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Deciphering recent events in the ream: the spillover effects of Cambodia's bandwagoning with China

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1 Introduction: Cambodia's alignment with China

The Sino-Cambodian diplomatic relations have rapidly intensified in the past several decades. Led by Hun Sen for approximately three decades, it has been China that consistently expressed its support for the semi-authoritarian regime of the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) since the ousting of Hun Se's co-Prime Minister, Prince Norodom Ranariddh (Menon, 2023; Watanabe and Sovannroeun, 2024; Yu, 2024). Throughout the democratic struggle in the past two decades, China has consistently recognized Hun Sen and the CPP's rule, establishing a strong commitment among the two states to maintain relations (Storey, 2006; Jeldres, 2012; Pheakdey, 2012; Chheang and Pheakdey, 2019; Nikkei, 2021; GGTN, 2023). Out of all the countries in Southeast Asia, Cambodia has shown that it is among the most "pro-China" nations, engaging with China in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and representing China's concerns in regional platforms such as in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (Richardson, 2010; Ciorciari, 2013; Hutt, 2016; Chong, 2017). Perhaps this growing alignment in interests between Cambodia and China is why the bilateral relations have been termed an "ironclad friendship" (Lim, 2023; Yu, 2024). Meanwhile, academics have interpreted such foreign policy alignments as Cambodia's bandwagoning stance with China, or the act of aligning interests with a stronger state (Roy, 2005; Chheang, 2016; Doung et al., 2022).

The fruitful economic relations between the two nations have defined most of the partnership in recent years. Cambodia's Hun Sen and his son Hun Manet (granted premiership in 2023) have ensured that aligning with China would bring unprecedented economic benefits for its people. A few of the major projects of China's BRI in Cambodia include the Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone (SSEZ), the Siem Reap-Angkor International Airport, and thousands of kilometers of reconstructed roads and bridges (Cripps, 2023; Sok, 2024b; Yalirozy, 2024). In addition, the signed Cambodia-China Free Trade Agreement (CCFTA) that took effect in 2022 further accelerated the two-way trade between the nations (Po and Sims, 2022).

Nevertheless, a particular event has been puzzling. Starting in December 2023 and continuing until March 2024, two Chinese naval ships were observed docking at Cambodia's Ream Naval Base (RNB) (AMTI, 2024). As reported by the Wall Street Journal in 2019, there have been speculations over a secret deal that would allow Chinese access to the RNB due to Chinese funding for the renovations in the base (Page et al., 2019). As a non-aligned state that forbids foreign bases in the country, the developments are concerning and worthy of investigation (Head, 2024; RFA, 2024; Sok, 2024a).

This opinion article argues that by bridging the alignment literature of international relations, the docking of the Chinese naval ships can be understood. This study builds up past research that has concluded that Cambodia is bandwagoning with China in the Asia Pacific (Po and Primiano, 2020; Doung et al., 2022) by emphasizing how Cambodia's bandwagoning in the economic and political dimensions has spilled over to an alignment in military posturing. Doing so does not take the developments in the Ream Naval Base as taken-for-granted events, and how Cambodia's bandwagoning can extend from political and economic bandwagoning shapes, to one that reflects military interest alignments. Secondary data from the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI) is utilized to make sense of this, specifically between December 2023 and March 2024.

2 China's presence in the ream naval base

Southeast Asia is currently a hotspot in maritime diplomatic events. As studies have shown, any occurrence taking place in the maritime domain cannot be taken for granted as the developments may contain diplomatic intentions that need to be explored (Parameswaran, 2015, 2017, 2019; Anugrah et al., 2020; Putra, 2020; Tarriela, 2022). The argument put forward in this opinion article is that the facilitation of the Chinese navy in the RNB constitutes an act of cementing Cambodia's alignment with China by bandwagoning.

Informed by AMTI and the satellite imagery by MAXAR Technologies (see Figure 1), two Chinese warships were observed docking in the new pier of the RNB starting December 3, 2023 (AMTI, 2024). The ships would maintain their position, only

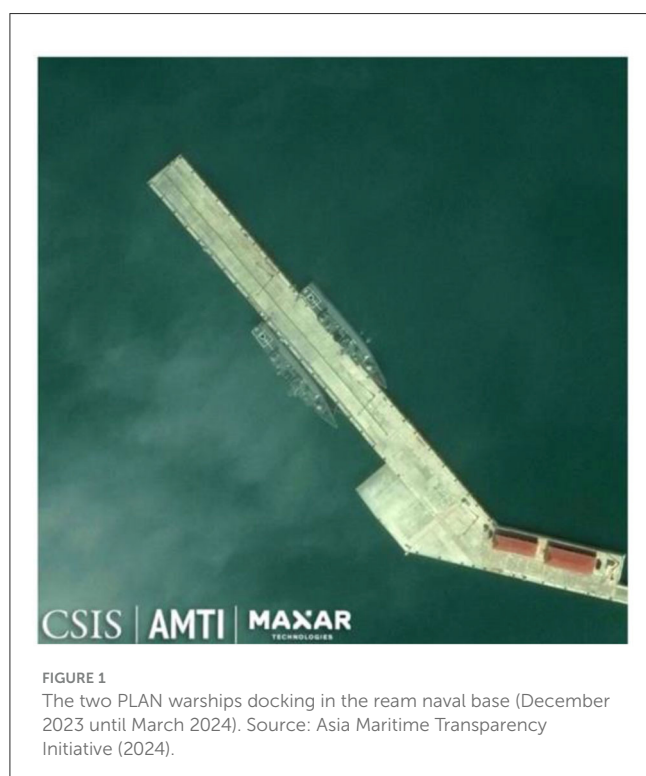
leaving the site for brief periods of time in January and March (AMTI, 2024; Choi, 2024). Cambodian officials have denied the presence of any secret agreement between Cambodia and China concerning exclusive access to the RNB (Choi, 2024; Rinith, 2024; Robertson, 2024). The justification made by Cambodian officials is that the two Chinese naval ships docked in the RNB to support the conduct of the sixth "Golden Dragon 2024" joint military exercise between Cambodia and China, which took place in May 2024 (Cheang, 2024; Cheang and Rising, 2024; Ke and Peng, 2024; Koemsoeun, 2024).

Nevertheless, the developments in the RNB are concerning for a couple of reasons. One is the reconstruction of the RNB, which China finances. The developments, including a new pier, roads, and ship repair facilities, are made to be able to host larger naval warships (Detsch, 2022; Yu, 2024). Second, to make the path for the Chinese-funded constructions, several existing facilities in the RNB had to be destroyed. Among them is the US-funded facility (equipped by Australia) demolished in 2021 (AMTI, 2021). The building has stood there since 2012, and it has become a center for the National Committee for Maritime Security. After the demolition, scholars and observers have concluded that this gesture was Cambodia's way of showing its overt alignment with China, considering how the West has consistently abandoned its support for Hun Sen's regime since the ousting of his co-Prime Minister in 1997 (HRW, 2012; Freedom House, 2019; Noren-Nilsson, 2019). The following section will attempt to decipher these developments in the RNB, which are connected to the literature on bandwagoning in international relations.

3 Deciphering Cambodia's China policy: contemporary Cambodian foreign policy under the context of bandwagoning

Most Southeast Asian states have been ambivalent in their stance vis-à-vis China (Kuik, 2008; Goh, 2016; Haacke, 2019; Jones and Jenne, 2022). Several claimant states to the South China Sea crisis have taken a more decisive stance, including balancing against China amid tensions in disputed seas (Putra, 2022, 2023; Putra and Cangara, 2022). Nevertheless, a small number of states in Southeast Asia, which includes Cambodia, have shown clearly that they bandwagon with China through the expression of a positive expectation to closer align with the Asian giant (Burgos and Ear, 2010; Pheakdey, 2012; Ciorciari, 2015; Po and Primiano, 2020; Po and Sims, 2022). A dominant theme within this discourse is that Cambodia bandwagons in order to secure China's lucrative funding opportunities through its BRI projects (Chen and Yang, 2013; Po and Primiano, 2020). The American Enterprise Institute reported that the accumulated value of China's investments in Cambodia between 2005 and 2024 is USD 13.43 Billion (AEI, 2024), making Cambodia the third largest recipient of Chinese investments in Southeast Asia.

This opinion articles that Cambodia's economic bandwagoning with China results into three consequences/spillovers. First has been the alignment of interests on China's national, regional, and global political preferences. Cambodia has long supported China's



“One-China” policy since the positive relations of Hun Sen and the Chinese government ensued. Hun Sen banned the Taiwan flag from being raised in Cambodia and has constantly expressed how Taiwan and Hong Kong are part of China (Pang, 2017; Po and Primiano, 2020; Železný, 2022). Back in 2009, Cambodia also supported China’s stance on the Uyghurs, having deported 20 Uyghurs back to China despite knowing that those individuals would be prosecuted (HRHF, 2010).

Second, Cambodia’s bandwagoning stance with China is evident at the regional and global levels. Regionally, Cambodia has been known as a pro-China state since the 2012 incident when Cambodia held the chairmanship position of ASEAN. Prior to that, China had clashed with the claimant states of the South China Sea and started to display overt assertiveness to claim its Nine-Dash Line (Blazevic, 2012; Shoji, 2012; Simon, 2012; Thayer, 2012). When ASEAN member states wanted to criticize China’s actions through the joint communique in 2012, Cambodia blocked the effort and emphasized that the South China Sea conflict should be resolved outside of the ASEAN platform (Minh Vu, 2019; Pich, 2021). ASEAN could only agree to adopt cautious wordings, which during the 15th ASEAN-China Summit, mentioned, “We agree to continue to uphold the spirit and principles of the DOC to contribute to the promotion of peace, friendship, mutual trust, confidence, and cooperation between and among ASEAN Member States and China” (ASEAN, 2012). Unfortunately, a similar occurrence took place in 2016, as Vietnam and the Philippines wanted ASEAN to have a common stance regarding the need for China to halt its actions at sea (Pich, 2021). Meanwhile, Cambodia has always been a proponent of the BRI and other Chinese global initiatives, such as the Global Development Initiative and the Global Security Initiative (GGTN, 2023; Ha, 2023).

Eventually, what acts as the third spillover, consistent with the Cambodian bandwagoning literature of international relations, is in the military domain. The docking of the Chinese naval ships in the RNB indicates that China should no longer be concerned about Cambodia’s alignment. Therefore, whether the true intentions of Cambodian officials were to facilitate a short-term docking of the Chinese Navies or indeed meant to only provide supportive roles in the joint military exercise in 2024, Cambodia is still signaling to China that it places a high value toward the ironclad friendship. For Cambodia, the gesture shown to China does not come with a hefty price because of two reasons.

First, Cambodia does not have any territorial claims that compete with China. As seen with the stance of claimant states to the South China Sea, policies of coerciveness at sea are displayed as what is at stake is too valuable to ignore (Yu, 2016; Basawantara, 2020; Robles and Robles, 2021; Chubb, 2022). For Cambodia, the possible adversary is not China but the giant Southeast Asian neighbors of Cambodia located to its left (Thailand) and right (Vietnam). In the past, Cambodia did not make enough efforts to defend Phu Quoc Island, which led Cambodia to let go of the Island due to Vietnam’s reference over the Brevie Line (Leng, 2017; Bong, 2023; Jones, 2024b).

Against Thailand, Cambodia’s Hun Manet and Thailand’s Paetongtarn Shinawatra are struggling to find common ground about the overlapping claims area in the Gulf of Thailand that stretches to 26,000 square kilometers (Bangprapa and Sattaburuth, 2024; Daiss, 2024; Jones, 2024a). The case of Thailand is exceptionally complex for Cambodia, as Thailand has in the past

shown its coerciveness with the land border conflict in the vicinity of the Preah Vihear Temple, which lasted 3 years starting in 2008 (Yoosuk, 2013; Lee, 2014; Turcsányi and Kříž, 2017). If any, the apparent alignment of Cambodia with China in the military domain is to compel existing adversaries and display the maritime power that currently defends it.

The tight relations between the CPP political elites and China can also explain the spillover of Cambodia’s bandwagoning alignment stance with China. As studies have suggested, China’s importance to Cambodia is detrimental as China acts to legitimize Hun Sen’s rule (Bader, 2015; Lim, 2023). As Lim stated, “China puts a strong emphasis on fostering ties with the ruling elites of the Cambodian People’s Party and backs their regime legitimacy” (Lim, 2023). Consequently, China has deployed the strategy of ensuring individuals of the CPP gain economic benefits from BRI-related projects across Cambodia (Un and So, 2009; Vannarith, 2019; Chheang, 2022, 2023; Lim, 2023). In Cambodia, the dominating political party strongly influences the government, including the determination of foreign policy (Minh Vu, 2019). Consequently, it was easier for Hun Sen in the past and Hun Manet in the present to ensure that China’s interests in the military domain could be facilitated. Among the gestures that show the CPP’s facilitation of Chinese interests is the docking rights throughout the period assessed in this opinion article.

To conclude, it is predicted that an alignment in the military domain will continue to occur within the bilateral relations between Cambodia and China. The CPP’s preferences in foreign policy will be maintained as they continue to hold power under Hun Manet’s rule. The agreed CCFTA has accelerated the two-way trade between the nations, increasing Cambodia’s dependence on China. Furthermore, the growing misalignment of interests between Cambodia and ASEAN has compelled Cambodia to facilitate China’s interests further. Being pushed to the corner on the options of its alignment decisions, Cambodia is expected to explore more avenues to accommodate China’s interests within the region and be consistent with its bandwagoning stance since three decades ago.

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