

**BEYOND REALISM: A PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING
CAMBODIA-CHINA RELATIONS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR ASEAN
SOLIDARITY**

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree of
Master of Arts
In Asian Studies

By

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Washington, DC
November 16, 2018

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ABSTRACT

The rise of China has brought about changes in the balance of power in Southeast Asia, and the realist approach to foreign policy cannot explain why some Southeast Asian countries are balancing the increasing economic and political influence of a rising China and some are not. The Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen called his country “China’s most trustworthy friend”, a sentiment that is apparent in Cambodia’s close economic and political ties to China. This paper aims to go beyond realist considerations and takes political psychology into account when seeking to understand how deeply Cambodia has been drawn into China’s orbit. Despite several benefits Cambodia has acquired from its ASEAN membership such as political and economic stability, legitimacy, and multidimensional cooperation with ASEAN countries and dialogue partners, evidence demonstrates that Cambodia’s loyalty to China trumps its commitment to ASEAN solidarity. This special interstate relationship can be seen in Hun Sen’s propaganda documentary *Marching towards National Salvation*, and his encouragement of his citizens to read the Cambodian version of *Xi Jinping: The Governance of China*. By adopting a psychological model, which takes into account trust, emotion, belief, identity, perception and the leadership traits of Hun Sen, and other Cambodian ruling elites, analysts can better understand Cambodia’s behavioral deviation from other ASEAN countries with regards to its relations with China.

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I. Introduction

Facing a rising China and its increasing economic and political influence, Southeast Asian states' interactions with major powers does not always follow the logic of the balance of power and bandwagoning described by the realist theory. Cambodia, despite having the opportunity to enhance its international standing and prestige through its ASEAN Chairmanship in 2012, chose to accommodate China on the South China Sea issue and abandoned its constructive leadership role by not issuing a Joint Statement at the conclusion of the annual meeting that addressed all parties' concerns. Cambodia's action not only negatively affected the country's reputation and credibility, but ASEAN's as well. Cambodia's inability to conclude the meeting outcome document at the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' meeting in 2012, for the first time in ASEAN's 45-year history, cast a long shadow over the progress ASEAN has made over the past several decades. Understanding the Cambodian ruling elites' decision to support China over respecting the ASEAN consensus decision-making approach is critical for understanding Cambodia's position in the region and has important implications for ASEAN's future.

In observing relations between Cambodia and China, analysts need to reassess the motivations behind the decision-making process by incorporating Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen's purpose, leadership style, beliefs, and actions. Political psychology focuses on agents or group's choices and behaviors and how these agents define situations and structures, and international relations, while also looking at systemic characteristics. Insights from political psychology, with an emphasis on emotions, cognition and trust that are embedded in the leader's behavior at the individual or group level of analysis, could help explain why Cambodia prioritizes its relations with China over maintaining ASEAN's core values of unity and solidarity. I begin this paper by extensively discussing different theories and frameworks with a view towards

exploring relevant theories that could best describe Cambodia's actions. I argue that realism cannot sufficiently explain Cambodia's position in the region, as Hun Sen's unique relationship and cooperation with several Chinese leaders after the end of the Khmer Rouge regime highlights the important roles individuals and groups play in foreign policy decisions. Therefore, realism, which depends on an international systems level analysis, cannot account for individuals as the prime actors in making foreign policy decisions. Cambodian-Sino historical and economic ties and military cooperation will be examined in this paper as leaders' decisions depend significantly on their perception of the environment. Since leadership trait analysis is fundamental to political psychology research, content analyses of Hun Sen speeches will be assessed through (1) Hun Sen's propaganda documentary *Marching towards National Salvation*, which describes Hun Sen's heroism during the Khmer Rouge regime but avoid mentioning that it was China that backed the Khmer Rouge regime, and (2) Hun Sen's encouragement of his citizens to read the Cambodian version of *Xi Jinping: The Governance of China* to imitate China's development. Political belief systems, image theory, leadership trait analysis and the psychology of emotions will help determine Hun Sen's actions and policy choices towards China. I will then examine the meaning of ASEAN solidarity to reflect how it differs from the viewpoint of the Cambodian decision makers.

II. Theoretical Discussion

This section aims to underscore the importance of comparing two types of state relations—multilateral relations within ASEAN, and interstate relationship between Cambodia and China—and the need to apply different theories for each relation in order to understand state behavior. The realist theory of international relations can best explain the shared objective of ASEAN countries in balancing against China, but Cambodia's deviation from other ASEAN

nations can only be described by political psychology through its special relationship with China. Only through a thorough understanding of the separation between (1) structure and agency; (2) foreign policy analysis (FPA) and international relations and (3) rationality, organizational and bureaucratic models, can analysts realize the necessity of employing different tools in interpreting variation in states' behavior.

Political psychology helps us see the similarities within agency analysis, FPA and bureaucratic models that focus on an individual's choices, behaviors, perceptions, beliefs and emotions and how it can contribute to understanding state behaviors and changes in the international system.

Agents and Structure in International Relations

According to Kenneth Waltz, international relations theories that employ the international system level of analysis, are systemic. They focus on the relationship between the units of the international system and the structure of the international system most relevant to state behavior. Waltz's primary concern is to construct a systemic theory of international politics and not treat the unit level as properties of the international system such as states, interaction between states, individuals, interest groups. Waltz's international system level analysis describes specific behavior from the standpoint of the system of international politics. Since the international system is anarchic and there is no higher authority that can enforce rules over individual states, states thus act on the basis of self-help. States operate with the objective of survival, and their interactions with other states reflect their desire to survive. The structure of the international system changes as great powers balance against each other and as they try to increase their chances of survival. The distribution of power is the main determinant of international outcomes or a change in the structure of the international system. Since states are concerned with their own

security, they try to maximize their relative power with respect to other states. The structural level of analysis explains that because the structure of the international system constrains the patterns of actions for states to respond to international phenomena, different states tend to behave in similar ways.¹

Several scholars, including Robert Keohane, support the conventional construction of the “state-as-agent” thesis, noting that the way in which leaders of states conceptualize their situations is strongly affected by the institutions of international relations. States not only form the international system but are shaped by its conventions, particularly by its practices. However, Wendt, suggests that “states are collectivities of individuals that through their practices constitute each other as “persons” having interests, and fears.”² In other words, states that possess qualities of having a theoretical understanding of their activities are capable of providing reasons for their behavior, of monitoring and adapting their behavior, of and making decisions, and are simply individuals. Wendt accepts that the state is a structure but it is a particular kind of structure that emerges into a corporate agent or collection of individuals, who have the obligation to act on behalf of collective beliefs.³ As structural theorists believe that international relations theory must be more structure-based than agent-oriented, agent-centered theories would reverse this trend, favoring agent explanations over structural ones.⁴

Foreign Policy Analysis: the Disconnect between Foreign Policy Analysis and IR

Foreign policy analysis (FPA) hopes to explain why governments come up with certain policy decisions, when they could have pursued alternative foreign policy options. FPA

¹ Royo 2012.

² Wendt 1992, 398.

³ Wight 2006, 182–83.

⁴ Wight 2006, 101.

investigates how regime type, bureaucratic politics, interest groups, social and individual psychology and other independent variables influence government decisions.⁵ It focuses on how domestic political and decision-making factors affect an actors' choices and policies. FPA is psychologically-oriented and agent-based, which emphasizes the role of the central decision-making unit and the subjective understandings of leaders as conduits for other international and domestic decisions. Kubalkova, as cited in Kaarbo, added that FPA refers to a complex process, consisting of the objectives that governments pursue in their relations with other governments. Foreign policy not only encompasses the complicated communications within governments and its diverse agents, but also the perceptions and misperceptions of other countries. The essence of a foreign policy study is the nature and impact of domestic politics. In other words, attention to domestic politics or decision-making is an essential characteristic of FPA research.⁶ Drawing on Hudson's statement, FPA has an actor-specific focus, he argues that all policy outcomes that occur within and across states are grounded in human decision makers acting individually or in groups.⁷

The disconnect between FPA and IR provides us with a better understanding of why IR theories cannot always explain the behavior of states and why FPA could bring us closer to interpreting leaders' behavior. According to Houghton, "FPA has a minority status within IR: it has not fully engaged with the rest of the discipline and does not appear to fit anywhere within the framework of the contemporary debates going on in IR."⁸ This could be traced back to the historical development of the IR discipline, which treats FPA and IR as separate enterprises.

⁵ Walt 2011.

⁶ Kaarbo 2015, 191.

⁷ Hudson 2005, 1.

⁸ Houghton 2007, 26.

Realism asserts that international politics, due to the condition of anarchy, differs from domestic politics. The degree of anarchy in the international system creates a Hobbesian dynamic, or what Hedley Bull describes from a realist view as a state of war of all against all or a zero-sum game.⁹ Such international activity or war is typically absent from domestic politics. International relations theories tend to undermine the importance of foreign policy processes and focus instead on characteristics of the international system. Waltz's structural realism excludes a theory of foreign policy as part of neorealist theory. Although realists adopt a rational choice perspective, their analyses are not at the level of the individual.¹⁰ In sum, realism, (as well as liberalism, and constructivism) largely divorce international politics from domestic politics and decision making.¹¹

Graham Allison's Three Models of Decision-Making

Graham Allison's three models of decision-making, in his publication *Conceptual Models and the Cuban Missile Crisis*, were introduced in 1969. He contended that the study of international relations should only focus on rational explanations, where states consider all options and act rationally to maximize their utility, while ignoring critical aspects of the decision-making process. The three models of decision-making are (1) the rational policy model, (2) the organization process model and (3) the governmental politics or bureaucratic politics model. These were proposed as alternative frameworks in understanding a state's choice. The first model sees the internal structure of decision-making as based on rationality. States act as a unitary actor to make rational choices through value-maximizing mechanisms - having the outcomes calculated based on benefits and costs in terms of strategic goals and objectives. Since the

⁹ Bull 2012, 24–25.

¹⁰ Waltz 1979.

¹¹ Kaarbo 2015, 193.

strategic goals of states depend on national security and national interests, all states would consider policies as their national choice. The second model looks at actors as a constellation of loosely allied organizations. This model reflects the constraints that organizations place on decision makers' choices as the state can only act according to predetermined procedures or policy options that are allowed by the standard operating procedures and budget to achieve established goals and objectives. The third model regards individuals as decision makers. In contrast to the first model, the bureaucratic politics model sees no unitary actor but rather many key individuals in critical positions as players. As each key individual focuses on diverse intra-national problems as well as different perceptions and priorities, government decisions are the result of negotiations, bargaining, competition, and confusion among them, instead of rational choice.¹² This model helps explain the role of key individuals and why at times, they work towards achieving different ends, contrary to the interests of the government at large. This helps explain how policy sometimes appears irrational from a unitary government perspective.

Agent-centered theories, FPA and bureaucratic model are in line with the study of political psychology, which looks at an individual's choices, behaviors, perceptions, beliefs and emotions and how it can contribute to understanding state behaviors and changes in the international system. A psychological perspective has been useful for assessing foreign policy outcomes as it provides a better understanding of political phenomena that revolve around individuals or interactions within a group, filling the gap that international theories cannot account for.

¹² Allison 1969, 707.

III. Political Psychology's Contribution to International Politics: Dismissing the Realist Theory in Describing Cambodian-Sino Relations

This section aims to dismiss the realist theory in describing the Cambodian-Sino relations and instead presents the contribution that the political psychology can make to a better understanding of international politics. Hun Sen's perceptions of his decision-making context and the foreign policy situation that he encounters can shed light on the importance of the role of human agency in international politics.

Dismissing Realism Theory in Describing Cambodian-Sino Relations

As China is asserting its regional power status in Asia, Southeast Asia has become a major area for rivalry among the great powers that are redefining their strategic positions towards each other. In this current shift, Southeast Asian nations realize the increasing relevance of ASEAN-led multilateral mechanisms in dealing with regional conflicts and disputes. ASEAN's security objectives are to stimulate the involvement of other great powers to counter-balance China's growing influence and to create stability in its periphery by playing a regional role.¹³ The extent to which ASEAN can reinforce its unity will determine its effectiveness in addressing security issues and thus contribute to geopolitical stability in the region.

Over the past few years, China's influence in mainland Southeast Asia - Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia – has increased significantly. In January 2018, Premier Li Keqiang announced that China is offering more government concessional loans with a total value of US\$1.1 billion to the lower Mekong countries.¹⁴ Similar to Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar also received large foreign investment from China but have made efforts to balance

¹³ Egberink 2011.

¹⁴ Chhengpor 2018.

relations between China and other great powers by strengthening their role and collective action within ASEAN. Cambodia, on the other hand, directs its foreign policy objectives solely in China's favor. Thus, a psychological approach is needed as an alternative to realism in assessing Hun Sen's decisions that are associated with the notions of trust, emotion, belief, identity, perception and leadership traits in relation to rest under China's sphere of influence without any attempt to balance against it.

Political Psychology's Contribution to International Politics

Similar to the agency analysis, FPA and bureaucratic model, political psychology, with a focus on the individual level of analysis, aims to explain the processes behind political attitudes and behavior, decision-making, and the interaction between the individual and the group – or the black box of the human mind in search of what goes in between the stimulus and the response. It hopes to highlight the study of leadership, foreign policy decision making, foreign policy analysis, and public opinion.

Political psychology first emphasized the study of personality and leadership in 1930s, and later emotions and affect as major explanatory variables of political attitudes, decisions and behavior in the 1980s. Studies of political leaders and their foreign policy decisions require an in-depth understanding of how the involved individuals' attitudes are formed, how they make decisions and act on those decisions. Individual histories and political conditions under certain contexts can play a significant role in how the processes of the mind work to give the output of a given response.¹⁵ As political psychologists discovered cognitive, emotional, attitudinal and behavioral patterns in politics, they argued that it is the individual acting alone or in a group who

¹⁵ Erisen 2012, 10.

makes foreign policy decisions. The cognitive capacity and the processes of the human mind has contributed to the accumulation of knowledge that has increasingly contradicted the classical assumptions about the rational individual. Since the role of emotions and affect has been incorporated in explanations of how political information is processed, political psychology shows the facilitating role of emotions in decision making as an integral element of the human mind that works with cognition. The study of emotions allows us to better understand individual decisions, attitudes, and behavior.¹⁶

As rationalists see people with impulsive, inconsistent and short-sighted emotions, Jervis explains that misperceptions, which undermine or support policy, are caused when actors only embody pure rationality, and attempt to remain undisturbed by emotion.¹⁷ Psychology can help explain what is not easily accounted for by the dominant rational model of decision making in the international relations field. Jervis notes that cognitive constraints on rational decision making give us a biased perception of the foreign policy maker since policy outcomes, from a cognitive point of view, are the product of mental construction.¹⁸

Instead of discussing the structure and agency debate or assessing whether IR theories or political theory would best describe or predict state behavior, it is necessary to allow the political psychology model to complement the study of international politics as it focuses on political leaders who actually make foreign policy decisions. As noted by Harold and Margaret Sprout “Logic permits us to distinguish between the “psychological milieu (the world as the actor sees it) and the “operational milieu” (the world in which the policy will be carried out) and to argue

¹⁶ Erisen 2012, 11–13.

¹⁷ Jervis 2006, 643.

¹⁸ Jervis 2017, 83.

that politics and decisions must be mediated by statesmen's goals, calculations and perceptions."¹⁹

IV. Understanding Cambodian-Sino historical ties, economic, political and military cooperation and Hun Sen's actions from the political psychology perspective

This section will examine the leadership traits, emotions, political belief systems, and perceptions of Hun Sen through a content analysis of his policies, documentaries, and speeches. Since politicians shape the policy attitudes of the mass public as well as the influence the public has on the foreign policy decisions, the focus will be on Hun Sen and mass interaction and how individual citizens in Cambodia form their foreign policy views, which in this case give support to Hun Sen and Cambodia's close relations with China. In the study of political leaders and other elites, content analysis in political psychology is indispensable as it is used to make inferences about the psychological state of politicians from the oral or written material attributed to them.²⁰

Historical Ties and Cooperation Between Cambodia and China

Hun Sen was a former Khmer Rouge commander who fled to Vietnam in 1977 due to internal purges of Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge regime supported by China. In Vietnam, Hun Sen was appointed as one of the leaders of the rebel army, as the Vietnamese were preparing to invade Cambodia. After the fall of Pol Pot's regime in 1979, Hun Sen became the Foreign Minister for the Vietnamese installed government in Phnom Penh and established People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). He once described China "the root of everything that was evil" in the country and called the Cambodian government he overthrew "the barbarous genocidal regime of the Pol

¹⁹ Sprout and Sprout 1956.

²⁰ Erisen 2012.

Pot clique and an instrument of China’s expansionist policy.”²¹ Hun Sen became the second Prime Minister, serving alongside Norodom Ranariddh from 1993 to 1997. After the 1997 coup, he won the election and became Cambodia’s Prime Minister in 1998. Hun Sen, being one of the world's longest-serving leaders, has been described by international media as a “wily operator who destroys his political opponent” and as a dictator who has assumed authoritarian power in Cambodia using violence, intimidation and corruption to maintain his power base.²² Hun Sen consolidated his grip on power through a web of patronage and military force.²³ As China found itself, after the Sino-Soviet split, surrounded by hostile powers including Japan, South Korea, Vietnam and the Philippines and other South China Sea claimant states, one of China’s foreign policy goals was to maintain good relations with its allies and improve its reputation among its southern neighbors.²⁴ China, therefore, shifted its support from Pol Pot to Hun Sen during Hun Sen’s power transition in 1997.

Hun Sen’s rise in the 1990s made him an attractive partner for China, as he welcomed Chinese aid and investment and shared China’s skepticism about Western demands for democratic reform. In 1997, Hun Sen closed the Taiwanese trade office in Phnom Penh and received military cargo trucks and other vehicles valued at US\$2.8 million from China in return. Since 1997, China has become Cambodia’s biggest source of military aid, contributing more than US\$5 million a year.²⁵ In 2000, President Jiang Zemin paid a visit to Cambodia, marking the first leader-level visit since 1963. None of the story of Cambodia and China’s strained history– that

²¹ Willemyns 2018.

²² Murdoch 2014.

²³ Pilling and Peel 2014.

²⁴ Bader 2015, 78.

²⁵ Mertha 2014.

China was once the supporter of the Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge regime –were found in Jiang Zemin's or Hun Sen's public remarks. China also wrote off millions of Cambodia's debt dating back to the 1960s and signed several agreements to increase the inflow of foreign direct investment to Cambodia. In 2006 Prime Minister Wen Jiabao also visited Cambodia to conclude economic agreements totaling US\$600 million.

The form and substance of Chinese aid and economic cooperation emphasized infrastructure, production, and university scholarships. The inflow of Chinese machinery and equipment has also been consistent from the Cold War era to the present day. For recipient countries, Chinese non-conditionality provides an alternative aid regime that is desirable to authoritarian regimes which tend to see Western demands for democratic reforms, better governance, and transparency as a threat to the power of the ruling elites. Whereas several donor countries put pressure on Hun Sen to improve Cambodia's governance and enact reforms, China attempted to prove its sincerity towards Cambodia by offering loans and investments without any demands related to how Hun Sen runs the country. As the United States announced a cancellation of a shipment of 100 military trucks to Cambodia as a punishment for the deportation of the Uighurs back to China, the Chinese stepped in with a shipment that was nearly twice the size. Hun Sen believes that China respects his political decisions. As he said during the ceremony of a US\$128 million Chinese-funded bridge over the Tonle Sap Lake in 2009 "They build bridges and roads for us and there are no complicated conditions."²⁶

For Hun Sen, the relationship with China is straightforward. On the economic front, Cambodia could help manage challenges to China's export manufacturing base by giving

²⁶ Strangio 2014, 216 -217.

Chinese firms open access to Cambodian land and resources. On the political front, Cambodia had proved itself to be China's strongest supporter by derecognizing Taiwan in 1997, supporting the One China Policy, forcible repatriating ethnic Uyghurs to China in 2009, and supporting China's claims in the South China Sea in 2012.

Holsti's image theory, which emphasizes the cognitive perception of an international leader towards others, can help explain why Hun Sen believes that Cambodian-Sino relations are straightforward. This theory captures the importance of how one's ideas transform into images with cognitions and beliefs regarding the other party's motives, leadership, and characteristics.

²⁷ The nature of China's aid is something that Cambodia greatly appreciates as it has become an alternative to the Western development assistance that demands changes in Cambodia's institutional development and human rights record. Image studies also include perceptions of the other party, the overall relationship, the resulting images, and the strategic responses associated with the perceptions, which can help determine and even predict Cambodia's policy response to China.

Cambodia's Reward for its Continuous Support for China over Regional Disputes

In October 2016, President Xi Jinping paid a visit to Cambodia to show China's commitment to economic support for Cambodia. Over 31 cooperation agreements, worth more than US\$600 million, were included. Cambodia's support for China in its ongoing territorial dispute over the South China Sea was evident in 2012 during Cambodia's chairmanship at the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' meeting. Cambodia blocked any statements and proposals to include a call against the further rise of tensions in the South China Sea, resulting in a failure to issue an

²⁷ Herrmann 1985.

ASEAN joint communiqué for the first time since its establishment in 1967.

In contrast, Laos, another country in Southeast Asia that receives a lot of economic benefits from China, while acting as ASEAN Chair in 2016, was able to make a compromise between China and its fellow ASEAN member, Vietnam, which had competing claims in the South China Sea. The ASEAN Foreign Ministers came to a conclusion to express “serious concern over land reclamation and escalation of activities in the disputed waters” in the joint communiqué issued as requested by some states. This reflected the balancing act that Laos has been practicing to manage relationships with its neighboring countries and China.

Chinese grants, state-owned enterprises, and infrastructure projects aiming to assist Cambodia economically and militarily have proven effective. Although the U.S. assistance to Cambodia in the areas of health, education, governance, and economic development was worth more than US\$77.6 million in 2014, China was Cambodia's biggest donor and lender. Chinese firms sent nearly US\$5 billion to Cambodia in loans and investments between 2011 and 2015.²⁸ As of 2016, China became the largest source of development assistance and investment in Cambodia with foreign investments totaling nearly US\$12 billion. Cambodia sees China as its most important financial and developmental assistance partner. In addition to firm Sino-Cambodian economic ties, the Cambodian ruling elites are reminded that because of Chinese military assistance, which helped bolster Hun Sen’s military advantage over his domestic competitors, Hun Sen was able to successfully stabilize his political rule after the coup in 1997.

In interpreting Cambodia’s stance towards regional conflicts, e.g. the South China Sea and Uighur asylum-seekers, analysts cannot rely only on realism to describe and predict

²⁸ Narin 2017.

Cambodia's behavior, as this behavior differs from other ASEAN countries. Some Western countries view Hun Sen as an irrational and emotional leader who has made inhumane and wrong decisions. Jonathan Mercer reiterates that irrationality, in fact, does not arise from emotions. According to Mercer, understanding that psychology does not only explain mistakes should help policy makers overcome their fear of "going mental" and thus encourage them to pay attention to the psychological assumptions that often drive their explanations.²⁹ Therefore, Hun Sen's decisions to implement policies that provide support for China are not irrational if analysts take into account emotion and cognition as contributing to rational behavior rather than undermining it. Emotions refer to fear, anger, sadness, joy, anxiety, stress, longing and love, which bring meaning to humans' lives. They affect our needs and actions in almost every cognitive process, e.g., attention, judgments, estimates, biases, and morality.³⁰ Thus, emotions work as the driving force behind behavior and can subvert rational thinking. Political psychology that takes emotions seriously has focused on how leaders' decisions influence the public's attitudes and behavior. George Marcus associates emotions with politics in the sense that each individual exhibits different degrees of seriousness of their commitment, existing loyalties, openness to new possibilities, and self-interest.³¹ Emotion, in a broader sense, according to Mercer, becomes an essential part of the international system as it constitutes and strengthens norms. In this case, norms become an emotional belief just as trust is an emotional belief.³²

Cambodia's strong political, economic and military ties with China along with China's consistent unconditional foreign aid since 1997 has formed the strong trust and loyalty Cambodia

²⁹ Mercer 2005.

³⁰ Jervis 2017 , lxxiii.

³¹ Marcus 2003, 204.

³² Mercer 2006, 299.

has for China, compared to the United States or other ASEAN countries. But trust requires reliance on how one feels about someone and certainty beyond observable evidence. For the Cambodian ruling elites, trust with China has been established not merely because of financial aid and other economic benefits but the stable and sincere relations of the two countries over time. Thus, it is not surprising to see Hun Sen once describe China as “its most trustworthy friend,” and President Xi Jinping describe Cambodia as a “good neighbor, like a brother” and “a good friend with sincerity.”³³

Propaganda Documentary “Marching through National Salvation” and the Cambodian Edition of “Xi Jinping: The Governance of China”

Analysts should never overlook the significance of emotion as it plays a crucial role in several policies carried out by Hun Sen. *Marching through National Salvation* is a 90-minute propaganda documentary released in January 2017, which was built around interviews with Hun Sen, his close associates, and Vietnamese officials. Hun Sen described the story of himself as he tried to defect from the Khmer Rouge and return in 1979 with a Vietnamese army to oust Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge regime.³⁴ In his interview, Hun Sen described the difficulties that he had gone through: having to risk his life in Vietnam and spend 18 months away from his family as he was planning to overthrow the Khmer Rouge regime. Hun Sen’s heroic story in the documentary was seen as a political instrument for the upcoming election in mid 2018 and an attempt to promote his personality cult. In Hun Sen and his close associates’ words:³⁵

“I always had 12 needles with me to thrust into my throat in case I was seized and sent

³³ Var 2016.

³⁴ Willemyns 2018.

³⁵ The Council of Ministers’ Press and Quick Reaction Unit 2018.

back to Cambodia...those tears were for my country before I crossed the border” – Hun Sen

“Hun Sen was both the commander of the military and the chief of political strategy. The invasion plans had been driven solely by Hun Sen” - Chea Sim, Founding President of the ruling Cambodia People’s Party (CPP)

“It was not by chance that Hun Sen became the leader...All of the military at that time wanted to listen to Hun Sen. They wanted more and more of his words of education and teaching” – Sao Sokha, the National Military Policy Commander

Such patriotic statements highlight the importance of the influence of emotion on an individual’s action, as emotions serve as strong forces that mobilize people, and make them engage in certain behaviors. Political psychology that has taken emotions seriously has focused on how leaders’ decisions influence the public’s attitudes and behavior. From a psychological perspective, nationalist sentiment stems from attachment, identity, and the constant threats and feelings of insecurity at a national level that seep down to the individual. Hun Sen believes that through the production of this documentary, his desire of winning the future election could be achieved by instilling patriotism and developing deep emotional and psychological attachment. However, it is interesting to find that Hun Sen’s 90-minute heroic story during the Khmer Rouge regime never mentions the significant aid given to the Khmer Rouge by China, who was Cambodia’s biggest donor at that time. Hun Sen’s promotion of his personality cult had to be made in a careful way that does not affect his relations with China, as it could incite anti-Chinese sentiment, which could negatively affect the public’s attitudes.

In addition to seeing Cambodia’s loyalty to China through the careful omission of information in the documentary that mourned about how Cambodia had lost millions of lives during the Khmer Rouge regime without referring to the source of the Chinese support, it is interesting to examine Hun Sen’s loyalty which is apparent in his call for translating *Xi Jinping*,

the Governance of China into Khmer (Cambodian). The book is a compilation of Xi Jinping's speeches, talks, interviews, instruction and correspondence from 2012 to 2014 to help readers understand China's social system, history and culture. It is interesting to observe Hun Sen's speech at the book launch ceremony in Phnom Penh in April 2017. Hun Sen mentioned that the book would enable the Cambodian people to better understand Chinese President Xi Jinping's thoughts, views, and judgments on a broad range of issues in China. He also encouraged all officials, professors and students to follow Xi's ideology and policy as they carry out their daily work. Hun Sen said he was impressed by Xi's ideas on governance and anti-corruption, and he believed that China treated every country in the world as true friends.

Leadership trait analysis explains that Hun Sen's intention of elevating, and participating in the cult of Xi Jinping is a way of managing information. People who are familiar with Hun Sen's personal characteristics, e.g., decision-making style, social style, beliefs, and motives might not find his policy of elevating Xi's cult irrational. This interaction between the leadership and the masses results in the influence of public opinion on foreign policy making. Since decision-making processes include how well the public perceives things based on their experiences and analytical capability, Hun Sen's encouragement of his citizens to read the Xi Jinping book could be understood as an attempt to gain the public support for the country's policy of developing closer ties with China as this will bring more economic benefits to the ruling elites.

Herrmann describes two types of leaders: those who seek change and those who dislike change.³⁶ Since Hun Sen's motive is to stay in power, he would carry out initiatives that bring more support for his regime. Alexander George and Ole Holsti combine social cognition with the

³⁶ Herrmann 1985.

study of personality, which were conceptualized as political belief systems. George and Holsti are committed to the idea that individuals' beliefs are consistent as they are constrained by their beliefs towards the nature of politics and conflict, and how to advance one's interests.³⁷ Therefore, Hun Sen's encouragement of his citizens to admire Xi Jinping and read the book could be seen as an attempt to legitimize his own political regime as Cambodia shares an authoritarian model with China, and achieve his political aspirations of having the one-party system like China. Since Cambodia is aiming to prove its own authoritarian regime to other Asian countries and hopes to allow a one-party election to take place this year, Hun Sen's interaction with the masses, which influences public opinion, is considered to be one of his strategic plans.

V. Understanding ASEAN Solidarity

Each individual ASEAN state, except for Cambodia, tends not to align too closely with any great power. In order to understand how big of an impact Cambodia's foreign policy deviation is for ASEAN, analysts need to understand the ultimate goal of ASEAN from the ASEAN perspective. Founded in 1967 to counter the region-wide threat of communist-led insurgencies, ASEAN today is comprised of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam. The Member States signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) in 1976 and adopted fundamental principles including mutual respect for national independence, non-interference in the internal affairs of one another, and a commitment to the peaceful resolution of disputes. The outbreak of the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 laid a foundation for its three communities: Economic, Political-Security and Socio-Cultural. In 2008, the ASEAN Charter, a legally binding agreement among the 10 ASEAN

³⁷ Marcus 2003; Holsti 1970.

Member States, entered into force with a view to expediting its community-building process. Today, ASEAN is a major global hub of manufacturing and trade, as well as one of the fastest-growing consumer markets in the world. ASEAN is working towards achieving what is known as the ASEAN Community in 2025, as it envisions a peaceful, stable and resilient Community with enhanced capacity. ASEAN's engagement with the great powers has involved efforts to draw them into the ASEAN normative framework and reinforce the ASEAN-centered regional architecture for the wider Asia-Pacific region. ASEAN today faces a challenge from Sino-American competition, which has made the task of building and maintaining unity within ASEAN increasingly difficult.

ASEAN's ultimate goal is to stay united in order to avoid being pulled into the orbit of other great powers. As the year 2017 marks the 50th anniversary of the founding of ASEAN, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand, one of the founding countries of ASEAN, published an article "*ASEAN at 50: What if...And what next?*" to urge ASEAN countries to take a step back and imagine what the region would look like if ASEAN did not exist:³⁸

Without a sense of common future, one would perhaps see a Southeast Asia fragmented into groups of countries, aligned with one another, and against one another. The basis of such an alignment could be religion or ethnicity. It could be an alignment pitting mainland Southeast Asia versus maritime Southeast Asia. The combinations are endless and could be shifting constantly... Without ASEAN and ASEAN-led fora for dialogue, we in Southeast Asia would not be in a position to handle the situation collectively. And since we cannot do it, others would be tempted to handle it for us. Indeed, our region could be hosts to a number of UN peacekeeping missions or observer missions when conflicts arise.

The article asserts that ASEAN must to continue to have unity and ensure ASEAN

³⁸ Chindawongse 2017.

centrality vis-à-vis its relations with external powers. For ASEAN to retain its diplomatic space in the face of rising competition amongst major powers in the Asia-Pacific, having a united ASEAN seems to be the only way forward. Thus, it is mandatory for all ASEAN members to stay united and handle regional conflicts collectively. The past ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in 2012 when ASEAN was unable to issue joint statements, due largely to Cambodia's support for China in the South China Sea dispute, weakened its credibility in dealing with security issues collectively.

China's ASEAN approach is based on the belief that the regional balance of power is moving in China's favor and that other countries will eventually have to compromise in order to maintain good relations with a dominant China. No single ASEAN country can counter China's influence and assertiveness alone. Therefore, the ability of ASEAN to maintain a degree of internal unity and engage the support of its dialogue partners, i.e., the United States, Japan, India, Korea, Australia, and New Zealand, is vital. Unlike Cambodia, most of the ASEAN members have attempted to either balance, bandwagon or hedge against China. Some ASEAN countries tend to accommodate China to a certain extent while ensuring balanced relations with other great powers.³⁹ Thailand, for example, despite seeing China's rise as an economic opportunity, is not tolerating illegitimate actions. Many Thais oppose Chinese-led infrastructure projects such as dam building on the upper Mekong River, which has led to the water level dropped in the downstream countries.⁴⁰

Cambodia in 2012 accepted the role of ASEAN Chair with an objective of moving forward the goal of forming the ASEAN Community or achieving a single ASEAN market and

³⁹ Saunders 2014, 166-67.

⁴⁰ Murphy 2010, 16

production base by 2015. Hun Sen emphasized that Cambodia would fulfill its leadership role responsibly and would work to neutrally moderate and mediate all regional and international issues. Under the theme “ASEAN: One Community, One Destiny,” Cambodia attempted to empower ASEAN to have a more proactive presence on the global stage.

Solidarity has been a core value of ASEAN since its establishment in 1967. Cambodia’s inability to conclude the meeting outcome document at the ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ meeting in 2012, for the first time in ASEAN’s 45-year history, cast a long shadow over the progress ASEAN has made over the past several decades. Cambodia’s action had destroyed the reputation of Cambodia as ASEAN chair because of its support for China in the South China Sea dispute. It suggests that Cambodian decision makers do not interpret the meaning of ASEAN solidarity similarly to other ASEAN member countries. This is because Cambodia’s national security depends on its relations with China. Cambodia’s support for China has led to ASEAN’s failure to create a united stand against China’s position, especially with regard to the South China Sea issue. This further reflected the underlying limited capacity of ASEAN in dealing with sensitive issues.⁴¹ Critics claim that the ASEAN-led regional mechanism is largely symbolic and ineffective in mediating key conflicts of interest, and that regional security and stability are still primarily determined by great power politics. By accommodating China, Cambodia has not only been instrumental in reaffirming China’s rise and sphere of influence in the region against the United States, but has also degraded ASEAN’s longstanding values of unity and solidarity.

VI. Conclusion

Most international relations scholars tend to ignore the general question of how states

⁴¹ Chheang 2012.

perceive each other. Without an effort to investigate leaders' perceptions, trust, identity, emotions, and loyalty, as suggested by political psychology, states will continue to be surprised by unexpected foreign policies that other states implement.

In an attempt to understand Hun Sen's decision for choosing China over ASEAN, I argue that the structural analysis or the realist theory of international relations alone could not capture the unique meaning of the Cambodian-Sino relationship. More emphasis should be placed on the connection of political psychology and international relations, as the outcome of political events are influenced by political leaders. Political belief systems, image theory, leadership trait analysis and the psychology of emotions, which belong to the political psychology approach, indicate that Hun Sen's actions and policies towards China are not irrational. Cambodia's decision to choose China over ASEAN's solidarity rests on China's multi-dimensional support that strengthens Cambodia's authoritarian regime, and the ruling elites' power. If Cambodian national security depends largely on its relations with China, Cambodia's motives should be strengthening its cooperation with China rather than supporting ASEAN's aspiration of unity and collective action.

In understanding Cambodian-Sino relations and the implication it has for ASEAN, the next important question to ask is "Why is it that Hun Sen and Cambodian ruling elites give the benefit of the doubt to the Chinese political leaders they trust, and doubt anything beneficial done by the ASEAN member countries they distrust?" This will require greater efforts to examine the Cambodian ruling elites' feelings and trust towards each individual ASEAN country.

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