

BOOK REVIEW

Chanborey Cheunboran. *Cambodia's China Strategy: Security Dilemmas of Embracing the Dragon*. New York: Routledge, 2021.

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Cambodia's China Strategy: Security Dilemmas of Embracing the Dragon written by Chanborey Cheunboran (2021) endeavours to offer a thorough analysis of Cambodia's foreign policy by delving into the historical context of the country's quest for survival and security. It examines Cambodia's diplomatic traditions, political and economic imperatives, as well as the worldview of Cambodian leaders regarding the future of Asia and the international order, along with their implications for the nation. The book presents eight key findings. Firstly, Cambodia's geographical position, sandwiched between powerful and historically adversarial neighbours such as Thailand and Vietnam, has consistently influenced the country's strategic orientation from 1431 to 1997. This geographical reality has prompted Cambodian leaders to seek support and assistance from external powers against immediate neighbours, as evidenced by the acceptance of the French protectorate in 1863, Lon Nol's alliance with the United States (US) after the 1970 coup, and the strengthening of the Democratic Kampuchea-People's Republic of China (DK-PRC) alliance in the late 1970s.

Secondly, between 1997 and 2008, Cambodia under Hun Sen and the ruling Cambodia's People Party (CPP) pursued a hedging strategy towards China, Vietnam, Japan, ASEAN and key western Official Development Assistance (ODA) donors such as the US and European Union (EU). This cautious approach stemmed from Phnom Penh's suspicions and fears regarding China's past involvement in Cambodia, as well as concerns about potential alienation of Hanoi, ASEAN, and Western ODA donor countries crucial for Cambodia's security and economic development. Thirdly, in the late 2000s, Cambodia's strategic direction evolved towards an alignment with China.

This change was primarily driven by Phnom Penh's perception of heightened security threats from historically adversarial neighbours, particularly Thailand, following the eruption of the Cambodia-Thailand border conflict from 2008 to 2011. Additionally, tensions with Vietnam, stemming from historical animosity, border disputes, illegal Vietnamese migration, and Cambodia's support for China's stance on the South China Sea, further contributed to this strategic reorientation.

Fourthly, Phnom Penh's perspective on the emergence of a Sino-centric regional order in Asia has solidified its alignment with China. Recognising China as the most strategic partner for promoting economic growth and safeguarding territorial integrity, Cambodia has become increasingly willing to confront other ASEAN members to protect its interests, particularly in light of ASEAN's perceived ineffectiveness during the 2008–2011 Cambodia-Thailand border conflict. Nevertheless, there remains a consensus within Cambodian foreign policy circles regarding the importance of ASEAN, presenting Phnom Penh with the challenge of balancing its alignment with China and its participation in ASEAN integration. Fifthly, Cambodia's strategic options with major powers are limited. Apart from China, Japan stands out as a potential source of benefits, but Cambodia views China's strategic and political significance as outweighing that of Japan. Cambodia's scepticism towards American strategic interests in Asia, coupled with declining American leadership in the region in favour of China, further reinforces Phnom Penh's reluctance to align with Washington. While France and Russia hold symbolic significance as Cambodia's former patrons, they lack the willingness and capacity to effectively address the Kingdom's security and economic needs.

Sixthly, China's aid and investment in Cambodia play a crucial role in bolstering the performance legitimacy of the ruling CPP. Beijing's unconditional economic engagement allows CPP leaders to enrich themselves and maintain the patron-client system, thereby consolidating political control. Additionally, China serves as a vital diplomatic shield for Phnom Penh against external criticism regarding democratisation efforts in Cambodia. Seventhly, Cambodia's deepening alignment with China poses several risks and challenges for the small state. These include the potential erosion of democratic values and good governance, the risk of financial dependence on China leading to a loss of foreign policy autonomy, entanglement in China-US competition, and alienation of its neighbouring countries, notably Vietnam.

Finally, this book introduces "tight" and "loose" alignments as new frameworks for understanding the strategic choices of small states. The author argues that Cambodia should pursue a loose alignment with China, viewing

it as the most cost-effective approach for small states seeking support from external powers. This strategy allows small states to balance the risks and benefits of security cooperation while maintaining flexibility for foreign policy diversification and engagement in multilateral diplomacy. A loose alignment differs from a tight alignment in three main ways. Firstly, there is a relatively low level of coordination in foreign and defence policies between the small state and the great power. This can be observed through limited institutionalisation within bureaucratic and military structures, and the absence of military or quasi-military bases within the small state. Secondly, the small state resists pressure from the great power to conform to its interests. And thirdly, the small state actively participates in inclusive regionalism, leveraging regional norms and multilateral diplomacy to constrain the dominance of the great power and create room for manoeuvring.

This book presents several strengths. Firstly, it thoroughly examines Cambodia's historical strategic options and the factors influencing them since the fall of the Angkor Empire in 1431, with a particular focus on Cambodia's foreign policy towards China from 1997 to 2018. Secondly, it distinguishes between system and sub-regional external factors to elucidate Cambodia's strategic options. It aptly argues that while changes in the broader international system are significant, they often take a backseat to geopolitical developments within the sub-region. The case of Cambodia illustrates that the security environment created by immediate neighbours often plays a paramount role in shaping small-state foreign policy. Thirdly, the author convincingly suggests that Cambodia's optimal strategic approach is loose alignment rather than hedging, and effectively delineates between the two strategies. This distinction is crucial, as the concept of inclusive regionalism within loose alignment bears similarities to the binding-engagement concept within hedging, both aimed at integrating great powers into the established order to mitigate their revisionist tendencies. However, the author highlights that while hedging implies ambiguity and indecision, loose alignment represents a deliberate choice for the small state. Fourthly, by incorporating the variable of development-based performance legitimation, the author adopts a comprehensive domestic-external framework to analyse Cambodia's strategic options. It is rightly emphasised that China's significant role as Cambodia's primary trading partner, main source of foreign direct investment, and top provider of development assistance and soft loans has facilitated remarkable socioeconomic development, thereby bolstering the authority of the CPP domestically.

However, this book is not without its shortcomings. Firstly, the author fails to theorise the various pathways through which the ruling elite of CPP legitimise their authority despite offering insights into patronage, nationalism, cooptation, and coercion. In addition to the performance legitimation discussed in the book, the ruling elite also bolstered its legitimacy through “patronage-based non-procedural legitimation”, consolidating both political influence and economic power by incentivising various parties with rewards in exchange for votes, support, funds, and contributions. Cambodia’s strategic alignment with China is also driven by the ruling elite’s nationalism-based particularistic legitimation, as China’s assistance helps safeguard Cambodia’s national sovereignty amid tensions with neighbouring states. Additionally, the ruling elite garners external legitimacy through informal support, exemplified by China’s diplomatic backing of the CPP leadership despite the regime’s use of legal and repressive measures to maintain power. Hence, the ruling elite of CPP employed various legitimation pathways, including development-based performance legitimation, nationalism-based particularistic legitimation, patronage-based non-procedural legitimation, and informal-support-based external legitimation.

Secondly, the “loose alignment” presented in the book is a theoretical construct that is not applicable in the context of Cambodia-China relations. Instead, it serves as a suggested approach for Cambodia to navigate its relationship with China. In reality, Cambodia continues to maintain a tight alignment with China due to ongoing security concerns stemming from neighbouring states like Thailand and Vietnam, coupled with a lack of confidence in ASEAN’s ability to address security issues. Furthermore, the perceived benefits of Cambodia’s alignment with China outweigh any potential costs. This alignment is further reinforced by the intensifying strategic and economic competition between the US and China, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. The increasing trend of economic rebalancing, decoupling, reshoring, and friend-shoring pursued by the US in its semiconductor competition with China aims to limit China’s access to crucial commodities, software, and technologies from the US and its allies. Additionally, the US is expanding its economic influence by launching initiatives such as the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) and the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII), alongside Europe’s Global Gateway. These developments in the Indo-Pacific region are likely to strengthen Cambodia’s position as a key ally to China, further solidifying its tight alignment with Beijing.

Thirdly, the author's interpretation of lessons from Cambodia-China relations may be somewhat perplexing. The author contends that individual-level variables exert less influence on shaping the strategic direction of small states, as structural factors primarily constrain them at the sub-regional level. He suggests that regardless of who leads Cambodia, they would face the geopolitical challenge of dealing with historically antagonistic neighbours. However, this view disregards the role of domestic variables, particularly the ruling elite's desire to leverage the relationship with China to bolster their political authority at home. It should be acknowledged that external factors, such as historically antagonistic neighbours, and domestic factors, such as ruling elite legitimation, are mutually reinforcing, contributing to Cambodia's tight alignment with China. Lastly, this book is time-bound as it primarily covers significant developments in Cambodia's relations with China from 1997 to early 2019. It fails to account for the change in Cambodian leadership in August 2023, when Hun Sen, who had ruled the country for nearly 40 years, was succeeded by his eldest son, Hun Manet. The emergence of new Cambodian leaders, some of whom have studied and spent considerable time in the West including Hun Manet, raises questions about whether the Cambodian government may pursue hedging strategies and seek to reset relations with the West at the expense of China's influence.

However, Cambodia's tight alignment with China is unlikely to change for several reasons. Firstly, during his initial visit to China as Prime Minister, Hun Manet reaffirmed Cambodia's commitment to the one-China policy and expressed willingness to advance cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative. Secondly, with Hun Sen expected to maintain political influence within the CPP and elderly colleagues overseeing the young cabinet from their positions on the CPP Politburo, China retains strong connections and access to the party's leadership. Thirdly, maintaining Chinese political support will be essential for the new CPP cabinet in resisting Western pressure and preserving the party's near-absolute political dominance. Fourthly, China's significance is underscored by its substantial stake in Cambodia's national debt, along with investments from Chinese state-owned enterprises in critical infrastructure projects such as airports, high-speed rail networks, and special economic zones, vital to Cambodia's economic growth. Fifthly, China remains the primary supporter of the Cambodian armed forces, providing access to advanced defence technologies, military equipment, and training crucial for bolstering Cambodia's military capabilities. Sixthly, the continuation of

Cambodia's tight alignment with China hinges on the ability of both Cambodia and Western governments to find compromises on longstanding issues that have strained bilateral relations, notably the CPP's erosion of democratic institutions over the past decade.

Zaharul Abdullah
Political Science Section, School of Distance Education,
Universiti Sains Malaysia, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia