporter, plays a key role in the Philippines' military modernization efforts.⁷ The recent acquisition of BrahMos missiles marks a shift towards a more diversified defense partnership for the Philippines.⁸ Furthermore, India's experience in indigenous defense development is attractive to the Philippines, seeking to reduce dependence on foreign suppliers.⁹ This potential collaboration on technology transfer and capacity building could be another pillar of this growing partnership.

The Philippines-India partnership emerges as a potential counterweight to China's assertiveness in the South China Sea. China may respond by intensifying "gray-zone" tactics, deploying coast guard vessels, and conducting more military exercises near disputed areas.¹⁰ However, the partnership could complicate this strategy. A strengthened Philippine military presence, possibly backed by Indian support, might deter China from aggressive maneuvers. Moreover, heightened international scrutiny could make China more cautious, reducing the

⁵ Nash, Paul. 2016. "Beijing Calls Hague Tribunal's Decision on South China Sea 'Null and Void.'" *The Diplomatic Courier*. July 21, 2016. <https://www.diplomaticcourier.com/posts/beijing-calls-hague-tribunals-decision-south-china-sea-null-void>.

⁶ "India Expands Naval Presence amidst Growing Competition with China." *Politics Today*. February 3, 2024. <https://politicstoday.org/india-expands-naval-presence-amidst-growing-competition-with-china/>

⁷ "India Eyes Key Role in the Philippines' Military Modernisation Plan." *Asia News Network*. February 19, 2024. <https://asianews.network/india-eyes-key-role-in-the-philippines-military-modernisation-plan/>.

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ "What's behind China's "Gray-Zone" Strategy That Threatens the Philippines?" *NHK WORLD-JAPAN*. April 16, 2024. <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/backstories/3244/>.

likelihood of provocative actions. Despite potential pressure from China, the partnership can create a more stable security environment in the region.

China's propensity for diplomatic pressure is evident in its response to criticisms, as seen in the recent condemnation of remarks made by the Philippine ambassador.¹¹ This means a similar tactic can be anticipated against the Philippines and India to undermine their partnership and isolate the Philippines regionally. However, the effectiveness of these tactics is uncertain. In fact, China's pressure tactics could inadvertently strengthen the resolve of the Philippines and India to collaborate against such pressures.

The Philippines-India defense partnership presents exciting prospects but faces significant barriers. Logistical challenges, such as the vast geographical distance between the two countries (roughly 4,600 kilometers), could complicate communication, troop deployment, and logistical support. Secondly, sustaining the partnership requires long-term political will in both countries, and changes in leadership or domestic priorities could weaken cooperation. This means the two countries should build strong institutional linkages, and garnering public support can enhance resilience against political shifts.

Despite challenges, there are possible opportunities for collaboration. India's growing defense industry offers cost-effective modernization options for the Philippines while India gains experience in defense technology exportation. Joint maritime patrols and exercises enhance regional security cooperation, deterring threats in the South China Sea. Additionally, the partnership could provide a diplomatic platform for advocating peaceful dispute resolution and upholding international law, contributing to a more stable Indo-Pacific order.¹²

The escalating tensions in the South China Sea compel the Philippines to seek new security partners. The burgeoning partnership with India presents a strategic shift, offering the Philippines a chance to diversify its alliances beyond traditional ties. This move not only strengthens the Philippines' position in the face of China's assertiveness but also paves the way for a potentially stronger regional voice advocating for a rules-based order and freedom of

¹¹ "China's Embassy Condemns Philippine Envoy's Remarks on South China Sea." Voice of America. March 3, 2024. <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-embassy-condemns-philippine-envoy-remarks-on-south-china-sea/7512089.html>.

¹² "'Adhere to International Law, Rules-Based Order': India amid China-Philippines Row." The Times of India. August 12, 2023. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/adhere-to-international-law-rules-based-order-india-amid-china-philippines-row/articleshow/102661400.cms>.

navigation. While challenges remain, a more robust Philippines-India partnership can ensure the Philippines has a stronger voice in securing its interests and upholding international law in the contested waters. This strategic shift holds the potential to reshape the regional security landscape in the Indo-Pacific.

Khim Sotheara is a Young Researcher Fellow at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS). He is also a Junior Student majoring in International Relations at the Institute for International Studies and Public Policy (IISPP). The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS).

Is Australia Projecting its Baby BRI to Southeast Asia?

Pheng Thean

The recent ASEAN-Australia Special Summit in Melbourne marks a significant milestone in the evolving relationship between Australia and Southeast Asia. As both sides commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the ASEAN-Australia Dialogue Relations since 1974, the summit underscores Australia's renewed commitment to deepening its engagement within the region. One may say Australia was more of a strategic partner to ASEAN in the past than it is today, yet Canberra is now trying to carve its new ways forward.

Amidst the shifting geopolitical landscape, Australia's infrastructure push raises eyebrows and sparks speculations among many leaders. The new 1.3 billion USD package under the Southeast Asia Investment Financing Facility (SEAIFF), responsible for building infrastructure in the Pacific, the defense industry, critical minerals capacity, and aspects of development aid, gave Australia a big-ticket initiative to grab the attention of ASEAN leaders. Moreover, the emergence of Southeast Asia Economic Strategy 2040¹ showcased that Australia is ambitious, prompting an intriguing question of whether Australia is launching its version of a "Baby BRI" in the region. Hence, this essay aims to examine Australia's new strategy for Southeast Asia while exploring notable distinctions that set Australia's approach apart from the actual BRI.

Affirming its commitment to regionalism, Canberra always aims to strengthen the institutional framework and mechanisms across various sectors, especially for the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). Through the Partnership for Infrastructure program, Australia will provide a 93 million USD package to support infrastructure development, putting Southeast Asia in a tight spot over whether or not to embrace Australia fully.² The determination rests solely with

¹ Ayman Falak. "Australia Unveils Southeast Asia Economic Strategy to 2040" ASEAN Briefing. Last modified September 21, 2023. <https://www.aseanbriefing.com/news/australia-unveils-southeast-asia-economic-strategy-to-2040/>

² The Hon Anthony Albanese MP. "\$2 billion Investment Facility to Support Business Engagement with Southeast Asia." Prime Minister of Australia. Accessed April 19, 2024. <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/2-billion-investment-facility-support-business-engagement-southeast-asia>.

Australia and with ASEAN as a collective entity. Once ASEAN wishes to take in its partnership with Australia, the regional architecture will subsequently align.

Moreover, Australia will provide a mere 4.5 million USD funding package to support the ASEAN Centre for Energy and an additional 147 million USD package to tackle shared development challenges in the Mekong subregion.³ While the exact division of funds among individual states has not been detailed, the initiative emphasizes regional cooperation and collective resilience. This engages Australia in a competition with regional powers to gain attention and soft power from infrastructure and capacity development in the region. As infrastructure development becomes a focal point of Australia's regional engagement, parallels are drawn between its initiatives and China's ambitious BRI.

Against this backdrop, whether Australia is projecting its version of BRI or not, the country is revitalizing its engagement in the region, particularly in institutionalization and infrastructure development. Due to its nature and characteristics, Australia's Baby BRI could be very different from China's.

First, Australia's initiatives are characterized by a greater emphasis on transparency and sustainability. Australia's focus on sustainability is evident in its allocation of funds and the nature of the projects it supports. Australia is now prioritizing a multilateral framework when initiating its Southeast Asian projects. The engagement is often conducted in partnership with like-minded nations and international organizations. Collaborative efforts with countries such as Japan, the United States, and members of ASEAN underscore a multilateral approach to regional development, contrasting with the unilateral nature of China's BRI. Back at the summit, Australia offered various businesses the opportunity to invest in Southeast Asia, and Albanese once said, "Southeast Asia is where Australia's future lies." In return, Australia would conduct funding that would last longer. Unlike the BRI, which has faced criticism for its lack

³ The Hon Anthony Albanese MP. "\$2 billion Investment Facility to Support Business Engagement with Southeast Asia." Prime Minister of Australia. Accessed April 19, 2024. <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/2-billion-investment-facility-support-business-engagement-southeast-asia>.

of transparency and debt-trap diplomacy⁴, Australian projects prioritize environmental sustainability and unanimous adherence to international standards.

Additionally, Australia's initiatives in Southeast Asia are driven by a mix of economic and diplomatic imperatives. Economically, Australia will look into clean energy transition and expertise in driving ways forward. Australia has a strong history of sustainable mining and high environmental standards. ASEAN countries can gain from Australia's expertise by adopting technology, building skills, and implementing environmental management practices to enhance their mining sectors.⁵ Diplomatic-wise, by investing in infrastructure, Australia seeks to enhance trade ties, promote people-to-people exchanges, and strengthen its regional influence. The Aus4ASEAN Scholarship will be provided as part of a new era of partnership with the region. Given the strongly underpinned development of research and education, this initiative will bolster international education collaboration and partnerships that align with the Southeast Asia Economic Strategy 2040.

Despite not keeping pace with Southeast Asia's remarkable economic expansion over the past two decades, in which two-way trade accounted for 101 billion USD in 2022, representing just 3.4% of the grouping's total trade, Australia will still be making new commitments on Southeast Asia.⁶ Indeed, Australia prioritizes people-to-people exchanges, contributing to the similarity of Chinese initiatives. Australia believes in facilitating greater commercial links, including the flow of efficient visa access and business investments, between the two economies while also boosting two-way trade within the region.⁷

Interestingly, according to the "State of Southeast Asia: 2024" survey by the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Australia is generally seen as a reliable partner by a significant portion of Southeast Asians, in spite of sitting 7th out of 11 major powers in terms of strategic relevance

⁴ Bernard Condon. "China's loans pushing world's poorest countries to brink of collapse" AP News. Last modified May 19, 2023. <https://apnews.com/article/china-debt-banking-loans-financial-developing-countries-collapse-8df6f9fac3e1e758d0e6d8d5dfbd3ed6>

⁵ Sharon Seah. "ASEAN-Australia cooperation in the clean energy transition". February 28, 2024. <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpretor/asean-australia-cooperation-clean-energy-transition>

⁶ Melinda Martinus. "Forging Economic Synergy: Australia's Path to ASEAN Prosperity". Fulcrum. March 06, 2024. <https://fulcrum.sg/aseanfocus/forging-economic-synergy-australias-path-to-asean-prosperity/>

⁷ The Hon Anthony Albanese MP. "\$2 billion Investment Facility to Support Business Engagement with Southeast Asia." Prime Minister of Australia. Accessed April 19, 2024. <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/2-billion-investment-facility-support-business-engagement-southeast-asia>.

to ASEAN, with a mean score of 5.51.⁸ Nevertheless, When ASEAN respondents were asked to choose a third party as a strategic partner to hedge against US-China rivalry, Australia's support slightly increased from 9.3% in 2023 to 9.5% in 2024. This represents a huge pool for Australia to dive into and exert its influence in the region.

However, challenges persist in Australia's efforts to establish its version of a "Baby BRI" in Southeast Asia. Limited financial resources, competition from other regional powers, and the need to navigate complex geopolitical dynamics pose significant hurdles. Australia must ensure that its initiatives are perceived as complementary rather than competitive to existing regional frameworks and initiatives that would further hinder regional growth.

In sum, while Australia's infrastructure projects in Southeast Asia are similar to China's BRI, they also showcase distinct characteristics that reflect Australia's interests and strategic priorities. Whether Australia's endeavors will evolve into a full-fledged "Baby BRI" remains to be seen. Still, its engagement in the region undoubtedly significantly shapes Southeast Asia's economic and geopolitical landscape.

Pheng Thean is a Young Researcher Fellow at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS), and a Research Associate at the Asian Vision Institute (AVI). He is also a Junior Student majoring in International Relations at the Institute for International Studies and Public Policy (IISPP). The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS).

⁸ Sharon Seah, et. al. The State of Southeast Asia: 2024 Survey Report (Singapore: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, 2024. Last modified. April 02, 2024.

Iran's Unprecedented Attack on Israel: A Dangerous Escalation and A Wake-Up Call

Chum Sothealeap

The recent events in the Middle East have taken a dramatic turn, as Iran launched an unprecedented direct military assault on Israel, marking a significant escalation in the longstanding tensions between the two nations. This attack, which involved hundreds of drones, ballistic missiles, and cruise missiles, shocked the region and the international community.¹ The consequences of this attack could have extensive implications, potentially sinking the Middle East into a more devastating conflict. It also serves as a wake-up call about the region's instability and the urgent need for diplomatic solutions.

On the night of April 13, 2024, Iran released a staggering assault on Israel, launching over 300 projectiles, including about 170 drones and more than 120 ballistic missiles, in retaliation for the Israeli strike on an Iranian consulate in Damascus, Syria, earlier on April 1st.² This attack was the first time Iran has directly targeted Israel militarily, despite decades of hostility and a history of proxy warfare between the two countries. The international community has responded with a mix of condemnation and concern. Leaders of the G7 nations issued a joint statement "unequivocally condemning in the strongest terms Iran's direct and unprecedented attack against Israel," warning that the situation risks "provoking an uncontrollable regional escalation." The United Nations Security Council also convened an emergency meeting, underscoring the gravity of the problem and the need for immediate de-escalation.³

Iran's motivations are rooted in its deep ideological opposition to Israel's existence as a Jewish state. Iran's leaders have long viewed Israel as a national threat and regional opponent. The suspected Israeli strike on an Iranian consulate in Syria that killed commanders provided the immediate excuse. Still, hostility traces back to Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, which fueled

¹ Associated Press, "Live Updates: Iran Launches Its First-ever Direct Military Assault on Israel," PBS NewsHour, April 13, 2024, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/live-updates-iran-launches-its-first-ever-full-scale-military-assault-on-israel>.

² Rob Picheta, "Why Iran Attacked Israel and What Comes Next," CNN, April 15, 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/04/14/middleeast/why-iran-attack-israel-intl/index.html>.

³ "Israel Says 99% of Drones and Missiles Launched by Iran Were Intercepted," AP News (ASSOCIATED PRESS, April 14, 2024), <https://apnews.com/live/israel-iran-drone-attack-live-updates>.

anti-Israeli rhetoric and support for militant proxies like Hezbollah.⁴ The recent attack can be attributed to the changing balance of power in the region, with Iran seeking to assert its dominance and Israel determined to protect its interests. Israel likely targeted the Iranian consulate in Damascus to disrupt Iran's efforts to entrench itself militarily in Syria and supply weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon⁵. Iran's missile barrage was an attempt to demonstrate its ability to strike Israel directly and deter further Israeli attacks.

What matters is that this attack could potentially lead to not just regional but global consequences. The fear is that this one attack could trigger a wider regional conflict. It could draw in other parties such as the United States, Russia, China, and Iran's regional allies, including Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthi rebels in Yemen.⁶ A regional war would have devastating humanitarian consequences. Given the region's role as a major producer and exporter of oil and gas, it could disrupt global energy supplies and spike oil prices.

The delicate balance in the region, already strained by the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, could be further destabilized. A full-blown regional war would likely cause massive destruction, displace millions of civilians, and exacerbate existing humanitarian crises. It would also undermine efforts to combat extremist groups like ISIS that have taken advantage of regional instability. The world cannot afford another major war, especially one that could draw in global powers and disrupt the global economy.

In the face of escalating tensions between Iran and Israel, effective solutions must be pursued to prevent further conflict and promote stability in the region. A comprehensive approach to de-escalation and conflict resolution requires a multi-faceted strategy that addresses the root causes of the hostility between the two nations.

One crucial aspect of a successful resolution is the engagement of both Iran and Israel in meaningful diplomatic efforts by direct dialogue between the two countries, facilitated by neutral mediators or international organizations for constructive communication and

⁴ Raffi Berg, Tom Spender, and Jonathan Beale, "Why has Iran attacked Israel?," BBC News, April 14, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68811276>

⁵ Maziar Motamedi, "Why Does Israel Keep Launching Attacks in Syria?," *Al Jazeera*, April 4, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/4/4/why-does-israel-keep-launching-attacks-in-syria>.

⁶ Al Jazeera Staff, "Iran Attacks Israel With Over 300 Drones, Missiles: What You Need to Know," *Al Jazeera*, April 15, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/4/14/iran-attacks-israel-with-over-300-drones-missiles-what-you-need-to-know>.

negotiation. Addressing grievances, clarifying intentions, and exploring potential areas of cooperation can help build trust and reduce the risk of miscalculation or misinterpretation.

However, involving key regional and global actors, such as the United States, the European Union, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, is challenging. Given the complex web of regional alliances and rivalries, it may be difficult for these actors to maintain impartiality and credibility as mediators. For example, the United States has a long history of supporting Israel⁷, while Saudi Arabia and Iran are engaged in a proxy war in Yemen⁸. Turkey, on the other hand, has its tensions with Israel and has been accused of supporting Hamas in Gaza.⁹

One potential solution to this challenge is creating a new, impartial mediation body composed of representatives from diverse countries, including those with no direct stake in the conflict. This body could be established under the auspices of the United Nations. It could draw on the expertise and resources of existing regional and global actors while maintaining its independence and neutrality. This mediation body could help bridge the gap between Iran and Israel and facilitate a mutually acceptable resolution by bringing together a wide range of perspectives and interests.

Moreover, addressing the underlying tensions and grievances that have fueled the rivalry between Iran and Israel is no easy task. This requires a holistic approach beyond immediate security concerns to encompass broader political, economic, and social dimensions of the conflict. Initiatives promoting mutual understanding, fostering people-to-people exchanges, and building confidence-building measures can help lay the groundwork for long-term reconciliation and cooperation. However, such efforts may be hindered by deep-seated ideological differences and mistrust between the two countries.

One way to overcome these challenges is to focus on common interests and shared benefit areas, such as economic cooperation and environmental protection. By identifying and pursuing projects that offer tangible benefits to Iran and Israel and their respective populations,

⁷ “U.S. Relations With Israel,” United States Department of State, January 20, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-israel/>.

⁸ Center for Preventive Action, “War in Yemen,” Global Conflict Tracker, March 5, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/war-yemen>.

⁹ Seth J. Frantzman, “The Symbolism of Hamas Leaders' Visit to Ankara,” The Jerusalem Post | JPost.Com, April 21, 2024, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-hamas-war/article-798101>.

it may be possible to build trust and create a foundation for more ambitious cooperation in the future. This could involve joint ventures in sectors like renewable energy, water management, or agriculture, which could help address pressing regional challenges while fostering a sense of shared purpose and mutual gain.

Furthermore, a comprehensive regional agreement addressing the Middle East's various conflicts is essential for lasting peace and stability. By linking the resolution of the Iran-Israel conflict to broader regional issues, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the conflicts in Syria, Yemen, and Libya, and regional security arrangements, a comprehensive settlement can create a more stable and secure environment for all parties involved. However, achieving such a comprehensive agreement is challenging, given the competing interests and power dynamics at play in the region.

One potential pathway to a comprehensive regional agreement is the establishment of a regional security framework that brings together all the key stakeholders in the Middle East, including Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and others. This framework could be modeled on successful examples of regional security cooperation, such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). By providing a forum for regular dialogue, confidence-building measures, and the development of shared norms and principles, such a framework could help create an environment conducive to resolving specific conflicts and promoting regional stability more broadly.

Iran's bold attack served as a wake-up call that the present path is unsustainable for regional and global security. A new multilateral approach is desperately needed, one that looks past narrow self-interests to find a pathway for comprehensive conflict resolution across the Middle East. The path forward will not be easy, but the risks are too high to ignore the urgent need for de-escalation and a comprehensive regional settlement.

Chum Sothealeap is a Young Research Fellow and Research Intern at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies. She is also a Junior student at the Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh. The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS).

Why have ASEAN and EU not reached a common position on the Gaza conflict?

Eoeng Kanhara

Two weeks after the Gaza conflict, there was the Indo-Pacific talk, in which the European Union and ASEAN failed to reach common ground. This is considered the failure of ASEAN centrality and the EU's limited role as the major security maintainer in the Indo-Pacific region. The ASEAN members have issued separate statements on the crisis, not the organization.¹ Southeast Asia is the most diverse region; around 42 percent of the population is Muslim.² The October 7 attack murdered 1,200 people in Southern Israel, while Southeast Asians are among those who have been killed, taken hostage, or trapped in the Gaza Strip. Muslim and non-Muslim states in Southeast Asia have failed to reach a common position to release a clear statement about ASEAN as a whole. At the same time, the EU still played a limited role in maintaining security and crisis in the region.

On October 7 last year, a Hamas attack brutally murdered 1,200 people in southern Israel, and more than 240 were kidnapped to the Gaza Strip, leading Israel to declare war on Hamas and vow to remove them from power in the Strip. Since the attack, more than 24,000 Palestinians have been killed in the Gaza Strip, and over 70 percent of them were women or children.³ Furthermore, more than 1.9 million people, equal to 85 percent of the total population of Gaza, have been displaced, including Southeast Asian people from Thailand and Cambodia. There are four main reasons why ASEAN and EU have not reached common ground on the Gaza conflict such as the diverse position of ASEAN members on the Gaza conflict such as the divided opinion of ASEAN members on the Gaza conflict, the failure of EU members to sharpen its position at UNGA, the rise of China and geopolitical contestation

¹ Leong Wai Ki & Calvin Yang. 18 October 2023. "Israel-Hamas conflict could have implications on ASEAN Centrality as members adopt different stance: Experts". Channel News Asia. Available at <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/israel-hamas-war-implications-southeast-asia-asean-centrality-unity-relevance-member-states-different-stances-geopolitics-3854906>

² Joseph Rachman. 4 January 2024. "Half a world away, Gaza is burning topic for Southeast Asia's domestic politics". The Times of Israel. Available at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/half-a-world-away-gaza-is-a-burning-topic-for-southeast-asias-domestic-politics/>

³ UN Women. 2024. "Gender alert: The gendered impact of the crisis in Gaza". Available at <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2024/01/gender-alert-the-gendered-impact-of-the-crisis-in-gaza>

of US and China, and the limited structure of ASEAN and the limited role of EU to response on regional and global challenges.

Firstly, the ASEAN member states have issued separate statements of different positions on the Gaza conflict. Numerous Indonesian leaders have expressed support and admiration for Hamas terror attacks, and there has been a trend against ties with Israel. President Joko Widodo's response to the October 7 attack during the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Summit urged an immediate ceasefire, encouraged the acceleration and expansion of humanitarian assistance, held Israel accountable for humanitarian atrocities, and urged the restart of peace talks and support for a two-state solution.⁴ In addition, Malaysia hosted Hamas leaders during the PM Najib Razak administration in 2013.⁵ Malaysian Prime Minister on April 15 said that he supported Iran's decision to launch a drone attack on Israel and joined 16000 pro-Palestinian supporters to condemn Israel for its action in the Gaza Strip.⁶ While Thailand remains neutral and silent to preserve its positive diplomatic relationships with all involved parties.

However, immediately after the news broke that Hamas had captured Thai migrant workers in Israel, the Thai Prime Minister denounced Hamas for its brutal acts.⁷ Cambodia condemns all forms of violence and urges all parties to exercise maximum restraint and seek avenues for de-escalation and a ceasefire.⁸ The Philippines are directly affected in terms of lives lost and people being taken hostage since thousands of them are working and studying in Gaza. Philippine has abstained from the vote because of the notable absence of a factual mention in the solution of the terrorist attacks on 07 October, in which Filipinos were killed.⁹ In

⁴ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia. 12 November 2023. "President Jokowi calls for United OIC at Forefront of resolving Gaza crisis". Available at <https://kemlu.go.id/portal/en/read/5485/berita/president-jokowi-calls-for-united-oic-at-forefront-of-resolving-gaza-crisis>

⁵ Adnan Abu Amer. 25 June 2019. "Hamas considers Malaysia its gateway to Asia". Middle East Monitor. Available at <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20190625-hamas-considers-malaysia-its-gateway-to-asia/>

⁶ Reuters. 24 October 2023. "Malaysian PM joins thousands to condemn Israel, Western allies for 'barbarism' in Gaza". Available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/malaysian-pm-joins-thousands-condemn-israel-western-allies-barbarism-gaza-2023-10-24/>

⁷ ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute. 15 February 2024. "The Israel-Palestine conflict reveal political divisions within Thailand". Available at <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2024-15-the-israel-palestine-conflict-reveal-political-divisions-within-thailand-by-daungyewa-hong-utarasint/>

⁸ Orm Bunthoern & Neang Sokunthea. 08 October 2023. "Cambodia urges restraint as Israel fight rages on". Phnom Penh Post. Available at <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/cambodia-urges-restraint-israel-fight-rages>

⁹ Department of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Philippines. 28 October 2023. "Developments in Israel and Gaza". Available at

contrast, Singapore, as a long-term Israeli ally, has strongly condemned Hamas's action, and the Singaporean government is unfolding on a zero-tolerance approach towards terrorism, which implies that states have the legitimate and inherent rights to self-defense and have taken military.¹⁰ This results in difficulty forging a common position or outlook and a lack of unity in the conflict, which could diminish the bloc's relevance on the global stage.

Secondly, the EU leaders have failed to sharpen their position on the Israel-Hamas war and escalating humanitarian crisis in Gaza in the vote in the United Nations General Assembly. In contrast, seventeen member states voted in favor of a humanitarian ceasefire to allow aid to flow into the small land strip, except a few abstained, and the Czech Republic and Austria, as two Israel supporters had voted against it.¹¹ The final summit communique could be seen as contradictory to Israel's right to defend itself. The EU leaders' summit in December last year failed to agree on any joint statement until mid-January, and a deeply divided European Parliament passed a resolution that called for a ceasefire but under the condition of dismantling the Hamas effect, legitimizing the continued Israel offensive.¹² Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom have continued to supply weapons to Israel. According to the UNHR, the United States and Germany are by far the largest arms exporters, and shipments have increased since 07 October 2023. Other military exporters include France, the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia.¹³

Another key factor that led ASEAN and the EU to respond differently to the Gaza conflict is the relationship between the EU and ASEAN being influenced by the rise of China and the geopolitical contestation between the US and China.¹⁴ The EU is a major development

<https://dfa.gov.ph/dfa-news/statements-and-advisoriestupdate/33583-dfa-statement>

¹⁰ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Singapore. 6 November 2023. "Speech by Minister for foreign affairs Dr Vivian Balakrishnan during the parliamentary motion on the Israel-Hamas conflict". Available at

<https://www.mfa.gov.sg/Newsroom/Press-Statements-Transcripts-and-Photos/2023/11/20231106ministerspeech#:~:text=These%20acts%20of%20indiscriminate%20killing,release%20of%20all%20civilian%20hostages>

¹¹ Alexandra Brzozowski & Aurelie Pugnet. 15 December 2023. "EU leaders fail to sharpen stance on Israel-Hamas war". EURACTIV. Available at <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/eu-leaders-fail-to-sharpen-stance-on-israel-hamas-war/>

¹² Martin Monecny. 16 March 2024. "EU's Gaza war response: a tale of contradiction and division". Clingendael Institute. Available at

<https://spectator.clingendael.org/en/publication/eus-gaza-war-response-tale-contradiction-and-division>

¹³ The United Nations Human Rights (UNHR). 23 February 2024. "Arms exports to Israel must stop immediately: UN experts". Available at

[Arms exports to Israel must stop immediately: UN experts | OHCHR](#)

¹⁴ Olivia Lazard & Dhanasree Jayaram. 4 July 2023. "EU-ASEAN Climate Diplomacy: Navigating misperceptions, interests, and opportunities" in Reimagining EU-ASEAN Relations: Challenges and Opportunity edited by Lizza Bomassi. Carnegie Europe. Available at

partner of ASEAN, the biggest donor, education supporter, and economic and trade partner. However, ASEAN countries have been influenced by the major powers, including China, through bilateral trade and its projects, especially the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which is adding to the growing political challenges with China that seek instability in the region while getting influenced by US's trade and investment and maintaining security in the region. Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand have seen stronger Chinese investment in the past two years. According to the Maybank, the investment and construction contracts from China to ASEAN recovered, rising to US\$18.6bn in 2022, and six out of China's top 15 investments to BRI countries in 2022 were in ASEAN.¹⁵

Lastly, the EU has yet to reach close relations with ASEAN even though they are the democratic states and the third largest economy in ASEAN. There is a contradiction of purpose between the two organizations in terms of promoting democracy and human rights and a role in maintaining security in regional and global issues like the Myanmar Crisis, the South China Sea Dispute, and the Israel-Hamas Conflict. The EU promotes democracy and human rights among ten ASEAN member states. At the same time, there is concern about the crisis in Myanmar and the current elections of ASEAN member states, which the EU considered the election will not be conducted freely or fairly.¹⁶ For instance, during the Cambodia General Election in 2023, the spokesperson of the European Union released a statement concerning the legislative elections being conducted in a restricted political and civic space, restricting the rights to freedom of speech and the rights of all citizens to stand for election.¹⁷ Furthermore, the geopolitical tension as the regional and international challenges also present complications in the region, especially tension in Taiwan, the South China Sea dispute, and the Russia-Ukraine war, which indirectly and directly impact food security and the economy due to the global supply chain. This could reflect on how hard the EU influences and reaches the same position as ASEAN on global issues, mainly the Gaza conflict, as new to both regional and global challenges.

<https://carnegieeurope.eu/2023/07/04/eu-asean-engagement-on-democracy-sharper-challenges-new-opportunities-pub-90084#tableContents>

¹⁵ The Maybank. 17 March 2023. "China Belt and Road Initiative". Available at

https://www.maybank.com/iwov-resources/mibg/files/2023/China_Belt_and_Road_March_2023.pdf

¹⁶ Ravindra Ngo. 11 May 2023. "The ASEAN and EU relationship: a shared present and future?". Friend of Europe. Available at

<https://www.friendsofeurope.org/insights/the-asean-and-eu-relationship-a-shared-present-and-future/>

¹⁷ EEAS. 24 July 2023. "Cambodia: Statement by the Spokesperson on the general elections". European Union External Action. Available at https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/cambodia-statement-spokesperson-general-elections_en

ASEAN and the EU failed to reach a common position on the Gaza Conflict due to the diversity leading to released separate statements, the failure of the EU to sharpen its position, the major powers influenced, and the limited role of the EU in the Indo-Pacific region in maintaining security and stability. A few weeks later, there was an ASEAN-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) statement on Development in Gaza. The leaders have exchanged views and expressed concern, following by condemning all attacks against civilians, calling for a ceasefire from all parties, following with a peaceful resolution, and supporting the initiative of the European Union to resolve the dispute by international law and UN resolutions on the conflict. Even though the final statement has reached a common position, each member of both organizations somehow remains neutral to preserve its positive diplomatic relationships and economic interests.

Hoeng Kanhara is a Young Research Fellow at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS) and a research associate at Cambodia Center for Regional Studies (CCRS). She is also a junior student at the Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh. The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS).

The Funan Techo Canal Project: Cambodia's Rationales Meet International Media

Song Sokvimean

Cambodia's Funan Techo Canal, the region's latest large-scale infrastructure project, aims to enlarge Cambodia's shipping capacities. It is a proposed waterway connecting Phnom Penh Autonomous Port to the Kep coastal province via a Mekong River tributary. The project is estimated to cost USD 1.7 billion and will be completed by 2028.¹ Construction was commenced in August 2024 after numerous studies conducted by national and international experts since 2021.² While the ambitious plan is intended to foster the country's economic and trade growth, it has sparked notable apprehensions among neighboring countries and international communities regarding the potential effects of the project's occurrence. This paper will examine why the Funan Canal project has drawn considerable attention from international media.

Cambodia's Funan Techo Canal has prompted a broad spectrum of concerns. Initially, there were worries about the environmental impacts of the canal project on the Mekong region. Vietnam, whose ports Cambodia depends on for importing and exporting goods to the global market, is raising concerns over the transboundary floodplain and alteration of the water flow of the Mekong River.³ Consequently, Vietnamese farmers conjectured that the planned project could endanger the habitat of vulnerable species and prevent water from reaching crucial parts of the Southern Mekong Delta.⁴ However, in December 2023, the public was assured of this during Prime Minister Hun Manet's official visit to Hanoi, asserting that the canal would not cause detrimental impacts regarding water disruption and environmental

¹ Firm, Mike, and Elaine Chan. "Cambodia's Hun Sen Hits Back at Criticism about Funan Techo Canal." Dagold News. April 11, 2024.

https://dagoldnews.com/cambodias-hun-sen-hits-back-at-criticism-about-funan-techo-canal-radio-free-asia/?feed_id=43436&unique_id=66179f06b9c60&fbclid=IwAR0RjJdERfnJIB0Qmga9mwH-Tu4Vgu6-CIwt-7iYvx8iM91is6dFFtnzf4

² Khmer Times. "Calming concerns: PM says Canal will boost Economy, poses no Security Threat." April 12, 2024. <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501471636/calming-concerns-pm-says-canal-will-boost-economy-poses-no-security-threat/>

³ Yee, Tan Hui. "Vietnamese Concerned that Canal Project in Cambodia could be Potential Gateway for Chinese Forces." The Straits Times. April 9, 2024. <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/vietnamese-concerned-canal-project-in-cambodia-could-be-potential-gateway-for-chinese-forces>.

⁴ Ibid.

hazards to regional neighbors, particularly Vietnam.⁵ Instead, it will help preserve the ecology and environmental balance of the region, according to the in-depth study conducted by the Cambodian government before project approval. With this thorough evaluation, the Cambodian government and water transportation consultants also completed a two-phase environmental impact study.⁶ Acknowledging that if any environmental impacts occur during construction, they would largely be temporary and limited to the construction period, the government will take essential measures to mitigate the problems.

Some may doubt that the intended project would cause significant social implications for the local communities, potentially those living near the proposed canal. It is projected that if the Funan Techo Canal is carried out, it will likely involve relocating and displacing several communities.⁷ This could result in exclusion and uncertain situations for residents in the targeted areas. Nonetheless, what the Cambodian government has been framing to the local media so far displays otherwise. In this regard, an interministerial working group led by Cambodia's Ministry of Economy and Finance will assess the effects on the locals, ensuring that affected residents are considered in the decision-making process.⁸ Furthermore, Prime Minister Hun Manet has urged the canal would create more jobs and improve the livelihoods of approximately 1.6 million people on both sides of the waterway.⁹ Its infrastructure plan includes the construction of three water gates, 11 bridges, 208-kilometer sidewalks, and other cross-river infrastructure.¹⁰ These developments will expand the agriculture and aquaculture sectors, improve export and import activities, and facilitate the seamless movement of goods and people across the country.

Through the lock operations on the Funan Techo navigation canal, there are promising alternatives that captured a lot of attention from international media amid the regional influence tussle. Many media outlets have been questioning its "dual use" nature, stemming

⁵ Yalirozy, Teng. "Hun Sen Asserts Techo Funan Canal Will Not Be Used by Chinese Military." *Cambodianess*. April 9, 2024. <https://cambodianess.com/article/hun-sen-asserts-techo-funan-canal-will-not-be-used-by-chinese-military>

⁶ Liblib, Lors. "Cambodia Tries to Reassure Vietnam that Proposed Canal Won't Affect Mekong River." *Voice of America (VOA)*. December 21, 2023. <https://www.voanews.com/a/cambodia-tries-to-reassure-vietnam-that-proposed-canal-won-t-affect-mekong-river/7406682.html>

⁷ Brancaccio, Lucia. "Why Cambodia's Funan Techo Canal Project is Worrying Vietnam?" *Vietnam Briefing*. April 9, 2024. <https://www.vietnam-briefing.com/news/why-cambodias-funan-techo-canal-project-is-worrying-vietnam.html/>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Taing, Rinith. "Funan Techo Canal 'To be a Game-Changer' for Cambodia." *Khmer Times*. January 31, 2024. <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501431789/funan-techo-canal-to-be-a-game-changer-for-cambodia/>

concerns over the possibility of Chinese troops using the canal.¹¹ While others anticipated the new waterway would redirect the Mekong River to the country's coastal provinces, some believed it would allow Chinese navy ships to enter from the Gulf of Thailand or Ream Naval Base, potentially constituting security threats within the Southeast Asian region. This demonstrates increasing scrutiny toward the realization of the canal's capacity. Despite the growing apprehensions about its intention, Prime Minister Hun Manet has proclaimed the canal solely serves economic interests and poses no security implications to other countries.¹² This recent mega-project aims to seek autonomy for the country's foreign trade by fully maximizing the potential of its inland waterway transportation.

Notably, the proposed Funan Canal connects not directly to the Mekong River water system but to the Bassac River system. This Mekong tributary crosses four inland provinces: Kandal, Takeo, Kampot, and Kep.¹³ The canal will be 100-meter wide upstream, 80-meter wide downstream, and 5.4-meter deep, according to the feasibility study as proven by a 26-month study.¹⁴ One key aspect of this project is that the canal would be too shallow for warships to pass through because they are larger than its capacity, so it is only for cargo ships.¹⁵ This reflects the continuous efforts of the Royal Government of Cambodia to ensure the thoroughness of its planning and its commitment to advancing national interests while promoting socio-economic development. Additionally, Article 55 of the Constitution states that the Kingdom of Cambodia adheres to the principles of sovereignty and non-interference, which are at the core of its foreign policies.¹⁶ The proposed canal is an example, as it aligns with the 1995 Mekong Agreement and international law on the Mekong River.

¹¹ Rim, Sokvy. "Vietnam's Security Concerns About the Funan Techo Canal Project Are Misplaced." *The Diplomat*. May 9, 2024. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/05/vietnams-security-concerns-about-the-funan-techo-canal-project-are-misplaced/>

¹² EAC News. "Techo Funan Project Update Acting Head of State Addresses Fabrication." April 10, 2024. <https://eacnews.asia/home/details/29739>

¹³ Han, Yang. "Hun Sen defends Canal Project on Mekong River, refutes Allegations." *China Daily Global*. April 10, 2024. <https://epaper.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202404/10/WS6615bcd9a310df4030f50b9b.html>

¹⁴ Ben, Sokhean. "In-depth explanation: Cambodia allays Vietnam's concern over Funan Techo Canal." *Khmer Times*. December 15, 2023. <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501407454/in-depth-explanation-cambodia-allays-vietnams-concern-over-funan-techo-canal/>

¹⁵ AFP. "Cambodia to Push Forward with Plans to Build US\$1.7 billion Canal, says PM Hun Manet." *Channel News Asia (CNA)*. April 11, 2024. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/cambodia-plans-canal-pm-hun-manet-china-warships-4258501>

¹⁶ Taing, Rinith. "Matter of principle: Cambodia willing, but not obliged to share info on Funan Techo Canal." *Khmer Times*. April 19, 2024. <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501474787/matter-of-principle-cambodia-willing-but-not-obliged-to-share-info-on-funan-techo-canal/>

The government has undertaken a comprehensive approach to curb controversies and criticisms of the Funan Techo Canal project. One way to ease doubts surrounding the canal is for Cambodia to work closely with the Mekong River Commission (MRC) regarding any possible project impacts. By initiating a continuous consultation process, the MRC will allow specific concerns to be addressed and common ground identified, including environmental, technical, and feasibility studies.¹⁷ This also leads to ensuring greater transparency on any major undertakings involving the canal's potential implications, whether in accordance with relevant international laws and practices.

Lastly, a third-party technical review should support the commission along the operation.¹⁸ This suggests forming various subcommittees to monitor and oversee whether the construction is on track with its plan. Doing so can help reduce concerns and build regional and international community trust. On the other hand, manifesting sustainable and equitable management of its infrastructure for riparian countries and local residents is key to overcoming implementation challenges.

In conclusion, the proposed Funan Techo Canal marks a significant stride in Cambodia's infrastructural evolution. The canal is expected to generate wide-ranging economic benefits for the country and its people by transforming a historic waterway into a new hub for trade and logistic activities. This transformative project holds promising opportunities for the future endeavor of its economic gateway on global supply chains and as an investment destination in Southeast Asia. However, despite the positive outcomes projected by the Cambodian government and several canal developers, there are a variety of concerns from different outlets over the future construction of the canal. Showcasing the canal's attractiveness could influence local and regional communities while exposing its coverage to the international fora.

¹⁷ Mao, Sreypich. "Cambodia Won't Give Canal Info to Anyone but MRC." Kiripost. May 4, 2024. <https://kiripost.com/stories/cambodia-wont-give-canal-info-to-anyone-but-mrc>

¹⁸ Sok, Raksa. "Inter-ministerial Commission Formed to Oversee Canal Project." Phnom Penh Post. June 12, 2023. <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/inter-ministerial-commission-formed-oversee-canal-project>

Song Sokvimean is a Young Researcher Fellow at Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh. The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS).

Explaining Stakeholders' Concerns about the Funan Techo Canal Project

Larch ChanMinea

When former Prime Minister Hun Sen left office in 2023, he proposed digging a 180-km canal connecting Phnom Penh to the coastal province of Kep to boost commerce.¹ Prime Minister Hun Manet is now in charge of continuing this ambitious project as a sign of pushing for infrastructure growth in this developing nation.

This commentary discusses the stakeholders' perspective on this contentious project and the key exclusive benefits it will bring to Cambodia. The benefits of this infrastructure project are undeniable, but the reaction from Vietnam is something to consider. This piece will also make critical claims and evaluate them based on the actual evidence in place.

Cambodia's reliance on the Vietnamese port at the mouth of the Mekong Delta is overwhelming, as heavy-duty ships cannot access the autonomous port in Phnom Penh, where most factories and industrial parks are located. The proposed canal will be 100m in width and 5.4m in depth, allowing cargo ships of up to 5,000 tons to pass through in the rainy season.² This new canal will help solve this issue, as larger vessels can reach Phnom Penh. The canal will help facilitate the transport of goods between the autonomous port of Phnom Penh and the deep-water port in Sihanoukville and enhance economic development.³ Cambodia seeks to gain more control over its financial prospects, as the Prime Minister described the plan as “breathing through our own nose.”

¹ Ry Sochan, “Bassac-Kep Waterway Link Named ‘Funan Techo Canal’ | Phnom Penh Post,” Phnom Penh Post, May 21, 2023, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/bassac-kep-waterway-link-named-funan-techo-canal>.

² Meng Sievmey, “Funan Techo Canal Benefits’ Overcome Impacts, Sun Chanthol Says,” Cambodianess, May 4, 2024, <https://cambodianess.com/article/funan-techo-canal-benefits-overcome-impacts-sun-chanthol-says>.

³ Rim, Sokvy. (2024, March 11). BRI’s Funan Techo Canal could steer Cambodia away from Vietnam and towards China”, ThinkChina. Wwww.thinkchina.sg. <https://www.thinkchina.sg/bris-funan-techo-canal-could-steer-cambodia-away-vietnam-and-towards-china>

Former Prime Minister Hun Sen openly criticized hostile critics in a Facebook rant on April 9th 2024, claiming six points about why the critics' claims are baseless.⁴ His response mainly tackled the issue of the canal being a passage for Chinese troops to move up the Mekong River. He stated that Cambodia does not need Chinese troops, further claiming it is contrary to the Cambodian constitution to allow a foreign nation's troops to set up bases in Cambodia. The former prime minister also reassured that Cambodia and Vietnam are still strategic, comprehensive partners that aim to grow together in the region. He added that the canal follows Article 5 of the 1995 Mekong Convention, which mandates a notification to a Joint Committee on any project, with the canal stemming from the Bassac River and not the main Mekong River.⁵ He wanted this infrastructure project to be the longstanding legacy of his long tenure as prime minister.

The current government under Hun Manet wants to use this canal to send a message to the opposition party criticizing the government for being too close to Vietnam. Ever since the removal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia in 1989, there have been several concerns that the government is helping Vietnam and that our neighbor has influence in the decision-making process of Cambodia.⁶ This will weaken Vietnam's sphere of influence over Cambodia. This canal will also bring closer relations between Phnom Penh and Beijing, as the Chinese counterpart heavily supports this plan.

After questioning the project's environmental impacts and the lack of transparency surrounding the proposal, Vietnam has raised numerous suspicions regarding the canal. Vietnam has asked about its intention to use the canal after requesting information about water management and the ecological environment from its Cambodian counterpart.⁷ Vietnam's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Doan Khac Viet, has claimed that Vietnam supports the usage of the Mekong River for socioeconomic growth, but Vietnam is concerned about sustainable management.

⁴ Hun Sen. Facebook, April 9, 2024. <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/oXD6pCWphXQEMyjW/>.

⁵ Chheang Vannarith, "Cambodia's Funan Techo Canal, a Game Changer? - Khmer Times," Khmer Times, December 4, 2023, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501401182/cambodias-funan-techo-canal-a-game-changer/>.

⁶ Rim, "BRI's Funan Techo Canal could steer Cambodia away from Vietnam and towards China"

⁷ Anh, Vu, and Nguyuen Tien. 11 April 2024. "Vietnam requests Cambodia share information on Funan Techo canal." *VN Express International*. <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/vietnam-requests-cambodia-to-share-information-on-funan-techo-canal-project-4733267.html>.

Many critics have questioned Vietnam's true intention in opposing the Funan Techo project, as environmental issues are the smallest of Vietnam's concerns. Many have stated that the core concern is the loss of ships entering Cambodia through Vietnam's Cai Mep port. Cambodia relies heavily on Vietnamese ports to import raw materials from China and finished materials to Western nations, with around 20 million tons of products being shipped on this waterway.⁸ This is a true concern for Vietnam, as it might lose the economic interest and influence it has previously enjoyed.⁹

The concerns regarding the Funan Techo Canal will always be raised until its expected completion in 2028, as nations that will be affected want negative publicity on this project. Vietnam has raised the idea of the canal being a pathway for Chinese warships to enter the Mekong.¹⁰ The US hopes for more transparency to help ensure sustainable measures to help the Mekong and harmony in the region.¹¹ The main solution to these critics is to be more open about the project and push for transparency in the construction. If blatant information is shown, critics will not have a standing on this matter. Cambodia should be able to develop its nation however it sees fit rather than being restricted by Western ideas that have not been beneficial.

The Techo-Funan Canal will be the highlight of the decade, as this is a bold step forward by Hun Manet in his first year as Prime Minister. The government has made it clear that the sole purpose of the canal is for economic gains only, to boost trade, and to facilitate the transport of materials from the deep-water port to Phnom Penh. Cambodia has much to gain from this deal, whereas Vietnam will lose certain economic perks and the crucial influence it once claimed.

⁸ Chheang Vannarith, "Cambodia's Funan Techo Canal, a Game Changer? - Khmer Times,"

⁹ Sothearak Sok, "Why Is Vietnam Worried about Cambodia's Mekong Canal Project?," The Diplomat, January 4, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/01/why-is-vietnam-worried-about-cambodias-mekong-canal-project/>.

¹⁰ Tan Hui Yee, "Vietnamese Concerned That Canal Project in Cambodia Could Be Potential Gateway for Chinese Forces," The Straits Times, April 9, 2024, <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/vietnamese-concerned-canal-project-in-cambodia-could-be-potential-gateway-for-chinese-forces>.

¹¹ South China Morning Post, "US, Vietnam Fear Cambodia's China-Backed Canal Could Serve Military Goals." 2024.. April 11, 2024. <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3258642/us-vietnam-fear-china-backed-techo-funan-canal-cambodia-could-be-used-military-purposes>.

Larch ChanMinea is a Young Researcher Fellow at Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh. The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS).

The Funan Techo Canal Project: Explaining the Rationales

Mogn Sereysovathana

In recent years, Cambodia has undergone a significant transformation, marked by ambitious development initiatives to strengthen its economic infrastructure and position itself as a regional hub for trade. With rapid growth over the years and overflowing with investment, Cambodia's economy is forecast to grow by 5.8 percent in 2024, up from 5 percent the previous year.¹ This growth is significant as Cambodia aims to become an upper-middle income by 2030 and a high-income country by 2050.²

Cambodia has initiated various projects to bolster its economy further and align with its Pentagonal Strategy for its grand development. Among them is the Funan Techo Canal, a 180-km waterway connecting Phnom Penh Autonomous Port to the coastal province of Kep while stretching through key provinces such as Kandal, Takeo, and Kampot. It is estimated to cost around 1.7 billion USD and will be finished by 2028.³ This waterway is expected to become a key economic driver, reshaping and developing the country's economic landscape and strengthening its infrastructure and transportation.

For decades, Cambodia has relied on Vietnamese strategic ports along the Mekong Delta's mouth to import raw materials from China, and export finished products to the US and Western markets.⁴ This is the outcome of not having a waterway linking the coastal port to the capital city. This has resulted in increased financial expense and extended time consumption. Difficulty challenges occasionally emerge due to the connectivity between the capital city and the coastal ports via road and rail. These challenges can lead to disruptions in the supply chain when transporting goods over the highway. The Funan Techo Canal is anticipated to alleviate these difficulties and bolster Cambodia's position as a key player in regional commerce. By

¹ Asian Development Bank. 2024. "Cambodia's Economic Growth to Accelerate in 2024, Fueled by Manufacturing and Tourism." Wwww.adb.org. April 11, 2024. <https://www.adb.org/news/cambodia-economic-growth-accelerate-2024-fueled-manufacturing-and-tourism>.

² Ibid.

³ "Funan Techo Canal 'to Be a Game-Changer' for Cambodia - Khmer Times." 2024. January 30, 2024. <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501431789/funan-techo-canal-to-be-a-game-changer-for-cambodia/>.

⁴ Rim, Sokvy. 2024. "BRI's Funan Techo Canal Could Steer Cambodia Away from Vietnam and towards China, Politics News - ThinkChina." Wwww.thinkchina.sg. March 11, 2024. <https://www.thinkchina.sg/bris-funan-techo-canal-could-steer-cambodia-away-vietnam-and-towards-china?page=335>.

bypassing longer and more congested overland routes, the canal will facilitate cost savings in fuel, time, and operational expenses.

Moreover, establishing the Funan Techo Canal will allow Cambodia to utilize its well-positioned and strategic location as a gateway for trade between the region's economies.³ The canal is also expected to enhance Cambodia's competitiveness and attractiveness as a trade and investment destination. With improved connectivity between the capital city and the coastal ports, the canal will help Cambodia stimulate economic growth and foster more collaborations with neighboring countries for greater economic cooperation, opening up new investment and trade collaboration avenues.

This canal could boost the domestic transportation network, regional economic collaboration, and the tourism sector in Cambodia. In the Netherlands, Amsterdam's waterway has a significant economic impact. The canal system is a maze of connecting canals that has brought merchandise from all over the world to the doorstep of the Netherlands since 1660.⁵ Currently, the canal system generates over €2 billion and supports 50,000 jobs annually, from canal tours and water taxis to transporting tourists to canal-sided restaurants.⁶ Cambodia could learn from this, allowing the Kingdom to generate another source of revenue and create more jobs for the local citizens. Despite these mega-project challenges, Cambodia will have a new shipping route connecting our capital to the sea, enabling logistical ease and attracting more foreign investments.

However, various issues are being raised by the inhabitants along the route marked for the canal construction and by the neighboring country, Vietnam.⁷ This project still undeniably concerns the local citizens over the potential displacement. They are worried about the lack of information provided by the authorities and the government, as the construction is scheduled to start in the fourth quarter of 2024.⁸ Meanwhile, Vietnam is raising concerns over

⁵ Admin, "Why The Amsterdam Canals Have Always Been a Great Place to Work - Spaces," Spaces, July 10, 2018, <https://www.spacesworks.com/why-the-amsterdam-canals-have-always-been-a-great-place-to-work/>.

⁶ Vacations, Insight. 2023. "Golden Idea: Understanding the Genius of Amsterdam's Canals." Insight Vacations, May 17, 2023. <https://www.insightvacations.com/blog/amsterdam-canals/>.

⁷ Ben, Sokhean, "In-Depth Explanation: Cambodia Allays Vietnam's Concern over Funan Techo Canal - Khmer Times." 2023. December 14, 2023. <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501407454/in-depth-explanation-cambodia-allays-vietnams-concern-over-funan-techo-canal/>.

⁸ Nimol, Seung. 2024. "Cambodia's Ambitious Funan Techo Canal Project Sparks Concerns near and Far | CamboJA News." Cambojanews.com. March 23, 2024. <https://cambojanews.com/cambodias-ambitious-funan-techo-canal-project-sparks-concerns-near-and-far/>.

environmental problems and the alteration of water flow in the Mekong Region. They believe the canal's construction will prevent water from reaching crucial areas in the Mekong Delta in Southern Vietnam, potentially creating a dry zone.⁹ During Prime Minister Hun Manet's official visit to Vietnam on 11th December 2023, he tried to alleviate the neighbor's concerns. He reaffirmed that the canal would not pose any environmental harm or threat to the region, as a study has conducted.¹⁰

The Funan Techo Canal may also have various implications for Cambodia's domestic politics. This project could be a game changer for the newly established administration under Prime Minister Hun Manet. This linking waterway will also reshape our political power dynamics within the local and regional spheres.¹¹ The successful execution of the Funan Techo Canal project requires strong governance structures, efficient coordination among government agencies, and mechanisms for stakeholder engagement and participation. Especially for a new administration under Prime Minister Hun Manet, this canal project thus presents an opportunity for the government to demonstrate its commitment to enhancing good governance, institutional capacity, accountability, and economic expansion, thereby enhancing its legitimacy and credibility in the eyes of the public.

The canal would also allow more regional and international cooperation. The waterway linking the capital city to the coastal part of the country would allow Cambodia to establish itself as a new commercial hub, offering better accessibility, trade facilitation, and logistical efficiency. This would eventually shape Cambodia's strategic importance within the region, especially for ASEAN.¹²

In conclusion, the Funan Techo Canal revolutionized Cambodia's advanced infrastructure and economic development. It is highly anticipated that the construction of this canal will be carried

⁹ "Why Cambodia's Funan Techo Canal Project Is Worrying Vietnam." 2024. Vietnam Briefing News. April 9, 2024. <https://www.vietnam-briefing.com/news/why-cambodias-funan-techo-canal-project-is-worrying-vietnam.html/#:~:text=Currently%2C%20Cambodia%20heavily%20relies%20on.>

¹⁰ Yalirozy, Teng. 2023. "Canal Will Not Harm Mekong, PM Tells Vietnam." n.d. Cambodianess. December 13, 2023. [https://cambodianess.com/article/canal-will-not-harm-mekong-pm-tells-vietnam.](https://cambodianess.com/article/canal-will-not-harm-mekong-pm-tells-vietnam)

¹¹ "Cambodia to Divert Mekong Trade via China-Built Canal, Vexing Vietnam." n.d. Nikkei Asia. March 12, 2024. [https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Asia-Insight/Cambodia-to-divert-Mekong-trade-via-China-built-canal-vexing-Vietnam.](https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Asia-Insight/Cambodia-to-divert-Mekong-trade-via-China-built-canal-vexing-Vietnam)

¹² "Funan Techo Canal - Opening Cambodia up to the World." n.d. Realestate.com.kh. May 28, 2023. [https://www.realestate.com.kh/news/Funan-Techo-Canal-Opening-Cambodia-Up-To-The-World/.](https://www.realestate.com.kh/news/Funan-Techo-Canal-Opening-Cambodia-Up-To-The-World/)

out. Hence, it is also questionable how this canal would help Cambodia further realize its long-term economic strategy to enhance its regional and international theatre position.

Mogn Sereysovathana is a Young Researcher Fellow at Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh. The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS).

The Funan Techo Canal Project: A Boon for Cambodia, a Worry for Vietnam?

Thai Sreyvin

The Funan Techo Canal is a landmark infrastructure project spearheaded by Cambodia's new Prime Minister, Hun Manet. This 180-kilometer waterway aims to connect the capital city, Phnom Penh, to the coastal province of Kep, traversing four provinces along the way, including Kandal, Kompot, Takeo, and Kep. According to the Ministry of Transport, this \$1.7 billion canal project is scheduled to be finished in 2028. The canal is 180km long, with a waterway boasting a width of 100 meters upstream and 80 meters downstream, with a depth of 5.4 meters.¹ This design allows for seamless passage of vessels up to 3,000 deadweight tons in both directions. Additionally, the project incorporates three waterway dams, eleven bridges, and a 208-kilometer sidewalk, enhancing navigation and overall connectivity.

The Funan Techo Canal is being constructed by the Chinese state-owned firm, China Road and Bridge Corporation, which secured the contract during last year's Belt and Road Forum in Beijing.² Prime Minister Hun Manet described this latest China-funded infrastructure project as a means of boosting the country's economy and reducing dependence on its eastern neighbor, likening it to "breathing through our own nose."³ The primary objective is to enhance connectivity and facilitate the efficient movement of people and goods across Cambodia. Once the canal is completed, trade and commerce are expected to thrive, providing easier and more cost-effective access to domestic and foreign markets.⁴ Additionally, Prime Minister Hun Manet emphasized that the project was strategically designed to leverage economic benefits, decrease transportation costs, attract foreign direct investment, and improve livelihoods while safeguarding the Mekong River's environment.

¹Taing, Rinith. "Funan Techo Canal 'to be a Game-changer' for Cambodia." Khmertimeskh. Last modified January 31, 2024. <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501431789/funan-techo-canal-to-be-a-game-changer-for-cambodia/>.

²Strangio, Sebastian. "\$1.7 Billion Cambodian Canal Project Draws Increasing Scrutiny." The Diplomat – Asia-Pacific Current Affairs Magazine. Last modified April 12, 2024. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/04/1-7-billion-cambodian-canal-project-draws-increasing-scrutiny/#:~:text=The%20180%2Dkilometer%2Dlong%20Techo,and%20reducing%20its%20reliance%20on.>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Sam, Seun. "The Funan Techo Canal's Advantages for Cambodia and the Region." Khmer Times - Insight into Cambodia. Last modified February 26, 2024. <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501445951/the-funan-techo-canals-advantages-for-cambodia-and-the-region/>.

Moreover, the canal holds potential for environmental sustainability and agricultural development, offering flood mitigation and water system benefits while creating ecotourism and biodiversity preservation opportunities. By serving as an ecological corridor, the canal will protect Cambodia's waterways' natural beauty. Additionally, its strategic location enables the implementation of effective irrigation systems, ensuring a stable water supply for the surrounding agricultural areas of the Kingdom. Reflecting on the historical significance of the Funan era as the most prosperous region in Southeast Asia, the Techo Funan canal is anticipated to catalyze societal harmony, preserve culture, and instill a sense of national pride in its citizens, attracting tourists to experience the nation's beauty culture.⁵

Despite Cambodia's positive outlook, Vietnam, as a neighboring nation, harbors significant concerns regarding the Funan Techo Canal. Prime Minister Hun Manet met his counterpart Pham Minh Chinh in Hanoi on December 11, 2023, to discuss various topics. Pham Minh Chinh voiced serious worries about the canal's potential adverse effects on the Mekong River's environment and water system.⁶ However, Hun Manet assured him that the project's impact on the Mekong River, especially downstream water flow, had been studied for 26 months and found to be negligible.⁷ Nonetheless, Vietnam still asserts itself as the most affected country by the project. Vietnam's main concerns include socio-environmental impacts, economic ramifications, and the South China Sea dispute. The canal is anticipated to disrupt the Mekong Delta's environment, notably affecting Vietnam's fisheries and agriculture. According to studies conducted by the US-based Stimson Center's Southeast Asia Program, the canal's construction, as envisaged, may act as a levee, preventing water from reaching crucial areas of the Mekong Delta in Southern Vietnam. However, the Cambodian government has assured that the environmental standard of the project is upheld to avoid adverse effects.

Economically, Cambodia has relied on Vietnamese strategic ports to import raw materials from China and export finished goods to the US and Western markets. Since 2011, around 30 million tons of goods

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Sok, Sothearak. "Why is Vietnam Worried About Cambodia's Mekong Canal Project?" *The Diplomat – Asia-Pacific Current Affairs Magazine*. Last modified January 2, 2024. <https://thediplomat.com/2024/01/why-is-vietnam-worried-about-cambodias-mekong-canal-project/>.

⁷ "PM: Funan Techo Canal Solely Serves Economic Purpose." *Khmer Times*. Last modified April 12, 2024. <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501471860/pm-funan-techo-canal-solely-serves-economic-purpose/#:~:text=Prime%20Minister%20Hun%20Manet%20stated,harming%20the%20Mekong%20River%20environment.>

have been transported across Vietnam-Cambodia waterway routes.⁸ The canal's completion could lessen Vietnam's shipping earnings, particularly from ports near Ho Chi Minh City, which could impact trade routes with China and Western markets. Additionally, Vietnam's last apprehension regarding the Funan Techo canal project revolves around the South China Sea dispute. It concerned that the canal's depth could facilitate China's military presence within Cambodian territory, especially with its ability to accommodate military vessels from the Gulf of Thailand to the Cambodian-Vietnam border. This strategic concern for Vietnam could potentially tip the balance in favor of China in the broader context of the South China Sea dispute.⁹

In response to allegations of China establishing a military presence in Cambodian territory, Prime Minister Hun Manet of Cambodia addressed the issue on April 11. He refuted claims linking the project to China's military intentions and appreciated those who supported the initiative. He emphasized that the Cambodian constitution strictly prohibits foreign military bases on its soil, and Cambodia has no desire or intention to violate its own constitution. He firmly rejected any foreign troop presence within the country's borders and adamantly opposed the exploitation of Cambodia as a launching point for aggression against any other nations.

The Funan Techo Canal project promises numerous benefits for Cambodia, such as reducing transportation time, distance, and costs and fostering economic growth and agricultural development. Despite challenges and external scrutiny, the Ministry of Public Works and Transport recently declared that the government is actively negotiating with Chinese development partners to finalize the formal agreement. Overall, the Funan Techo Canal represents a project of significant potential for Cambodia, although its environmental impact and effects on regional dynamics are yet to be fully understood. Vietnam's concerns underscore the intricate geopolitical context surrounding the project.

Thai Sreyvin is a Young Researcher Fellow at Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh. The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS).

⁸Brancaccio, Lucia. "Why Cambodia's Funan Techo Canal Project is Worrying Vietnam." Vietnam Briefing News. Last modified April 9, 2024. <https://www.vietnam-briefing.com/news/why-cambodias-funan-techo-canal-project-is-worrying-vietnam.html/>.

⁹ Ibid.

Cambodian-Thai People-To-People Relations: The Fight toward Ownership of Cultural Heritage

Leng Molina

Two Southeast Asian countries, Cambodia and Thailand, share a very similar culture in terms of art, custom, dance, and cultural heritage. However, Thai-Cambodian people-to-people relations have been influenced by a complexity of historical ties, cultural exchange, and similarity over the past few decades. Due to the complex historical relations and cultural similarity between these two countries, the claim of ownership of cultural heritage has emerged as a focal point of tension for Cambodian-Thai people-to-people that could prolong cultural disputes without mutual understanding.

Another element fostering the cultural rivalry between Thailand and Cambodia is irredentism. The phrase describes those willing to fight to protect the treasured territory their ancestors formerly controlled. Thailand has had to deal with irrational claims regarding its cultural legacy from Cambodians because of this irredentism. However, irredentism has also caused Thai nationalists to misunderstand the historical background presented in textbooks and other narratives. For instance, in the commentary produced by Bangkok Post, it has been found that the extreme sense of nationalism has already had a strong influence in kids' minds due to the history book taught in school. The kids strongly believed that Thailand is the greatest in this region and that all the neighboring countries nowadays were once owned by Thailand. Therefore, the kids keep claiming that the other few neighboring countries, including Myanmar, are aggressive and heartless.

At the same time, Cambodia is a nation that cannot be trusted, and Laos is weaker than Thailand due to the textbook that had taught them so. Another example of Thailand claiming ownership of Cambodian land that was written in a historical theory was found in Vadhakarn's theory. According to this theory, Cambodia belonged to an ethnic group called "Khom," and Cambodia was also a part of the Thai race.¹ Meanwhile, according to archeological findings and other

¹ Bora Touch, "A Khmer View of the Thai View of the Khmer," *Phnom Penh Post*, no. 8/19 (September 1999). <https://khmerstorylovers3.yolasite.com/resources/Touch%20Bora%20-%20A%20Khmer%20View%20of%20the%20Thai%20View%20of%20the%20Khmer.pdf>

research documents, humans first settled in what is now known as "Cambodia" at least 40,000² years ago (Chandler, n.d.).

On the other hand, the discussion, findings, and reports from the Cambodia site regarding the ownership of the land claimed that a few provinces, including Battambang, Siem Reap, and Srei Sophorn, that were invaded by Thailand in 1795 also originally belonged to Cambodia (Touch, 1999). Furthermore, due to the lack of an identified historical context for the Thai nation and its cultural legacy, nationalists in Thailand are attempting to assert their cultural history by creating confusing cinematic applications. For instance, in 2020, the Thai filmmaker from Channel 3, one of the biggest Thai televisions, featured Angkor Wat in the background of the film titled "The Promise," which intensified tensions among the public between the two countries. In this regard, according to the Ministry of Fine Art investigation of this case, the director of the ministry's cinema and cultural diffusion claimed that Thai film producers did not submit any requests to shoot a film in Cambodia despite the documentary for the last two years³. These factors contributed to the continued hate speech and cultural criticism on social media between Thais and Cambodians.⁴

Once at a time, a severe dispute between these two nations over who should own cultural elements turned into the first-ever military confrontation over ownership of the Preah Vihear temple, situated along the border between Thailand and Cambodia. Following Preah Vihear's designation as a World Heritage Site in 2008, tensions between Thailand and Cambodia intensified. While Cambodian forces controlled the Ta Moan complex, Thai soldiers took control of smaller temples. Patrols engaged in low-level combat, but the soldiers subsequently retreated. The Thai army accused Cambodian soldiers of trying to provoke the dispute. UNESCO officials conducted a "reinforced monitoring mission" to the temple, finding damage

² David Chandler, "Cambodia: A Historical Overview | Asia Society," accessed May 28, 2024, <https://asiasociety.org/education/cambodia-historical-overview>

³ Sakun Po and Vantha Phoung, "Cambodia Is Investigating the Use of the Image of Angkor Wat on a Thai Movie Poster," *Cambodianess*, accessed May 28, 2024, <https://cambodianess.com/article/cambodia-is-investigating-the-use-of-the-image-of-angkor-wat-on-a-thai-movie-poster>

⁴ The Rice Field, "The Never-Ending Feud of Thailand-Cambodia Cultural Conflict," *Medium* (blog), May 16, 2024, <https://medium.com/@thericefield/the-never-ending-feud-of-thailand-cambodia-cultural-conflict-ada78cf953bf>.

to the temple to be minor but a risk of further incidents. Fighting broke out in April 2009, with higher-caliber weapons used, resulting in casualties.⁵

In 2021, a significant dispute over cultural ownership emerged about Angkor Wat, a World Heritage Site. The Sihaknakhon Temple is being constructed in Buriram province, northeast of Thailand, with an investment of 100 million baht by Thai authorities in 2021. The Cambodian government announced that they would send archaeologists and temple architects to determine whether or not the site had too many similarities to Angkor Wat as tensions began to rise. Furthermore, asserting that the temple has no greater similarity, the head of construction and the Thai government have denied attempting to copy it. Anger among Cambodians erupted immediately following the Thai construction officials' remark, sparking a social media battle. A few hashtags, including #SaveAngkorWat and #Angkorwatbelongtokhmer, were shared across social media, and this controversy still goes viral on the internet. Meanwhile, Cambodians and Thais keep arguing about ownership and imitating the temple.⁶

Moreover, there was another dispute between Khmer martial arts and Muay Thai during the 32nd Southeast Asian Games that Cambodia hosted earlier in the year. The term "Muay" was dropped from the letter, and "Kun Khmer" was used instead for the boxing match at the 2023 Southeast Asian Games, which sparked the controversy. Even the former Muay Thai boxer made a post about owning Khmer martial arts and Muay Thai during that period, which sparked further retaliation for the ongoing conflict between Thais and Cambodians⁷. Thiago Teixeira, a boxer from Brazil, was banned from the sport due to the controversy surrounding the origins of kickboxing, which involved Cambodia and Thailand. On the other hand, Cambodia is also promoting its version of kickboxing, Kun Khmer, and has removed Muay Thai from the upcoming Southeast Asian Games. The International Federation of Muaythai Associations has

⁵ "Cambodia/Thailand, Border Conflict around the Temple of Preah Vihear | How Does Law Protect in War? - Online Casebook," accessed May 28, 2024, <https://casebook.icrc.org/case-study/cambodiathailand-border-conflict-around-temple-preah-vihear>

⁶ Rebecca Ratcliffe and Rebecca Ratcliffe South east Asia correspondent, "New Thai Temple Sparks Controversy over Claims It Imitates Angkor Wat," *The Guardian*, August 27, 2021, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/27/new-thai-temple-controversy-claims-imitates-angkor-wat>

⁷ Khmer Times, "More Controversy on Cambodian Martial Arts as Thai Man Claims He Was Bokator Boxer Seen on Cambodian Social Media," January 26, 2023, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501226612/more-controversy-on-cambodian-martial-arts-as-thai-man-claims-he-was-bokator-boxer-seen-on-cambodian-social-media/>

also banned participation in Kun Khmer from the upcoming SEA game 2025 hosted by Thailand.⁸

Recently, there has been yet another needless argument between Thais and Cambodians around the celebration of Songkran and the Khmer New Year. The four mainland Southeast Asian nations of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand celebrate Sangkranta as a national holiday; nevertheless, rivalry has only ever arisen between Thailand and Cambodia. It was formally acknowledged as an intangible cultural heritage event in December 2023 after UNESCO initially filed the proposal for UNESCO listing to the Thai government in March 2020⁹. Some Cambodians object to the term Sangkranta because it sounds a lot like the Thai Sangkran festival and because there has been a dispute between Thais due to past and current tensions on cultural issues. However, the prime minister of Cambodia has declared that, in the future, Cambodia will also ask that Sangkranta in Cambodia be included on the UNESCO list of intangible cultural heritage of humanity due to the tension and public misconceptions regarding Songkran in Thailand being recognized by UNESCO.¹⁰

The people-to-people relations between Cambodia and Thailand have grown increasingly difficult due to their comparable cultures and levels of sensitivity. Even after these two countries had engaged in direct military combat over a territorial dispute with a claim to cultural heritage, animosity and criticism persisted between them. As neighboring countries, the ongoing friction regarding the origins of some cultural heritages, such as Muay Thai, the New Year's celebration, and the Angkor Wat temple debate, may affect diplomatic ties. To improve knowledge and admiration of one another's cultures, both governments must work together to combat fake news and make a concerted effort to hold formal cultural diplomatic discussions.

⁸ "More Controversy on Cambodian Martial Arts as Thai Man Claims He Was Bokator Boxer Seen on Cambodian Social Media - Khmer Times." <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501226612/more-controversy-on-cambodian-martial-arts-as-thai-man-claims-he-was-bokator-boxer-seen-on-cambodian-social-media/#:~:text=A%20former%20Muay%20Thai%20boxer,hosted%20by%20Cambodia%20in%20May>.

⁹ Post Reporter, "Songkran Wins Unesco Recognition," *Bangkok Post*, accessed May 28, 2024, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2699816/songkran-wins-unesco-recognition>.

¹⁰ "Cambodia Eyes Enlisting 'Songkran in Cambodia' in UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List - Khmer Times," February 9, 2024, https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501437780/cambodia-eyes-enlisting-songkran-in-cambodia-in-unesco-intangible-cultural-heritage-list/#google_vignette

Leng Molina is a Young Researcher Fellow at Center for Southeast Asian Studies and a Programme Assistant at Transparency International Cambodia. She is also a senior student majoring in International Relations at Institute for International Studies and Public Policy. The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS).

Cambodian Songkran's UNESCO Bid By 2025 and Its Effect on Cambodia-Thailand Relations

Seat Munysontary

Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet has announced that he plans to submit “Cambodia Songkran” to UNESCO by 2025. The decision was made public when he attended an inauguration at Pursat Province. This resolution is because Thai people have been using the word “Songkran” for the celebration of Thai New Year, which has made Cambodia people concerned and confused that they might not be able to use this word properly way since Thailand has already registered their “Songkran” celebration to UNSECO. Indeed, it is a reason that the Cambodian Prime Minister, Hun Manet, wants to make a process of applying to register with UNESCO so that his people can have an official celebration of Songkran for its version and also another heritage for Khmer people.

Prime Minister of Cambodia, Hun Manet, has emphasized that “Songkran” is not only for Thailand, but it is a festival that Cambodia, Laos, and other countries in the religion have always celebrated yearly. Indeed, to achieve this aim for World Heritage status, he urged the Minister of Culture to prepare all the necessary documentation for UNESCO’s approval. Moreover, the Prime Minister of Cambodia assured the public about the country’s cultural heritage and encouraged the continued use of “Songkran” during the New Year season.¹

In addition, the Cambodian Prime Minister called on his people and neighboring Thailand to avoid unnecessary disputing, as Thailand’s Songkran traditional New Year festival has been inscribed to UNESCO before Cambodia. Otherwise, this has shown that it is not a concern for Cambodian people because these two countries share the same culture and history. Moreover, “Songkran” is a Sanskrit-derived term for the traditional New Year of the Buddhist calendar, which is noticed in several Asian Buddhist countries.² As a result, Cambodia and Thailand

¹ EAC News., “Cambodia Plans to Submit,” March 31, 2024, <https://eacnews.asia/home/details/29548>.

²Star Online, “Cambodian PM Moves to Add Songkran to Unesco Heritage Listing,” *The Star*, February 12, 2024,

<https://www.thestar.com.my/aseanplus/aseanplus-news/2024/02/12/cambodian-pm-moves-to-add-songkran-to-unesco-heritage-listing>.

have no reason to debate this topic anymore since Cambodia will apply for their version of Songkran to UNESCO.

In the future, if Cambodia's Songkran passes the UNESCO list, it would be an honor for its people to have their version of the Songkran festival and celebrate it officially. They can especially show the world their culture during the Khmer New Year, and it might be a great way to grab tourists' attention and encourage them to visit Cambodia. If Khmer people commemorate the event, tourists would love to see and expect something new, enhancing and enriching their experiences with Cambodians. Furthermore, it is also a great chance to share different versions of Songkran between Thailand and Cambodia and celebrate the festival together on the holidays. This shows that these two countries would help their cultural and social relations ties very close and would lead to tourism development.

It is not the first time that Cambodia and Thailand have had a dispute about their cultural treasures. In the past, they argued over the ownership of the historic Khmer temple, Prasat Preah Vihear, which was given to Cambodia in 1962. In 2005, the Cambodian government submitted a registration appeal to UNESCO.³ Therefore, Cambodia returned the Preah Vihear temple to its country after that. Their relationship has significantly improved in the past decade.

Lately, Thailand and Cambodia have agreed to upgrade their relationship to a Strategic Partnership, focusing on tourism cooperation and promoting regional tourism through the "Six Countries, One Destination" campaign. To ease private vehicle border crossing, Thailand proposes an update to the Agreement on Border Crossing to permit short-term and extended border passes and resumption negotiations on the Bilateral Agreement on Cross-Border Transportation by Road. The two countries also plan to open the Royal Thai Consulate-General in Siem Reap and the Royal Consulate-General of Cambodia in Songkhla.⁴ Through continued collaboration and engagement in partnership, both countries can strengthen their bilateral relations and contribute to regional harmony and prosperity.

³Rice Field, "The Never-Ending Feud of Thailand-Cambodia Cultural Conflict," *Medium*, May 16, 2024, <https://medium.com/@thericefield/the-never-ending-feud-of-thailand-cambodia-cultural-conflict-ada78cf953bf>.

⁴Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Thailand . 8 February 2024. "Thailand and Cambodia announced Strategic Partnership to foster closer cooperation for common peace and development." Available at [Thailand and Cambodia announced Strategic Partnership to foster closer cooperation for common peace and development - กระทรวงการต่างประเทศ \(mfa.go.th\)](https://www.mfa.go.th/en/press-releases/2024/02/08/thailand-and-cambodia-announced-strategic-partnership-to-foster-closer-cooperation-for-common-peace-and-development)

Cambodia-Thai diplomacy has essential implications for peace and security throughout Southeast Asia despite the political complexity and sensitivities involved. Even though the growth of nationalism and populism presents a challenge, it is essential that Thailand and Cambodia, along with their regional counterparts, face these dynamics with an open mind and commitment to mutual understanding. They should encourage increased interpersonal interaction and make sure that the common goals of stability, prosperity, and peace prevail over divisive tendencies.⁵ By showcasing the rich cultural heritage of both countries through various initiatives and events, promoting academic and tourism collaborations, and emphasizing mutual respect and appreciation for each other's cultures, the bond between Thailand and Cambodia can be deepened and cultural relations enhanced.

In conclusion, the decision to encourage Cambodia and Thailand's bilateral relationship to a Strategic Partnership is an important turning point in their history. Both nations have the potential to improve their connections and advance peace and prosperity in the region by collaborating more closely in the fields of tourism, border management, consular services, and diplomatic engagement. Cambodia and Thailand may establish an effective framework for permanent cooperation and friendship by prioritizing communication, mutual understanding, and cross-cultural exchange.

Seat Munysonary is a Young Researcher Fellow at Center for Southeast Asian Studies. She is also a sophomore student majoring in International Relations at Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh. The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS).

⁵ Lim, Chhay, and Sovitou Long. 27 March 2024. "The past, present and future of Cambodia–Thailand relations." *East Asia Forum*. Available at <https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/03/27/the-past-present-and-future-of-cambodia-thailand-relations/#:~:text=Prioritising%20cross%2Dborder%20trade%20and,sensitivity%20between%20the%20two%20nations.>

Assessing Cambodia-Thailand Relations Under New Leadership

Sok Hour

On 7th February 2024, Cambodia-Thailand relations experienced a rapid improvement under the new leaders of both countries. Under Prime Minister (PM) Srettha Thavisin, Thailand has turned its strategy toward Cambodia as his first state official among Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN) members.¹ Meanwhile, Cambodian PM Hun Manet visited Thailand to commemorate the 75th anniversary of Cambodia-Thailand relations.

The significance of the new relations is to evaluate the bilateral ties from a “partnership of peace and prosperity” to a “strategic partnership”.² In addition, both countries are committed to strengthening the digital and green economy, tourism, education, labor, and security sectors.³ Common ground, such as party-centric, economic, and security considerations, promotes the growth of the new strategic partnership.

In 2022, The Royal Government of Cambodia introduced a Defense White Paper 2022 (DWP 22)⁴. This document is the key national defense policy of Phnom Penh, which opened its defense purpose and strategic objective to publicity. DWP 22 marked border security as its core defense strategy. Reflecting on history, the border conflict between Phnom Penh and Bangkok in 2008 caused memories for leaders and civilians of both states. Even though the relations between Cambodia and Thailand have been stable and positive for a decade, the leader from a defense background still needs to foster the negotiation of the 11 un-demarcation borders with Thailand⁵.

¹ The Phnom Penh Posts. Thavisin touches down in Phnom Penh for first official visit to an ASEAN member state. September 28, 2023. <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/thavisin-touches-down-phnom-penh-first-official-visit-asean-member-state>

² Ministry of Foreign Affairs & International Cooperation. Cambodia and Thailand elevate bilateral relation to Strategic Partnership. February 8, 2024. <https://www.mfaic.gov.kh/posts/2024-02-08-Press-Release-Cambodia-and-Thailand-elevate-bilateral-relations-to-Strategic-Partnership--16-11-36>

³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs & International Cooperation. Cambodia and Thailand to further enhance Partnership for Peace and Prosperity. September 28, 2024. [Cambodia and Thailand to further Enhance Partnership for Peace and Prosperity. - Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation \(mfaic.gov.kh\)](https://www.mfaic.gov.kh/posts/2024-09-28-Press-Release-Cambodia-and-Thailand-to-further-enhance-partnership-for-peace-and-prosperity)

⁴ Ministry of National Defense. National Defense Policy. 2022. <https://dot.mod.gov.kh/dwp2022/>

⁵ Khmer Times. Thailand-Cambodia border demarcation becomes clearer. September 06, 2022. <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501145801/thailand-cambodia-border-demarcation-becomes-clearer/>

On the maritime border, Phnom Penh and Bangkok share 27000 square kilometers of overlapping claimed areas (OCA) in the Gulf of Thailand, which consists of 11 trillion cubic feet of natural gas.⁶ This issue was left by the previous government when the Thai cabinet unilaterally decided to scrap the 2001 Memorandum of Understanding, a framework to settle the maritime border between both countries.⁷ Because of the need for domestic usage and economic development, the OCA negotiation became the main agenda for both governments to find solutions and joint exploration for mutual benefit.

Economic development is also a factor in pushing the Cambodia-Thailand partnership. In 2022, the former PM Hun Sen introduced an Economic Diplomacy Strategy (2021-2023). This economic strategy aims to attract foreign direct investment and promote international trade, tourism, cultures, and sports for national economic development.

Thailand stands as Cambodian fourth-largest trading partner and second-largest trading partner in ASEAN, accounting for 3.71 billion dollars in 2023⁸; trade areas comprise textiles, gems, agriculture, foodstuff, automobiles, and construction materials. The new ties with Bangkok are planned to reach 15 billion in 2025. Manet's administration will attract more investment in the digital economy, tourism, agriculture, and infrastructure development sectors, as seen in his statement during the Cambodia-Thailand Business Council Forum 2024.

Another critical aspect in shaping new strategic partnerships is domestic politics. The closer relationship between the former PM Hun Sen and Thaksin will influence the next generation of both parties, especially when the Pheu Thai Party (PTP) backs to power, and the Cambodian People Party (CPP) remains in office. In the new government, there were five high-level visits by both countries, two by the Cambodian side-prime minister and CPP leader and three by the Thailand-prime minister, house of the speaker, and PTP president.

⁶ Thai PBS World. Maritime dispute with Cambodia remains a hurdle for joint oil exploration. January 31, 2024. [Maritime dispute with Cambodia remains a hurdle for joint oil exploration | Thai PBS World : The latest Thai news in English, News Headlines, World News and News Broadcasts in both Thai and English. We bring Thailand to the world.](https://www.thaipbsworld.com/maritime-dispute-with-cambodia-remains-a-hurdle-for-joint-oil-exploration/)

⁷ AustchamThailand. Thailand Cambodia Overlapping Claims Area. Is a settlement in sight. March 09, 2023. <https://www.austchamthailand.com/thailand-cambodia-overlapping-claims-area-is-a-settlement-in-sight/>

⁸The Phnom Penh Posts. Bilateral trade with Thailand nearly \$ 342M. February 24, 2024. <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/business/bilateral-trade-with-thailand-nearly-342m#:~:text=This%20included%20trade%20agreements%2C%20such,%2Dyear%20decrease%20of%2020.5%25.>

As invited the PTP leader to visit Cambodia by CPP leader Hun Sen when he dropped by his godbrother for lunch after parole.⁹ The PTP leader has met with Cambodian high-level public institutions to discuss future cooperation and mechanisms to enhance the mutual benefit of new strategic ties in the economy, tourism, and digital. This was reflected in Paetongtarn, who was recently appointed as PTP president, meeting with Cambodian PM Hun Manet, National Assembly acting president Chea Yeap, Senate president Say Chhum, and CPP leader Hun Sen.¹⁰ The closer relationship between ruling parties can be a sign that PTP is fully active in working with the Hun Manet government and Hun Sen's party to promote peace, digitalize the economy, strengthen relations, and strive for mutual gain for both kingdoms.

The relationship between Cambodia and Thailand has become warm and stable in the past due to domestic political factors. Currently, both countries are under new administration and firm strategies arising from security, economy, and domestic political factors. To improve the relationship more positively and closer, both countries should increase dialogue to address the common issue, people to people, and find the proper solution for the current ties.

Sok Hour is a Young Research Fellow at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies. He is also a senior student majoring in International Relations at the Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh. The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS).

⁹CNA. Thailand's Billionaires ex-PM Thaksin release on Parole. Feb 18, 2024

<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/thailand-thaksin-shinawatra-parole-released-4132101>

¹⁰ Jintamas. Daughter of Divisive Former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Name ahead of Political Party linked to Him. October 27, 2023. <https://apnews.com/article/thaksin-shinawatra-paetongtarn-pheu-thai-party-leader-86a706a96f88f7408e2fe11c0947ee66>

The Fourth Leadership Transition in Singapore: What to Expect

Meng Lyhor

Previous transitions have been pivotal for Singapore; the first was Lee Kwan Yew's handing over to Goh Chok Tong in 1990, marking a new era. The second transition in 2004, when Goh Chok Tong handed over to Lee Hsien Loong, brought in a focus on innovation, infrastructure development, and social policies. Now, the People's Action Party (PAP) announces the fourth transition on Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's social media, besides addressing the leadership transition as a “significant moment” and declaring the relinquishment of his role as Prime Minister and handing over the leadership to Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong, Prime Minister Lee also praised Mr. Wong and the 4G team's work during the pandemic.

Lawrence Wong, who will turn 51 this year, first entered politics in 2011 and served as Lee's principal private secretary from 2005 to 2008, leading the education and national development ministries before becoming finance minister in 2021 and deputy prime minister in 2022.

After successfully leading Singapore through the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2022, his colleagues and cabinet ministers chose him as the leader of the next generation. When the COVID-19 pandemic increased the need for strategic leadership among multi-ministry task force (MTF) members, Mr. Wong readily accepted the request to co-chair the MTF. For instance, in July 2021, the MTF tightened restrictions due to the Jurong Fishery Port and karaoke lounge COVID-19 clusters. Despite public frustration over rising cases and increasing vaccination rates, Mr. Wong addressed the public's disappointment by expressing empathy and understanding. In another moment in March 2020, Mr. Wong teared up in Parliament while thanking frontline workers; a display of compassion connected with people boosted public support for him and the MTF.¹ In FY2020 Covid-19 expenditure, the government planned to use \$52 billion but only used \$31.9 billion, which has put him in the spotlight, showing his effective pandemic responses, economic rebound, and empathetic leadership.²

¹ Woo Jun Jie, “Commentary: COVID-19 Paved Lawrence Wong's Path to 4G Leader, but We Should Look Beyond That,” *CNA*, April 18, 2022, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/lawrence-wong-4g-leader-mtf-pandemic-2630756>

²Tham Yuen-C, “Budget 2022: \$6b Draw on Past Reserves to Pay for Covid-19 Public Health Expenditure,” *The*

In Singapore, the "4G team" refers to the fourth generation of political leaders in the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) in which leaders are expected to take over the reins from the current third generation of leaders to ensure continuity and stability in Singapore's governance. In the statement issued by the Prime Minister's Office, Mr. Lee stated about the consultation process that Cabinet ministers affirmed on April 14th, 2022, choosing Minister Lawrence Wong to be a 4G leader. Mr. Wong's appointment comes with deep experience in economic strategies, energy, and healthcare finance, positioning him best for his new role to navigate Singapore's complex challenges with the support of his team from the private sector and the involvement of other members of the MTF.

On his top priority agenda, a cabinet reshuffle was seen as a way for the 4G team to unite. As mentioned in the CNA interview, DPM Lawrence Wong said that since he couldn't bring outsiders to join the team until the election, he will continue renewing, updating the team, and forming the best possible team for Singapore. However, there might be a reform and change in the cabinet lineup.³

One of the expectations from Lawrence Wong's leadership is how he handles economic imperatives. While Singapore moves through the complexities of post-pandemic recovery and faces global geo-economic instability, his background and experiences as Finance Minister present his capacity to tackle the challenges. With the ongoing economic and livelihood issues such as jobs, cost of living, and education, the Forward Singapore exercise, which is a key plan that was launched by DPM Lawrence Wong, can be expected to be more prominent in the months ahead after he is sworn in as the next Prime Minister.

Mr. Wong has set policies to address the challenges mid-career workers face in Singapore's evolving economy. As part of the "Forward SG" road map, significant investments were announced in the latest budget to support skill development for ages 40 and above, including a S\$4,000 top-up in "SkillsFuture" credits and up to S\$3,000 monthly training allowances for selected full-time courses.⁴ In 2021, over 660,000 Singaporeans benefited from this

Straits Times, February 19, 2022, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/politics/budget-2022-6b-draw-on-past-reserves-to-pay-for-covid-19-public-health-expenditure>.

³Taufiq Zalizan, "Analysis: 5 Priorities on Lawrence Wong's Agenda as Next Prime Minister," *TODAY*, May 8, 2024, <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/analysis-5-priorities-lawrence-wong-agenda-pm-2404011>

⁴Ang Hwee Min, "Budget 2024: S\$4,000 SkillsFuture Top-up for Singaporeans Aged 40 and Above," *CNA*,

SkillsFuture-supported program, said Mr. Wong in the Singapore Economic Policy Forum on 18 October 2022.⁵ Mr. Wong also announced financial support for retrenched workers, marking a shift in the government's stance on unemployment benefits. He emphasized the need for support due to the rapid technological changes that create economic churn, leading to job losses and new opportunities. These measures aim to help workers adapt, thereby boosting the economy.

Mr. Wong announced a significant increase in the Goods and Services Tax (GST) in his first budget statement this year. This decision was necessary as Singapore faces rising healthcare costs and an aging population. The GST hike is expected to generate an additional S\$3.5 billion to help cover these increasing expenses.⁶

Singapore needs a leader who understands finances, and the government needs to support citizens and explain tough decisions. Based on Mr. Wong's experience as a civil servant at the Energy Market Authority, he is ready to tackle critical issues by leading initiatives like electric vehicle testing in which aligns perfectly with the government's objective of phasing out petrol and diesel cars by 2040.

Beyond domestic considerations, Lawrence Wong's leadership is to shape Singapore's role on the global stage, especially facing the China-US rivalry, which presents the most obvious challenge. The senior lecturer at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy outlined the challenges facing Mr. Wong and mentioned that in order to maintain diplomatic relations as well as navigate emerging conflicts, Mr. Wong will need to spend time and diplomatic efforts to strengthen existing ties and foster new ones.⁷ Before stepping into office in 2023, Mr. Wong had already led several foreign trips to the US for sides to upgrade bilateral technology partnerships across key domains and China for the highest-level bilateral forum in which both sides agreed on several items, including new digital dialogue, amid a boost for ties. Moreover, Mr. Wong also led a trip to Europe, where he announced his intent to upgrade relations with

February 17, 2024, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/budget-2024-skillsfuture-top-4128721>.

⁵Koh_Yong_Sheng, "DPM Lawrence Wong at the Singapore Economic Policy Forum 2022," Prime Minister's Office Singapore, n.d., <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/DPM-Lawrence-Wong-at-the-Singapore-Economic-Policy-Forum-2022>.

⁶Judith Tan, "Budget 2024: \$3.5b to Help Seniors Age Actively, Stay Socially Connected," *The Straits Times*, February 19, 2024, <https://straitstimes.com/singapore/budget-2024-35-billion-to-help-seniors-age-actively-stay-socially-connected>.

⁷"Lawrence Wong's Ascent as Singapore's 4th Generation Leader," Lowy Institute, n.d., <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/the-interpretor/lawrence-wong-s-ascent-singapore-s-4th-generation-leader>.

Germany and France. Apart from his current positions as deputy prime minister and finance minister, Wong has held several previous roles on Singapore's international links, including portfolios tied to defense and education and being chief executive of the Energy Market Authority.⁸

Mr. Wong's rise through the ranks in various ministries since 2012, along with his task of tackling COVID-19 in 2020, brought him to the spotlight of achievement and gained more popularity among Singaporeans. Another milestone of his work is the launch of the Forward Singapore exercise, which showed how he and the 4G team tend to take the country forward to achieve the "Singapore dream" showing his readiness and commitment. Lawrence Wong's term as the next Prime Minister of Singapore marks the beginning of a path towards a better, more inclusive future as residents look forward to a new age of leadership.

Meng Lyhor is a Young Research Fellow at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, currently majoring in International Studies at the Institute for International Studies and Public Policy. The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS).

⁸Asean Wonk, "How New Singapore Leader Lawrence Wong Could Shape Foreign Policy," *ASEAN Wonk* (blog), April 15, 2024, <https://www.aseanwonk.com/p/lawrence-wong-singapore-foreign-policy-outlook>.

Singapore's Fourth Prime Minister: Navigating Challenges Under Lawrence Wong's Leadership

Soeung Phearanon

The swearing-in ceremony on May 15 marked Singapore's first transition of power in 20 years. Former Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong stepped down, and former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance Lawrence Wong ascended to the role. The 64-year-old city-state has had four Prime Ministers, all from the same People's Action Party (PAP).

Assuming the Prime Minister's office, Wong inherits the accomplishments and shortcomings of his predecessors. This commentary will focus on the obstacles that await the new Prime Minister.

Lawrence Wong was born into a modest Hainanese family and was educated in the United States. Before this, Wong rose in various public office positions, from civil servant to member of parliament, minister, and deputy prime minister in Singapore's highly meritocratic system. Most notably, he was appointed co-chair of the COVID-19 task force during the pandemic.¹ As co-chair, he successfully managed Singapore during the pandemic, maintaining a low infection and mortality rate. These achievements were accomplished with a \$75.6 billion (SGD) expenditure, lower than the \$100 billion budget allocated. This job gained him popularity among Singaporeans through interviews and press conferences, where he provided updates and reassurances and announced government policies to the public, along with support from his party.²

The PAP has faced damaging events in recent years. Corruption allegations and claims of receiving gifts exceeding 380,000 Singapore dollars led to the arrest of Transport Minister Iswaran on July 11th. Subsequent investigations have resulted in additional charges, totaling

1 PM Office SG. 2024. "Mr Lawrence WONG." Prime Minister's Office Singapore. May 19, 2024. Accessed May 20, 2024. <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/The-Cabinet/Mr-Lawrence-WONG>.

2 Mohan, Matthew. 2024. "Lawrence Wong's Leadership Amid COVID-19 Pandemic Helped Elevate Him to Top Post: Observers." CNA, May 8, 2024. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/lawrence-wong-4g-leader-analysts-2626466>.

35 by March 25th³. Just a week after Iswaran's arrest, another scandal erupted involving an extramarital affair between the Speaker and a Member of Parliament, resulting in their resignations. The scandals have significantly impacted the PAP's reputation for honesty and incorruptibility, given Singapore's long-standing clean political image, dubbed "the most severe crisis of public confidence in recent times" by the state-owned CNA.⁴

At the same time, the opposition forces are gaining more share in the parliament seats. No one, not even the opposition leaders, has been louder than Lawrence Wong in reiterating this trend. On many occasions, Wong alerted his party members about the possibility that the PAP could lose the next election. Meanwhile, the opposition themselves are the ones denying these possibilities. A spokesman from the Progress Singapore Party mocked this, stating: "The chance of having no opposition MPs elected to parliament is a 'far more probable' scenario."⁵

While it is unlikely that the PAP will lose the next election, it is clear that Singapore's political landscape has changed. Singaporeans' "hunger for more opposition voices" could challenge the PAP to maintain a supermajority in parliament, which could lead to an inability to make effective decisions and produce fewer "capable politicians," according to the PAP. That is precisely the goal of the PAP's biggest opposition, the Workers' Party. The turnout from the 2020 polls proved that this goal has a long way to go. The PAP won 61.24% of the popular votes in 2020, which decreased by 9% from the 2015 results but still gained 83 out of 93 seats, 89% of parliament, and the remaining ten seats were held by WP MPs.⁶ The other nine candidate parties did not win any.

Singapore's neutral position within ASEAN is being challenged, with member states leaning towards the United States or China despite claims of "not choosing sides." This favoritism

3 CNA. 2024. "Iswaran's Case: A Timeline of Events From Graft Probe, Resignation and New Charges." CNA, March 25, 2024. Accessed May 05, 2024. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/iswaran-corruption-cpi-timeline-ong-beng-seng-fl-lum-kok-seng-4054046>.

4 Min, Ang Hwee. 2023. "PAP Faces a Severe Crisis After String of Incidents Including Tan Chuan-Jin's Affair: Analysts." CNA, July 18, 2023. Accessed May 05, 2024. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/pap-tan-chuan-jin-cheng-li-hui-affair-workers-party-leon-perera-nicole-seah-3634196>.

5 Lim, Kimberly. 2024. "Can Singapore's Opposition Really Win the Next General Election and Form a Coalition Government?" South China Morning Post, May 19, 2024. Accessed May 05, 2024. <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3263131/can-singapores-opposition-really-win-next-general-election-and-form-coalition-government>.

6 Loh, Dylan. 2020. "Singapore Election Results Give PAP Supermajority as Rivals Rise." Nikkei Asia, July 10, 2020. Accessed May 05, 2024. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Singapore-election/Singapore-election-results-give-PAP-supermajority-as-rivals-rise>.

manifests in various forms, including public opinion. The ISEAS conducted an annual survey over two consecutive years, targeting Southeast Asian individuals generally more familiar with politics, such as scholars, businesspeople, and policymakers. The overall result was that 38.9% of ASEAN chose China in 2022 and 50.5% in 2023. The perspective in Singapore did not change much, with about 38% favoring China in both years. However, Malaysia went from 54% to 75%. This presents three trends: unpredictable shifts in a short period, fragmentation in public opinion across the region, and growing favor towards China.

Singapore faces social problems, including inequality and the lack of welfare programs. Credit Suisse in 2022 reports that the “crazy rich” top 1% in Singapore owns 34% of the country's wealth⁷. In Oxfam's Commitment to Reducing Inequality (CRI) index 2022, Singapore ranked 80 out of 161 countries. Oxfam's justification for giving such a low score to the country was its low public spending on education, health, and social protection and a low minimum tax rate for the wealthiest Singaporeans.⁸ Although the low spending on education and healthcare is not necessarily a problem for Singapore, given that the country is appraised internationally in those fields for its low cost and remarkable results, social welfare will need to be improved. Singapore's fast-aging population, the wide inequality gap, and the rising cost of living will force this highly meritocratic government and society to focus more on social welfare.⁹

Singapore's new Prime Minister, Lawrence Wong, faces domestic challenges like addressing the opposition's growing influence and engaging younger voters more actively. Internationally, he must continue Singapore's careful balancing act between the U.S. and China amid escalating tensions through skilled diplomacy that avoids upsetting either superpower. Wong recognizes the need for Singapore to be “thoughtful, careful, nimble” in navigating this complex geopolitical environment. He must also consider Singapore's divided public opinion on which power to favor. Wong's tenure will require deft handling of domestic and foreign affairs to maintain Singapore's prosperity and stability in a rapidly changing global landscape.

7 Credit Suisse Research Institute. 2023. “Global Wealth Databook 2022.” Accessed May 21, 2024. <https://www.credit-suisse.com/media/assets/corporate/docs/about-us/research/publications/global-wealth-report-2022-en.pdf>.

8 Walker, Jo, Matthew Martin, Emma Seery, Nabil Abdo, Anthony Kamande, and Max Lawson. 2023. “The Commitment to Reducing Inequality Index 2022 - Oxfam Policy & Practice.” Oxfam Policy & Practice. July 6, 2023. Accessed May 20, 2024. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/the-commitment-to-reducing-inequality-index-2022-621419/>.

9 Forbes, Steve. 2020. “Superb Healthcare at Ultra-Low Prices? How Singapore Does It.” Forbes, May 22, 2020. Accessed May 21, 2024. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/steveforbes/2020/05/26/superb-healthcare-at-ultra-low-prices-how-singapore-does-it/?sh=513ab28e3add>.

Soeung Phearanon is a Young Research Fellow at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies. He is in his junior year at the Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh. The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS).

Singapore's New Leadership: Unpacking Lawrence Wong's Top 5 Priorities

Sorn Solita

The Republic of Singapore, an island country in Southeast Asia that stands out for its efficient government, infrastructure, high standards of living, and strong economy, is ready to announce its new president on May 15 with an official ceremony. On April 15, 2024, the Prime Minister's Office showed its upcoming fourth Prime Minister, Lawrence Wong, Deputy Prime Minister, to take over Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong to the public. Mr. Lee, 72, had previously stated that he intended to resign before turning 70 in February 2022, but due to the COVID-19 outbreak, the plan had to be delayed until 2024.¹ This paper will include some information about Mr. Lawrence Wong, the general election, and the challenges that he will face.

First and foremost, who is Lawrence Wong? Mr. Lawrence Wong is Singapore's deputy prime minister and minister of finance. He is a prominent Singaporean politician who has served as Deputy Chairman of the GIC Board, Monetary Authority Chairman, and International Advisory Council Chairman. He supports the labor movement and was elected a parliament member in 2011.² Significantly, with the unanimous support of the PAP MPs (People's Action Party members of parliament) and some of his exemplary achievements, including working as one of three co-chairs of Singapore's multi-ministry COVID-19 task force and launching the Forward Singapore exercise in 2022, he qualifies to become the fourth prime minister.³

¹“Lawrence Wong to take over as Singapore Prime Minister from Lee Hsien Loong on May 15,” *CNA*, last modified April 16, 2024. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/prime-minister-lee-hsien-loong-lawrence-wong-leadership-handover-4266031#:~:text=SINGAPORE%3A%20date%20for%20Singapore's,from%20Mr%20Lee%20Hsien%20Loong>.

² “Mr. Lawrence WONG,” *Prime Minister's Office Singapore*, last modified April 17, 2024, accessed April, 2024. <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/The-Cabinet/Mr-Lawrence-WONG#:~:text=Mr%20Lawrence%20Wong%20is%20the,of%20the%20People's%20Action%20Party>.

³“Lawrence Wong to take over as Singapore Prime Minister from Lee Hsien Loong on May 15,” *CNA*, last modified April 17, 2024. https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/prime-minister-lee-hsien-loong-lawrence-wong-leadership-handover-4266031?cid=telegram_cna_social_28112017_cna.

How was Mr. Lawrence Wong chosen as the successor of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong? In selecting the leader of the ruling People's Action Party's fourth-generation (4G) team in 2022, Mr. Lawrence Wong was chosen as the successor of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong by most of Singapore's top leaders and all its members of parliament. The voting process had 19 Cabinet ministers, excluding Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and the two senior ministers. It included Speaker of Parliament Tan Chuan-Jin and NTUC secretary-general Ng Chee Meng. The result was Mr. Lawrence Wong got the majority of 79 percent or 15 of 19 stakeholders supporting him, which made him the first choice.⁴ On May 15, 2024, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced Mr. Lawrence Wong as his successor.

After the announcement of the upcoming new Prime Minister from the Prime Minister's Office, a date for the general election also becomes a question, as the new Prime Minister needs a mandate from Singaporeans to settle in with a good track record. According to Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, the general election will likely be held by November 2025. However, a specific date has yet to be released since it is also crucial for Mr. Wong to prepare for the challenges ahead.⁵

Additionally, the next important step for Mr. Lawrence Wong is to go through a general election, which is expected to be held by November 2024. Singapore's next general election is scheduled for November 2024, with Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong aiming to hand over leadership to Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong before the next GE and by November 21 to give preparation time for the new Prime Minister.⁶ As for the opposite party, there are two notable political parties. The first is the People's Alliance; four opposition parties, including Peoples Voice, Reform Party, People's Power Party, and Democratic Progressive Party, form

⁴Warren Fernandez, "Lawrence Wong clear choice to helm PAP's 4G leadership, with 15 of 19 stakeholders backing him," *The Straits Times*, last modified May 04, 2022. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/politics/lawrence-wong-clear-choice-to-helm-paps-4g-leadership-with-15-of-19-stakeholders-backin>.

⁵Justin Ong Guang-Xi, Abigail Ng, "General Election likely to be called by year-end, May handover will give next PM 'good runway': Analysts," *CNA*, last modified April 16, 2024. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/general-election-prime-minister-lawrence-wong-4266611>.

⁶Louisa Tang, Tang See Kit, "Singapore's next General Election likely to be held in late 2024 at the earliest, analysts say," *CNA*, last modified November 5, 2023. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/singapore-next-general-election-2024-pap-leadership-transition-3898556>.

an alliance.⁷ The second one is the Coalition, which also consists of four parties, including the National Solidarity Party, the Red Dot United, the Singapore People's Party, and the Singapore United Party.

However, in terms of effectively functioning government, Mr. Lawrence Wong also met challenges, but five priorities are most concerning.⁸

The first is leadership renewal because the new Prime Minister needs to shape the next cabinet, which some call the "elections cabinet." This reshuffle is expected to be bold and innovative, involving changes to the future deputies, third-generation ministers, and promotions. According to law lecturer Eugene Tan from Singapore Management University, fifth-generation succession is a priority, as the next generation must be ready to take over within the next decade.⁹

The second is general election preparation. Analysts Assoc Prof Tan and Mr. Singh suggested that Wong and his team must maintain trust among Singaporeans as the next general election is set for November 2025. They believed the new 4G team must demonstrate its ability to "win well" and not do worse than GE2020. The PAP won 83 seats and 61.24% of the popular vote in 2020, reflecting Wong's consultative and collaborative leadership.¹⁰ To the new Prime Minister, building trust among Singaporeans is essential, especially in the general election, as it shows how supportive and effective the government is.

The third priority is Singapore's global standing. To maintain diplomatic relations and navigate emerging conflicts, Mr. Wong must strengthen existing ties and foster new ones. Moreover, Dr. Woo Jun Jie states that the global geopolitical environment is volatile and will require

⁷Natasha Ganesan, "4 opposition parties form alliance to contest in Singapore's next General Election," *CNA*, last modified June 1, 2023. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/general-election-alliance-lim-tean-peoples-voice-reform-party-peoples-power-democratic-progressive-opposition-3530861>.

⁸Taufiq Zalizan, "Analysis: 5 priorities on Lawrence Wong's agenda as next prime minister," *TODAY*, last modified May 8, 2024. <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/analysis-5-priorities-lawrence-wong-agenda-pm-2404011>.

⁹Taufiq Zalizan, "Analysis: 5 priorities on Lawrence Wong's agenda as next prime minister," *TODAY*, last modified May 8, 2024. <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/analysis-5-priorities-lawrence-wong-agenda-pm-2404011>.

¹⁰Taufiq Zalizan, "Analysis: 5 priorities on Lawrence Wong's agenda as next prime minister," *TODAY*, last modified May 8, 2024. <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/analysis-5-priorities-lawrence-wong-agenda-pm-2404011>.

significant attention from the new prime minister, Wong.¹¹ Additionally, Mr. Wong's concerns about Singapore's foreign relations are related to a global context, including the relationship with China and the United States, by stating that “we are pro-Singapore and neither pro-China nor pro-American.”¹²

The fourth priority is the economy and livelihoods. In Singapore, job creation and reducing living costs affect workers and families. The last one is social impact and policy. Singapore's new Prime Minister, Lawrence Wong, is expected to tackle domestic issues like housing and living costs. Experts, Mr. Singh, Dr. Woo, Dr. Gillian Koh and Dr. Koh, believe the new team will address these long-term concerns convincingly.¹³ They also emphasize strengthening social compacts and building public trust. Moreover, the reforms should be presented to voters before the general election.

In conclusion, Mr. Lawrence Wong faces five key priorities in his government. The first one is leadership renewal, which involves shaping the next cabinet, the "elections cabinet," and ensuring the next generation is prepared for the next decade. To add on, in terms of the public image of Mr. Lawrence Wong in the general election, this is the next step that he has to go through and builds good relationships with Singaporeans. Ultimately, the general election is still important for this new upcoming Prime Minister, and the result is yet to come.

Sorn Solita is a Young Research Fellow at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS). She is a sophomore majoring in International Relations at the Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh. The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS).

¹¹Taufiq Zalizan, “Analysis: 5 priorities on Lawrence Wong’s agenda as next prime minister,” *TODAY*, last modified May 8, 2024. <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/analysis-5-priorities-lawrence-wong-agenda-pm-2404011>.

¹²“DPM Lawrence Wong's Interview with the Economist (May 2024),” *Prime Minister's Office Singapore*, last modified May 6, 2024. <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/DPM-Lawrence-Wongs-Interview-with-the-Economist-May-2024>.

¹³Taufiq Zalizan, “Analysis: 5 priorities on Lawrence Wong’s agenda as next prime minister,” *TODAY*, last modified May 8, 2024. <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/analysis-5-priorities-lawrence-wong-agenda-pm-2404011>.

How does the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar affect Bangladesh?

Thorng Pisethvisal

Rohingya people, originally known as the Muslim ethnic group in Myanmar, basically live among the majority of Buddhists in the country. However, this ethnic group is not recognized by the government itself.¹ At times, Myanmar was under the control of the British Empire around 1823. The Rohingya group maintained their belief, while the Buddhist group was forced to adopt the Muslim concept for administrative positions. Because of that, it led to the nationalism that drove the Burmese independence movement. After Myanmar gained its independence in 1948, the Burmese government no longer acknowledged the Rohingya group as their official citizen, with the belief that Burmese is the land of Buddhist ethics only. Even more, in 1982, the citizenship law in Myanmar failed to acknowledge several ethnic groups, including Rohingya, as the government claimed that immigrants who were under British occupation were not as indigenous as the Burmese people.²

The Rohingya crisis is one of the worst human rights violations that happened in Southeast Asia. The Rohingya group has experienced countless acts of discrimination and violence since the early days of Myanmar's independence. Their biggest attack happened in 2017 after massive violence broke out in Myanmar's Rakhine State, which led about 742,000 people to move to Bangladesh.³ In this paper, we will further elaborate on how the Rohingya crisis affected the neighboring country, Bangladesh specifically, and how they suffered from the migration itself, as well as the consequences of the 2021 military coup in Myanmar.

The Rohingya are the Muslim minority in Myanmar, as there are 3.5 million Rohingya ethnicities worldwide. In early 2017, the majority of Rohingya in Myanmar was around one million, and that is nearly a third of the population in Myanmar. Along with that, since the renaming of the country to Myanmar in 1989, the Myanmar government continues to deny the

¹ Al Jazeera Staff. "Who Are the Rohingya?" www.aljazeera.com, April 18, 2018. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2018/4/18/who-are-the-rohingya>.

²Rohingya Culture Center. "History of the Rohingya | Rohingya Culture Center." rccchicago.org, July 22, 2022. <https://rccchicago.org/history-of-the-rohingya/>.

³ "Rohingya Refugee Crisis Explained." UNHCR, (2023). <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/rohingya-refugee-crisis-explained/>.

Rohingya group as one of the country's official ethnic groups. As a result, most of them had no legal documentation, making them stateless.⁴ In early 2021, Myanmar's military carried out a coup. Aung San Suu Kyi, the de facto head of state, was taken into custody, and other parliamentarians were forced into hiding. The Leader of the military force, General Min Aung Hliang, has changed civilian rules and democratic governance, as well as producing the security force to use lethal force against protesters. On top of that, since the military junta took over the Myanmar government, more than six hundred people have died since the protests started. Furthermore, the act of violence and changing the government system also contributed to its economy's downfall and the country's instability up until now. The economic deadlock made it even harder for ethnic minorities, including the Rohingya, to access basic services and necessities because this new Military government has the same bones as the military in the past, which held many acts of violence against the Rohingya, especially in 2017.⁵

With the support of the Bangladesh government and other international communities, both parties have provided lifesaving assistance and humanitarian aid, also preventing the Rohingya from any cruelty at all costs. However, in December 2023, around 32,560 Rohingya refugees were living on the Bhasan Char Island, where they are facing many obstacles due to limited secure food, lack of medical support, and natural disasters that are damaging their camps.⁶ Along with that, due to the shifting of global priorities, many organizations have started to reduce humanitarian funding for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. As for now, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs' main focus is to meet the goal of sustainable development, which includes human rights, climate change, education, and so on. It makes total sense if those supports are limited, as they started to prioritize other issues that are also a concern instead of dwelling on just one particular issue, especially if it has been ongoing for years.⁷

⁴ Albert, Eleanor, and Lindsay Maizland. "The Rohingya Crisis." Council on Foreign Relations, January 23, 2020. <https://www.cfr.org/background/rohingya-crisis>.

⁵ Center for Preventive Action. "Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar." Global Conflict Tracker. Council on Foreign Relations, May 12, 2022. <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/rohingya-crisis-myanmar>.

⁶ "IOM Bangladesh Appeal 2024: Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis." Relief Web, (2024). <https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/iom-bangladesh-appeal-2024-rohingya-humanitarian-crisis>.

⁷ United Nations. "Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development." United Nations, 2015. <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>.

On top of that, a concern regarding the existence of Rohingya people in Bangladesh is the security of the country. Moreover, the situation at the camp is fragile due to the increase of criminal gangs, violence, unprotected births, armed groups, drug trafficking, extortion, and so on.⁸ The overcrowding of Rohingya refugees comes with violence, as many are killed, dead, and injured. As the Bangladesh authorities have reported, there were over 40 Rohingya refugees killed in 2022, and at least 48 refugees have also been killed in the first half of 2023. Many refugees have complained about their safety, which is threatened by criminal gangs. The administrative authorities also do not take full accountability with the justice system when the refugees are affected by any act of violence; instead, the refugees must approach the authorities themselves.⁹

In 2024, the International Organization for Migration Bangladesh or IMO Bangladesh, one of the international funders in Bangladesh, provided accessible treatment to Rohingya refugees by helping minimize pressure on forests because most of their camps are produced with bamboo or wood, alternative fuel sources, food security, and providing life-saving assistance. With the lack of education on environmental issues, the refugees that are living there have no hygiene and lack basic access such as toilets and food, and to make it even harder, it is during the rainy season as they have to deal with natural disasters such as flooding, wildfire, and so on. They also claimed to urge other international communities to support their efforts to meet the needs and redefine the situation in Bangladesh for the better.¹⁰

In conclusion, the Rohingya crisis shows how serious it is in terms of human rights violations in modern society. With the large number of refugees that migrated to Bangladesh, it took a toll on the stability of Bangladesh due to the overcrowded camping and the high level of violence between the Bangladesh government and the refugees. Bangladesh is such a small country, but the amount of migration that they must deal with is very intense, and the support of international communities is vital and needed because aid is the main resource to support the needs of Rohingya refugees.

⁸ "Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh: Limiting the Damage of a Protracted Crisis." Crisis Group, (2023). <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar-bangladesh/rohingya-refugees-bangladesh-limiting-damage-protracted>.

⁹ "Bangladesh: Spiraling Violence Against Rohingya Refugees." Human Rights Watch, (2023). <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/07/13/bangladesh-spiraling-violence-against-rohingya-refugees>.

¹⁰ "IOM Appeals for USD 119 Million for Rohingya Refugee Response in Bangladesh." UN Migration, (2024). <https://www.iom.int/news/iom-appeals-usd-119-million-rohingya-refugee-response-bangladesh>.

Thorng Pisethvisal is a research intern at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies and a sophomore student majoring in International Studies at the Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh. The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS).

How the Karen's Capture of Myawaddy affects Myanmar's Junta

Bon Sonavin

The Military Junta, led by Min Aung Hlaing, overthrew the Myanmar Civil Government in 2021 and put democratic leader Aung San Suu Kyi in detention. What awaited the junta was not a peaceful regime but a regime full of resistance, war, and blood. The coup started in 2021 with protests nationwide, demanding a return to a democratic state again. Many ethnic groups rebelled against the military junta and formed various resistance forces. Karen is one of the ethnic groups that are armed with weapons. Their new capture of Myawaddy, which borders Thailand, indicates the military junta's weakness and powerlessness against the resistance of its own people.

Myawaddy is a town in Kayin State, opposite the Thai district of Mae Sot in Tak Province. The two are connected by bridges across the Moei River.¹ It is one of the most important strategic locations for the military junta because it is a trading town between Myanmar and Thailand. It plays a significant role in Myanmar's economy through exports and imports. It guarantees the junta access to goods and food and expands its military power. According to the junta's Commerce Ministry, Myawaddy is the third busiest land crossing to Thailand, with US\$1.1 billion in goods passing through it over the last 12 months.²

The Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), the armed wing under the Karen National Union (KNU), and its ally, The People's Defense Forces (PDFs), captured the important trading town Myawaddy near the Thai border on April 11, 2024. Before the two forces captured Myawaddy, they had already captured an important base at Thingannyinaung, which was 10 meters away from Myawaddy. The base contained 477 surrendered military personnel of the Tatmadaw military junta and 140 of their relatives. The KNU negotiated the surrender with the Infantry Battalion 257, a base that is 4 kilometers to the west of Myawaddy before they

¹ "Karen Ethnic Army Launches Final Push to Capture Myawaddy on Thai Border," *The Irrawaddy*, April 9, 2024, accessed June 15, 2024, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/karen-ethnic-army-launches-final-push-to-capture-myawaddy-on-thai-border.html>.

² "Myanmar's Karen guerrillas claim seizing final army base defending border town," *Nation Thailand*, April 12, 2024, accessed June 15, 2024, <https://www.nationthailand.com/world/asean/40037188>

launched an attack and captured the town. Before the two forces captured Myawaddy, they had already captured an important base at Thingannyinaung, which was 10 meters away from Myawaddy. The base contained 477 surrendered military personnel from the Tatmadaw army junta and 140 of their relatives. The KNU negotiated the surrender with the Infantry Battalion 257, a base that is 4 kilometers to the west of Myawaddy before they launched an attack and captured the town.³

Over the past five months, the military junta has lost control over several states, such as Northern Shan State, where it lost several border crossings with China and Rakhine State in the west. Losing another Thailand border town is another big loss for the junta and its regime over the control of Myanmar. Even though the military junta has tried to retake the area twice, it was still defeated by the Karen National Liberal Army and its allies. After successfully capturing the town, the Karen took down the Myanmar national flag and replaced their own flag instead to announce their victory over the junta military coup.⁴

Hundred, surrounded by junta soldiers, retreated near Myawaddy and Mae Sot bridge. They have two choices: either surrender to Thai authorities or the KNU or be targeted by other resistance groups. Upon hearing of the attack around Myawaddy on April 9th, Thai authorities sent soldiers with arms to control the border and protect the people near the border. Over 1,000 Myanmar civilians walked across the bridge to Mae Sot. Thailand's government announced that it could accept over 100,000 refugees if the fight in Myawaddy leads to large-scale displacement.⁵

³ Strangio S, "Ethnic Karen Rebels Complete Capture of Strategic Myanmar Border Crossing," *The Diplomat*, April 11, 2024, accessed June 15, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/04/ethnic-karen-rebels-complete-capture-of-strategic-myanmar-border-crossing/>

⁴ Panu W, "Rebels raise flag at seized Myanmar base, commander confident of retaining control," *Reuters*, April 15, 2024, accessed June 15, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/rebels-raise-flag-seized-myanmar-base-commander-confident-retaining-control-2024-04-15/>

⁵ "Thailand ready to receive 100,000 fleeing Myanmar, foreign minister says," *The Japan Times*, April 9, 2024, accessed June 15, 2024, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2024/04/09/asia-pacific/politics/thailand-100000-fleeing-myanmar/>

The Karen National Liberal Army and People's Defense Forces have joined forces to capture Myawaddy since late last year, and the fight got intense early this year. After the mission was successful, the junta still wanted to regain control of the economic line of Myawaddy again but failed. The Military junta has lost control of several states crossing China, India, and now Thailand.⁶

In conclusion, Myawaddy, an important trading town near the Thai border, was captured by the KNU. This capture led to thousands of displacements and economic loss to the military junta. The junta faces resistance from all armed groups across the country. Some ethnic groups that can get access to arms and weapons rebel against the military government and even take over some of the most important states that are considered the lifeblood of the military junta. The loss of those states decreases the power of the military government to control Myanmar. The junta cannot monopolize the power because of the existence of the resistance groups with one common goal: to overthrow the military junta. Even with the support of some big countries such as Russia and China, the junta still cannot control the whole country, let alone know when the regime can continue to survive with all of the obstacles to their path of taking over the whole of Myanmar.

Bon Sonavin is a Young Researcher Fellow at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies. She is also a sophomore student majoring in International Relations at Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh. The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS).

⁶Peck G, "Myanmar's ethnic Karen guerrillas claim to have seized the last army base defending key border town," *AP News*, April 11, 2024, accessed June 14, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/myawaddy-karen-knu-mae-sot-border-thailand-1133cd767e4015229f4b43fc675bcfa6>

Cambodia and Laos Bilateral Relations on the Rise

Phan Phoansatya

As members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and also due to the geography of the same region, Cambodia and Lao PDR are working together to avoid conflict on their border. Furthermore, they are set to open for cooperation to ensure development in every sector, including Agriculture, Education, Electricity, Investment, Mining, Services, and Trade. Even though the two countries had been struggling for their independence in the contemporary period and the border tension, both parties have signed the agreement throughout the discussion in which they will open the connections for each other and also expand their potential to the region further to strengthen Tourist and Trade through high-speed rail.¹

Back in February 2017, Lao PDR launched the troops crossing Cambodia's territory at the "white zone" located in the northeastern part of Stung Treng Province. The Lao PDR used to claim that it belongs to Laotian territory. A few months later, Laos authorities still stayed in the same area, which made more warnings about the border tension with Cambodia. The conflict occurred when it crossed 540km of the Cambodia and Lao PDR border at the Mom Bei area in Preah Vihear Province in August 2017. However, the Prime Minister of Cambodia, Hun Sen, sent the military to stop the war with the declaration, "We do not declare war," he added, "We just ask to get our land back, and we won't take land from anyone".² Moreover, the Cambodian government told the Lao PDR that it had six days to leave Cambodian territory, and if not. They would start to take action, specifically with the evidence of France's colonial era map, which the Prime Minister of Cambodia had used to claim and solve the dispute issues with the Laos party. Regarding this, both their military personnel and civilians had held on for the meeting and were finding the right solutions. After the bilateral negotiation, both sides agreed to withdraw the troops from the warning area to threaten cooperation on managing to enhance their border areas.³

¹ "Manet in Laos to Strengthen Comprehensive Partnership," accessed May 28, 2024, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/manet-in-laos-to-strengthen-comprehensive-partnership>.

² David Hutt, "What's behind Cambodia-Laos' Border Flare-Up?," Asia Times, August 14, 2017, <http://asiatimes.com/2017/08/whats-behind-cambodia-laos-border-flare/>.

³ Angaindrankumar, Gnanasagaran, "Behind the Cambodia-Lao PDR Border Dispute," The ASEAN Post, December 29, 2016, <https://theaseanpost.com/article/behind-cambodia-lao-pdr-border-dispute>.

Cambodia's government recalled the Cabinet's first meeting at the Peace Palace on August 24 under Prime Minister Hun Manet. The Cambodian government will be reformed directly to point out the scope of job creation, equity, efficiency, economic growth, and sustainability. It is the major that had been transforming Cambodia from a killing field, minefields, and insecurity to a peaceful and independent sovereign state with political stability and the rule of law. Moreover, the New Cambodian government aims to become a high-middle-income country by 2030 and a high-income country by 2050, respectively.⁴

Also recalling the Laos government, Saleumxay Kommasith, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Laos, is trying to promote the National Economy of Lao PDR. It also would like to open up for discussion with its partner on economic diplomacy, foreign investment, International Cooperation, and Bilateral Collaboration. The Laos Government's strategy is setting the potential in which they are focused on trade and investment for state development in sectors such as Electricity, Mining, Services, and Agriculture.⁵

Acknowledge that Hun Manet has been to four ASEAN countries since becoming Cambodia's Prime Minister. Those countries include Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, and Laos. The prime minister's participation is to strengthen their relations in line with those of other countries to further their ties in the future. Specifically, the Prime Minister of Cambodia attended an official visit to Laos accompanied by Foreign Minister Sok Chenda Sophea and the President of the Cambodia Chamber of Commerce, Kith Meng, on March 25–26, 2024. It was the first meeting for both parties after Hun Manet became the Prime Minister of Cambodia. Regarding this, Cambodia supported Laos in becoming the ASEAN chair in 2024. It provided a \$1 million fund to show their support to Lao PDR with their strong neighbor relations and the members of ASEAN. Moreover, Manet believed that both countries could work together more to promote both countries' Industries, Security, Trade, Investment, and Collaboration.⁶

⁴ Orm, Bunthoeurn, "Manet Unveils First Phase of 'Pentagonal Strategy', Goals," accessed May 28, 2024, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national-politics/manet-unveils-first-phase-pentagonal-strategy-goals>.

⁵ Vientiane Times, "Laos Sets Sights on Economic Diplomacy to Boost Trade, Investment," accessed May 28, 2024, <https://asianews.network/laos-sets-sights-on-economic-diplomacy-to-boost-trade-investment/>.

⁶ Samban, Chandara, "Manet in Laos to Strengthen Comprehensive Partnership," accessed May 28, 2024, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/manet-in-laos-to-strengthen-comprehensive-partnership>.

Furthermore, His Excellency Thongloun SISOULITH is the president of the Lao People's Democratic Republic. He has also played an important role in which he had been to the Kingdom of Cambodia as it is a state visit to strengthen both countries' relations and encourage them to continue their Bilateral Relations to foster close ties between them, enhance cooperation, and mutual growth. It was the second meeting after Manet Hum became the Prime Minister of Cambodia, as both countries would contribute to regional development in all sectors.

Furthermore, His Excellency Thongloun SISOULITH, the President of the Lao People's Democratic Republic, played an important role in strengthening the relations between both countries. He has encouraged bilateral relations and fostered close ties between Cambodia and Laos, enhancing cooperation and mutual growth. The visit marked the second meeting between the two leaders since Prime Minister Hun Manet took office, and the two neighboring countries will continue contributing to regional development in all sectors.⁷

The deep discussions by the leadership of both countries strengthen their Cooperation on Security and Defense, Border Affairs, Connectivity, and Energy Cooperation. First, both sides agreed to cooperation and prevention in security-related issues, especially traditional crime. Second, both country's leaders have discussed and exchanged on the Border Affair of the instrument of ratification of the treaty on the delimitation of borders between Cambodia and Laos in which the latter aims to build a Border of Peace, Stability, Cooperation, and Long-term Development based on State Independence, Sovereignty State, and Territorial Integrity. Both sides have agreed to settle on the 14 Percent of the border segments to build friendship, peace, and cooperation.⁸

After the border dispute mid-2017, the two countries had been negotiating to solve the conflict and were open to each other exchanging development strategies and gaining development opportunities. The renewed bilateral relations between Cambodia and Laos, called "Close and

⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, "Cambodia, Laos to strengthen Comprehensive and Long-Lasting Strategic Partnership" accessed April 25, 2024, https://www.mfaic.gov.kh/files/uploads/6AUFX604J0SI/Sealed_ENG_Press%20outcome%20.pdf

⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, "Cambodia, Laos to Strengthen Comprehensive and Long-Lasting Strategic Partnership." accessed May 28, 2024, <https://www.mfaic.gov.kh/posts/2024-04-25-Press-Release-Cambodia--Laos-to-strengthen-Comprehensive-and-Long-Lasting-Strategic-Partnership--22-41-30>.

Comprehensive Collaboration,” share advanced benefits. Since both nations had experienced a struggle, it was a challenge for them to recover their Relationship and Trust in each other. However, their economic cooperation has been resilient these past two decades regarding their review of the progress they have made together following the structures, specifically due to their important sectors such as Agriculture, Economics, Electricity, Natural resources, Tourism, Textiles, and Tourism. The fair trade between them could make their Bilateral Relations even better in the present and future. The recent data on Cambodia and Laos Cooperation are on their Economic Health and Diplomatic Relations in which Cambodia imports Electricity from Laos, which is linked to contributing to Laos’s Economic Growth.⁹ Moreover, the two countries have agreed to select a bridge to Facilitate Trade, Investment, and Tourism. The bridge would be across the Ropou River in Cambodia to Selampao in Laos. Last, the agreement on energy cooperation, signed when Samdach Thipadei visited Lao PDR, said that Laos has agreed to supply electricity to Cambodia to enhance its socio-economic development.¹⁰

For Cambodia, China has inspired its politics since 1950-1960 in the era of Sihanouk due to the Cold War. Furthermore, the procedure of China communism turning Cambodia into the Khmer Rouge period in 1975-1979 formed the Cambodia People’s Party under Prime Minister Hun Sen. However, Laos was also influenced by China in politics, which the communist party of Laos has left largely under Vietnam’s sphere of influence. The two neighboring countries are more likely to be influenced by the People’s Republic of China now since it has played an important role in their political and economic development. Cambodia and Laos trust China as their priority partners and the main economic and developmental investors. Specifically, the Belt-Road Initiative (BRI) is the process of investment and infrastructure projects. It is the key framework of the “Indochina Peninsular Corridor” into Southeast Asia. China’s investment is important for both countries because it could seek interest as it is a part of the fast-growing of Cambodia and Laos, and also, they do not have a choice or little choice to catch up with their neighbors, such as Vietnam and Thailand.¹¹

⁹ “Cambodia and Laos: A New Era of Cooperation,” accessed May 28, 2024,

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/cambodia-laos-new-era-cooperation-attain-asia>.

¹⁰ Laotian Times, “Laos and Cambodia Renew Commitment to Strengthening Bilateral Cooperation,” *Laotian Times* (blog), July 6, 2022, <https://laotiantimes.com/2022/07/06/laos-and-cambodia-renew-commitment-to-strengthening-bilateral-cooperation/>.

¹¹ Edgar Pang, “‘Same-Same but Different’: Laos and Cambodia’s Political Embrace of China,” ISEAS Perspective, no. 2017 (2017).

In conclusion, the two neighboring countries have signed agreements to understand each other and ensure their bilateral cooperation in all sectors as much as possible. Strengthening comprehensive relations between both countries is a sign of development, and it shows that both countries can potentially ensure peace and stability in their collaboration. Moreover, it is believed that Cambodia and Laos could run further and beyond their bilateral relations as they are willing to contribute to the region and ASEAN. In addition, it is expected that the two countries could exchange and have a formal engagement to ensure prosperity, peace, and stability for their citizens.¹²

Phan Phoansatya is a Young Researcher Fellow at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies. He is a sophomore student majoring in International Relations at Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh. The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS).

¹² “Strengthening Bonds and Fostering Progress: The Landmark State Visit of Lao President Thongloun SISOULITH to Cambodia,” *The Better Cambodia* (blog), April 24, 2024, <https://thebettercambodia.com/strengthening-bonds-and-fostering-progress-the-landmark-state-visit-of-lao-president-thongloun-sisoulith-to-cambodia/>.

Assessing Japan's Official Development Assistance Policy in Cambodia

Ann SreyNich

Cambodia and Japan established diplomatic relations in 1953. Then, bilateral relations were suspended due to Cambodia's civil war. Subsequently, Tokyo also played a significant role in helping all conflict parties to reconcile and mainly contributed to post-war reconstruction to rebuild itself as a nation. Once again, this is an important instrument in preventing Cambodia from falling into political instability.¹ The bilateral relations with Phnom Penh cover many aspects, one of which is Official Development Assistance, also known as ODA. Through ODA, Cambodia has been able to contribute significantly to economic development and poverty reduction.

Official Development Assistance (ODA) is grants or technical cooperation supported by Japan's government to Cambodia to boost the economic development of Cambodia. There are three components of grants from Japan's ODA to Cambodia such as bilateral assistance, multilateral assistance, and local government and Non-profit organization (NGO) funds. First, bilateral assistance refers to general and cultural grant aid and technical cooperation. It is provided through Japan International Cooperation Agencies (JICA), Yen Loan which is non-reimbursable funds for Cambodia generally focused on the rehabilitation of physical infrastructure (roads, bridges, irrigation, hospitals, etc.). Next, multilateral assistance includes donations to international organizations (IGOs) such as the United Nations Human Security Fund, United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and Asia Development Bank (ADB). This fund aims to entail a strategy of protection and empowerment to assure people's living and human freedom by addressing poverty, environmental destruction, illicit drugs, and infectious diseases such as HIV. The final grant is given to local government and nonprofit organizations (NGOs) through a project called "*KUSANONE*".²

¹ Phoak Kung, "Cambodia-Japan Relations: Beyond the East China Sea," *The diplomat*, February 24, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/02/cambodia-japan-relations-beyond-the-east-china-se/>.

² "Japan's Official Development Assistance to Cambodia," accessed June 21, 2024, <https://www.kh.emb-japan.go.jp/economic/cooperation/cooperation.htm>.

Japan's Official Development Assistance constitutes a substantial portion, 25 percent, of the total ODA inflow to Cambodia, making Japan the largest donor to the country. Japan has actively extended grants, totaling a significant \$ 720 million over the past decade, as reported by the Embassy of Japan in Cambodia. This substantial financial support has been a driving force behind Cambodia's economic development, growth, and political stability.³

Japan assists small countries like Cambodia because of some rationality behind the provision of aid. First, the objective is to facilitate a peace and security mediator in the region and ensure Japan's security and prosperity. Japan also played an important role in facilitating as the mediator in conflict resolution. During that time, Tokyo expressed its willingness to bring conflict parties together all by inviting the main three conflict parties including the Cambodian People Party, FUNCINPEC, Democratic Kampuchea (Khmer Rouge), and Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF) to attend the conferences to negotiate to settle the civil war in Cambodia. Moreover, Japan still led its role to restore Cambodia's social economy by providing a potential development fund program after UNTAC sponsored the election as well as solved all conflicts through peaceful means.⁴

Second, after the end of World War 2, the kingdom announced that it would abandon claims of war damage or compensation from Japan which Japan had done to Cambodia. Therefore, Japan reciprocated this action and demonstrated the willingness to assist Cambodia in promoting development and ensuring people's dignity and livelihood. Thus, since the post-Khmer Rouge Regime, Japan helped this small nation by providing humanitarian aid, capacity building, and infrastructure development. Japan has also provided support in the form of technical cooperation and capacity-building initiatives. For instance, programs for training, knowledge sharing, and assistance with institutional development in fields like public administration, agriculture, and governance are all included in this.

Third, Tokyo sees a developing nation like Cambodia as potential economic benefits through trade and investment. Even though it is a small and poor nation, it is very rich in terms of agricultural resources. Thus, they can switch the benefits from each other and foster their economic growth. Between the first two months of 2024, their bilateral trade rose 9.3% from \$298.06 million. Phnom

³ The Government of Japan, "Japan's Assistance Policy for Cambodia," accessed June 21, 2024, <https://www.kh.emb-japan.go.jp/economic/cooperation/japc/japc.htm>.

⁴ Chea Vandeth, "Japan Won't Abandon Cambodia - Khmer Times," Khmer Times, June 25, 2018, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/504332/japan-wont-abandon-cambodia/>.

Penh's main exports to Japan are garments, bags, footwear, furniture, cosmetics, paper and office supplies, and leather goods while the major imports are automobiles, machinery, electronic items, furniture, fabrics, and so on.⁵

Last but not least, Japan provides aid to developing countries which include Cambodia because of development needs. Japan's ODA policy generally emphasizes poverty reduction that comprises significant projects to develop education, healthcare, sanitation, and clean water. Furthermore, her fund aims to address the needs and contribute to Cambodia's socio-economic development.

Lastly, Japan has strategic interests in the South Asia region which is an important region for Japan's diplomacy.⁵ In addition, Japan cooperates with developing countries to strengthen its goal as a regional leader by adapting its approach to enable greater success in countering China's influence through BRI, etc in the region. In addition, based on policy dialogues with the Cambodian government, Japan's assistance is mainly technical cooperation and grant aid and Japan pays more attention to specific issues such as countryside and agriculture improvement, human resources growth, and social and economic infrastructure development. Through General grant aid for economic infrastructure, Japan constructed bridges "Kizuna & Neak Loeung bridge", schools in both rural and city, rehabilitation of National Roads 6 and 7, upgraded Water Supply Facilities in Phnom Penh Phase I and II and in Siem Reap, Kompong Cham ect, and advancement of telecommunication networks. Besides, Tokyo also supports the Human Resources Development Scholarship which enables Cambodian students to get opportunities to study at Japan Universities.⁶

Japan's ODA is beneficial to Cambodia in many aspects. With Japan's ODA and Cambodia's institutional strength and human capital, public services are provided more effectively and efficiently, which promotes sustainable development. Japanese ODA plays an important role in improving Cambodia's economic growth. These days, there are ongoing projects and plans such as the improvement of sewage liners, public transportation, health care services, etc. Thus, Japan will keep contributing to Cambodia's core interests.

⁵ Hin Pisei, "Cambodia-Japan Trade Hit \$326M Jan-Feb," The Phnom Penh post, March 25, 2024, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/business/cambodia-japan-trade-hit-326m-jan-feb>.

⁶ JICA, "Signing of Japanese ODA Loan Agreements with Cambodia: Contributing to the Economic Development of the Country by Improving the Southern Economic Corridor, Strengthening the Rural Road Network, and Improving the Water Supply | News & Media - JICA," Japan International Cooperation Agencies (JICA), June 28, 2023, https://www.jica.go.jp/english/information/press/2023/1514502_25258.html.

Ann SreyNich is a Young Research Fellow at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh. The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS).

Theme II

Societal Issues and Emerging Trends

Chbab Srey: Verses to Promote Women's Self-Cultivation

Sovann Vimean

The increasing usage of social media, particularly Facebook, by the Khmer people has allowed them to exchange knowledge and voice their thoughts. By 2022, the rise in the use of social media, specifically Facebook, among the Khmer people has reached 73.9%, enabling them to share information and opinions. It is terrific that globalization has contributed many ideas to Cambodia's growth. Globalization is not without flaws, though; it may harm the customs, traditions, and beliefs our ancestors left behind.

Gender inequality has been a topic of discussion in the country for some time now, owing to an increase in the number of reports and women's shared experiences of domestic violence, as well as a lack of educational opportunities for young girls. Numerous scholars and activists worldwide have noted that *Chbab Srey*, or the women's code of conduct, is the cause of this matter because it normalizes domestic violence by silencing women and accepting men's dominance.¹ Concerned that the women's code of conduct reinforces gender inequality, in 2007, the Ministry for Women's Affairs called for the entire text to be removed from the official school curricula, with only some of the rules taught.² Placing the blame on traditional norms for gender inequality and domestic violence while downplaying the significance of this literary work would not lessen the seriousness of the problem.

Therefore, it is crucial to carefully reassess and analyze *Chbab Srey*, the women's code of conduct, considering it as a repository of methods and accumulated wisdom that empowers women and fosters personal growth. Specifically, our focus will be on the well-known version compiled by Bandith M'in Mai.

Chbab Srey boasts a rich historical legacy with three distinct authorships and numerous versions attributed to figures such as King Ang Doung, Bandith M'in Mai, and Suttanprija Ind,

¹ Anderson, Emily, and Kelly Grace. "From Schoolgirls to 'Virtuous' Khmer Women: Interrogating Chbab Srey and Gender in Cambodian Education Policy." *Studies in Social Justice* 12, no. 2 (December 29, 2018): 215–34. <https://doi.org/10.26522/ssj.v12i2.1626>.

² Brickell, Katherine. "Violence Against Women and Girls in Cambodia." *Routledge International Handbooks*, September 13, 2016, 314–25. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315736709.ch25>.

each with monkhood experiences. Despite their contributions to outlining women's codes of conduct, these authors, particularly King Ang Doung, are often unfairly labeled as misogynistic.³ In reality, their writings reflect a deep respect for women and a belief in their potential for spiritual growth and understanding, shaped by the teachings of Buddhism that inspired their compilation efforts.

Gaining insight into the profound meaning of *Chbab Srey* in Khmer culture entails examining the roles that women hold in Cambodian society. Within the tapestry of ancient Cambodian beliefs, women were esteemed and honored as harbingers of happiness, prosperity, influence, and abundant wealth for their families and communities. In fact, the Khmer word for women, "srey," is derived from "serey," which convey meanings of prosperity, power, fortune, and abundance. The prevailing view was that while men typically assumed roles as providers and external leaders, women held the true leadership position within families, communities, and society, exerting their influence from within.

The Khmer people adhered to a belief that emphasized the significance of harmony and stability within the family, seeing it as crucial for ensuring peace and prosperity within the wider community and country. Within this cultural framework, the power of women in nurturing and safeguarding their families and homes was not only acknowledged but also respected. It was recognized as both a strength and a vulnerability because in a society where familial bonds were deeply cherished and given primacy, a woman's competence in managing her household served as a key measure of her worth. Success in this role was seen as a great contribution to the kingdom, which brought her great honor from her children and garnered praise from the community, aligning with the accepted norms of life.

The narrative of *Chbab Srey* commences with Indrandati, a daughter of the Naga, or dragon, who, newly wedded, seeks counsel from her mother, Queen Vimala, as she prepares to depart the Realm of the Nagas. The queen advises her daughter to maintain peace within the home, walk and talk softly. This has led a general understanding of *Chbab Srey* that, in order to protect

³ Jacobsen, Trudy. *Lost Goddesses: The Denial of Female Power in Cambodian History*, 2008.

her family's reputation, a woman should be quiet and refrain from speaking out when faced with difficulties.⁴ However, a famous verse challenges this notion:

ក្រមួយមិនបានសម្តី ពាក្យទន់តិចនឹយ ឲ្យញញឹកចូលចិត្ត។
ក្រមួយមិនចេះវិះគិត ឃើញញញឹកនាយជិត ហៅឡើងនីស្លា។
ទោះមានមិនមានក្តីណា ពាក្យផ្អែមចរចា ទើបគេស្រឡាញ់។

These lines encourage women to possess a strong sense of reasoning and to cultivate effective communication skills. It is important to gauge the appropriateness of one’s words and to carefully consider them before speaking because an individuals' personality, dignity and worth are assessed in various contexts, including personal interactions.⁵ As the Khmer proverb goes:

ត្រីកំភ្លាញស្លាប់ព្រោះមាត់ សត្វខ្វែកស្លាប់ព្រោះអាចម៍។

“A gourami dies because of its mouth; a heron dies because of its feces.”

This shows that a proper woman knows when to speak up and when to stay quiet, showing humility and tact. Instead of publicly scolding or taking charge for personal gain, she subtly guides and redirects with remarkable power through her gentle whispers and advice, making a significant impact on those around her.⁶ Here, they also depict silence not as a sign of weakness or vulnerability but as a potent tool for fostering better relationships, earning respect, and leading a fulfilling life.⁷ Mastering this art demands discipline and clear introspection, empowering us to focus our energies and confront challenges and uncertainties with serene composure.

ទៅឋានមនុស្សលោកនាយអេះ ចូរនាងចាំចេះ បម្រើស្វាមី។
ធ្វើវត្តប្រតិបត្តិប្រក្រតី កុំឲ្យស្វាមី អាក់អន់ចិត្ត។
នាងអើយគម្ពែងក្រឡា ជាម្ចាស់សិរសា កូនកុំមាក់ងាយ។

Within the narrative, Queen Vimala tells her daughter to obey and respect her husband. The concept of “obedience” or “submission” often carries negative connotations, particularly for women. It cannot be inherently deemed a virtue, as the value of submission depends greatly on the entity to which one submits, the reasoning behind such submission, and the resultant

⁴ Allison. “Chbab Srey – the Way to Be the Perfect Cambodian Woman - Univers'ELLES.” *Univers'ELLES* (blog), January 5, 2024. <https://universelles.net/chbab-srey-the-way-to-be-the-perfect-cambodian-woman/>.
⁵ Mech, Samphors. “Women Codes of Conduct (Chbab Srey): Discourse Analysis on the Historical Influence on Education and Practices.” Webinar, Slide show. Center for Khmer Studies, March 4, 2022. <https://khmerstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/20220225-Webinar-Ms.-Samphors-Mech.pdf>.
⁶ Note The Good. “What We Learn From EOWYN (and Why Other ‘Strong’ Women Characters Are Boring),” August 17, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6OTmHvPCWSY>.
⁷ TEDx Talks. “The Power of Silence--Why Shutting up Is Good for You | Michael Angelo Caruso | TEDxOcala,” December 13, 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h_GLrUA0q4.

outcomes.⁸ Investigating the larger historical and cultural settings is essential to grasp this topic thoroughly.

Here, the Khmer people submits themselves and embraced Buddhism with fervent devotion; it is deeply ingrained in the culture and exerts a profound influence over societal norms and traditions. Before the French Protectorate of Cambodia, local monasteries primarily administered education in the country, with monks serving as teachers. Young boys would typically undergo schooling in these monasteries, eventually transitioning into monkhood. During their tenure as young monks, they would immerse themselves in the study of Pali scriptures and uphold strict discipline.⁹ Upon completion of their monastic education, they would reintegrate into society, marrying and leading conventional lives. Through their rigorous training as monks, they underwent a profound transformation, emerging as exemplary men or *komdengokrala*, revered and esteemed for their unwavering dedication to Buddha's teachings. In exhibiting unwavering loyalty and devotion to her husband, the exemplary man, a woman has demonstrated respect and dedication to Buddhism by embodying the *brahmavihārā: metta*, loving-kindness; *karuna*, compassion; *mudita*, appreciative joy; and *upekkha*, equanimity.

Despite the decreasing prevalence of this custom and with both genders having access to education, *Chbab Srey* instilled the importance of being cooperative regardless of circumstances. Effective cooperation requires attentive listening, understanding others' perspectives, taking turns, compromise solutions, and shared responsibilities.¹⁰ This essentially encapsulates the teachings and ideas that the poem wants to impart.

In the modern society of Cambodia, women have greater freedom and opportunities to engage in public services; however, regrettably, some encounter restrictions and misguidance along the way. Freedom in the absence of responsibility for one's actions can have long-term repercussions, impacting oneself and others. A law is created to guide and protect individuals, but it can become immoral if one misunderstands and abuses its power, which is why we have

⁸ Jasmyne Theodora. "The Art of Submission | Femininity 101," November 4, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qaENtW1v7kY>.

⁹ Glavin, Chris. "History of Education in Cambodia | K12 Academics," n.d. <https://www.k12academics.com/Education%20Worldwide/Education%20in%20Cambodia/history-education-cambodia>.

¹⁰ Grutzeck, Sasha. "Be Cooperative!" *My Learning Solutions* (blog), November 11, 2022. <https://mylearningsolutions.org/2022/11/14/be-cooperative/>.

to carefully analyze the reason behind it from various perspectives. In Cambodian beliefs, women held revered roles as bearers of happiness, prosperity, influence, and wealth within their families because harmony and stability within the family also brought societal peace and prosperity. *Chbab Srey* imparted valuable lessons to young girls and women, emphasizing tact, humility, responsibility, and cooperation within her family and community. Alongside *Chbab Srey*, numerous oral stories and works of Khmer literature have been passed down through generations, often portraying the exemplary woman as someone who embodies qualities of sensibility, wisdom, resourcefulness, dignity, and virtue.

Sovann Vimean is a Young Researcher Fellow at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS). She is a sophomore student majoring in International Economics at Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh. The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS).

The Education Crisis in Afghanistan: A Barrier to Women's Empowerment

Sreng Kimnai

Afghanistan's ongoing education crisis, marked by the systematic exclusion of girls and women from educational opportunities under the Taliban regime, is not merely a breach of fundamental human rights but a blueprint for a lost generation.¹ This refusal to educate girls and women creates a harmful cycle that traps them in poverty, makes them rely on others, and stops them from reaching their full potential.² The detrimental effects of this inequity extend beyond individual girls and women, impacting the entire country's economy, progress, and stability.³

Historically, Afghan women have faced numerous obstacles to education due to cultural norms, traditional practices, and conflict. During the Taliban regime (1996-2001), girls were completely banned from attending school, resulting in a significant decline in female literacy rates.⁴ Although progress was made after the fall of the Taliban in 2001, with increased enrollment of girls in schools and universities, the security situation and ongoing conflict continue to pose challenges to girls' education.⁵ In recent years, the resurgence of the Taliban and their restrictive policies have once again threatened the hard-won gains in girls' education. According to UNESCO, the female literacy rate in Afghanistan remains alarmingly low, estimated to be around 30%.⁶ This aligns with findings from other organizations, such as UNICEF, which reports that an estimated 3.7 million children are out of school in Afghanistan, 60% of them are girls. Factors such as poverty, early marriage, lack of infrastructure, and cultural barriers all contribute to the education crisis, making it a complex issue with deep-rooted causes. As highlighted in a 2023 Human Rights Watch report, there has been an

¹ Ahmad, Mukthar, "1000 Days After Taliban Ban on Girls in School, the Resistance Lives," accessed June 10, 2024, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/1000-days-after-taliban-ban-on-girls-in-school-the-resistance-lives/ar-BB1nPdJY>.

² Amnesty International, "Afghanistan: Taliban Destroying Lives of Women and Girls – New Report," August 2, 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org.au/afghanistan-taliban-destroying-lives-of-women-and-girls-new-report/>.

³ Human Rights Watch, "Afghanistan: Taliban Deprive Women of Livelihoods, Identity," January 18, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/01/18/afghanistan-taliban-deprive-women-livelihoods-identity>.

⁴ Sadaf, Jandad Jahani, and Madina, "Women's Education under the Taliban," *Global History Dialogues*, August 15, 2023, <https://globalhistorydialogues.org/projects/womens-education-under-the-taliban/>.

⁵ UNESCO, "Let Girls and Women in Afghanistan Learn!," accessed June 10, 2024, <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/let-girls-and-women-afghanistan-learn>. SASNET, "1999-02.pdf," accessed June 10, 2024.

⁶ Ibid.

"alarming deterioration" in access to education for both boys and girls, emphasizing the potential for a "lost generation."⁷

The limited access to educational opportunities has a profound impact on the lives of Afghan women. As Masuma Bano points out in her 2013 book, *The Education of Afghan Girls: A Human Rights Issue*, without education, women are more vulnerable to poverty, early marriage, domestic violence, and health problems.⁸ They are less likely to participate in decision-making processes, access economic opportunities, or challenge discriminatory practices. The lack of education perpetuates a cycle of disadvantage, limiting women's potential and hindering their ability to contribute to the development of their families and communities.

The barriers to girls' education in Afghanistan are multifaceted and require a comprehensive approach. Cultural norms that prioritize early marriage and domestic roles for girls often discourage families from sending their daughters to school. Security concerns, particularly in conflict-affected areas, also pose a significant obstacle. Girls face threats of violence and intimidation on their way to school, making it difficult for them to access education safely. Addressing these barriers requires investments in infrastructure and resources and efforts to change attitudes and behaviors within communities.

The efforts to address the education crisis in Afghanistan have been multifaceted and involve various stakeholders. Significant investments have been made in constructing new schools and rehabilitating existing ones, particularly in rural and underserved areas. The Afghan Ministry of Education, with support from international donors like USAID through the Education Support Program (ESP), has made strides in expanding educational infrastructure, building or rehabilitating over 680 schools, and benefiting over 1.1 million students.⁹

Recognizing that infrastructure alone is not enough, there has also been a focus on improving the quality of education through teacher training and professional development. The Afghan Teacher Training Program (ATTP), implemented by Creative Associates International with USAID funding, is a prime example, having trained over 123,000 teachers across

⁷ Ibid. See 3.

⁸ Ibid. See 4

⁹ "Afghanistan." U.S. Agency for International Development, February 13, 2024.
<https://www.usaid.gov/afghanistan>

Afghanistan.¹⁰ This emphasis on teacher training is crucial, as qualified teachers are essential for effective learning and student success.

Additionally, scholarships and financial aid programs have been established to help girls and young women overcome economic barriers to education. The Afghan Girls Financial Assistance Program (AGFAP), funded by the U.S. Department of State, provides scholarships to Afghan girls to pursue higher education in the United States, illustrating the commitment to supporting women's educational aspirations.¹¹

Furthermore, community-based approaches have been adopted to foster a supportive environment for girls' education. These initiatives often involve working with local leaders, religious figures, and parents to address cultural and social barriers to girls' schooling. The National Solidarity Program (NSP), a community-driven development program implemented by the Afghan government, has played a key role in mobilizing communities to support education initiatives, demonstrating the importance of local ownership and engagement.¹² Despite these multifaceted efforts, significant challenges persist. The United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI) has identified key areas for further action, emphasizing the need for new policies specifically focused on girls' education, robust financial commitments to sustain these efforts, and strategies to ensure uninterrupted access to education for girls and women in the face of ongoing conflict and instability.¹³ These recommendations underscore the complex and persistent nature of the education crisis in Afghanistan and the need for continued and coordinated action by all stakeholders.

To improve Afghan women's access to education, it is crucial to adopt a multi-pronged approach. This includes investing in teacher training, expanding educational infrastructure, promoting community engagement, and addressing the root causes of gender inequality. It is essential to create a safe and supportive learning environment for girls free from violence and

¹⁰ Woloschuk, Dianne, and Shri N. Rangarajan & Dr. J Eswaran. "Analysing the Challenges Faced by Afghan Teachers." Education International, March 6, 2024. <https://www.ei-ie.org/en/item/28376:analysing-the-challenges-faced-by-afghan-teachers>

¹¹ GuideStar, "Afghan Girls Financial Assistance Fund Inc." Afghan Girls Financial Assistance Fund Inc - GuideStar Profile. Accessed June 10, 2024. <https://www.guidestar.org/profile/47-5527310>.

¹² "National Solidarity Programme." ALNAP. Accessed June 10, 2024. <https://library.alnap.org/help-library/national-solidarity-programme>.

¹³ Implementation, Director of Program. "Home." UNGEI, March 1, 2024. <https://www.ungei.org/>.

discrimination. Empowering women through education requires sustained commitment and collaboration among all stakeholders.

The education crisis in Afghanistan is a complex issue with far-reaching consequences for women and girls. Limited access to educational opportunities perpetuates gender inequality, hinders social and economic development, and denies women their fundamental rights. However, by addressing the root causes of the crisis and investing in education, we can empower Afghan women to reach their full potential. Education is a human right and a powerful tool for social change. By empowering Afghan women through education, we can create a more just, equitable, and prosperous future for all. The international community must continue to support efforts to improve access to education for Afghan women and girls, recognizing that their empowerment is essential for building a peaceful and stable Afghanistan.

Sreng Kimmnai is a Young Researcher Fellow at Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS), and a sophomore student majoring in International Relations at the Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh. The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS).

How Buddhism Shapes Cambodia's Politics

Morn Liza

Politics and religion coexist in every nation. The influence of religion on national politics is significant. Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity are the major religions practiced in Cambodia. A political leader's ability to enact laws and regulations can be influenced by any religion. Buddhist monks also have a role in shaping the country's policies by using their position. In Cambodia, religions are interlaced with politics and political leaders. During the Khmer Empire, the God-king (devaraja) used their power to rule the country in the name of Hindu gods. Religious influences shaping the country's politics can be illustrated through the country's governance, monarchy, and international affairs.

The country's governance shows how religious beliefs shaped the country's politics. The Sangha in Cambodia have their position.¹ This tradition maintains constitutional recognition by including the Supreme Patriarch of each sect as a member of the Throne Council. Since Cambodia officially recognized Buddhism as the national religion, Sangha has stayed close to political leaders and involved in political decision-making. Political decision-making, the ruling party's decisions to make laws or rules, must consider cultural factors and religious domain. Otherwise, there will be problems with their subjects.

Buddhism influences the Monarchy in Cambodia. Buddhism has historically impacted the Cambodian monarchy, providing the rulers with a spiritual and moral base. For instance, during his 12th-century reign, King Jayavarman VII built many Buddhist temples, including the Bayon Temple in Angkor Thom. The relationship between Buddhism and the monarchy has contributed to the kings' political legitimacy. A god-king or a monarch descended from heaven was revered by all people. The monarchy is still what Cambodians want to see in charge of their nation. The reason why they were born into the royal family is that many believe that the royal family is a god with power and good acts. "When you do a good deed, you will receive it back in this life and the next life, such as being born into a rich family, being born with a

¹ Lawrence, Benjamin. "Reconstituting the Divided Sangha: Buddhist Authority in Post-Conflict Cambodia." Chapter. In *Buddhism and Comparative Constitutional Law*, edited by Tom Ginsburg and Benjamin Schonthal, 220–38. Comparative Constitutional Law and Policy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022.

merciful family, or even the royal family," is the Dharma, as taught by the Buddhists. This shows how meritorious the king is. Specifically, some characters in the history of Buddha gave the lotus flower (representation of purity) to the Buddha. As a result, in the next life, they became Angels (*Thevada*). They were also born with a flowery odor naturally. The mindset and beliefs of Cambodian people in the past are robust due to the history of Dharma and Buddha.

The legal domain of Cambodia is also influenced by religious principles as well. The international law of human rights protects human rights in every position. Those laws resemble the Buddha principle, such as non-violence, freedom, and tolerance. That is why Cambodia also exercises these principles of protection and promotion of the core human rights system under the United Nations. As documented, Cambodia ratified the Universal Declaration of Human Rights into the constitutional law of Cambodia.² Buddhism strongly emphasizes ideas like empathy, nonviolence, and harmony in society. The formulation of laws and policies in Cambodia has been impacted by these ideas. As a result, all people of Cambodia are guaranteed the freedom to practice any religion they choose, with Buddhism being recognized as the official state religion. This acknowledgment of Buddhism indicates its impact on the nation's political structure. More than that, many international laws and treaties that Cambodia signed to be implemented were influenced by the religion we also practice.³ For instance, the death penalty law is not practiced in Cambodia. In this case, it has been mentioned that Cambodia cannot use this law due to our religious beliefs. We believe that people deserve a chance to correct their mistakes, like the Buddhist principle of forgiveness. The religion practiced in Cambodia shapes the country's politics through governance, social norms, and laws. Religious belief has been practiced from the past till now. We cannot separate religion and politics. However, many opposing ideas through the religion are still involved in the country's politics.⁴

To some extent, Thailand and Myanmar are also a Buddhist country. The way Buddhism is involved and influenced in shaping the country's politics in Thailand and Myanmar are

² United Nation :Universal Declaration of Human Rights

<https://cambodia.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Promotional-materials-soft/UDHR-Simple-EN.pdf>

³ Ledgerwood, Judy, and Kheang Un. "Global Concepts and Local Meaning: Human Rights and Buddhism in Cambodia." *Journal of Human Rights* 2, no. 4 (2003): 531–49.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/1475483032000137129>

⁴ Stuart-Fox, Martin. "Buddhism and politics in Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar and Thailand." *Cambodian, Laos, Myanmar and Thailand Summer School, Asia Pacific Week* (2006). [http://asc.mcu.ac.th/database/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/BUDDHISM AND POLITICS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA.pdf](http://asc.mcu.ac.th/database/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/BUDDHISM_AND_POLITICS_IN_SOUTHEAST_ASIA.pdf)

different in Cambodia. Religious belief is powerful in Southeast Asian countries like Cambodia, Thailand, and especially Myanmar.

Morn Liza is a Young Researcher Fellow at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS). She is a sophomore student majoring in Political Sciences and Public Administration at Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh. The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS).

Climate Change in Cambodia: Challenges, Impacts and Strategic Responses

Steven Kuoch

Cambodia is located in the center of Southeast Asia and is a country that is well-known for its bright, colorful landscapes, strong people, and rich cultural legacy. Beneath this beautiful backdrop, though, lies the threat of climate change, a worldwide emergency that jeopardizes the country's economic development and environmental purity. An interesting fact is that Cambodia wasn't used to be this hot a while ago until recently. With these global weather patterns becoming more unpredictable, sea levels rising, and temperatures rising, Cambodia finds itself at a turning point in its history. At this critical point in its history, Cambodia must act quickly to prevent climate change and protect its future due to changing weather patterns, growing sea levels, and rising temperatures.¹

The nature, economics, and society of Cambodia are all impacted by climate change. The increase of extreme weather events, such as rising temperatures and protracted droughts, is one of the most prominent and immediate effects that have a Biodiversity loss threatening ecosystems like Tonle Sap Lake and the Mekong River due to rising temperatures and changing rainfall patterns. Devastating effect on agricultural livelihoods Prolonged droughts and irregular rainfall negatively affect rice crop yields, increasing the risk of failures and reducing agricultural productivity among farmers.² Extreme weather damages infrastructure, disrupts transport, and increases urban vulnerability, particularly in Phnom Penh, causing increased flooding risks, straining drainage systems, and exacerbating poverty and health issues. ³Lastly, food security reduces agricultural output, leading to higher food prices, increasing malnutrition

¹Cornford, Daniel, and Richard Matthew, "*The Greater Mekong and Climate Change: Biodiversity, Ecosystem Service and Development Ris*," WWF, 2007, Accessed May 22, 2024.

https://wwfeu.awsassets.panda.org/downloads/final_cc_reportlowres_2.pdf.

² Nong, Monin, "The Impacts of Climate Change on Agriculture and Water Resources in Cambodia: From Local Communities' Perspectives." Working Paper Series No. 125, March 2021.

https://cdri.org.kh/storage/pdf/Wp125_Impacts%20of%20CC%20on%20Agriculture%20and%20Water_1622792055.pdf

³ Flower, Ben, and Mike Fortnam, "Urbanizing Disaster Risk: Vulnerability of the Urban Poor in Cambodia to Flooding and Other Hazards," 2015.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343394659_Urbanizing_Disaster_Risk_Vulnerability_of_the_Urban_Poor_in_Cambodia_to_Flooding_and_other_Hazards?channel=doi&linkId=5f280011a6fdcccc43a62ad7&showFulltext=true

rates, especially among rural populations, and vulnerability to climate impacts, particularly for smallholder farmers. These effects are severely impacted by these occurrences. Furthermore, coastal erosion and floods are becoming more and more of a threat to Cambodia's long coastline, endangering coastal cities as well as important industries like fishing and tourism involving poses threats to Cambodia's cultural heritage sites, ecotourism, and fish breeding cycles, causing increased rainfall, humidity, and flooding, and disrupting specific water conditions for spawning.

Furthermore, Cambodia's habitat loss experienced a 25% decrease in forest cover between 2001 and 2020, with 46% of the total land area covered by 2022, primarily due to logging, agricultural expansion, and infrastructure development.⁴ Deforestation is caused mainly by economic activities like logging and farming activities like rubber and palm oil plantations, along with infrastructure projects like roads and dams. Dwindling biodiversity is only a few of the environmental problems already in Cambodia and is made worse by climate change. In addition to raising carbon emissions, widespread deforestation and land conversion for agriculture also lower the country's natural resilience to climate impacts, such as decreased water availability and soil erosion. The Mekong River, essential to millions of people in Cambodia, is becoming more vulnerable to fluctuations in river flow brought on by climate change, which would worsen the country's water shortage and jeopardize freshwater ecosystems, agricultural output, and hydropower development.

In addition to harming the environment, climate change exacerbates social divides and makes it more difficult for Cambodia to pursue sustainable development. The impact of climate change is disproportionately felt by vulnerable communities, including women, indigenous peoples, and marginalized groups, because they have less access to resources, information, and decision-making processes. Furthermore, efforts to mitigate and adapt to climate change's effects are complicated by the interaction of land tenure issues with socio-political factors such as growing urbanization, exacerbating social tensions and vulnerabilities.

⁴ Gray, Randal, and H. Shayo, "Climatic conditions and household food security: Evidence from Tanzania," *Food policy*, 112, 102362. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodpol.2022.102362>

In conclusion, Cambodia needs a comprehensive approach to address climate change and conservation, including reforestation, planting more trees and less cutting trees, water management with renewable energy, advancing climate education to those needing knowledge, and strengthening community empowerment policy through international cooperation. Cambodia's future depends on its capacity to address the climate catastrophe head-on with creativity, collaboration, and resolve, guaranteeing a just and sustainable course for coming generations.

Steven Kuoch is a Young Research Fellow at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies and a sophomore student at the Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh. The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS).

Plastic Waste Management in Cambodia: Managing Difficulty

Chay Bunhout

The economy and population growth in Cambodia have contributed to significant environmental pollution. As a developing country, managing waste is one of the many issues that Cambodia has faced during the past century. With a population of over 17 million people, Cambodia generates a lot of rubbish daily, particularly from local consumption, tourism, and manufacturing or industrial activities. Most of it is dumped in rivers, landfills, and seas.

In this context, this paper will discuss some of Cambodia's significant challenges and provide a few critical solutions to address those issues.

In Cambodia, using plastic is a part of daily life. Approximately 10 million plastic bags are used daily in Phnom Penh alone, and most of the items we consume daily are served, packed, or wrapped in plastic.¹ In 2021, The Phnom Penh Capital Administration stated that it was collecting 1,000 tons of rubbish daily; after two years, that amount had increased to 3,700 tons per day.²

The locals often bury, burn, or litter the plastic waste. The local population and the administration want less plastic leakage, but the resources are not there.³ A few factors explain why Cambodia faces difficulty in handling its plastic waste.

The first factor is the lack of public awareness and education among Cambodian people on the effectiveness of plastic waste. Many people in Cambodia might not realize how important it is to separate recyclable materials, including plastic waste, from regular trash if they are not properly educated about the significance of doing so. The Ministry of Environment claimed that 65% of this garbage could be recycled; however, only 20% of Cambodia's garbage had

¹ "Combating Plastic Pollution in Cambodia," UNDP, n.d., <https://www.undp.org/cambodia/projects/combating-plastic-pollution-cambodia>.

² Ian Hollinger, "No End to Waste Management in Cambodia - Focus Cambodia," Focus, November 8, 2023, <https://focus-cambodia.com/article/no-end-to-waste-management-in-cambodia/>.

³ TTTslskfjalkjfsdf, "Plastic Waste in Cambodia: How TONTOTON Is Making a Difference," TONTOTON, November 6, 2023, <https://tontoton.com/plastic-waste-in-cambodia-how-tontoton-is-making-a-difference/>.

been escaping the pit, and even then, not all of it had been getting recycled; part of it just leaked into streams and rivers or burned up as poisonous smoke.⁴

Furthermore, due to a lack of awareness about the harmful effects of littering and improper disposal of plastic trash, the plastic waste is often buried, burned, or littered by the locals, which has negative impacts on communities and the natural environment, as it can contaminate water sources, soil, and air. Without considering the repercussions of their actions, people would keep disposing of plastic trash carelessly, worsening Cambodia's waste management issues.⁵ Local people who live in communities heavily polluted by plastic pollution want to see a better environment, yet they are unaware that current actions have adverse environmental effects.⁶

The second factor is the limitation of resources and infrastructure. Cambodia also lacks the infrastructure for sufficient waste management, including landfills and recycling centers, to deal with the increasing amount of plastic trash produced, and there is not enough money or people available for the Cambodian government to devote to waste management and recycling initiatives.⁷ Many parts of Cambodia, mainly rural areas, lack proper trash collection services and disposal facilities. As a result, uncollected rubbish builds up in districts, streets, and rivers, posing a health and environmental risk. Cambodia also lacks the infrastructure for sufficient waste management, including landfills and recycling centers, to deal with the increasing amount of plastic trash produced.

Along with the lack of public awareness and education and limited resources and infrastructure, weak regulation and enforcement regarding plastic waste management are the other crucial factors. Cambodia has very low regulations and enforcements regarding plastic management, which allows for uncontrolled dumping and burning of plastic waste. Without a clear regulation

⁴ Southeast Asia Globe, "The Waste Land," September 10, 2021, <https://southeastasiaglobe.com/the-waste-land/>.

⁵ Stephanie Francalancia and Barbara Tan, "Waste Management and Health in Rural Cambodia," *the Undergraduate Journal of Public Health at the University of Michigan* 4, no. 20210521 (April 8, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.3998/ujph.17872072.0004.002>.

⁶ "PLASTIC POLLUTION EDUCATION: HOW AWARENESS CHANGES BEHAVIORS." Accessed May 27, 2024. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/plastic-pollution-education-how-awareness-changes-behaviors->.

⁷ Dek Vimean Pheakdey et al., "Challenges and Priorities of Municipal Solid Waste Management in Cambodia," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health/International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19, no. 14 (July 11, 2022): 8458, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19148458>.

to punish people who throw the trash away from the trash bin, there could be a lack of responsibility among waste generators.

In order to address those issues in managing plastic waste, the Cambodian government and the Ministry of Environment should provide critical details regarding the risky impact of plastic waste through the educational system, specifically to the younger generation. Education can play a crucial role in modifying consumer behavior and attitudes about the management of plastic trash, which inspires people to take proper action to protect the environment by raising awareness of the problem and the actions that need to be taken.⁸

Additionally, Cambodia should implement and enforce regulations to enhance the current laws and rules related to the management of plastic waste, such as those prohibiting single-use plastics, placing limitations on plastic packaging, and specifying appropriate recycling and disposal methods. More than that, Cambodia should encourage individuals, businesses, and industries to reduce their use of plastic products by using eco-friendly products, advocate for reusable alternatives, and put recycling programs in place. Eco-friendly products can help the environment because they are biodegradable and are made using sustainable materials, which can decrease the quantity of plastic that is dumped in landfills.⁹ Cambodia can also follow the 3R (Reduce, Reuse, Recycle) approach to managing plastic waste, which is considered one of the most successful countries for managing waste.¹⁰

Cambodia has faced significant environmental pollution due to its rapidly growing population and economic growth. Cambodia faces difficulties handling plastic waste due to a lack of resources and information about effective waste management. The local population and administration want to reduce plastic leakage, but resources are limited. Lack of public awareness and education about the effectiveness of plastic waste is another factor. The lack of regulation and enforcement regarding plastic waste management also contributes to environmental degradation. To address plastic waste, Cambodia must implement and enforce

⁸ Chauhan, Nalini, and Abhay Punia. "Role of Education and Society in Dealing Plastic Pollution in the Future," 267–81, 2022. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119800897.ch14>.

⁹ Green Alternatives, "The Benefits of Eco-Friendly Products," October 28, 2023, <https://greenalternatives.co.uk/blogs/green-alternatives-blogs/the-benefits-of-eco-friendly-products#:~:text=Eco%2Dfriendly%20products%20are%20made,that%20ends%20up%20in%20landfills.>

¹⁰ "Plastic Pollution and Waste Management in Singapore," Semula-Asia, n.d., <https://www.semula-asia.com/plastic-waste-singapore>.

regulations prohibiting single-use plastics, place limitations on plastic packaging, and specify appropriate recycling and disposal methods. Additionally, Cambodia should encourage individuals, businesses, and industries to reduce their use of plastic products, advocate for reusable alternatives, and implement recycling programs to create a circular plastics economy.

Chay Bunhout is a Young Researcher Fellow at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies and a sophomore majoring for a Bachelor of Science in International Economics at the Department of International Economics, Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh. The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS).

Marine Microplastics in Water in Malaysia: Challenges and the Ways Forwards

Van Vannrithy

The existence of microplastics in the Malaysian oceans carries a high danger of human exposure in the way of fish consumption. The unclean microplastics take place in the area known as the gastrointestinal tract area (GIT). Microplastics, mainly around 86 and 92%, have been detected in the GIT. These smaller wastes appearing in the maritime make fish mistaken for food and digest them, while larger wastes stuck in the grills of fish instead of being swallowed, fishes flush them back into the water.¹ The Malaysian authority must monitor the situation closely and implement efficient action plans to address the worsening issue.

Microplastic is a tiny plastic particle identified as no more than 5 millimeters or 0.2 inches in diameter. It is divided into two sorts: primary and secondary. Primary microplastics are made for the use of commercial cosmetics or microfibers shed from textile stuff like clothes. Secondary microplastics are consequences of bigger plastic wastes like water bottles. It took hundreds and thousands to degrade; these plastic wastes break down and can be decomposed from the sun's radiation and the ocean's waves.² In Malaysia, microplastic characteristics can take different shapes, such as fragment, film, fiber, filament, and irregular form, since understanding the kind of microplastics can indicate their chemical compositions.³

Since 2000, the plastic industry has reached one of the most important growth rates across all other sectors. Malaysia has over 1,300 plastic companies and is a key actor in the plastic globe. The Malaysian plastic sector or industry is considered into seven primary sectors: household goods, agricultural encompassing, packages, buildings, electronics, automotive, and other sub-

¹ Jaafar, N., Azfaralariff, A., Musa, S.M., Mohamed, M., Yusoff, A.H., & Lazim, A.M. Occurrence, distribution and characteristics of microplastics in gastrointestinal tract and gills of commercial marine fish from Malaysia. *Science of The Total Environment* 799 (2021), 149457, ISSN 0048-9697, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2021.149457>

² "Microplastics." National Geography. n.d. <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/microplastics/>

³ Löder, M.G.J., Gerdts, G. (2015). Methodology Used for the Detection and Identification of Microplastics—A Critical Appraisal. In: Bergmann, M., Gutow, L., Klages, M. (eds) *Marine Anthropogenic Litter*. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-16510-3_8

sectors like medical devices. The package sector, one of the 7, emerges as the largest end-use for the plastics industry in Malaysia.⁴

If waste management is not improved, Malaysia could become one of the world's most polluting countries. Dr. Melvin Gunmal, a director of the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) Malaysia, mentioned that it recently ranked 8th worldwide for mismanaged plastic waste. Moreover, he stressed the process of plastic waste mismanagement flowing from the unwell recycled or has not been disposed properly would frequently wind up in the oceans, resulting in a marine environment. "You don't realize this but you are affecting the air that you try to breathe in and you are accidentally consuming things that you are polluting and harming yourselves," he said.⁵ In terms of physical particles, some microplastics may pass through the gastrointestinal tract, and those will eventually be eliminated through defecation. Nevertheless, some can increase steadily, causing mechanical disruption in the gastrointestinal tract and elsewhere. Consuming more fish with microplastics can pass through the blood, resulting in serious harmful health effects.⁶

First is transforming plastic from waste to wealth. One of these efficient methods to deal with microplastics is the practice of upcycling and valorizing wastes and turning them into praiseful and useful things, including fuel and refinery feedstock. Preventing any waste from becoming microplastics by reutilizing the plastic waste, due to its high value of calorific, which refers to any producing heat element, can assist in fuel production. However, several countries are processing incineration to respond to the plastic waste management policy and construct the landfill space.

Second is the introduction of the circular economy (CE). Generally, once the trash is used, the psychology of human beings will rarely use it twice since it is cheap and affordable. There is no denying this fact. However, another policy linked to the previous one is the overview of a plastic circular economy. Merely 14% of plastic packaging is recycled, 40% is left in landfills,

⁴ Chen, H.L., Nath, T.K., Chong, S. et al (2021, March 08). The plastic waste problem in Malaysia: management, recycling and disposal of local and global plastic waste. *SN Appl. Sci* 3(437). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42452-021-04234-y>

⁵ Ten, M. (2018, April 28). Malaysia ranks 8th among nations that mismanage waste. *Borneo Post*. <https://www.theborneopost.com/2018/04/28/malaysia-ranks-8th-among-nations-that-mismanage-waste/>

⁶ Ma, Z.F., Ibrahim Y.S., & Lee, Y.Y. Microplastic Pollution and Health and Relevance to the Malaysia's Roadmap to Zero Single-Use Plastics 2018-2030. *Malays J Med Sci*. Last modified June 2020, 27(3):1-6. doi: <https://doi.org/10.21315%2Fmjms2020.27.3.1>

32% is left in ecosystems, and 14% is incinerated for energy recovery, based on the Ellen MacArthur Foundation. In terms of the thriving circular economy, the constant plastic flow is kept on the line of recycling, redesigning, and recyclability, mixing with new and renewable materials along with the substitute of fossil-based, making the final product easy to decompose.⁷ Managing the plastic waste begins from where the microplastics were used. In this regard, the state has to associate with the households aiming to strengthen the awareness capability to widespread and encourage them with incentive to change the mindful behavior and actions of reduce, reuse, and recycle.

To make the pathway of plastics sustainability for 2030 and further, Malaysia adopted the Malaysian Plastics Sustainability Roadmap in 2021. Its tactic to achieve this is through the enhancement of design products using raw materials such as recycled resin to ensure the greenness of the environment. Improvements in collection and sorting processes are a must. Collection systems have to separate the types of waste in both the sidewalk and river bank to minimize the fragment and contamination. The collection centers play a crucial role in recycling drop-off and keeping the public engaged by making incentives like reverse vending machines or buy-back programs, which can be considered participation efforts while raising awareness.⁸ In addition, No Plastic Bags Day has been conducted, which dedicates the sense of environment friendliness in a collaborative manner.⁹

In conclusion, the concept of microplastic waste management is unlimited to any individual actor or individual industry. Everyone is part of it, demanding the collective sense and force to start the innovation of thinking outside of the box by using innovative, data-driven solutions. Without proper management, the tiny pieces can pose a larger threat to the life of maritime animals, physical human health, and the beauty of the environment. It is significant to note that the challenge can be budget constraints, human resources, professional technical, and the commitment or behavior from public engagement. Nevertheless, further research on the issues has been suggested to gain clear data and apply the best approaches. The policy should be made

⁷ Ng, C.H., Mistoh, M.A., Teo, S.H., Galassi, A., Ibrahim, A., Sipaut, C.S., Foo, J., Seay, J., Taufiq-Yap, Y.H. and Janaun, J. (2023, April). Plastic waste and microplastic issues in Southeast Asia. *Front. Environ. Sci.* 11, 1142071. doi: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fenvs.2023.1142071>

⁸ "Malaysia's Plastics Sustainability Roadmap 2021 – 2030". CCS&CO. Last modified 07 April 2023. <https://www.ccs-co.com/post/malaysia-s-plastics-sustainability-roadmap-2021-2030>

⁹ Sulaiman, R. N. R., Bakar, A. A., Ngadi, N., Kahar, I. N. S., Nordin, A. H., Ikram, N. & Nabgan, M. Microplastics in Malaysia's aquatic environment: current overview and future perspectives. *Global Challenges* 2023, 7(8), 2300047. <https://doi.org/10.1002/gch2.202300047>

in the process and mechanism of transparency, timely, and consistent with the common interests while ensuring that it is closely monitored and evaluated.

Van Vannrithy is a Young Research Fellow at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh. The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS).

Traffic Accidents on the Rise in Cambodia: Addressing Chronic Challenges

Ly Rachana

In the first week of 2024, traffic accidents had already killed 20 people and caused 80 injuries in Cambodia.¹ On average, in Cambodia, traffic accidents cause four deaths and 12 injuries per day.² Traffic accidents are considered one of the most significant problems in Cambodia. Not only do they cause suffering for the families of the victims, but they also contribute to the loss of human capital and development in Cambodia. In this paper, we will delve in-depth into understanding the root causes of the rise of traffic accidents in Cambodia and discuss the approaches that can be taken to address this chronic issue in society.

One of the leading causes of traffic accidents in Cambodia is drunk driving. It can be seen from many recent cases in Cambodia that most of the drivers are under the influence of alcohol. Especially with the infamous traffic accident that caused four deaths and several injuries at a red light due to drunk driving.⁴ This case shows that in Cambodia, there are still limitations regarding alcohol control measures, and thus, Cambodia requires heavier restrictions and regulations on drinking and driving. Moreover, suppose we dive deeper into this issue. In that case, Cambodia has a large amount of alcohol advertisements everywhere within the country, which can also contribute to possibly causing the traffic accidents in Cambodia to rise. The issue is made worse by the widespread alcohol advertising in Cambodia. Numerous alcohol-related campaigns are running around the country, which could be helping to normalize and tolerate alcohol consumption among the general public. For instance, beer companies, in particular, are highly aggressive in their promotion, targeting young people using billboards,

¹ Mom, Kunthear. 2024. "Traffic Accidents Claim over 20 Lives, Prompting Call for Action." The Phnom Penh Post . January 10, 2024. <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/traffic-accidents-claim-over-20-lives-prompting-call-for-action#:~:text=National&text=In%20the%20first%20week%20of,enforcement%20of%20road%20traffic%20laws>.

² "Killer Roads: Time to Solve the Problem." 2024. The Phnom Penh Post . February 29, 2024. <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/opinion/killer-roads-time-to-solve-the-problem>

TV commercials, event sponsorships, and influencers that have a significant engagement with youth to promote. These beer companies also provide incentives for people to drink more, such as offering prize money so that the consumers would buy huge amounts of alcohol to have a higher chance of winning. These widespread marketing campaigns for alcohol may be changing people's perceptions of alcohol and how they behave, which could eventually increase the number of drunk drivers on the road.³ Thus, addressing the issue of drunk driving as well as the pervasive alcohol promotion is necessary to address the traffic accident catastrophe in Cambodia.

Another reason for this cause is the lack of strict law enforcement. This includes a lack of restrictions on alcohol consumption, alcohol advertisements, and punishment. Thus, the inefficiency of enforcing these impositions has posed many challenges for the Kingdom of Cambodia. The problem with this lack of enforcement has given rise to issues such as traffic law violations like people running red lights, driving in the opposite lane, and not wearing safety helmets. Furthermore, there is no specific law or enforcement regarding drinking regulations in Cambodia. For instance, in Cambodia, alcohol can be easily accessed by anyone. Even children can buy alcoholic beverages because there is no minimum drinking age in Cambodia.⁴ Not only does it heavily impact the health and security of the people, especially the youths of Cambodia, but it will also pose a threat to the human resources that Cambodia needs for development. Following that, the lack of strict punishment for people who violate traffic laws or cause traffic accidents has kept allowing people to violate the law continuously. Now, this issue is known and called a chronic disease in society. For example, in the same infamous case mentioned above, after the incident, the perpetrator of the accident will only face three years in prison and a fine of 15 million riels or 3750 US dollars for the incident that caused four deaths that have left the family of victims to grieve and mourn for many years to come.⁵ Therefore, it shows that Cambodia has limited light regulations and punishments to address traffic accidents.

³ Orm, Bunthoeurn. 2024. "Public Concerned over Alcohol Marketing." The Phnom Penh Post . February 15, 2024. <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/post-in-depth/public-concerned-over-alcohol-marketing>

⁴ Rithy, Odom, and Sopheakpanha Sok. 2019. "Lack of Alcohol Law and Drinking Age Leaves Cambodian Youths Vulnerable." VOA Cambodia. September 30, 2019. <https://www.voacambodia.com/a/lack-of-alcohol-law-and-drinking-age-leaves-Cambodian-youths-vulnerable/5104040.html>

⁵ Kim, Yutharo, ed. 2024. "Driver Charged after Four Killed in Crash." The Phnom Penh Post . January 25, 2024. <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/driver-charged-after-four-killed-in-crash>

Lastly, there is a deficiency of driving education and safety awareness. There are regulations on the legal driving age, which states that 18-year-olds can get a license and drive a car, and 16-year-olds can obtain a motorbike license.⁶ However, it can be seen in the capital and especially in the countryside that youths under 18 and 16 have access to these vehicles. Hence, this shows that many Cambodian drivers may be operating vehicles on the road without having a high degree of skill to drive safely. They may be deficient in vital skills like driving safely, spotting potential dangers, controlling the car or motorbike, carefully negotiating turns, and observing traffic laws. This is due to the lack of a comprehensive driving education program in Cambodia that offers professional driving lessons to Cambodian citizens, mainly for individuals who drive motorbikes; most Cambodians learn how to drive, especially motorbikes; they learn from scratch. For instance, they pick the motor and drive by themselves or with a little help from family members, which results in their lack of awareness and understanding of most of the traffic laws, road safety practices, and driving techniques. Therefore, this is also one of the contributing factors that caused the rise of traffic accidents in Cambodia.

Cambodia can look at the successful case of Singapore to address the chronic traffic accident crisis. Cambodia should follow multi-strategies to resolve this chronic issue. Firstly, the country must strengthen alcohol control measures by implementing strict regulations on alcohol advertising and sales to reduce the culture of drunk driving. This should be accompanied by the enforcement of sobriety checkpoints and heavy penalties for drunk driving offenses. Secondly, Cambodia needs to enhance law enforcement and regulations, increasing the severity of punishments for traffic violations, such as heavy fines, demerit points, license suspension, or revocation.⁷ Additionally, Cambodia should adopt comprehensive road design standards that prioritize safety over speed, incorporating traffic calming measures like speed humps while also providing dedicated infrastructure for pedestrians and cyclists, such as sidewalks, crosswalks, and separated cycling paths.⁸ Lastly, Cambodia must improve driver education and safety awareness by implementing comprehensive training programs to ensure all drivers receive thorough preparation and education and launch public awareness campaigns to promote responsible driving behaviors.

⁶ Balagot, Darlyn, ed. 2020. "Getting a Cambodian Driver's License." Independent Property Services (IPS) March 6, 2020. <https://ips-cambodia.com/getting-a-cambodian-drivers-license/>

⁷ "Penalties for Traffic Offences." n.d. A Singapore Government Agency. Singapore Police Force. Accessed June 14, 2024. <https://www.police.gov.sg/Advisories/Traffic/Traffic-Matters/Penalties-for-Traffic-Offences>

⁸ "Driver Improvement Points System." n.d. A Singapore Government Agency. Singapore Police Force. Accessed June 14, 2024. <https://www.police.gov.sg/Advisories/Traffic/Traffic-Matters/Driver-Improvement-Points-System>

In conclusion, the rise of traffic accidents in Cambodia is a complex issue driven by a combination of factors, including the lack of strict alcohol control measures, ineffective law enforcement, and deficiencies in driver education and safety awareness. To prevent the number of traffic accidents from rising, Cambodia should follow a comprehensive approach and further strengthen restrictions and regulations regarding traffic accidents. The government and policymakers should collaborate with various stakeholders, including law enforcement, transportation authorities, and community organizations, to develop and implement these solutions. By learning from the example of Singapore, which has the lowest traffic accident rate in ASEAN due to its strict enforcement, licensing requirements, and focus on road safety.⁹ Cambodia can work towards reducing the significant loss of life and hindering human capital development caused by this traffic accident crisis.

Ly Rachana is a Young Research Fellow and Research Intern at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS), and a Junior at the Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh. The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS).

⁹ "ASEAN Regional Road Safety Strategy." 2016. ASEAN. Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat. https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/ASEAN-Road-Safety-Strategy_full_24Oct16_rev_clean-1.pdf

Remote Working Policy in Singapore: Benefits and Potential Drawbacks

Sum Pichkanika

In 2024, a major change in work has occurred with Singapore's new requirement that requires employers to take requests for flexible work arrangements (FWAs) into consideration. FWAs seeks to develop a workforce that is more inclusive and flexible in response to Singapore's competitive labor market, the country's aging population, and the demands of those who are responsible for providing care. Singaporean businesses have been gradually implementing FWAs to give their staff members flexibility. More businesses now offer at least one official FWA and/or one ad hoc FWA than they did five years ago¹. Although there are many advantages to this policy for businesses and employees alike, implementing it will need careful thought.

The Singapore government has implemented guidelines to encourage companies to provide a better work-life balance to their workers which is a hybrid working system. This system allows workers to work either from home or office. Or it could be a combination of both. Such working arrangements must be usually agreed between employers and employees since remote working is now lawful in Singapore. Currently, the Tripartite Advisory on Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs) set out some recommendations to encourage employers to follow this flexible work arrangement with demands such as working schedule and location, starting and ending dates, working location, and so on².

The new working policy seeks to enhance employee empowerment and well-being. Employees are believed to benefit from remote work opportunities and flexible schedules in order to attain a work-life balance. Increased productivity, decreased stress, and higher employee satisfaction. For instance, 65% of Singaporean enterprises claim that flexible working is a key to work-life

¹ “Article: A More Flexible Singapore!” 2018. Mom.gov.sg. 2018. <https://stats.mom.gov.sg/Pages/A-More-Flexible-Singapore.aspx>.

² “Remote Working Policy in Singapore | Boundless EOR.” n.d. Boundless. Accessed May 13, 2024. <https://boundlesshq.com/guides/singapore/remote-work/>.

balance while productivity has not decreased significantly because of that³. DBS launched a living lab that integrates a physical and virtual workspace to promote conversations across teams, and it gives employees the opportunity to work remotely up to 40% of the time. In 2020, UOB said that, if COVID-19 restrictions are released, the bulk of its 26,000 employees would have the option to work remotely two days a week. Employee satisfaction, productivity, and decision-making speed may all rise as a result of such work arrangements. But only under good management is this achievable⁴.

Besides that, the policy also helps Singaporean workers to increase savings. Working remotely is another big benefit that Singapore has to offer on the regular commutes, which saves a lot of money. Spending can be cut back or completely avoided on a variety of expenses, including gas, auto maintenance, transportation, parking fees, business attire, lunches out, and much more. People will have more money in their pockets as a result of these cumulative savings. Hence, prior to the pandemic, 3.9 million workers worked from home at least half the time, which cut greenhouse gas emissions by an amount equal to removing more than 600,000 cars off the road for a full year. Additionally, eating in or out for lunch, uniforms, and other incidentals related to in-person work can be avoided by remote workers, which is an economical option. By significantly lowering the number of commuters, this new policy helps to cut carbon emissions and ease traffic congestion.

While the new policy provides positives, it does not mean there are no drawbacks. This policy could somehow make employers rethink hiring employees abroad which could harm local workers. Some Singaporean employers said that they may rethink hiring local staff and look for overseas recruitment. For example, Ms. Tan Wan Ting, who is a founder of a digital marketing agency in Singapore said that she has 11 Singaporean employees and 13 Malaysian employees. The cost of paying Malaysian workers could be four or five times lower than paying Singaporean workers. Similarly, Mr. Felix Sim, the founder of Blockchain venture capital firm Salad Ventures, predicted that most businesses would eventually stop caring about the local workers. He added that his company employs ten full-time remote workers and eight full-time workers in Singapore. The hybrid work policy involves two days per week. According to Mr.

³ “How Singapore Employers Are Building a Hybrid Workforce.” 2022. MyCareersFuture. June 21, 2022. <https://content.mycareersfuture.gov.sg/singapore-employers-building-hybrid-workforce/>.

⁴ “How Singapore Employers Are Building a Hybrid Workforce.” 2022. MyCareersFuture. June 21, 2022. <https://content.mycareersfuture.gov.sg/singapore-employers-building-hybrid-workforce/>.

Sim, firms can develop their teams remotely and become less dependent on locally based workers if flexible work arrangements become the standard. As a result, the job market will become more difficult for Singaporean local workers⁵.

Moreover, if improperly handled, the flexible working arrangement could have an impact on the organization's general work culture workers. The possibility of less Communication and Collaboration may limit team members' opportunities for in-person communication and cooperation. This may result in misconceptions and breaks in communication, which could be detrimental to output and teamwork. Moreover, the decision to work from home or office depends on the workers' role, industry, and management. For example, if you're working in tech, the possibility of remote working is much higher; however, if you're working on a construction project, employers would require you to be at the site⁶. Therefore, to make sure the policy works for everyone involved, it might need to be carefully monitored and adjusted.

In conclusion, Singapore has put new rules into place requiring companies to take requests for flexible work schedules into account. Employees view this as essential to achieving a work-life balance as work-life balance. While employees can also benefit from lower stress levels and higher production. However, flexible work hours and locations could affect the organization's general work culture workers and local workers.

Sum Pichkanika is a Young Researcher Fellow at Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh. The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS).

⁵ “‘Singaporeans Need to Level Up’: Companies Say Flexi-Work Could Push Them to Hire Overseas.” n.d. CNA. Accessed May 13, 2024. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/flexi-work-arrangements-employers-companies-hire-overseas-wfh-4273911>.

⁶ “Work from the Office vs. Work from Home: Find out Which Option Is Right for You - Jobstreet Singapore.” n.d. Jobstreet. Accessed May 27, 2024. <https://www.jobstreet.com.sg/career-advice/article/work-from-office-vs-work-from-home-find-out-which-option-is-right-for-you>.

Theme III

Economic Analysis

Revitalizing Cambodia's Economy: Addressing the Skills Gap in the Workforce

Heng Lyponnareay

Cambodia, a rapidly modernizing Southeast Asian country, has witnessed appreciable economic progress in the past years. Nevertheless, the most adverse problem facing this nation is the skills gap among workers, which greatly decelerates its movement to become a competitive economy. This in-depth analysis seeks to bring attention to and delve into this issue so that causes and possible solutions can be explored.

Skills mismatches in Cambodia's workforce could lead to various problems for the country's economy and society. First, there may be a loss of business competitiveness locally since businesses might find difficulty getting adequately qualified individuals to work according to market requirements.¹ This challenges local businesses to find employees with the skills and knowledge necessary to fulfill their roles and meet market demands. This implies that productivity will decline because firms will have to invest more time and money in training or look outside borders when hiring. Consequently, local enterprises may not be able to compete with foreign companies that benefit from a higher-skilled workforce. As such, industry growth is slowed down while foreign investments are discouraged, hence affecting national economic development as a whole.²

Second, unemployment rates can increase as the gap in skills makes it difficult for those with outdated or inadequate skills to get high paid jobs.³ This can generate higher unemployment rates when the mismatch between employer-demanded skills and job seekers' abilities grows wider. In fact, despite having a low unemployment rate, Cambodia is not immune to this issue. While the country's unemployment rate is currently low with a decrease to 0.22% in 2023 from

¹ Heng, K. 2023. "Skills mismatches in Cambodian higher education: Major causes and possible solutions." 78.

² Emerald Insight. April 11, 2023. "Industrial Impact Analysis Of Foreign Direct Investment on Economic Development in Cambodia." Available at <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JBSED-11-2022-0120/full/html>.

³ International Labour Organization. November 16, 2015. "Cambodia Addressing The Skills Gap: Employment Diagnostic Study." Available at https://www.ilo.org/asia/publications/WCMS_425375/lang--en/index.htm.

0.23% in 2022,⁴ the fast-changing landscape of the world economy and disruptive technologies could soon change this. For instance, the rise of automation and artificial intelligence may lead to job losses in sectors like vocational education and information technology, potentially increasing unemployment rates among those lacking the necessary skills to adapt to these changes.⁵ This can foster social inequality since individuals who have better access to educational and vocational training services are deemed advantaged in searching for a job. Eventually, this translates into a widening gulf between “haves” and “have-nots”, which has adverse effects on social unity.

Thirdly, the skills gap has an adverse effect on the country’s overall economic growth. Businesses may be reluctant to expand or invest in new projects if they cannot find suitable employees. Moreover, a less skilled workforce means low productivity, which will negatively affect the country’s economic performance.⁶ Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) plays a crucial role in a country's economy by bringing in much-needed capital, technology, and expertise. However, low productivity and low-skilled labor could deter foreign investors from investing in a particular country. This could result in a decrease in FDI inflow, leading to missed opportunities for growth and development. Failure to attract foreign investors may also lead to a loss of competitiveness in the global market, hindering the country's overall economic progress. Therefore, countries must prioritize enhancing productivity and improving the skills of their workforce to attract and retain foreign investment.

Cambodia’s economy has grown impressively, but there remains an issue with a skills gap. A report by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) states that the mismatch between skills taught and those required by employers makes this issue a skills gap that curtails Cambodia’s economic development.⁷ Moreover, the rapid technological advances and the growing importance of digital competencies in today’s workforce have only worsened the problem. Over time, Cambodia's education system has improved significantly with substantial government investments in the expansion of primary and secondary schools. However,

⁴ Trading Economics. January 1, 2023. "Cambodia Unemployment Rate." TRADING ECONOMICS | 20 Million INDICATORS FROM 196 COUNTRIES. Available at <https://tradingeconomics.com/cambodia/unemployment-rate>.

⁵ Holzer, J. March 9, 2022. "Understanding the Impact of Automation on Workers, Jobs, and Wages." Brookings. Available at <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/understanding-the-impact-of-automation-on-workers-jobs-and-wages/>.

⁶ ADB. n.d. “EMPLOYMENT AND POVERTY IMPACT ASSESSMENT: CAMBODIA” pp 1-11.

⁷ Asian Development Bank. April 17, 2024. "Cambodia: Economy." Available at <https://www.adb.org/where-we-work/cambodia/economy>.

education quality remains a serious concern as many graduates do not have the skills needed for employment. A World Bank study indicates that just 30% of Cambodian students are functionally literate, meaning they can read simple words and solve basic math problems, implying there is much need to improve the educational system.⁸

Vocational and technical training initiatives can help bridge this gap by giving students hands-on work-related knowledge. This means that the government should collaborate with local authorities and international organizations to develop quality vocational programs that are aligned with industry needs. In addition, they could also consider investigating public-private collaborations to improve the connection between employers and workers. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), investing in skills development can increase productivity, higher wages, and better employment opportunities.⁹ Currently, the ILO is partnering with the Ministry of Labor to enhance the training of Cambodia's workforce, emphasizing the importance of acquiring relevant skills, such as digital and green economy skills, that are coordinated with today's development trends.¹⁰

Ensuring the partnership between education institutions and the private sector remains solid can guarantee that the curriculum is up-to-date and relevant to industry requirements. This teamwork can also give students openings for internships and job placements, thereby giving them practical skills and raising their employability levels. Such partnerships, according to ADB, contribute towards a more skilled workforce, which ultimately lifts the economic growth of a country.¹¹ Workers should be encouraged to embrace continuous learning so that they can effectively adjust to the ever-evolving labor market. The government may provide incentives for staff who take part in training programs and support companies through funding for

⁸ World Bank. April 19, 2024. "Development Projects : Skills for Better Jobs Project - P179159." Available at <https://projects.worldbank.org/en/projects-operations/project-detail/P179159>.

⁹ International Labour Organization. April 8, 2021. "ILO Guide for Skills Development in Employment-Intensive Investment Programmes." Available at https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/employment-intensive-investment/publications/WCMS_779044/lang--en/index.htm.

¹⁰ International Labour Organization. April 18, 2024. "The ILO-China Partnership Programme and Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training Join Forces to Advance Green Skills, Digital Skills in Cambodia." International Labour Organization. Available at <https://www.ilo.org/meetings-and-events/ilo-china-partnership-programme-and-ministry-labour-and-vocational-training>.

¹¹ Asian Development Bank. July 8, 2021. "Partnership Report 2020: Responsive Partners, Resilient Communities." Available at <https://www.adb.org/documents/partnership-report-2020>.

employee development. The WEF report indicates that lifelong learning is vital in maintaining competitiveness within the global economy.¹²

Investment in teachers' professional development has a substantial effect on improving the quality of education. This should include access to ongoing refresher courses, materials, and mentorship opportunities. Empowered educators are at an advantage and will be able to better equip their learners against employment challenges ahead. According to a World Bank analysis, improving teacher quality is one of the most successful ways of enhancing students' learning outcomes to address the skills gap in the workforce.¹³ Furthermore, empowering educators with the necessary skills and knowledge can have a ripple effect on the education system. They can share their newly acquired expertise with their colleagues, creating a culture of continuous improvement and innovation within educational institutions. This collaborative approach can further strengthen the quality of education and help bridge the skills gap in the long run.

The skills gap in Cambodia's workforce significantly challenges the nation's economy and society. This issue hinders local businesses from finding adequately skilled employees, decreasing productivity and difficulty competing with foreign companies. Consequently, unemployment rates may rise, causing social inequality and affecting national economic growth. To address this problem, Cambodia needs to improve its education system and vocational training initiatives. Collaborating with local authorities and international organizations can help develop quality vocational programs aligned with industry needs. Encouraging continuous learning and investing in teacher development will also contribute to a more skilled workforce and economic growth.

Heng Lyponnareay is a Young Researcher Fellow at Center for Southeast Asian Studies and a Sophomore majoring in International Relations at the Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh. The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS).

¹² World Economic Forum. December 16, 2020. "Global Competitiveness Report 2020." Available at <https://www.weforum.org/publications/the-global-competitiveness-report-2020/>.

¹³ World Bank. November 9, 2023. "Teachers." Available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/teachers>.

Cambodia: Graduating from the Least Developed Country (LDC)

Seam Somontha

Though the exact year of Cambodia's graduation is still vague, Cambodia is expected to graduate from the Least Developed Country (LDC) in this decade. Least Developed Country (LDC) refers to developing or low-income countries listed by the United Nations that face challenges to sustainable development.¹ As of now, there are 45 countries identified as LDC by the UN,² And Cambodia is one of them.

Every three years, the Committee for Development Policy (CDP) conducts a thorough review of all LDCs, assessing their progress in Gross National Income (GNI), Human Assets Index (HAI), and the Economic and Environmental Vulnerability Index.³ Two out of three criteria thresholds are needed to graduate from the status at two consecutive triennial reviews. Following a recommendation by the CDP and endorsement by the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the final decision rests with the UN General Assembly.⁴ Additionally, for the income criteria, GNI per capita should be at least twice the graduation threshold in two consecutive triennial reviews.

Cambodia is expected to graduate from LDC status as early as 2027.⁵ This graduation will improve Cambodia's pristineness on the international stage and amplify national-reliance due to the potential economic growth. Cambodia seems to see a bright light in this path as the country underwent a new administration under Hun Sen's son, Hun Manet, who heavily stressed his objectives early in the election stage that he would prioritize the economic development of the country by diversifying the economy as well as his foreign policy. So far,

¹ United Nations "Least Developed Countries Category", accessed April 15, 2024
<https://www.un.org/ohrlls/content/ldc-category#:~:text=Least%20Developed%20Countries%20Category&text=The%20United%20Nations%20define%20LDCs.structural%20impediments%20to%20sustainable%20development>.

² Ibid.

³ Sar Socheat "Scholars weigh in as Cambodia prepares to exit LDC status" Khmer Times, January 24, 2022
<https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501011860/scholars-weigh-in-as-cambodia-prepares-to-exit-ldc-status/>

⁴ United Nations "Committee for Development Policy", accessed May 12, 2024
<https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/our-work/committee-for-development-policy.html>

⁵ "What Should Cambodia Prepare for post-LDC Graduation?" *Cambodianess*, May 15, 2023
<https://cambodianess.com/article/what-should-cambodia-prepare-for-post-ldc-graduation>

it has been seen that his approach toward the economy is quite different from his father's as some believe that he will be more Western-focused because he was educated in the West.

Cambodia met the LDC criteria for the first time in 2021 when its Gross National Income (GNI) per capita was \$1,377, Human Assets Index (HAI) was 74.3, and Economic and Environmental Index was 30.6 (threshold of \$1,222 or above, 66 or above, and 32 or below, respectively). Three years after meeting the criteria, Cambodia is again to submit its graduation application in June to ECOSOC to be evaluated for the triennial review. If Cambodia passes the review for two consecutive terms, the country can graduate from the status in four to six years or longer.

With Cambodia's new administration under Prime Minister Hun Manet, the economy has experienced great growth so far, with a projection of a growth rate of 6.6 percent,⁶ possibly achieving pre-pandemic growth of more than seven percent for the last twenty years. While the future is not promised, recently, there was also a positive tick from the UN's preliminary evaluation as the country's GNI per capita is \$1,546. Many of the country's economic governance can be seen as positive progress in this context. The prime minister has emphasized heavily the diversification of the economy by striking a balance between relationships with China and the West side, like the European Union, but also on the domestic SMEs as one of the most important factors in boosting the national economy. Besides increasing job opportunities and citizens' income, it can attract a wider range of foreign investments and reduce the reliance on imports. In his objectives of diversifying the economy and foreign policy, progress can be seen through his visits to Europe, such as his first meeting as Prime Minister with President Emmanuel Macron in France since taking office in August 2023. The most significant outcome of the visit was strengthening the bilateral relationship and elevating it to a strategic level, making France the fourth strategic partner of Cambodia.⁷ At ASEAN Business and Investment Summit 2023, he also declared that Cambodia welcomes all investors for opportunities and is more open to businesses.⁸

⁶ Sok Sereyath "Cambodia's Economic Growth Remains Robust, Says Samdech Thipadei Hun Manet" *CPP*, April 2, 2024 <https://www.cpp.org.kh/en/details/370997>

⁷ Chansambath Bong "Cambodia's strategic overture to France", *East Asia Forum*, March 05, 2024 <https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/03/05/cambodias-strategic-overture-to-france/>

⁸ May Kunmakara "PM urges ASEAN economic integration", *Phnom Penh Post*, September 05, 2024 <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/business/pm-urges-asean-economic-integration>

With opportunities, there also come the costs. Cambodia's leaving the LDC status also has massive impacts on the country's interests, particularly on the benefits of the status, such as the Duty-Free Quota-Free (DFQF) arrangements and other development aids. The country's current two-thirds of exports, garments, greatly depend on the advantage of being an LDC, including the Everything But Arms (EBA) agreement with the European Union and the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) with the United States. Without it, Cambodia would have to ensure market competitiveness through FTAs both bilaterally and multilaterally to find alternative markets.⁹ Maintaining open market access for goods and services is crucial for Cambodia in the post-LDC scenario. It is also seen that Cambodia has made numerous efforts to mitigate the impacts that it might face at the cost of graduating from LDC and achieving sustainable development. For instance, successive development strategies have contributed to the development, and this mandate is the Pentagon Strategy.

Cambodia's graduation from the LDC can be looked at from two perspectives. While the graduation itself is a significant achievement – such as being able to leverage the international image and attractiveness on the global stage – it is also possible that Cambodia might become a victim of its success and therefore, to tackle that effectively, it depends on the country's ability to navigate the complexities of a more competitive global market, address internal development issues, and seize new growth opportunities. On the bright side, Cambodia's graduation in the far future is not the endpoint but rather a springboard for new opportunities necessary for development.

Seam Somontha is a Young Research Fellow at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS) and a junior majoring in International Studies at the Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh. The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS).

⁹ Syad Ali "The Potential Impacts of Cambodia's Graduation from LDC Status", *LinkedIn*, June 12, 2023 <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/potential-impacts-cambodias-graduation-from-ldc-status-syed-ali/>

The Implications of QR Code Standardization on Japan-ASEAN Economic Relations

Mey Monita

The digital economy is a new payment method introduced in the fourth revolution of technology; thus, it plays a vital role in developing economic activities. Speaking of the digital economy, digital transactions and QR code payment are being introduced as the hot trending topic in the 21st century. In 2020, this payment method was introduced, with 1.5 billion users during the COVID-19 outbreak. After that, people find it easy to use in their daily lives.¹ One research study showed that QR codes provide many benefits, including security and efficiency in payment, a fastened payment process, and encryption. QR codes make transactions safe for merchants and buyers.² Therefore, the bank sector has introduced this method worldwide, impacting international economics or trade across the border. As a result, the ASEAN region uses this method to develop the economy faster and smoother.

The introduction of this new initiative contributed to the attraction of investment into the region; moreover, it is easy for people to buy products and trade.³ In 2022, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines signed a Memorandum of Understanding to allow cross-border payment through QR codes, which boosted the economies of these 5 countries to grow faster and be more developed.⁴ For example, the agreement between Indonesia and Singapore has helped these countries to increase the number of travelers to each country, with 1.1 million Indonesians to Singapore and 600,000 from Singapore to Indonesia.⁵ This can indicate the excellent outcome of the QR code payment, that it has an impact on the

¹ Raya Raychnova, "How QR Code Payments Work and Their Benefits," Emerchantpay, last modified April 5, 2024,

<https://www.emerchantpay.com/insights/how-qr-code-payments-work-and-their-benefits/>.

² Ibid.

³ "South-east Asia Takes QR Codes Across Borders," The Banker – Unrivalled Coverage of Global Finance & Banking, accessed April 19, 2024, <https://www.thebanker.com/South-east-Asia-takes-QR-codes-across-borders-1700036615>.

⁴ Fintech News Singapore, "QR Code Payment Integration Between Japan and ASEAN Set for 2025 Launch," Fintech

Singapore, last modified March 18, 2024, <https://fintechnews.sg/93202/payments/qr-code-payment-integration-between-japan-and-asean-set-for-2025-launch/>.

⁵ "Indonesia and Singapore Implement QR Linkage Payment." 2023. ASEAN Business News. November 20, 2023.

<https://www.aseanbriefing.com/news/indonesia-and-singapore-implement-qr-linkage-payment/>.

ASEAN region. In 2024, Japan proposed to collaborate with ASEAN countries, specifically with those 5 countries, to implement QR code payment as an official cross-border transaction.⁶ This essay will study the economic ties between Japan and ASEAN towards the digital economy, especially, study about the perception of QR Code Standardization that is wished to be implemented in 2025.

Japan has been an ASEAN trade and investment partner, and trading focuses mostly on electronic devices, as Japan is known as the best producer of electronic devices. This resulted in the establishment of the Japan-ASEAN agreement as the ASEAN-Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership (AJCEP).⁷ In 2021, the trade between ASEAN-Japan grew from 17% to 240.2 billion USD,⁸ In 2022, Japan was the No.3 trading partner with ASEAN; the value of trading between Japan and ASEAN is estimated to be around 31.649 Billion.⁹ Moreover, considering geographical context, ASEAN is essential for Japan's economy because, inside the ASEAN region, 30% of Japanese subsidiaries stay in this multicultural region.¹⁰ Additionally, Japan is committed to having good relations with ASEAN on cross-border payment using QR codes because these two parties believe in having a good connection on financial sustainability in developing the region together.¹¹

QR Code initiative was introduced to bind relations between Japan and ASEAN, as both countries have a common goal of developing their economies and creating an efficient lifestyle for their citizens. The implication of the QR code for official usage provides many positive impacts to the regions approved by both parties, especially stated by the government of Japan. According to Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry ("METI"), this new idea will

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "ASEAN-Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership | Free Trade Areas | ASEAN Investment." n.d. Investasean.asean.org. Accessed May 26, 2024. <https://investasean.asean.org/free-trade-areas/view/734/newsid/775/aseanjapan-comprehensive-economic-partnership.html>.

⁸ Vietnam+ (VietnamPlus). 2023. "Japan, ASEAN Seek to Facilitate Trade through Digital Shift." Vietnam+ (VietnamPlus). August 18, 2023. <https://en.vietnamplus.vn/japan-asean-seek-to-facilitate-trade-through-digital-shift-post266516.vnp>.

⁹ "ASEAN-Japan at a Glance." n.d. ASEAN-Japan Centre (AJC) - ASEAN Promotion Centre on Trade, Investment and Tourism. Accessed May 26, 2024. <https://www.asean.or.jp/en/asean-japan-information/>.

¹⁰ SUKEGAWA Seiya, "Japan, ASEAN, and 'De-Risking' through Free Trade," thediplomat.com, July 20, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/07/japan-asean-and-de-risking-through-free-trade/>.

¹¹ "The Evolution of ASEAN-Japan Economic Cooperation," ASEAN-Japan Cooperation: A Foundation for East Asian Community; (ed. Japan Center for International Exchange), Tokyo: Japan Center for International Exchange, 2003, pp. 63-74.

help both sides be more economically developed.¹² First, it will facilitate currency exchange to make it faster and smoother, saving time and cost for tourists, merchants, and consumers. Moreover, it creates a cashless space in the international realm, which is convenient for the world's economy and trade relations with other countries. Digital payment, including e-wallets and e-commerce, creates a safe place for cross-border payment that becomes more affordable, reliable, and accessible. Furthermore, there will be discussions with central banks of countries in Southeast Asia's country that the integration of this initiative will not only benefit the international economy but will further contribute to the growth of domestic growth conditions, which help to improve the living standard of those countries.

As of the time of this writing, according to the survey set out by Fidelity National Information Services (FIS), the percentage of QR code payments is increasing in SEA regions, especially for Thailand (23% of the total payment) and Indonesia (28% of total payment).¹³ As a result of this survey, we can conclude that the number of citizens in SEA who use QR Code for payment is increasing year by year; therefore, when Japan-ASEAN releases the official implications of this method in 2025, it will contribute a lot to both Japan and ASEAN's economies. It will benefit not only the 5 countries who signed the MoU but also all members of this organization.

The challenges of QR Code Implications for Japan-ASEAN members

Along with the positive impacts, this new QR code initiative has some challenges. Firstly, even if it is easy to access, there are still countries in ASEAN with a low level of digital literacy, which would affect digital currency usage. In 2022, 70% of internet users in ASEAN could use one-way services, which include social media or other digital platforms, for their daily life and entertainment, except for digital currency.¹⁴ Under the estimation, QR code payment could encounter difficulties due to digital illiteracy. Secondly, by using QR Code encryption, some opportunists could commit illegal acts such as cybercrimes (Fraud, Data Breach, and Data Obtain), which harm the privacy protection of each individual, or hack into the user's bank account.¹⁵ However, some countries in ASEAN have not yet implemented cybercrime laws,

¹² "Standardisation of QR Code Payments Likely Across SE Asia, Japan by 2025," Nationthailand, last modified March 15, 2024, <https://www.nationthailand.com/thailand/general/40036420>.

¹³ VietnamPlus, "Japan, ASEAN to Integrate QR Code Payments from 2025," VietnamPlus, last modified March 14, 2024, <https://en.vietnamplus.vn/japan-asean-to-integrate-qr-code-payments-from-2025/282930.vnp#:~:text=Japan%20and%20the%20Association%20of,of%2>

¹⁴ "Bridging Disparities to Bolster Digital Transformation in ASEAN," SEADS, accessed April 19, 2024, <https://seads.adb.org/solutions/bridging-disparities-bolster-digital-transformation-asean>.

¹⁵ "QR Code Scams: Protecting Your Money and Data," last modified December 7, 2023, <https://www.santander.com/en/stories/qr-code-scam>.

cybersecurity laws, and data protection laws to ensure cyberspace security, which could be a big threat to the citizens of ASEAN and the security of Japan and ASEAN nations. Overall, alongside the positive impacts, we cannot neglect the challenges both parties will encounter during this new initiative.

ASEAN and Japan enjoy robust economic ties, and ASEAN always receives support from Japan in Heart-to-Heart Diplomacy. This QR code implementation provides many opportunities for both sides, especially for ASEAN. Moreover, this newly introduced initiative will strengthen the ties of these two parties. Implementing QR codes will benefit ASEAN in the 4.0 technology realm. Nevertheless, there are challenges that we expect to meet due to the development gap inside the ASEAN region. To achieve “**One Identity, One Unity**”, ASEAN member states could explore collaborative action to strengthen the digital governance framework and promote digital illiteracy across the region. This mission would contribute to a more inclusive and prosperous ASEAN.

Mey Monita is a Young Researcher Fellow at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS) and a National Intern of GIZ under the project of ASEAN PROTECT II working on the Consumer Protection Field. She is also a Junior student pursuing Dual Degrees, majoring in International Relations at the Institute for International Studies and Public Policy (IISPP), Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP) and English Language Bachelor of Law (ELBBL) at the Royal University of Laws and Economics (RULE). The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS).

Theme IV

Governance

Dam building in the Mekong: A Double-edged Sword

Nguon Socheata

The ongoing projects for dam construction in the Mekong River have been done since the 1990s with the vision of encouraging countries to enhance hydropower as an alternative to raw minerals.¹ While it has benefited the energy sector, it poses a great threat to other economic sectors, especially for the countries in the Lower Mekong Basin.

Mekong River dam construction benefits surrounding countries by creating opportunities for development in their waterways, but it also negatively impacts the socioeconomic conditions of the countries around it.

Since the 1990s, China has built most of the Mekong River's dams. In addition, other Lower Mekong Basin (LMB) nations have benefited financially from their financial assistance in building their own dams.² China's large-scale dam construction can be attributed to three main reasons. Firstly, using hydropower energy instead of coal aligns with China's commitment to reduce the use of raw minerals to generate energy and reduce carbon emissions.³ Secondly, as energy needs rise, China wants to increase its energy capacity and become a central hub for supplying power in the region.⁴ Lastly, there have been concerns over China's alleged intention to control the water flow in the Mekong region. Many of the dams have controlled water movement by stocking up water and holding water back from flowing to the LMB, causing drought and unstable water distributions in different seasons in the Mekong region.⁵

¹ "The Effects of Chinese Dams on Water Flows in the Lower Mekong Basin." *Mekong River Commission*, Accessed April 10, 2024. <https://www.mrcmekong.org/news-and-events/news/the-effects-of-chinese-dams-on-water-flows-in-the-lower-mekong-basin/#:~:text=Since%201993%2C%20China%20has%20built,as%20the%20Lancang%20in%20China>.

² Chandran, Rina. "China's Mekong Dams Turn Thai Fishing Villages into 'ghost Towns'." *Thomson Reuters Foundation*, (2023). Accessed April 10, 2024. <https://www.context.news/just-transition/chinas-mekong-dams-turn-thai-fishing-villages-into-ghost-towns>.

³ Myllyvirta, Lauri, and Byford Tsang. "China Pledged to 'Strictly Control' Coal. The Opposite Happened." *Foreign Policy*, (2023). Accessed April 12, 2024. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/11/12/china-coal-climate-change-carbon-emissions-pledge-plants-apec/#:~:text=China%20has%20pledged%20to%20reduce,fall%20to%20achieve%20this%20goal>.

⁴ Kapoor, Kanupriya, Simon Scarr, Phuong Nguyen, Clare Trainor, and Manas Sharma. "How Dams Starve the Mekong River Delta of Vital Sediments." *Reuters*, (2022). Accessed April 18, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/graphics/GLOBAL-ENVIRONMENT/MEKONG/egpbyyadnvq/index.html>.

⁵ Citowicki, Philip. "China's Control of the Mekong." *The Diplomat*, (2020). Accessed April 16, 2024. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/chinas-control-of-the-mekong/>.

The Mekong River is one of the best-known rivers in Asia. It is rich in biodiversity and natural resources and flows through six countries: China, Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand.⁶ The construction of dams in the Mekong River is intended to enhance flood control in the region, upgrade the irrigation systems, and promote hydropower utilization.⁷

However, some countries in the LMB region have been critical of constructing dams in the Mekong River. While their concerns are valid, dam construction has benefited LMB countries in terms of energy demand. Most notably, through these constructions, the energy increase in the LMB region is expected to rise to 6-7 percent in 2025.⁸ LMB nations have also greatly benefited from foreign investments in their hydropower development. Therefore, their economic gains will reach USD 160 billion in 2024. In addition, the dams also provide a tool to combat climate change, as they function as flood control and can be useful for water supply for irrigation during the changing wet and dry seasons.⁹

In a report by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), the drawbacks of the construction of dams in the region outweigh the benefits.¹⁰ Damming the Mekong impacts the supply chains in the region and puts multiple other industries that rely on the Mekong River at risk. Additionally, The WWF continues to highlight the impact of dam construction on five main industries in the LMB, covering the mining of sand, rice production, fisheries, aquaculture, electronics, textiles and clothing, and energy production. The report points out the risk of hydropower's impacts on society and economic sectors outside the energy industry. With dams being built, many LMB countries that have benefited economically would be met with socio-economic risks. The risks include minimized household incomes, a shortage of food, labor migration from rural areas, and stricter industry regulations that could all have cumulative effects on the economy in the long run.¹¹

⁶ "Mekong Basin." *Mekong River Commission*,. Accessed April 10, 2024. <https://www.mrcmekong.org/about/mekong-basin/>.

⁷ Hirsch, Philip. "Dams in the Mekong Region: Scoping Social and Cultural Issues." *Cultural Survival*, (2010). Accessed April 18, 2024. <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/dams-mekong-region-scoping-social-and-cultural-issues>.

⁸ Roney, Tyler. "What Are the Impacts of Dams on the Mekong River?" *Dialogue Earth*, (2021). Accessed April 16, 2024. <https://dialogue.earth/en/energy/what-are-the-impacts-of-dams-on-the-mekong-river/#:~:text=Hydropower%20dams%20will%20continue%20to,more%20direct%20in%20their%20opposition>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ trangio, Sebastian. "Hydropower Dams Threaten Crucial Mekong Supply Chains, WWF Says." *The Diplomat*, (2023). Accessed April 10, 2024. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/10/hydropower-dams-threaten-crucial-mekong-supply-chains-wwf-says/>.

¹¹ Ibid.

There are different levels of impact on the four LMB countries in terms of variations in industries and different levels of dependency. Firstly, it can be noted that the supply chain in Vietnam and Cambodia faces a higher risk from hydropower dams. Vietnam's agriculture, textiles, electronics, and energy generation industries are threatened by the long-term effects of hydropower developments. Secondly, developing hydropower dams affects Cambodia's fisheries and aquaculture sectors more, as Cambodia is highly dependent on the Tonle Sap Lake's fisheries. Lao PDR and Thailand supply chains face lower-scale impacts. In contrast, as Lao PDR heavily relies on hydropower dams for its energy supply, it faces potential high-level risks in dry spells and low river levels.¹²

As concern over the dam building in the Upper Mekong Basin continues to grow, authorities at the Mekong River Commission (MRC) have established regional cooperation models. In their model, the MRC urges countries to consider different factors like fisheries, irrigation, environment, floods, and tourism before proceeding with development projects. The MRC also holds strong expertise and comprehensive knowledge on basin levels, which are useful as planning tools for the management of developments. Hence, the identification of planning criteria must be submitted early to the MRC to ensure the safety of the livelihoods of countries in the region.¹³

Furthermore, as hydropower development in the Mekong River continues to grow, the MRC continues to work towards supporting LMB countries in the management process. This includes strategies, procedures, guidance, assessment, and monitoring of their developments. Additionally, they have included development frameworks such as the Sustainable Hydropower Development Strategy to work efficiently and with low regional costs. The MRC procedures also work on notifying and consulting on project facilitation with the MRC members and the public, where technical guidance from the MRC is also provided to steer away from project failures and minimize the negative impacts of construction. As the projects

¹² Strangio, Sebastian. "Hydropower Dams Threaten Crucial Mekong Supply Chains, WWF Says." *The Diplomat*, (2023). Accessed April 10, 2024. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/10/hydropower-dams-threaten-crucial-mekong-supply-chains-wwf-says/>.

¹³ Bird, Jeremy. "A Responsible Approach to Dam Building." *Mekong River Commission*,. Accessed April 11, 2024. <https://www.mrcmekong.org/news-and-events/news/a-responsible-approach-to-dam-building/>.

end, the MRC conducts studies and assessments and keeps track of the situation to support adaptive management.¹⁴

In short, damming the Mekong further without addressing the risks that LMB countries face could potentially cause lasting harm to the region. The LMB region could face economic loss, biodiversity loss, floods, or drought, as well as tension with the Upper Mekong Basin. Consultation and regulation by the authorities involved are most important when resolving the issue at hand.

The dam construction in the Mekong River is a double-edged sword, providing benefits and negative impacts to countries in the region. As the Mekong continues to be a vital source of food supply and the economy as well as for renewable energy creation, governments should look into a more effective water management system, reducing the risks of damming the river while finding alternatives to hydropower, as it could be fatal to be solely reliant on hydropower. While it is not an easy task, local governments and institutions must promote cooperation and monitor the situation to prevent lasting negative impacts on countries in the region.

Nguon Socheata is an intern at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS) and a sophomore in the Department of International Relations (DIR), Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh. The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS).

¹⁴ "Hydropower." *Mekong River Commission*,. Accessed April 11, 2024. <https://www.mrcmekong.org/our-work/topics/hydropower/>.

Assessing the Social Media's Impacts on SMEs in Cambodia

BOU Nisa

The number of internet and social media users is continuing to rise. According to the latest report from DataReportal, at the start of 2023, there are around 11.37 million internet users in Cambodia. Additionally, 10.95 million social media users account for 65 percent of the total population.¹ With the rise of online users, businesses are also making themselves more relevant in this digital age. This phenomenon can mostly be seen as one of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. As Prime Minister Hun Sen said in his speech at a graduation ceremony at one university, the COVID-19 pandemic in the last two years has sped up digital transformation in Southeast Asian countries. In Cambodia, he continued that the pandemic has led to a tremendous surge in e-commerce.² Almost all local business owners in Cambodia are now promoting their goods and services using social media platforms. This indicates that social media is quickly gaining dominance in the E-commerce sector.³

According to the Result of the Second SMEs Promotion Policy Committee Meeting on January 21, 2021, Cambodia divides Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) into three sectors: agriculture, industry, or service and commerce. The specific criteria for classifying an SME depend on the number of people it employs, the amount of money it makes (turnover), or the value of its assets. To be clear, we will take services and commerce as an example. In this sector, the number of employees can range from 5-49 (small) and 50-99 (medium), and the value of its assets can range from 50,000-250,000 (small) and 250,001-500,000 (medium).⁴ World Bank data shows Cambodia's GDP was roughly 24.6 billion US dollars in 2018. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are estimated to have contributed around 58 percent of

¹ Kemp, Simon. 2023. "Digital 2023: Cambodia — DataReportal – Global Digital Insights." DataReportal. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-cambodia>.

² Xinhua. 2022. "COVID-19 pandemic accelerates digital transformation in Cambodia." Khmer Times, August 18, 2022. <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501134329/covid-19-pandemic-accelerates-digital-transformation-in-cambodia/>.

³ Ravindran, Sreekanth. 2023. "Social media platforms taking over e-Commerce segment." Khmer Times. <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501340001/social-media-platforms-taking-over-e-commerce-segment/>.

⁴ Office of the Council of Ministers. Result of Second SMEs Promotion Policy Committee Meeting. Number: 36 សមណ.៣៧, Date: 21st January 2021.

this GDP, which translates to approximately 14.2 billion US dollars, showing such a crucial contribution to the country's economy.⁵

As previously mentioned, there are as many as 11.37 million internet users and 10.95 million social media users, accounting for 65 percent of the Cambodian population. According to a poll conducted by the Confluences team of 1000 Cambodians released in 2023, there is a current shift in consumer preferences from traditional to online shopping. The same report then shows that about 30% of Cambodians report doing their shopping online numerous times per month.⁶ Therefore, social media and its advanced tools are becoming increasingly important for business owners, especially SMEs in Cambodia.

Live streamers and influencers have become the main drivers of sales in online shopping, leading to a big jump in purchases from 6.8% in 2017 to 21.8% in 2022.⁷ Mr. Penn Sovicheat, the Ministry of Commerce spokesperson, states that Cambodia's e-commerce industry is projected to produce \$1.78 billion in revenue by 2025.⁸ Social media is a strategy for survival in today's world. SMEs can reach countless potential customers by using social networking sites wisely, building connections, and boosting sales like never before. Therefore, embracing the full potential of social media's capabilities isn't just an option. SMEs have to survive in this increasingly competitive market.

Therefore, SMEs should use social media to their full potential to stay in this competitive market. This commentary explores social media's impact on SMEs in Cambodia and discusses the opportunities it brings to business strategies in the digital age. Covid-19 has shifted our shopping behavior from traditional market-based to online market-based. Even after the Covid-19 pandemic, online shopping continues to be popular among Cambodian consumers. Increasingly, individuals are relying on the Internet for their shopping needs.

⁵ "GDP (current US\$) - Cambodia | Data." n.d. World Bank Open Data. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=KH>.

⁶ "Consumer Report Cambodia 2023." 2023. confluences.asia. <https://www.confluences.asia/blog/consumer-report-cambodia-2023>.

⁷ "The Exciting Potential of Cambodia's E-Commerce Revolution The Exciting Potential of Cambodia's E-Commerce Revolution." 2023. Cambodia Investment Review. <https://cambodiainvestmentreview.com/2023/08/14/the-exciting-potential-of-cambodias-e-commerce-revolution/>.

⁸ Bandet, Vatanak. 2023. "A closer look at the Cambodian e-commerce landscape." A closer look at the Cambodian e-commerce landscape | BRAINS MEDIA SERVICES CO., LTD. <https://brains-comm.com/2023/10/11/a-closer-look-at-the-cambodian-ecommerce-landscape/>

Social media has made online shopping faster and easier for customers. With social media, consumers can discover new products and services that are closer to their needs. The Consumer Report Cambodia 2023 shows that more than one-third of the Cambodian population has engaged in online shopping multiple times per month, most of them residing in big cities like Phnom Penh.⁹

Local businesses use social media in different ways, such as marketing, increasing sales, and brand-building. The importance of creating a strong online presence enables businesses to reach wider customers. A social media presence makes SMEs reachable and findable, increasing sales and income. However, identifying your target social media platform is also important. Business owners need to identify where their target consumers are mostly present. In 2023, the most popular social media platforms in Cambodia include Facebook (10.45 million users), TikTok (7.06 million users), and Instagram (1.75 million users).¹⁰ Each social media platform has its unique purpose and can yield varying outcomes for your business.

According to the Khmer Times, Anthony Murray, an e-commerce entrepreneur specializing in beauty cosmetics in Cambodia, has been using advertisement strategies on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram to market his products and drive sales effectively. Murray has spent around USD 200 per week across both platforms and reached around 100,000 people.¹¹ Murray has achieved remarkable success through these efforts, with his monthly earnings now averaging around \$3,500. This significant revenue stream is primarily attributed to his adaptation of Facebook and Instagram for marketing purposes. He has secured approximately 20,000 followers across both platforms, allowing him to establish a loyal customer base.¹²

TikTok is another popular social media platform business owners have turned to. Yan Piset, a creator from Cambodia with 128,000 TikTok followers, showcases crayfish farming expertise on his account, relying solely on digital content for business promotion. In TikTok SEA Impact Forum 2023, he shows that his TikTok presence has directly translated into sales, with inquiries

⁹ Pradeep, Adur. 2023. "Understanding behaviours and preferences of customers." Khmer Times. <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501334016/understanding-behaviours-and-preferences-of-customers/>.

¹⁰ Kemp, Simon. 2023. "Digital 2023: Cambodia — DataReportal – Global Digital Insights." DataReportal. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-cambodia>.

¹¹ Boken, Jason. 2020. "Digitally adapting to economic challenges." Khmer Times. <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/50784394/digitally-adapting-to-economic-challenges/>.

¹² Ibid.

and orders pouring in from Phnom Penh customers and even seafood vendors. His success highlights the power of social media in bridging geographical barriers and tapping into niche markets. Entrepreneurs can learn from Piset's example, utilizing platforms like TikTok to transform passions into profitable ventures through strategic content and audience engagement.¹³

Potential benefits and opportunities for businesses that use social media come as follows: enhanced visibility and reach, targeted marketing, customer engagement and feedback, and brand building and loyalty. As SMEs get more advanced in using digital tools, they see more benefits. Therefore, those already using digital tech will likely keep investing in it, which might widen the gap between them and those just starting. Additionally, experts emphasized the importance of companies in Cambodia, where over 90 percent of registered businesses are SMEs, adopting social media strategies to expand into the international market.¹⁴

To effectively utilize social media in their marketing strategy, SMEs should start by setting clear goals and understanding their target audience. Other than that, choosing the right platforms where their audience is most active is also important. Various social media platforms to consider are Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. The next step is to create content that reflects their brand identity consistently. It is also important to actively engage with followers and use paid advertising to boost reach. Additionally, staying updated with social media trends and building relationships with influencers can further enhance sales and engagement efforts. Following these steps, SMEs can leverage social media to promote sales and foster meaningful connections with their audience.

Utilizing the use of social media may bring positive impacts to SMEs, at the same time, it also carries challenges to the theme as well. The current obstacles hindering the full utilization of e-commerce include issues such as defective infrastructures, payment trust issues, and the lack of digital commerce leaders.¹⁵ Furthermore, the lack of buyer protection is a big worry for

¹³ Mengheng, Seng. 2023. "TikTok Launches SEA Socio-Economic Impact Report 2023." Kiripost. <https://kiripost.com/stories/tiktok-launches-sea-socio-economic-impact-report-2023>.

¹⁴ Haider, Husain. 2021. "Social media is 'key' as local SMEs seek to enter global market." Khmer Times. <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/50836284/social-media-is-key-as-local-smes-seek-to-enter-global-market/>.

¹⁵ Standard Insights: AI-Powered Consumer Insights. https://standard-insights.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Consumer-Report-Cambodia_2023.pdf.

many people since it makes it more difficult for small firms to provide refunds for returned goods. This challenge becomes more complex when dealing with imported goods from sources like Abibaba.

Following these concerns, the Cambodian Royal government has put out a framework to promote and orient the digital transformation in Cambodia. This policy framework is Cambodia's long-term plan to guide the country's successful transition to a digital economy. It outlines specific actions (policy measures) that consider Cambodia's current situation and align with international trends to promote the widespread adoption of digital technologies.¹⁶

In Cambodia, the rise in internet and social media users highlights how important digital platforms are for businesses, especially SMEs. With SMEs making up over 90 percent of registered companies, businesses must use social media to stay competitive and reach more customers at home and abroad. The growing number of internet and social media users in Cambodia has highlighted the importance of digital platforms for businesses, particularly SMEs. Since SMEs account for over 90 percent of all registered companies, it is now essential for businesses to use social media to remain competitive and to expand their customer base, both locally and globally. Moreover, social media plays a big role in shifting shopping habits towards online shopping, making it easier for consumers to find and buy what they need. As more local businesses use social media, it becomes clear how much it's shaping the e-commerce landscape, giving SMEs new ways to market, sell, and build their brands.

Bou Nisa is a Young Researcher Fellow and a research intern at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies. She is also a junior majoring in International Studies at the Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh. The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS).

¹⁶ "Digital Economy and Business Committee - DEBC." n.d. Digital Economy and Business Committee - DEBC. <https://digitaleconomy.gov.kh/intro-detail?lang=en>.

The Healthcare System in Cambodia: Challenges and the Ways Forward

Mom Jawin

Cambodia's economic growth has significantly improved public health indicators, with healthcare expenditure increasing and life expectancy rising from 58 in 2000 to 70 in 2022. Moreover, Cambodia has a poor healthcare system, with only 0.49 hospitals per 100,000 citizens and 0.2 nurses per 1000 people. Private health providers are preferred, and 60% of healthcare expenditures come from out-of-pocket spending.¹ Hence, health remains a significant challenge and a priority for development. The Health Strategic Plan 2016-2020 reveals Cambodia has around 1000 public healthcare facilities and 8000 private providers, dividing health expenditure between the public and private sectors. The World Health Organization (WHO) collaborates with the Cambodian government, especially the Ministry of Health (MOH), and other development partners to achieve health for all in Cambodia.²

The healthcare system is still plagued by inefficiency and inequality. This refers to systematic disparities in the opportunities available to different groups for optimal health, resulting in unfair and avoidable disparities in health outcomes. Inequality and inefficiency have several causes, such as the distribution of power and resources, which is influenced by various factors such as race, gender, class, sexual orientation, gender expression, and other dimensions of individual and group identity.³

Cambodia is grappling with a significant deficit in funding, medical equipment, and facilities, especially in the rural areas. The government has enhanced public health through policies to increase workforce infrastructure, capacity, and worker distribution. Rural health workers face limited opportunities to improve their knowledge and training. Many Cambodians struggle to afford training in well-equipped hospitals and specialized schools requiring

¹ Cambodia, "The State of Public Health in Cambodia," *Cambodia*, August 25, 2023, <https://www.researchincambodia.com/insight/the-state-of-public-health-in-cambodia>.

² Antoine Fontaine, "In Review: The Healthcare Framework in Cambodia," *Lexology*, September 7, 2022, <https://www.lexology.com/library/detail.aspx?g=f6169ca6-1dd3-4c36-8b23-6fe21d5433a8>.

³ Alina Baciú et al., "The Root Causes of Health Inequity," *Communities in Action - NCBI Bookshelf*, January 11, 2017, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK425845/>.

advanced English language skills.⁴ Moreover, Cambodia's health strategic plan, launched in 2002, aimed to improve service in rural areas, but progress has been slow, and awareness of basic hygiene and disease prevention remains low.⁵

Furthermore, unequal access to healthcare persists across different socioeconomic backgrounds, particularly between rural and urban populations. Urban areas have more hospitals, clinics, and healthcare centers, while rural areas often have limited facilities, making basic care less accessible. Health centers provide basic healthcare services, while national and provincial referral hospitals often provide additional services. Public health facilities remain crucial for providing basic care to most of the poor.⁶ In 2016, the Cambodian government announced a promotion of all health workers to permanent jobs and improved social welfare benefits. The Ministry of Health invests in health and advancing universal health coverage, achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. The national health budget doubled in five years.⁷

Cambodia is shifting from the majority of the disease burden in is now attributed to non-communicable diseases like cardiovascular, diabetes, cancer, and respiratory disease while still maintaining and dealing with these infectious diseases. As mentioned, all types of noncommunicable diseases pose significant challenges to public health and development in Cambodia, resulting in an estimated annual cost of 6.6% of the country's GDP. Implementing WHO-recommended measures could address noncommunicable diseases in Cambodia, save over 180000 lives, and boost the economy by over \$417 million over 15 years.⁸ In addition, Cambodia has made significant strides in improving its health indicators; however, numerous challenges remain to be addressed.

Health equity coverage and utilization are hindered by incomplete ID, poor system coverage, and potential card distribution gaps, resulting in low funds. Studies reveal that less than half

⁴ Yurie Kobashi et al., "Improving the Rural-Urban Balance in Cambodia's Health Services," *International Journal of Health Policy and Management*, July 26, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.34172/ijhpm.2020.136>.

⁵ Ten Soksreinith and Voa Khmer, "Rural Health Centers Remain Underfunded, Under-Prepared," *Voice of America*, August 14, 2015, <https://www.voacambodia.com/a/rural-health-centers-remain-underfunded-under-prepared/2917998.html>.

⁶ Yurie Kobashi et al., "Improving the Rural-Urban Balance in Cambodia's Health Services," *International Journal of Health Policy and Management*, July 26, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.34172/ijhpm.2020.136>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ "Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases in Cambodia," UNDP, n.d., <https://www.undp.org/cambodia/publications/prevention-and-control-noncommunicable-diseases-cambodia>.

of cardholders utilize their cards to their full potential, possibly due to a lack of awareness or challenges.⁹ The ID Poor program, launched in 2006 with German and Australian government support, aims to simplify identifying vulnerable households and target free healthcare services in rural Cambodia. The Cambodian government claims the program has been successful, with over 600,000 equity cards distributed to households, benefiting an estimated 2 million people.¹⁰ Cambodia's social health protection system, consisting of the National Social Security Fund and Health Equity Fund, currently only covers civil servants, formal employees, and some special populations. The World Bank reports that Cambodians are paying almost 60% of their health spending out of pocket, posing a significant risk of household impoverishment. Cambodians use loans to cover expenses, with microfinance institutions contributing to nearly half (48.1%) of health loans in 2020, accounting for 69.4% of total health debt.¹¹

In conclusion, Cambodia has significantly improved healthcare but still faces numerous challenges, such as inefficiency and inequality. The focus is on addressing power and resource imbalances in the healthcare system and ensuring equal access to quality healthcare by not looking at race, socioeconomic status, or identity. It is important to provide some accessible and effective training programs to rural healthcare providers to enhance their skills and knowledge and improve healthcare access in rural areas by expanding the number of clinics, healthcare centers and technology improvement to enhance the accessibility of basic healthcare.

Mom Jawin is a Young Researcher Fellow at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies. He is a sophomore student majoring in International Economics at the Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh. The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS).

⁹ Mary White Kaba et al., "IDPoor: A Poverty Identification Programme That Enables Collaboration Across Sectors for Maternal and Child Health in Cambodia," *BMJ. British Medical Journal*, December 7, 2018, k4698, <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.k4698>.

¹⁰ Sun Narin and Voa Khmer, "Quality Free Health Care Remains Elusive for Poorest Cambodians," *Voice of America*, April 8, 2019, <https://www.voacambodia.com/a/quality-free-health-care-remains-elusive-for-poorest-Cambodians/4866865.html>.

¹¹ Vouchnea Tang, "Over-Indebtedness and Healthcare Financing in Cambodia," *The Diplomat*, November 15, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/11/over-indebtedness-and-healthcare-financing-in-cambodia/>.

Cambodia: On Becoming a Cashless Society

Pech Posocheata

The advancement of technology makes people eager to try new things; this has become a taste of life. This goes hand in hand with the economic sector, as the cashless trend has revolved around. Rather than a barter economy, a cashless society is a means to move on by replacing cash with digital or electronic payment methods in financial transactions.¹

Digital payment has become common among people, especially youngsters, due to its convenience. People can make transactions in both online and in-person spaces. Digital transactions also introduced Quick Response (QR) codes, which make payment faster and easier through camera scanning. With these digital payment options, people do not need to spend time going out to pay in person or carry a huge bag of cash, but will it be the preferred method in the future?

Over the last few years, the trend of cashless payment has spread all over the Southeast Asia region, including Cambodia. In 2023, the total amount of digital transactions in Cambodia increased to USD 492 billion, roughly 16 times the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), said Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet in March 2024.² Not only transfers from a person's account to a person's account, but payments also include the fee of utilities, like electricity, water, and waste bills, and other expenses such as internet, government service, education, investment, etc. By 2023, Cambodia achieved 19.7 million e-wallet registered users with USD 75.8 billion in mobile payment transactions, contributing approximately 2.4 times of GDP, as reported by the National Bank of Cambodia (NBC).³

¹ Nikola, Fabris. "Cashless Society – The Future of Money or a Utopia." Sciendo. Accessed May 26, 2024. <https://sciendo.com/article/10.2478/jcbtp-2019-0003>

² "E-wallet Payments in Cambodia Up 80 Pct in 2023." Xinhua – China, World, Business, Sports, Photos and Video | English.news.cn. Accessed April 19, 2024. <https://english.news.cn/20240311/d21771a36abb4ec4b055a5d2b3993913/c.html#:~:text=%22The%20total%20amount%20of%20digital,than%2019%20million%20in%202023>

³ "Cambodia's Mobile Payments Continue to Rise in 2023." Khmer Times - Insight into Cambodia. Last modified January 30, 2024. <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501432035/cambodias-mobile-payments-continue-to-rise-in-2023/>

Cambodia's digital payment is a significant step in Cambodia's digital transformation. The Cambodia Pentagonal Strategy emphasizes the country's importance in digitalization, in which digital technology plays a substantial role in socio-economic activities and development.⁴

The trend of digital payment made a huge debut during the COVID-19 pandemic. To counter the spread of coronavirus, NBC encouraged Cambodian people to use e-wallets and pointed out the benefit of cashless transactions as there would be no touching from person to person through cash.⁵ For convenience and social protection during that period of the pandemic, instead of going out, Cambodians prefer delivery service, especially food delivery to make a trip for them. According to the Phnom Penh Post report (2020), along with numerous food deliveries, digital payment also arises alongside that as there are many payment options for customers to select from, including ABApay, Unionpay, Wing, Pi Pays, credit cards, etc.⁶

Under the Visa Consumer Payment Attitudes Study (2022), 68% of consumers use QR codes for payment, an increase from 36% in 2021.⁷ With the increasing use of QR codes or contactless cards, this type of payment method has become Cambodia's permanent purchasing pattern.⁸ The latest Study of Consumer Payment Attitudes by Visa (2023) showed that 75% of survey respondents have observed that, compared to last year, more stores are open to accept mobile payments. Additionally, 72% of Gen Z, in particular, use banking apps, usually for paying bills and transferring money from a one-to-one account.⁹

⁴ "Pentagonal Strategy-Phase I." Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. Accessed April 19, 2024.

<https://www.mfaic.gov.kh/files/uploads/1XK1LW4MCTK9/EN%20PENTAGONAL%20STRATEGY%20-%20PHASE%20I.pdf>

⁵ "Cambodia's Central Bank Calls for Cashless Payments to Beat COVID-19." - Xinhua | English.news.cn. Accessed April 19, 2024. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/asiapacific/2021-05/24/c_139966838.htm

⁶ "Food Deliveries Sustain Business During Covid." Phnom Penh Post | The Phnom Penh Post is the Oldest and Most Comprehensive Independent Newspaper Covering Cambodia. Cambodia News, Phnom Penh News. Accessed April 19, 2024. <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/business/food-deliveries-sustain-business-during-covid>

⁷ "Interest in Cashless Payment Options Among Cambodians Grows in Post-COVID Environment While Cash Use Still Popular Habit: Visa Study." Visa, a Trusted Leader in Digital Payments. Accessed April 19, 2024. https://www.visa.com.kh/en_KH/about-visa/newsroom/press-releases/interest-in-cashless-payment-options-among-cambodians-grows-in-post-covid-environment-while-cash-use-still-popular-habit-visa-study.html

⁸ IBID

⁹ "Opportunity for Growth in Digital Payments in Cambodia: Visa Study." Phnom Penh Post | The Phnom Penh Post is the Oldest and Most Comprehensive Independent Newspaper Covering Cambodia. Cambodia News, Phnom Penh News. Accessed April 19, 2024. <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/gallery/opportunity-for-growth-in-digital-payments-in-cambodia-visa-study>

Bakong, launched by NBC in October 2020, aims to encourage digital transactions and promote the use of Riel as a digital currency.¹⁰ Bakong helped the country implement effective monetary policies to respond to inflation and the economy's instability. At the same time, Bakong also expanded to cross-border transactions, like working with Maybank in Malaysia and the Central Bank of Thailand; hence, Cambodian women migrants could feel secure transferring their money to their family in their home country, according to NBC Governor Chea Serey.¹¹ As of the second quarter of 2024, Bakong has expanded its membership to 57 financial institutions within Cambodia; this includes major banks in Cambodia such as Acleda, ABA, Canadia, Wing, Vattanac, etc.

Later in July 2022, NBC introduced KHQR, a standardized QR code payment for the participating financial institutions. In just a year of launching, KHQR achieved a significant accomplishment by receiving a record of almost 400,000 transactions in April 2023.¹² These achievements show that people are now more interested in using digital transactions and have shifted away from using cash-based. As a home to a young population, rather than a traditional payment method, the young Cambodian population may prefer modern tools like electronic use for payment. Thus, the QR code is a better choice.¹³

Bakong and KHQR encourage users to become involved in financial systems by introducing an easy-to-use tool with almost no transaction fee.¹⁴ After scanning the QR code for payment, the only necessary step the user must do is to check the transaction notification or history. Hence, this type of payment will create a quick and simple user atmosphere, especially for the underbanked population, as it eliminates the complexity of the banking system. In addition, this kind of digital payment also contributes to reducing the pressure on people with social anxiety.

¹⁰ NAGUMO, JADA. "Cambodia Aims to Wean off US Dollar Dependence with Digital Currency." Nikkei Asia. Last modified August 4, 2021. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Markets/Currencies/Cambodia-aims-to-wean-off-US-dollar-dependence-with-digital-currency>

¹¹ IBID

¹² "KHQR Records 400K Transactions in One Year." Khmer Times - Insight into Cambodia. Last modified August 2, 2023. <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501336016/khqr-records-400k-transactions-in-one-year/>

¹³ Chea, Serey. & Ouk, Sarat. "Electronic Payment and Promotion of Local Currency." *Cambodian Dollarization: Its Policy Implications for LDCs' Financial Development*, edited by Okuda. Hidenobu, & Serey. Chea, 162-181. Routledge. Accessed May 26, 2024. DOI: 10.4324/9781003391418

¹⁴ Makoto, Takemiya. "Cambodia's digital currency can show other central banks the way." *World Economic Forum – Financial and monetary system*. Accessed May 13, 2024. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/08/cambodias-digital-currency-ishowing-other-central-banks-the-way/>

In alignment with the growth of financial technology (Fintech), in 2023, the Ministry of Economics and Finance launched a Fintech Development Policy 2023-2028 to be implemented within this sector. This policy aims to promote and enhance inclusion, innovation, and stability in the financial system.¹⁵ This is believed to be a key to the effective adoption of fintech in Cambodia's social development and digital economy.¹⁶

As digital technology advances, cybersecurity serves as a vital body for this development. The National Authority for Anti-Cybercrime was established to work alongside that to build a strong infrastructure and address the evolving issues within cyberspace.¹⁷ This initiative's mission is to investigate, detect, and prevent cyber-attacks and, most importantly, take legal action against cyber criminals.¹⁸

Despite the rise of digital transactions, it remain limited in rural areas in Cambodia, as the huge contribution to this progress is the urban population. The increasing use of cashless payment in Cambodia might as well widen the digital divide gap between these two areas. The gap in digital literacy remains the challenge for Cambodia to become cashless entirely. According to the ASEAN Foundation report released in March 2024, only 30% of Cambodians have a basic knowledge of media and digital literature despite 67.5% having a mobile phone and the internet.¹⁹

Digital payments require smartphones or other smart devices to be made; however, looking at not a small number of citizens, especially the old generation, many are using a mobile phone that does not rely on the internet. As estimated by Khmer Enterprise (2022), with a huge number of mobile connections, 22.06 million among 17.06 million people, there are only 13.44

¹⁵ "Financial Technology Takes Center Stage in Cambodia's Economic Growth Plan." Khmer Times - Insight into Cambodia. Last modified October 5, 2023. <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501371701/financial-technology-takes-center-stage-in-cambodias-economic-growth-plan/>

¹⁶ IBID

¹⁷ "Cybersecurity Critically Important for Kingdom in Digital Era." Khmer Times - Insight into Cambodia. Last modified February 20, 2024. <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501443190/cybersecurity-critically-important-for-kingdom-in-digital-era/>

¹⁸ IBID

¹⁹ "ASEAN Review Notes Digital Literacy Gap Despite High Access to Internet." Phnom Penh Post | The Phnom Penh Post is the Oldest and Most Comprehensive Independent Newspaper Covering Cambodia. Cambodia News, Phnom Penh News. Accessed May 25, 2024. <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/asean-review-notes-digital-literacy-gap-despite-high-access-to-internet>

million internet users.²⁰ This indicates that up to millions of people still do not have access to the Internet, which makes digital transactions less likely for them as the digital financial system requires assistance from the Internet.

In conclusion, Cambodia, so far, has achieved significant achievements by encouraging the use of digital payment among Cambodian people to commit to digitalization. The country has established its own Central Bank Digital Currency (CBDC), Bakong, whose goal is to foster digital technology and simultaneously raise the use of Riel. Initiating KHQR provides citizens advantages as it creates a safe and convenient environment. Furthermore, citizens can transfer money across borders far more easily than before. Nevertheless, several challenges remain a barrier to Cambodia's road to a cashless society. Therefore, in response to that, financial institutions need to increase their capacity to ensure transparency for the user by working with the anti-cybercrime authority to protect the customer, as well as responding to the demand and promptly resolving the issue of digital usage. Moreover, the information technology team should develop an innovative system to attract more users and cooperate with internet service agents to enhance user accessibility. Also, more incentives should be given in many ways, including discount promotions like rewards or cash back and other content promotions through media platforms and national television to increase people's understanding of the digital financial system.

Pech Posocheata is a Young Researcher Fellow and a Research Intern at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies. She is also a Junior majoring in International Studies at the Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh. The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS).

²⁰ "Cambodia's E-commerce Market Eyes \$1.78B by 2025." Khmer Times - Insight into Cambodia. Last modified January 5, 2023. <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501214272/cambodias-e-commerce-market-eyes-1-78b-by-2025/>

Reasons to Visit Cambodia: More than What You Expect

Chhorn Kakada

The tourism industry plays a pivotal role in the economic advancement of Asian nations because of culture, scenery, and price. It encourages entrepreneurship, job possibilities, and economic progress. Additionally, it promotes the understanding and enjoyment of other cultures, allows cross-cultural exchanges, and provides incentives for preserving natural and cultural heritage places. Cambodia may be a small country, but it offers everything you need for a beautiful vacation. Cambodia is rich in history and culture, with breathtaking natural scenery, including serene islands, immaculate beaches, and stunning national parks. The country's distinctive characteristics can be found in its unique food and general atmosphere.

Cambodia is an intriguing travel destination with its breathtaking natural scenery and rich cultural legacy. Numerous resources, including travel guides, internet travel portals, blogs, national tourist organizations, media coverage, and social media, offer information about the destination's attractions, cultural experiences, and travel advice. Popular travel destinations, lodging options, and activities are discussed in travel guides, blogs, and national tourism groups. As Cambodia tourism is such an excellent place to visit, it plays a significant role in its socio-economic development, cultural preservation, and international reputation. This commentary discusses several factors that contribute to the allure and success of Cambodia's tourism sector. When tourists visit Cambodia, they get a sense of ancient Southeast Asia. Exotic temples, immaculate beaches, and breathtaking scenery can all be found in the former Khmer Empire. The best destinations in Cambodia draw visitors with a wide range of interests. This combination of the ancient and the new will impress everyone beyond belief, whether we are visiting the well-known Angkor temples or Phnom Penh, the stylish, contemporary capital city.¹ Tourists can enjoy adventure, leisure, and ecotourism in locations like the stunning islands of Koh Rong, the serene waters of Tonle Sap Lake, and the beach town of Sihanoukville. In addition, those locations are constantly renovated and maintained to maintain their beauty. The tourism industry will do more to strengthen Cambodia's economy.

¹ Hooper, Andrea. 2021. "34 Beautiful Places to Visit in Cambodia in 2021." Travel Triangle. April 6, 2021. <https://traveltriangle.com/blog/places-to-visit-in-cambodia/>.

Tourism development in Cambodia faces a significant challenge. The COVID-19 is a dynamic global economy. Before the epidemic, it made up around 17% of the nation's GDP. Domestic tourism saw a significant rise in 2019, with 11.32 million visitors. Sixty-three thousand persons were employed in this area, many women.² The RGC published two strategy documents in April 2021 and approved Cambodia's COVID-19 Recovery Strategy Plans. The National Tourism Recovery Roadmap, which has three phases, is the first one; the Siem Reap Provincial Tourism Development Master Plan, which is set for 2021–2035, is the second. The ambitious goals outlined in the Siem Reap Master Plan include bringing in 10.9 million local tourists by 2023 and 7.5 million foreign tourists by 2025, creating 9400000 employment, and an extra \$6 billion for the province's economy. The priority areas for the province's tourism growth, which include infrastructure and connectivity, administration, quality and sustainability, innovative tourism goods, prioritizing tourist sites, and environment management, are also planned to be promoted.³

Beyond routine travel, tourism in Cambodia includes a wide range of cultural encounters. Cambodians should start thinking outside the box regarding traditional cuisine, antiques for décor and horse-and-buggy passenger transportation to attract more tourists. Guests can participate in local enterprises and guesthouses, attend traditional dance performances, and savor traditional Khmer cuisine. One community, one tourist destination, and one community, one product are examples of community-based tourism. These genuine exchanges foster intercultural understanding and support the growth of lucrative and sustainable tourism. In addition, the most popular place in Cambodia to visit is Angkor Wat, the oldest temple with a good view. Angkor Wat, renowned for being the world's biggest temple, is among Cambodia's most magnificent sights. Angkor Wat, built over 28 years in the 12th century as a Hindu temple, quickly changed to a Buddhist temple, symbolizing the nation's dual religious traditions.⁴ The enormous temple complex, covering an area of over 402 acres, transports visitors to the height of the Khmer Empire with its exquisite design and cultural significance.⁵

² “The Best Cultural Wonders of Cambodia.” n.d. Southeast Asia Travel.

<https://www.visitsoutheastasia.travel/guides/cultural-wonders-of-cambodia/>

³ “Community-Based Tourism COVID-19 Recovery Project (GAR CAM 53243) SECTOR ASSESSMENT SUMMARY: TOURISM in CAMBODIA I.” n.d. <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/linked-documents/53243-001-ssa.pdf>.

⁴ “The Best Cultural Wonders of Cambodia.” n.d. Southeast Asia Travel. <https://www.visitsoutheastasia.travel/guides/cultural-wonders-of-cambodia/>.

⁵ Ibid.

The Angkor Wat complex, situated in the northern province of Siem Reap, consists of parklands, historic communities, towers, and more.⁶ It is an anthropological marvel and proof of Cambodia's unmatched religious and cultural past.⁷

Traveling to Cambodia at a reasonable cost is less expensive. Depending on their interests, they can visit Cambodia for a short or long time. Cambodia offers reasonably priced travel alternatives, including lodging, meals, and transportation, compared to many other Southeast Asian countries. For example, the cost is low because many low-cost and national airlines offer daily flights to Cambodia. At a fair price, travelers can choose an airline that works for them.⁸ Cambodia's reasonable pricing draws budget-conscious tourists. As people realize the benefits of responsible tourism, Cambodia has been increasingly adopting sustainable tourism practices. Reduced environmental impact and community benefit are the two main objectives of initiatives like wildlife conservation, eco-friendly housing, and community-based tourism.

Regarding hospitality, Cambodia is known for its warmth and friendliness and pays great attention to the hospitality of its visitors. Visitors are always struck by the openness and sincerity with which the people of Cambodia greet them. This welcoming atmosphere leaves Visitors with a lasting impression, which promotes favorable speech and repeat visits. More tourists will come as a result of this attention. The Kingdom of Wonder, commonly known as the "Land of Smiles," unexpectedly appeared on the top ten list in 2017 and placed fourth.⁹ In this instance, Cambodia will gain more from this industry, and the country's tourism industry will grow and flourish.

The government has constructed several highways to help travelers get where they're going faster and spend less money and time traveling. The tourism sector in Cambodia is largely dependent on the transportation infrastructure—including highways—that links well-known tourist locations like Phnom Penh and Siem Reap, the site of Angkor Wat. Traveling around the nation is made easier for visitors by well-maintained highways, encouraging tourism

⁶ "The Best Cultural Wonders of Cambodia." n.d. Southeast Asia Travel. <https://www.visitsoutheastasia.travel/guides/cultural-wonders-of-cambodia/>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Nguyen, Andy. 2017. "Compare Travel Costs in Southeast Asian Countries (Part 1)." Gadt Travel. December 27, 2017. <https://gadtravel.com/blog/compare-travel-costs-southeast-asian-countries/>.

⁹ Pisei, Hin. n.d. "Cambodia Ranks Fourth for Friendliness towards Foreign Residents."

Www.phnompenhpost.com. <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/business/cambodia-ranks-fourth-friendliness-towards-foreign-residents>.

growth and generating income. Public transportation also makes traveling more convenient and enhances visitors' travel experiences. Furthermore, infrastructure development benefits tourism. There are several reliable sources of information regarding Cambodia's infrastructure development to support its tourism sector. As an illustration, a sector assessment summary from the Asian Development Bank emphasizes the significance of tourism in Cambodia. It names it a key industry in the government's plan of action. The rise in both domestic and foreign tourism, as well as its benefits for poverty alleviation and socioeconomic development, are covered in length in this paper.¹⁰

In conclusion, travelers from all over the world are drawn to Cambodia by its tourism. It combines natural beauty, affordable prices, rich cultural diversity, and friendly locals. To attract tourists, Cambodia has made significant strides in developing the infrastructure required to support its growing tourism sector. Cambodia can preserve its position as the region's tourism destination by capitalizing on these advantages and emphasizing sustainable tourism practices.

Chhorn Kakada is a sophomore majoring in Political Science and Public Administration at the Department of Political Science and Public Policy, IISPP. His areas of research interest are social and political themes in Cambodia. The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS).

¹⁰ "Community-Based Tourism COVID-19 Recovery Project (GAR CAM 53243) SECTOR ASSESSMENT SUMMARY: TOURISM in CAMBODIA 1." n.d. <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/linked-documents/53243-001-ssa.pdf>.

Cambodia at a Crossroads: Human Rights, Democracy, and Economic Development

Soeun Sokchanvicheka

Cambodia, a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary system, has recently faced increasing scrutiny regarding its human rights record. The country has been criticized for human rights abuses, particularly since the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) won the 2018 national election.¹ Under the previous Prime Minister, Hun Sen, Cambodia transitioned into a single-party dominant rule, tightening civil freedoms and restricting freedom of expression, especially online media. These limitations have led to a lack of independent media and drawn criticism from Western countries, including the European Union (EU) and the United States, which are Cambodia's most important trading partners.

The Human Rights Watch has consistently reported on these issues, highlighting violations against freedom of expression, limited media access, and speech restrictions.² These reports have implications for Cambodia's international standing and economic interests. According to the Cambodian Constitution, all persons and refugees in Cambodia shall enjoy the rights and freedoms marked in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.³ However, growing restrictions on human rights raise concerns about Cambodia's commitment to its constitutional principles and international obligations.⁴

The situation has had tangible consequences for Cambodia's economy. In February 2020, the EU partially withdrew Cambodia's duty-free status under the Everything But Arms (EBA) scheme, designed to support developing countries' economic development. This decision affected 20% of Cambodia's exports to the EU and potentially led to job losses for Cambodian citizens.⁵

¹ Human Rights Watch. (2024). *Cambodia*. <https://www.hrw.org/asia/cambodia>.

² Human Rights Watch. (2024, January 11). *Cambodia: Events of 2023*. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/cambodia>.

³ The Declaration of Human Rights in the Cambodian Constitution. (2008, July). The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Cambodia Country Office. <https://cambodia.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/book/CCBHR-E.pdf>.

⁴ United States Department of State. (2023, December 7). *Our Work on the Sustainable Development Goals in Cambodia*. <https://cambodia.un.org/en/sdgs>.

⁵ European Commission. (2020, August 12). Cambodia loses duty-free access to the EU market over human rights concerns. European Union. <https://trade.ec.europa.eu/access-to-markets/en/news/cambodia-loses-duty-free-access-eu-market-over-human-rights-concerns>.

The EU-Cambodia relationship is complex, balancing trade interests with human rights concerns. The EU remains Cambodia's main trading partner but has made it clear that improvements in democratic governance and human rights are necessary for further trade benefits or financial assistance. The ongoing review of Cambodia's EBA eligibility reflects this tension between economic cooperation and human rights expectations.

Similarly, the United States maintains a multifaceted relationship with Cambodia, cooperating on commerce, security efforts, and aid while voicing concerns about decreasing political freedoms. The EU and US have called on Cambodia to uphold democratic values and human rights, sometimes resulting in diplomatic tensions.

Despite these challenges, both the EU and US must continue to engage with Cambodia on various levels, recognizing the importance of economic interests, security concerns, and regional stability.⁶ For instance, the EU and Cambodia collaborate on climate change initiatives, demonstrating that cooperation is possible even during political unrest.⁷

As classical democracies, the EU and the US are expected to continue actively monitoring and advocating for Cambodia to embrace democratic principles fully, ensuring citizens have access to their human rights, including freedom of expression. The restrictions highlighted in Human Rights Watch reports have led to economic consequences, such as the partial loss of duty-free access to the EU market, affecting Cambodia's economy and citizens' living standards.

To address these issues and reach upper middle-income status by 2030, Cambodia should proactively work towards successfully renegotiating with the EU to renew trade preferences. This would allow the country to regain the benefits of the EBA arrangement and support economic growth.

Cambodia has shown resilience in rising from past challenges and continues to work on state-building and democratization. International organizations can play a crucial role in helping Cambodia find solutions for peaceful democratization based on mutual respect. As Cambodia pursues its commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals, including promoting equal rights, peace, and justice by 2030,

⁶ VOA. (2020, October 16). *US Urges Cambodia to Respect 'Shared Principles' of Human Rights and Democracy*. <https://www.voacambodia.com/a/us-urges-cambodia-to-respect-shared-principles-of-human-rights-and-democracy/5622870.html>.

⁷ OFFICE OF THE SPOKESPERSON. (2021, August 02). *The United States-Cambodia Relationship*. US Department of States. <https://www.state.gov/the-united-states-cambodia-relationship/>.

addressing human rights concerns will be crucial for improving its international standing and achieving its development objectives.

Soeun Sokchanvicheka is a Young Researcher Fellow at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS) and a sophomore in the Department of International Relations, Institute for International Studies and Public Policy (IISPP), Royal University of Phnom Penh. The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS).



IISPP
INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL
STUDIES AND PUBLIC POLICY ~

CENTER FOR SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

Address: Russian Federation Blvd (110), Phnom Penh

Telephone: (855) 23 885 419

Email: info.iispp@rupp.edu.kh

Website: www.rupp.edu.kh/iispp