



## **The Importance of Enhancing Foreign Affairs Studies in Cambodia**

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Cambodia cannot separate itself from regional and international trends. In fact, for Cambodia to develop positively, the country needs to constructively embrace and engage with the international community. Therefore, Cambodia must be forward-looking in its foreign policy.

Cambodia has received dividends of peace and development over the last few decades, thanks to commendable efforts of the Royal Government of Cambodia with the assistance and collaboration by the international community.<sup>1</sup> The government's strategies, one after another, consistently emphasize Cambodia's commitment to integrate itself into the international community.<sup>2</sup>

RGC has indeed stayed true to this commitment. For example, Cambodia became a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1999. The country has always demonstrated its aspiration to play responsible roles in the regional bloc.

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<sup>1</sup> From 1992 to 2020, Cambodia received about 20 billion USD in Official Development Assistance (ODA). In 2020, Cambodia was projected to get the ODA of about 1.8 billion USD. See Council for the Development of Cambodia. March 2020. "Development Cooperation and Partnership Report". Available at <http://cdc-crdb.gov.kh/en/officials-docs/documents/DCPR-2018-English.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> For more details, see Royal Government of Cambodia. 1994. "Law on the Investment of the Kingdom of Cambodia". Available at

[https://www.wto.org/english/thewto\\_e/acc\\_e/khm\\_e/WTACCKHM3A3\\_LEG\\_45.pdf](https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/acc_e/khm_e/WTACCKHM3A3_LEG_45.pdf)

Royal Government of Cambodia. 2004. "Rectangular Strategy Phase I". Available at

[https://cambodiancorner.files.wordpress.com/2018/01/keynote-address\\_spm\\_rgc\\_rectangular\\_strategy\\_2004.pdf](https://cambodiancorner.files.wordpress.com/2018/01/keynote-address_spm_rgc_rectangular_strategy_2004.pdf)

Royal Government of Cambodia. 2008. "Rectangular Strategy Phase II". Available at

[https://cambodiancorner.files.wordpress.com/2018/01/keynote-address\\_spm\\_rgc\\_rectangular\\_strategy\\_phase\\_ii\\_2008.pdf](https://cambodiancorner.files.wordpress.com/2018/01/keynote-address_spm_rgc_rectangular_strategy_phase_ii_2008.pdf)

Royal Government of Cambodia. 2013. "Rectangular Strategy Phase III". Available at

<https://cambodiancorner.files.wordpress.com/2018/01/rectangular-strategy-phase-iii.pdf>

Royal Government of Cambodia. 2018. "Rectangular Strategy Phase IV". Available at

[https://cambodiancorner.files.wordpress.com/2018/09/rectangular-strategy-phase-iv\\_final\\_eng.pdf](https://cambodiancorner.files.wordpress.com/2018/09/rectangular-strategy-phase-iv_final_eng.pdf)

Also see World Bank. 10 February 1992. "Cambodia: From Rehabilitation to Reconstruction". Available at <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/408971468743782412/text/multi0page.txt>

Masatoshi Teramoto. 2002. "Section 5: Development Plans of Cambodia," in *The Kingdom of Cambodia: From Reconstruction to Sustainable Development*. 245-264. Japan International Cooperation Agency.

Available at [https://www.jica.go.jp/jica-ri/IFIC\\_and\\_JBICI-](https://www.jica.go.jp/jica-ri/IFIC_and_JBICI-Studies/english/publications/reports/study/country/pdf/cambodia_07.pdf)

[Studies/english/publications/reports/study/country/pdf/cambodia\\_07.pdf](https://www.jica.go.jp/jica-ri/IFIC_and_JBICI-Studies/english/publications/reports/study/country/pdf/cambodia_07.pdf)

Cambodia has seriously taken its role as ASEAN Chair for three times, in 2002, 2012 and 2022.<sup>3</sup> The country has also consistently engaged with ASEAN, and through this regional bloc, with external partners.<sup>4</sup> Besides actively engaging with ASEAN, Cambodia has always tried to engage bilaterally and multilaterally with various partners and friends. All these are well documented if one observes Cambodia's foreign affairs.<sup>5</sup>

With all these significant efforts that RGC has done, there are rooms for important undertakings needed to further enable Cambodia to enhance its roles as a responsible member in the region and the international community, especially when regional and international trends have become increasingly complex and concerning. For instance, the volatile strategic landscape resulting from the intensification of great power competition, attacks on basic international norms and multilateralism, and complex global economic challenges stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond<sup>6</sup> all give reasons for Cambodia to be considerably concerned. Cambodia therefore needs to be prepared well ahead of the regional and global strategic curves to navigate these uncertain currents.

Enhancing foreign affairs studies, I argue, is a key essence in helping Cambodia further integrate into the international community amidst this uncertain time. There have been significant efforts by RGC, Cambodian universities, and think tanks to promote discussions and studies about the country's foreign affairs by organizing discussion forums, promoting academic and policy research, and disseminating various forms of publications.<sup>7</sup> All these contributions have been useful for exposing Cambodia's foreign affairs communities to regional and international arenas.

However, if Cambodia wants to remain positively relevant in the regional and international stages, the country's foreign affairs discourses have to be promoted to stimulate more strategic discussions in order to enhance the national capacity to think and act ahead in a way that helps maximize national interests while promoting relevant regional and international interests. Such national capacity is imperative if Cambodia wants to enhance

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<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. 31 May 2022. "Keynote Address by His Excellency Prak Sokhonn, Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, at the Workshop on Cambodia's Contributions to ASEAN since Assuming Membership in 1999". Available at <https://www.mfaic.gov.kh/posts/2022-05-31-Speeches-Keynote-Address-by-His-Excellency-PRAK-Sokhonn--Deputy-Prime-Minister--Minister-of-Foreign-Affairs-a-10-00-36>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> See: Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. 2022. "News". Available at <https://www.mfaic.gov.kh/Media/News#>

<sup>6</sup> See Pou Sothirak. February 2022. "Post-Covid-19 World Order," in *The Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic: National & Regional Implications*, edited by Pich Charadine and Robert Hör. 12-19. Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace and Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. Available at [https://cicp.org.kh/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/The-Impact-of-COVID-19-Pandemic-National-and-Regional-Implications\\_Feb-2021.pdf](https://cicp.org.kh/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/The-Impact-of-COVID-19-Pandemic-National-and-Regional-Implications_Feb-2021.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> For examples of those activities, see National Institute of Diplomacy and International Relations, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. Available at <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100063619241028>  
Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh, <https://www.facebook.com/Institute.InternationalStudies>  
The Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, <https://cicp.org.kh/>  
The Asian Vision Institute, <https://www.asianvision.org/>

its internal sovereignty and independence, have good international cooperation, as well as reduce threats or risks inflicted externally.

In this connection, promoting foreign affairs studies is essential<sup>8</sup> to keep policymakers and other relevant stakeholders informed of useful readings of complex regional and international issues affecting Cambodia, and provide them with strategic ideas that are beneficial for the country's conduct of foreign relations in the short, medium, and long terms.

Therefore, in my view, Cambodia's foreign affairs studies need to be enhanced to make them more strategic, vibrant, and constructive.

To be strategic, foreign affairs studies should be about keeping up with the regional and international trends, analyzing those trends deeply, and strategizing practical actions to effectively respond to both seen and unseen issues and challenges.

To be vibrant, Cambodia's foreign affairs discourses have to be about promoting consistently active discussions on both mainstream and non-mainstream trends among practitioners, academics and think tankers, as well as other relevant stakeholders in order to discover useful inputs to enhance Cambodia's maneuvering of external relations.

To be constructive, Cambodia's foreign affairs studies should focus more on finding the best possible ways that Cambodia can do to respond to various complex challenges abroad, and that Cambodia can do as a responsible member of the international community to help address regional and international issues.

Thus, it is vital that relevant national and international stakeholders should consistently and proactively help bring about favorable atmosphere for Cambodia's foreign affairs studies to thrive.

Consistent support is crucial for quality foreign affairs studies to take place. Various relevant national and international bodies and agencies such as academic institutions and think tanks should also have a more sustained commitment to increase the sources of those studies. Assistance should be directed to establishing mechanisms to help enhance the institutional, technical, and human capacities of those institutions to be stronger and more vibrant in the long run. Having stronger and more vibrant academic institutions and think tanks that focus on the study of foreign affairs would definitely lead

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<sup>8</sup> See Kuik Cheng-Chwee. August 2008. "The Essence of Hedging: Malaysia and Singapore's Response to a Rising China". *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 30, No. 2. 159-185. Available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41220503>

Kuik Cheng-Chwee, "Getting hedging right: a small-state perspective," *China International Strategy Review*, No. 3, (2021): 300-315. Available at <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s42533-021-00089-5>

to more strategic, vibrant, and constructive foreign affairs studies. These would help inject various strategic and useful inputs to the government, thereby augmenting Cambodia's national capacity in formulating and implementing its foreign policy. A more confident and forward-looking Cambodia would position the Kingdom to be a more responsible and active member of the international community, making Cambodia stand out as a well-respected and trusted partner in the region and beyond.

By being proactive, all relevant national and international stakeholders should intensify their efforts to engage with the academic institutions and think tanks in Cambodia. There should be closer and stronger channels of communication between practitioners, academics, and think tankers to regularly engage in strategic discussions in order to exchange ideas on foreign affairs trends that are of importance to Cambodia. Research and practices should be more aligned and intertwined to foster closer and stronger relations between practitioners, academics, and think tankers, which would help harmonize the foreign affairs discourses to be more constructive and aimed at finding ways to address complex issues confronting Cambodia, the region, and beyond.

Overall, Cambodia will be able to further integrate itself into the international community and attain greater regional and international stature if its foreign affairs are guided by strategic options that are well-thought, well-crafted, and well-implemented to address various issues in the wake of volatile regional and global environment. Therefore, I strongly believe that enhancing strategic, vibrant, and constructive foreign affairs studies is a key essence in pursuing this important endeavor.

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