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## Hun Sen's Mistake? The Domestic Political Ramifications of His Chinese Shelter

CHARLES DUNST

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I S S U E S

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### **About the Author**

*Charles Dunst is an associate with Eurasia Group's Global Macro practice, focusing on Chinese foreign policy and the geopolitics of Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific. He is also a visiting scholar at the East-West Center in Washington, an associate at LSE IDEAS at the London School of Economics, and a contributing editor of American Purpose, a new magazine founded by Francis Fukuyama. A former foreign correspondent in Southeast Asia, he has reported from the region for The New York Times, The Atlantic, Foreign Policy, and the Los Angeles Times, among other outlets.*

*Email: [CharlesDunst@gmail.com](mailto:CharlesDunst@gmail.com)*

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**SUMMARY** Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen's close relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC) has led scholars and policymakers alike to suggest that Beijing's backing will keep him in power.<sup>1</sup> While Hun Sen himself seems to believe this to be true, his reliance on China is actually enflaming Cambodian discontent to such an extent that his planned patrimonial succession is at risk. Given the fragility of regimes mid-succession, Hun Sen's Chinese shelter is augmenting the potential of his clan's fall. Yet as Hun Sen faces increased domestic opposition, he will only further deepen ties with China in hopes of remaining in power, thereby creating a vicious cycle from which escaping will prove difficult.

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### Choosing China

Nowhere is China's rise more evident than in the Global South, the less socioeconomically developed regions of Africa, Latin America, Asia, and the Middle East. China has courted countries there with "South-South" partnerships hinging on economic assistance, minus the liberal political strings frequently attached to Western support. Just as American diplomat George Kennan feared that these states would seek Soviet backing because they believed communism to be "the coming thing, the movement of the future,"<sup>2</sup> so do small states today seek Chinese support in the belief that as fellow travelers alongside China, they will profit from Chinese trade and investment, and, ultimately, Beijing's rewriting of global rules.

This phenomenon is evident in China-Cambodia relations. China did not coerce Cambodia into joining its fold, as former US Assistant Secretary of State David Stilwell has suggested.<sup>3</sup> Rather, Hun Sen chose China, which in turn found Cambodia useful. And while China's backing has strengthened Hun Sen's short-term grip on power, it has undermined his clan's long-term control of Cambodia by backing them into an unenviable corner from which there are no good ways out.

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### Hun Sen's Relationship with China

In December 1978, Vietnam invaded Cambodia to oust the Khmer Rouge, the China-backed communists who had since April 1975 misruled the country and repeatedly invaded Vietnam. By January 1979, Vietnam had forced the Khmer Rouge back into the jungles from which they came. PRC leaders, furious to have lost their Cambodian proxy, invaded Vietnam in February 1979. The invasion was militarily unsuccessful, yet it taught the Vietnamese to be wary of further angering China—that "they cannot run about at will," as then-Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping put it.<sup>4</sup> Vietnam nonetheless occupied Cambodia and installed Hun Sen, a 27-year-old former Khmer

Rouge cadre who had defected to Vietnam, as their Cambodian foreign minister. After Vietnam ousted its first two prime ministers, they installed Hun Sen in this role in 1985. Beijing, meanwhile, continued arming the Khmer Rouge.<sup>5</sup> Hun Sen, accordingly, railed against the "Peking expansionists"<sup>6</sup> and decried China as the "root of everything that was evil."<sup>7</sup>

While the October 1991 Paris Peace Accords ended Vietnam's Cambodian occupation, bringing back the royal former leader (and Khmer Rouge figurehead) Norodom Sihanouk from exile, Hun Sen remained prime minister. In 1992, though, the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) arrived to democratize the country. But the situation quickly deteriorated, with violence and protests spreading across the capital. In January 1993, Sihanouk pulled out of the deal, citing crimes perpetrated against his political party *Front uni national pour un Cambodge indépendant, neutre, pacifique, et coopératif* (FUNCINPEC). UNTAC, having failed to secure the insurgent demobilization and administrative supervision, "went all-in" on its sole remaining objective: the holding of free and fair elections.<sup>8</sup> The environment was anything but neutral. Hun Sen's attack squads, "A-Teams" operating under state consent, killed at least 200 opposition activists.<sup>9</sup>

The two largest parties were the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) and the FUNCINPEC, control of which Sihanouk had handed to his son, Ranariddh. Many Cambodians voted for FUNCINPEC to demonstrate loyalty to Sihanouk, who they still revered as "Samdech Euv," or "father king." FUNCINPEC emerged victorious, while the CPP came in second. But Hun Sen had expected an easy victory; he rejected his loss, both stoking and "solving" a secession crisis. Ranariddh, in turn, agreed to share power with him in an interim government in which they would serve as co-prime ministers. The world accepted the arrangement. "Everybody," said one American diplomat, "was basically tired of the whole thing and wanted to create a fix that Cambodians could live with."<sup>10</sup>

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When Cambodia then re-established itself as a kingdom under Sihanouk in 1993, Beijing and Phnom Penh re-established diplomatic ties (although they were never officially broken during wartime).<sup>11</sup> The PRC severed its relationship with the Khmer Rouge and actively engaged with the new government. In April 1996, a PRC military delegation visited Phnom Penh and pledged \$1 million in military aid, even though Cambodia had allowed the rival Republic of China (ROC) to open a Phnom Penh trade office in 1995, and Cambodia had in 1996 opened a similar office in Taipei. But it was Ranariddh's FUNCINPEC, not Hun Sen's CPP, that was associated with these initiatives, so when the PRC brought Hun Sen to Beijing in July 1996 they did not invite anyone from FUNCINPEC.<sup>12</sup> For the previous decade, Beijing had considered Hun Sen a Vietnamese puppet and supported FUNCINPEC; Beijing, however, felt betrayed by their former clients' Taiwanese activities.<sup>13</sup> When Hun Sen met with Chinese leadership, the Chinese made it apparent that they considered him, rather than Ranariddh, to be their partner.<sup>14</sup> China wanted someone to stabilize the country so that no foreign actor could use it to contain China; Hun Sen was their man for the job.

In July 1997, Hun Sen violently ousted Ranariddh in a coup. The West pulled its support from Cambodia; China, in line with promised noninterference in partners' domestic affairs, fully backed Hun Sen. He promptly endorsed the "One China" policy, shuttering Cambodia's representative office in Taipei and Taiwan's office in Phnom Penh. In the years since, Cambodia-China relations have deepened in virtually every aspect. The coup, then, brought into being both the Cambodia, and the Cambodia-China relationship, that we know today.

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### **China's Cambodian Agenda**

Southeast Asia holds a special place in China's policy mind because of its markets, resources, strategic location, historical Chinese ties, and

the around 30 million ethnic Chinese scattered throughout. Since the early 2010s, the PRC has tried to integrate Southeast Asia into a Chinese-led "community of common destiny," a term that Chinese leaders use to inject "a deterministic sense of inevitability in the intertwined destiny" of China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—a "destiny" that only Cambodia and Laos have endorsed.<sup>15</sup> PRC leaders view Cambodia as a means to many ends: a strategically located state of special historical interest in which China can open business opportunities for its firms, to which it can export overcapacity, and which Beijing can wield to advance its geopolitics.

Hun Sen is a willing partner. In the early- and mid-2000s, he supported the PRC over the EP-3 reconnaissance plane incident, refused to issue a visa to the Dalai Lama, and clamped down on the Falun Gong movement, a group that the PRC violently persecutes.<sup>16</sup> In 2009, ahead of a state visit by then-Vice President Xi, Cambodia deported 20 Uyghur Muslims to China, knowing that they would be executed upon arrival.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, ASEAN, at its 2012 Summit of which Cambodia was chair, failed for the first time in its 45-year history to issue a joint communiqué because Cambodia rejected a draft that criticized China's actions in the South China Sea. In 2015 and 2016, Cambodia again blocked ASEAN from criticizing China. In 2017, Hun Sen demanded that the Taiwanese flag not be displayed anywhere in Cambodia.<sup>18</sup> And after 22 countries in July 2019 wrote to the United Nations Human Rights Council condemning China's mass interment of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, Cambodia signed a letter commending China's human rights "achievements."<sup>19</sup> Remarkably, Hun Sen's regime has even rewritten Cambodian history to omit the PRC's backing of the Khmer Rouge.<sup>20</sup>

Cambodia also serves more tangible Chinese interests. China exports to Cambodia its overcapacity of firms and workers to tamp down domestic concerns.<sup>21</sup> (This is no surprise: China originally conceptualized the Belt and Road

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Initiative as a way to offload overcapacity and diversify its foreign asset holdings.<sup>22</sup>) Cambodia has helped Chinese firms dodge US tariffs by rerouting exports through the Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, Cambodia has reportedly signed a deal with China that would allow Chinese forces to access a naval base at Ream, near the city of Sihanoukville.<sup>24</sup> Plans for other Chinese-built resorts on the Cambodian coast could also serve Chinese military purposes.<sup>25</sup> With military access in Cambodia, China would improve its access to the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea and ability to harass American vessels therein, thereby complementing its military presence in the Paracel and Spratly Islands to draw a perimeter around mainland Southeast Asia.

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### **What Hun Sen Gets from China**

While Western leaders castigate Hun Sen, China stands by him. In November 2017, after the United States condemned the Cambodian Supreme Court's banning of the opposition party at Hun Sen's request—and the EU threatened punitive action—PRC Foreign Minister Wang Yi told Hun Sen that China supported the decision. Hun Sen has since charged the opposition's leader with treason and secured all 125 parliamentary seats in rigged 2018 elections. Ahead of these elections, meanwhile, China even broke its promised noninterference to bolster Hun Sen by sending a PRC ambassador to a CPP campaign event. After the United States criticized these elections and threatened action, Wang offered his congratulations for a “smooth” election, telling Cambodia that foreigners should not interfere in its affairs.<sup>26</sup>

China has also strengthened Cambodia's military, reprising its Khmer Rouge-era role as the country's largest provider of military aid.<sup>27</sup> Chinese firms have refurbished facilities at Ream and Sihanoukville; the China's People's Liberation Army has conducted six bilateral exercises with its Cambodian counterpart since 2015, the most recent of which took place in April 2020 and included 2,500 Cambodians.

China is also Cambodia's biggest investor.<sup>28</sup> In 2019, after the United States imposed sanctions on, and the EU pulled some of its trade preferences for, Cambodia—the latter move costing Cambodia some \$50 million annually—China promised to expand China-Cambodia trade to \$10 billion.<sup>29</sup>

Perhaps more importantly to Hun Sen, China recognizes him as an “equal”—a marked contrast to the West. The international community's 1980s isolation of communist Vietnam-occupied Cambodia instilled in Hun Sen “an abiding resentment” for the West and “deep skepticism” of its “invocations of liberal values.”<sup>30</sup> The West has long considered Cambodia a strategically marginal country where it could press a values-based foreign policy, in contrast to Vietnam and Thailand, whose poor human rights records they overlook. But Hun Sen resents “being treated as a special case”: he has chafed at the West for holding him to higher standards than the ruling regimes of Cambodia's neighbors.<sup>31</sup> Just as Cambodia's accumulated history—epitomized by Phnom Penh's streets, which eclectically bear the names of Charles de Gaulle, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Mao Zedong—never completely erase that which came before, contemporary geopolitics have not subsumed the past from Hun Sen's psyche.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, Hun Sen looks to Beijing in part because the “Chinese leaders respect me highly and treat me as an equal.”<sup>33</sup> Yet the rising tide of Chinese capital has not lifted all Cambodian boats, but drowned many of the ricketiest sampans struggling to stay afloat.

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### **The Foreigner's Approach**

Other countries must recognize the reality of Hun Sen's Chinese backing while forging their own relationships with Cambodia. Indeed, Washington, Tokyo, and others should understand that Cambodia is firmly ensconced in China's orbit, and that sanctions, particularly those imposed by the United States or European Union—which anger Hun Sen, who resents being sanctioned when Thai and Vietnamese leaders are not—will neither force him from office nor into compliance.



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Instead, leaders must deal with the Kingdom as it is, rather than as they might wish it to be. Efforts to this effect should include engagement with independent Khmer-language media and civil society, as well as the expansion of aid to fill healthcare and other gaps left by Hun Sen's kleptocracy. By taking these steps—and by perhaps maintaining some limited sanctions on CPP officials most directly involved in human rights violations (rather than imposing national sanctions that will hurt ordinary people)—leaders the world over can strengthen Cambodians' power and thus better prepare Cambodia for its post-Hun Sen future.

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#### **Hun Sen's Mistake?**

Hun Sen is pragmatic. Chinese shelter, which allows him to further consolidate power while ignoring Western criticism, appears to fit his modus operandi. Yet, like other autocrats surrounded by "yes men" attuned only to flattering narratives—a problem particularly acute for long-ruling leaders—the ground has shifted beneath his feet and he has failed to notice.

Reliance on China in fact poses an array of problems for Hun Sen. For starters, the relationship has led him to act in ways inconsistent with Cambodians' identity and preferred image of themselves. He has increasingly isolated Cambodia from the West, allowed a mass influx of Chinese, and diminished Cambodians' livelihoods by privileging Chinese firms' interests. Chinese shelter comes also at an ecological cost: China's damming drastically reduced the Tonlé Sap's flooding period, dropping Cambodians' fish catches.<sup>34</sup> In 2019 and 2020, Beijing's engineers also caused record low water levels in the Mekong River, on which Cambodia relies more than any other country.<sup>35</sup> Meanwhile, stories of criminal Chinese behavior in Cambodia are plentiful, spurring widespread anti-Chinese sentiment.<sup>36</sup>

Overall, Hun Sen's closeness with China—as well as his failure to adequately improve social services and limit corruption, skyrocketing household debt, a lack of jobs, and lagging

development—is fanning the flames of Cambodian anger. This discontent is most pronounced among those under 35 years old who comprise two-thirds of Cambodia's population and do not remember the Khmer Rouge period from which Hun Sen claims to have delivered Cambodia (claims that once earned him support).<sup>37</sup> The pandemic's shrinking of China's economy, which has limited Beijing's ability to prop up Cambodia, will only aggravate such frustration. Chinese investment and wealth may keep Hun Sen and his patrons happy, but it causes resentment among the rest of the population. This anger undermines the chances that Hun Sen can seamlessly hand off power off to his eldest son, Hun Manet.

Hun Sen will likely stay in control of Cambodia against the wishes of the majority for years to come, but demographic and other geopolitical shifts are challenging his clan's plans for long-term control of Cambodia. As Hun Sen has cozied up to China, Western investment and aid has dwindled, leaving his regime all the more reliant on China for the capital to fund public projects, bolster his security apparatuses, and buy off key elites and military figures, even as public resentment grows. Ultimately, though, Hun Sen's Chinese shelter angers Cambodians, further widening the distance between the ruling regime and the ruled, actually accentuating the regime's dependence on China. The circle thus becomes vicious.

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#### **Transitional Perils**

While Hun Sen has tied his future to China, the PRC remains mercurial. In 2012, when it looked like the China-friendly Zimbabwean dictator Robert Mugabe might fall, Beijing courted his opposition.<sup>38</sup> After supporting the government of Sudan in its 2010s fight against secessionist rebels, China later backed these same rebels.<sup>39</sup> In 2018, at the beginning of the ongoing Venezuelan political crisis, China, despite its closeness with the ruling Nicolás Maduro, contacted opposition leader Juan Guaidó to protect its oil investments.<sup>40</sup>

The PRC is not an “all-weather” but a “fair-weather” friend. Hun Sen should thus not expect Beijing’s backing if his Chinese alignment, and then his son’s potential ascendance, becomes so intolerable to Cambodians that it brings about increased elite discontent and popular protest. China has, in fact, communicated as much to him. Hun Sen responded to his surprising 2013 electoral setback by seeking support from the PRC’s Phnom Penh embassy, which told him that they would not support him unconditionally but would back “any Cambodian leader who guarded Beijing’s interests.”<sup>41</sup>

Further stacking the deck against the Hun clan is the fact that patrimonial successions are among the greatest threats to personalist authoritarian regimes, as successors must immediately prove their worthiness to both volatile elites and the public.<sup>42</sup> While Hun Sen’s eldest son and likely successor Hun Manet has military and party credentials—he is a three-star general in the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces and the president of the CPP’s youth wing—these do not equal elite support.<sup>43</sup> Hun Sen does not appear to have passed on to Hun Manet what the German sociologist Max Weber called “hereditary charisma,” in which the radiance of power is transmitted to the ruling family’s next generation.<sup>44</sup> Hun Sen seems aware of this problem and has, accordingly, taken to promising in public that Hun Manet will match “his father by 80 or 90 percent.”<sup>45</sup> But Hun Manet is unlikely to reach this threshold or successfully manage the CPP’s rivalries.<sup>46</sup> Some elites, fearing the regime’s weakness, have even sought Cyprus citizenship as an “escape plan.”<sup>47</sup> (Their citizenship was later revoked.)

Hun Manet will also face public opposition resulting from widespread anger rooted in Cambodians’ disapproval of both his father and the prospect of dynastic rule itself. Such anger is already evident: the Cambodian government in June 2020 arrested a newspaper publisher for posting on Facebook that “Hun Sen will lose everything if he still wants to nominate his son as Prime Minister!”<sup>48</sup> This discontent, coupled with

elite opposition and China’s lack of loyalty to its clients, renders possible Hun Manet’s fall. Weber argued that “Everywhere the problem of succession has been the Achilles heel of purely Caesarist rule”;<sup>49</sup> Hun Sen’s Cambodia is no exception. Yet if Hun Manet is toppled, China, embodying the traditional realist maxim that “nations have no permanent friends or allies, they have only interests,” will simply try to woo Phnom Penh’s new leadership and add yet another Cambodian to its list of subordinates.

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## Conclusion

Hun Sen could have avoided backing his clan into this corner. He could have maintained enough of a democratic façade to satisfy the United States while engaging Washington on issues of mutual concern, and securing Chinese support nonetheless. Thailand and the Philippines have pursued such a strategy, forcing Washington and Beijing to compete for influence as a result. But this hedging would not have as strongly solidified Hun Sen’s short-term grip on power, so it was evidently discarded, if it was ever even considered. Instead, he has tied himself to China in hopes of passing power to his son, an endeavor whose chances of triumph appear increasingly uncertain. Hun Sen will for the foreseeable future remain in control of the Kingdom; yet only time will tell if his bargain—with an ambivalent and ultimately self-interested Chinese regime—can keep Cambodia in the Hun clan’s hands.

*Further stacking the deck against the Hun clan is the fact that patrimonial successions are among the greatest threats to personalist authoritarian regimes*

## Notes

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East-West Center  
1601 East-West Road  
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