



The Significance of Srettha Thavisin’s Visit: Strategic Moves to Strengthen Thailand-Cambodia Ties

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Srettha Thavisin's official visit to Cambodia signifies efforts to strengthen bilateral relations between Thailand and Cambodia. As his first bilateral trip since becoming Thailand’s prime minister, Cambodia has become a strategic partner for his administration. Despite the recent pandemic and geopolitical uncertainty in the region, the bilateral relations between Thailand and Cambodia have remained stable and friendly. This visit is built on a foundation of growing cooperation under existing bilateral and multilateral frameworks.¹

On a personal level, Srettha's visit also continues the friendly personal ties between leaders, such as the god-brother relationship between Thaksin Shinawatra and Hun Sen.² Upon their elections as prime ministers, Srettha and Hun Manet exchanged phone calls to offer congratulations to each other and discuss various issues confronting the two countries. This personal warmth highlights the positive chemistry between the two administrations.

¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs. “His Excellency Srettha Thavisin, Prime Minister of Thailand, to pay an official visit to Cambodia.” 26 Sep 2023. <https://www.mfaic.gov.kh/posts/2023-09-26-Press-Release-His-Excellency-Srettha-THAVISIN--Prime-Minister-of-Thailand--to-pay-an-official-visit-to-Cambodia--17-59-12>

² The Nation. “Hun Sen cheers Thaksin’s return, seeks closer ties with Thailand”. August 23, 2023. <https://www.nationthailand.com/world/asean/40030445>

With this visit, Srettha aims to further collaboration on issues of mutual interest. Most importantly, the two countries share a long border requiring a strict cooperative management. Discussions covered the topics of enhancing border trade and development, rising transnational crimes, and encouraging cross-border tourism.³ As part of this bilateral visit, the two leaders have also taken part in a handover ceremony for the transit and reception center in Poipet for victims of trafficking and other vulnerable groups.

Thailand and Cambodia are expected to step up efforts in settling illicit scam compounds near their shared border in Cambodia's provinces of Banteay Meanchey⁴, Oddar Meanchey⁵, and Koh Kong⁶. These criminal operations severely damage the reputation and tourism potential of both countries.⁷ After the success of the Chinese film "No More Bets"⁸ dramatizing scam networks, many potential visitors now associate the region with criminal activity.⁹ This negativity directly hinders tourism recovery in Thailand and Cambodia as COVID-19 travel restrictions ease. Both countries have a shared interest in quickly eliminating cross-border scam networks. As major tourism destinations competing in the same region, they cannot afford ongoing scams deterring visitors. Thus, Thailand and Cambodian authorities are to step up law enforcement and cross-border coordination. Eliminating shady crime compounds would remove a blight on the region's image, paving the way for tourism to thrive again.

In addition, Cambodia and Thailand have also set an ambitious goal of reaching 15 billion dollars in commerce by 2025. To achieve this, the two countries will continue to promote the development

³ Thai PBS World. "Srettha's Cambodia trip related to Thaksin-Hun Sen close ties?" September 27, 2023.

<https://www.thaipbsworld.com/sretthas-cambodia-trip-related-to-thaksin-hun-sen-close-ties/>

⁴ EAC News. "Thai Man Kills Family After Falling Victim to Online Scam." September 11, 2023.

<https://eacnews.asia/home/details/25009>.

⁵ Khmer Times. "75 Foreigners Rescued from Casino." October 18, 2022.

<https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501170369/75-foreigners-rescued-from-casino/>.

⁶ Wee, Sui Lee. "Cyber-scam Industry Booms in Plain Sight in Cambodia." Bangkok Post. August 29, 2023.

<https://www.bangkokpost.com/world/2637946/cyber-scam-industry-booms-in-plain-sight-in-cambodia>.

⁷ Channel News Asia. "Blockbuster movie scares Chinese tourists away from Thailand". September 22 2023.

<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/chinese-tourists-thailand-blockbuster-movies-scares-away-3791631>.

⁸ The film depicted a Chinese programmer and a model who had left for a country in Southeast Asia for the promise of high-paid jobs there but found themselves being fraudulently sold to a fraud farm instead. Read more on China Daily <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202308/08/WS64d1ff39a31035260b81af29.html>

⁹ Turton, Shaun, and Huang Yan. "Cambodia's 'scamdemic' Reputation Scares off Travelers from China." Nikkei Asia. September 8, 2023. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Business-Spotlight/Cambodia-s-scamdemic-reputation-scares-off-travelers-from-China>.

of border points.¹⁰ Likewise, the plan is underway to accelerate the use of Cambodia-Thai Friendship Bridge (Ban Nong Ian-Stung Bot Bridge).¹¹ Increasing interconnectivity in these border points will increase trade, mobility, and prosperity for both societies.

On trade, bilateral trade has been steadily increasing, totaling over \$8 billion in 2022.¹² In the first half of 2023, Cambodia exported \$527.886 million worth of merchandise to Thailand, up 57.11 per cent from \$335.99 million in the second half of 2022, according to Customs (GDCE).¹³ On the same note, the volume of goods exchanged between the two nations in the first half of 2023 accounted for \$1.976 billion.¹⁴ Thailand is one of Cambodia's top trade partners, while Cambodia provides agricultural products and an expanding array of manufactured exports to Thailand. By this, Prime Minister Hun Manet has proposed to his counterpart to further expand market access of Cambodian agricultural products. With Cambodian capacity growing in sectors besides agriculture, such as auto parts, electronics and garments, trade ties are expected to deepen further.

While Cambodia's exports to Thailand are growing, especially of agricultural commodities and manufactured goods from border factories, more effort is needed to maximize the potential of this trade and minimize the trade deficit. The government should prioritize improving product quality, storage, and processing facilities to turn raw materials into value-added exports. Enhanced marketing and promotion of Cambodian goods in Thailand would also expand exports.

As of May, Thailand hosts over 1.3 Cambodian migrant workers, an important source of remittances.¹⁵ Cambodia has requested assurances that Thailand will improve immigration procedures and border facilitation. Cambodia relies heavily on remittances from workers abroad,

¹⁰ Thai enquirer. "News Summary". September 28, 2023. <https://www.thaienquirer.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Thai-Enquirer-News-Summary-September-28-2023.pdf>

¹¹ The Standard. "Srettha meets with the Cambodian prime minister to discuss bilateral, raise relations, solve border-call center-trafficking problems." The Standard. September 28, 2023. <https://thestandard.co/srettha-meet-hun-manet-solving-boarder-call-center-human-trafficking/>

¹² Nuanam, Wassana. "Srettha to Visit Cambodia, Aims to Deepen Bilateral Ties." Bangkok Post. September 27, 2023. <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2653387/srettha-to-visit-cambodia-aims-to-deepen-bilateral-ties>.

¹³ Hin, Pisei. "H1 Thailand Exports Up 6.5% After Subpar H2." Phnom Penh Post. July 13, 2023. <https://m.phnompenhpost.com/business/h1-thailand-exports-65-after-subpar-h2>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ The Phnom Penh Post. "Thais reassure Cambodia's migrant workers can stay". June 8, 2023. Available at <https://m.phnompenhpost.com/national/thais-reassure-cambodias-migrant-workers-can-stay>

the majority in Thailand. Ensuring the safe, orderly movement of workers is thus a high priority for Cambodia. It seeks guarantees from Thailand that migration flows and protections for Cambodian workers will continue. This may include the facilitation of regular migration procedures, crackdowns on illegal recruiters who abuse workers, and enforcement of labor rights for migrants. As such, it is in Cambodia's interest to request Thailand to accelerate the efforts of establishing a Consulate General of Cambodia in Songkla Province where most Cambodian migrant workers are residing.¹⁶ Increasing cooperation in this area makes migration safer and expands labor protections. Above all, Cambodia aims to guarantee its citizens' access to vital overseas jobs in the region while ensuring they receive adequate protection.

On tourism, 379,665 Cambodians traveled to Thailand last year, while 853,376 Thais visited Cambodia, with 819,081 (95.98%) doing so on "holiday."¹⁷ To further enhance the number of visitors from one another and from elsewhere, the two prime ministers have also established a new joint action plan under the slogan "Two Kingdoms, One Destination". Deeper people-to-people exchanges between the societies could strengthen bonds and motivate more Thais to experience Cambodia's cultural richness and vice versa. This can be achieved through the sharing of diverse perspectives between the two peoples. During the meeting, the two sides emphasized the crucial roles of a vibrant digital economy and green economy in alleviating poverty and contributing to sustainable development.¹⁸ It is strongly evident that the usage of KH-QR cross-border payment has greatly facilitated financial transactions among the two societies.

Nevertheless, Cambodia did not bring up the plan to build a submarine power cable from Laos, crossing Thailand's and Malaysia's territorial water, to Singapore to discuss with Thailand.¹⁹ Similarly, the settlement of the overlapping maritime area (rich in oil and gas) between the two

¹⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "Cambodia and Thailand to further Enhance Partnership for Peace and Prosperity" September 28, 2023. <https://www.mfaic.gov.kh/posts/2023-09-29-Press-Release-Cambodia-and-Thailand-to-further-Enhance-Partnership-for-Peace-and-Prosperity--05-55-27>

¹⁷ Hin, Pisei. "H1 Thailand Exports Up 6.5% After Subpar H2." Phnom Penh Post. July 13, 2023. <https://m.phnompenhpost.com/business/h1-thailand-exports-65-after-subpar-h2>.

¹⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "Cambodia and Thailand to further Enhance Partnership for Peace and Prosperity". September 28, 2023. <https://www.mfaic.gov.kh/posts/2023-09-29-Press-Release-Cambodia-and-Thailand-to-further-Enhance-Partnership-for-Peace-and-Prosperity--05-55-27>

¹⁹ Ry, Sochan. "Manet Holds Bilateral Talks with ASEAN Counterparts." Phnom Penh Post. September 5, 2023. <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national-politics/manet-holds-bilateral-talks-asean-counterparts>.

countries in the Gulf of Thailand was not on the agenda as well.²⁰ Although both parties have reiterated their commitment to closer cooperation in the defense and security sector, it is noteworthy to mention that the press release from Cambodia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs didn't state²¹ whether Prime Minister Hun Manet take this opportunity to try to reassure his Thai counterpart in good faith the unprovocative intention regarding the upgrading of Cambodia's Ream Naval Base in the Gulf of Thailand.²²

Other 'minor' issues such as tensions aroused recently between the two nations' netizens regarding 'cultural conflicts'²³ during the Southeast Asian Games in Cambodia wasn't brought up for discussion. Nevertheless, the two sides agree that more efforts should be made to combat fake news that could cause misunderstanding between their respective citizens.²⁴

After all, Srettha's choice of Cambodia as his first official bilateral trip abroad strongly conveys Thailand's high regard for Cambodia as its close neighbor. It exemplifies the durable bilateral friendship that mutually benefits the two societies. Through frank dialogue and enhanced cooperation, this visit will further cement trade, interconnectivity, and mutual understanding between the two nations.

²⁰ Larkin, Chris. "Thailand Cambodia Overlapping Claims Area. Is a settlement in sight?". February 9, 2023. <https://www.clc-asia.com/thailand-cambodia-overlapping-claims-area/>.

²¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "Cambodia and Thailand to further Enhance Partnership for Peace and Prosperity" September 28, 2023. <https://www.mfaic.gov.kh/posts/2023-09-29-Press-Release-Cambodia-and-Thailand-to-further-Enhance-Partnership-for-Peace-and-Prosperity--05-55-27>

²² Sanglee, Tita. "Cambodia's Ream Naval Base Upgrade and Implications for Thailand." The Diplomat. September 27, 2023. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/09/cambodias-ream-naval-base-upgrade-and-implications-for-thailand/>.

²³ Rim, Sokvy. "Cambodia and Thailand's Cultural Rivalry Has Serious Implications." The Diplomat. May 19, 2023. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/05/cambodia-and-thailands-cultural-rivalry-has-serious-implications/>.

²⁴ The Standard. "Srettha meets with the Cambodian prime minister to discuss bilateral, raise relations, solve border-call center-trafficking problems." The Standard. September 28, 2023. <https://thestandard.co/srettha-meet-hun-manet-solving-boarder-call-center-human-trafficking/>

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