

EXPLAINING CAMBODIA'S FOREIGN POLICY: THE IMPORTANCE OF  
DOMESTIC FACTORS AND SINO-CAMBODIA RELATIONS ON ASEAN

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper studies the Cambodia decision to block the ASEAN Foreign Minister Statement from supporting the Permanent Court of Arbitration's award to the Philippines in the Philippines v China 2016 case on their disputed claims in the South China Sea. This paper argues that the Cambodian position on the South China Sea, and subsequently its decision to block confronting language in the ASEAN joint statements, is motivated by its domestic political leadership, namely Prime Minister Hun Sen, and not because of strategic geopolitical consideration. Prime Minister Hun Sen and his political party Cambodian People's Party prioritize staying in power over any other foreign policy objective. Therefore, he has little interest in balancing the US or Vietnam or ASEAN but rather siding with China because it helps him secure his grip on power domestically. This paper will analyze the Cambodia's decision in 2016 and the period leading up to it, answering what drives Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen and how that decision reflects the ASEAN integration process.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Introduction .....	1
II. Strategic Geopolitical Consideration .....	2
III. Foreign Policy Analysis .....	5
IV. Conclusion and Implication .....	14
Bibliography .....	17

## **I. Introduction**

The Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) on July 12, 2016 invalidated China's Nine-dash line historical claims over South China Sea and awarded a major victory to the Philippines government. The Cambodian Foreign Minister then blocked any mention of the award in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Foreign Minister Statement, July 25, 2016. Simultaneously, China rejected the case decision and the state of the dispute remained unchanged. Because of these results, the *Philippine v China* 2016 case received little academic attention after it was clear that the case contributed little impact to the ongoing tension in Southeast Asia. Nonetheless, I would argue that the case is worth reviewing for its implication on ASEAN as a regional institution. Even though the Philippines sidelined ASEAN by going to the PCA with its dispute, ASEAN remained the cornerstone of peaceful dispute resolution in the region that had its own mechanism. The success of ASEAN depended on the level of trust and reliance of its member states, both reflected and reinforced through collective action or detraction such as this case. Therefore, examining the Cambodian decision, which contributed to keeping the status quo on South China Sea, yields insight into what ASEAN can do to better integrate and overcome future collective action problem.

This paper argues that the Cambodian position on the South China Sea, and subsequently its decision to block confronting language in the ASEAN joint statements, is motivated by its domestic political leadership, namely Prime Minister Hun Sen, and not because of strategic geopolitical consideration. Prime Minister Hun Sen and his political party Cambodian People's Party prioritize staying in power over any other foreign policy objective. Therefore, he has little interest in balancing the US or Vietnam or ASEAN but rather siding with China because it helps him secure his grip on power domestically. This paper will analyze the Cambodia's decision in

2016 and the period leading up to it, answering what drives Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen and how that decision reflects the ASEAN integration process.

## **II. Strategic Geopolitical Consideration**

When political commentators reviewed what happened in 2016, they easily dismissed the Cambodian decision as no more than the country being a China's proxy. They asserted a Cambodia actively looking toward China for security and wealth to deter foreign aggression, specifically coming from the US and Vietnam (The Economist 2017, Greer 2017). This argument is based on the International Relations (IR) theories literature which focuses on explaining the state-to-state behavior.

The argument above is based on Realism, the dominant theory in IR, which asserts that the international space is anarchic. It assumes that the state is a unitary actor, meaning that it behaves in the international space as one cohesive actor with coherent pattern and identifiable objectives. These two assumptions characterize how a state acts in relation with the other: they engage in a zero-sum game with the intention to survive and out-survive the other. More importantly, realism characterize international politics as separated from domestic politics, forgoing the sub-state actors such as public opinion and domestic political system, and considering rational choice theory as the main framework for state decision making.

Because of the zero-sum game mentality in a survival game, realism makes a few conclusions related to the discussion on ASEAN as an international institution in the current Southeast Asia international politics. Firstly, states engage in balance of power to ally themselves to stronger state which can provide protection against other adversaries. In the current climate where the US and China is engaging in a contest of power over influence, smaller

states such as Cambodia have an interest in choosing side to ensure its survival from one another (Lane 2018). Other option includes staying out of the contest or playing two major states against each other to capitalize on their objectives to win allies. Secondly, as the US and China engage in such a contest, realism characterizes institution such as the ASEAN as an arena to lock in the major actors, preventing them from direct warfare but still providing an outlet for competition. ASEAN then offers the utility for the US and China as a potential ally whose choosing side might tip the balance of power. On the other hand, the ASEAN member states have an interest to band together under ASEAN to avoid being consumed by either the US or China. As a collective, they have more bargaining power to take advantage of while not getting entangled in the US-China competition.

Under this framework, Cambodia's aligning with China can be understood as an act of balancing and choosing side. Cambodia chooses China over the US because of the access to aid China provides. China's practice of unconditional lending allows it to continuously provide aids to Cambodia to more than just economic or humanitarian projects, whereas the US's aid practice prevents itself from aiding countries with human rights violations. Over time, Cambodia has been rejecting even the US humanitarian aids while getting more aids and assistance beyond monetary support, such as military training and equipment (Deth 2018). In addition to the US-China balance of power, Cambodia has an immediate interest to align itself with China against Vietnam. Cambodia and Vietnam have had a long antagonistic history which saw colonization and constant border disputes. Nowadays, this antagonistic history translates into rhetorically charged domestic election in Cambodia where both political parties claim legitimacy for challenging Vietnam. Unsurprisingly, Cambodia sees Vietnam as a bigger threat than even the US and comes to China as the solution (Greer 2017, Deth 2018).

However, this theory cannot explain other Southeast Asian states having similar conditions as Cambodia but react differently. For instance, Myanmar, trapped between India and China, remains reluctant to fold into China's orbit. Similarly, Laos, facing both Thailand and Vietnam as bigger neighbors, does not look toward China as the sole guarantor of security. Evidently, neither countries joined Cambodia to block the 2016 Statement. In addition, the theory cannot explain the Philippines position on the South China Sea under president Duterte. When he assumed the presidency in 2016, he reversed the Philippines position on the China, promoting a closer relation and temporarily shelving contentious dispute, namely the South China Sea. However, in 2019, president Duterte turns antagonistic against China, threatening an all-out war if China continues to undermine the Philippines' sovereign claim in the South China Sea. This development happens despite the Philippines being a treaty ally to the US and the relative power does not change to the point of threatening the Philippines' survival (Vitug 2018).

In short, Cambodia's aligning with China is because of its rational calculation according to realism. It perceives Vietnam as a threat and chooses China over the US as the solution. Consequently, ASEAN is not a concern in this calculation because without any coercive means, ASEAN cannot provide protection to Cambodia. ASEAN's utility to Cambodia is limited to the non-interference clause that prevents other member states from interfering with Cambodia's domestic politics and sovereignty or prevents Vietnam from clashing with Cambodia or anyone from criticizing its choice to align with China. Understandably, Cambodia then acts as a proxy for China in ASEAN because it does not have an interest in further integrating with ASEAN or seeing intra-ASEAN integration.

The implication for ASEAN integration then is to see Cambodia as a threat. But this cannot be the case because Cambodia is geographically bounded to Southeast Asia, having the

physical access to and sharing a history with other member states. Nor should this be the case because smaller states benefit more when they bandwagon together, not being divided by larger power. Realism might contribute an understanding to Cambodia’s behavior, but it does not provide a useful framework for moving forward.

**III. Foreign Policy Analysis**

The previous section has explained the deficit of IR theories in explaining Cambodia’s decision regarding China generally and regarding the ASEAN Foreign Minister Statement on the Philippines v China 2016 case specifically. This section applies the Foreign Policy Analysis literature to explain Cambodia’s foreign policy position. Specifically, it asserts that the decision is a result of Prime Minister Hun Sen’s objective to stay in power. It also argues that this is not because of the individual Hun Sen but rather because of the domestic politics.

The Foreign Policy Analysis literature focuses on explaining the decision of human decisionmakers. This focus differs from that in IR theories because it expands the source of explanatory factors, ranging from the conditions external to the state to domestic factors including domestic institutions and individuals. The Foreign Policy Analysis offers three levels of analysis accordingly to the sources of explanatory factors, summarized by Figure 1 (Breuning 2007).

**Table 1. Levels of Analysis and Causation**

Level of Analysis	Type of Causal Factor
Individual	Decision in response to Precipitating Event
State	Intermediate Cause
System	Deep Cause

The system refers to the international politics or the external conditions that affect the state. When the system explains a foreign policy decision, it means that the state would make the

same decision regardless of what the domestic institutions (such as regime type or political dynamic) or the individual decision makers (such as the Prime Minister or Minister of Foreign Secretary) are. Consequently, making a different decision will result in the loss of the state by another actor at the same level. In this framework, IR studies provides the system level explanation, drawing from state-to-state interaction the conditions that compel a state's decision. But FPA focuses on the decisionmakers who respond to other conditions below the system level. When the state (the second level) explains a decision, it means that the domestic institutions compel the decision and failure to make the same decision will result in a domestic actor being weakened, replaced, or removed. Similarly, when the individual level explains a decision, failure to make the same decision will have an individual replaced or removed from his or her position. In other words, FPA argues that the decisionmakers is rational so that they choose the most beneficial option that ensure their survivals and increase their relative power, wealth or influence.

Given the much larger range of possible explanations, FPA is an underdeveloped field that has not provided a concrete theory explaining all the connection between independent variables and the dependent variable (Hudson 2007, Chapter 5). Nonetheless, FPA asserts some variables that matter, on which this paper bases its analysis. At the state level, the decisionmaker is the government whose aim is to ensure its legitimacy and the domestic stability, both of which ensure its survival. At this level, regime type matters because it directly controls who becomes the government (through election or appointment, and through removal and dissolution) and indirectly influences the policy (through pressures from opposition parties, civil society, and epistemic community). At the individual level, the decisionmaker is a person whose psychology affects his or her perception of the surrounding and whose personal idealism decides his or her

objective. These perception or objective may not be the same as that of the national interest or the purpose of his or her office.

In considering the Cambodian case, FPA focuses on Prime Minister Hun Sen and his political party Cambodian People's Party (CPP), the individual and the domestic political actor involved in foreign policy making. Cambodia is a constitutional monarchy headed by a parliamentary government. The Royal Government exercises executive power, including making foreign policy, on behalf of and with consent of the monarch, who "shall reign, but not govern". Therefore, the Prime Minister is the head of the government, which is elected by a majority of parliament consisted of the National Assembly and the Senate (Cambodia 1993). Cambodia is considered a semi-authoritarian or illiberal democracy because the election is suppressed and undermined by Hun Sen's party. The CPP holds the majority of seat in both chambers of the legislative body, which can elect the Prime Minister and appoint his cabinet. In addition, members of the CPP fill positions in the Supreme Council of the Magistracy, the highest court of the judicial branch in Cambodia. Because of the extensive reach of the CPP in the government, it has wielded the government resources to suppress civil society and criticism against the government and dominate elections by silencing the opposition party (Freedom House 2019). Even within the CPP, Hun Sen enjoys almost absolute power, as he outmaneuvers the party president Chea Sim, eventually replaces Chea as the president in 2015 (O'Neil 2019, 101). Given this political landscape of Cambodia, Prime Minister Hun Sen and his political party is the sole decisionmaker of Cambodian foreign policy.

However, the Hun Sen regime is still challenged by the opposition party Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP), led by Kem Sokha and Sam Rainsy. The general election in 2013 was a watershed moment for Hun Sen as his party lost 29 seats to the CNRP out of the 123

seats in the National Assembly. Despite the CPP maintaining the majority with 68 seats, this result paled in comparison with the 90 seats won in 2008. Consequently, Hun Sen government was noticeably more responsive to the opposition demands in the next two years. For example, the CNRP has long been a proponent for environmental issues, such as opposing the hydropower plans that would displace villagers, disrupt their livelihood, and damage the environment via flooding and threatening endangered species. Before the election, Hun Sen government ignored the complains from the CNRP, civil society groups, and the local population. After the election, in June 2014, the National Assembly brought a Cabinet member, the Minister of Mines and Energy, to the Assembly to testify for a hydropower project, backed by China. This was the first instance of a Cabinet member having to defend a government policy before the Assembly, since the Hun Sen government of 1997. Similarly, Hun Sen delayed the construction of a different hydropower project by Sinohydro, the world's largest hydropower firm, announcing that the project would be delayed until 2018 (O'Neil 2019, 129). This responsive government period was short-lived, as Hun Sen felt threatened by the prospect of losing the 2018 election and proceed to arrest or exile opposition leaders, beginning in 2016. By September 2017, Hun Sen removed the opposition by arresting Kem Sokha on treason charges, and the Supreme Court, packed with CPP members, dissolved the CNRP in November (BBC 2018). Ahead of the 2016 Philippines v China case, Hun Sen and his party faced credible challenge to his stay in power, and thus, felt the importance of China's assistance in keeping his regime alive.

The basis of China's assistance to Hun Sen regime's survival has been money. China began its friendly relations with Hun Sen in the 1997 when Hun Sen initiated a coup to become the Prime Minister of Cambodia. This relation began despite the troubled past in which Vietnam installed Hun Sen into the Cambodian government and China backed his opposition in the early

1990s. After the coup, the international community but China did not recognize Hun Sen regime, leaving Cambodia isolated. Consequently, China's recognition of the regime became important because it provided the legitimacy, aid, and political support, which ensured its survival and even accession into ASEAN a few years later (236, 237). China is willing to provide economic assistance unconditionally, meaning without interfering or making demands on domestic political conditions, such as corruption and human rights. For instance, while the U.S. is the largest Cambodia's export market, US Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) into Cambodia is impeded by the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, which deters US firms from bribing foreign government to do business. Consequently, China dominates the FDI inflow because China's "Go Out" policy incentivizes Chinese firms to invest abroad, regardless of the rampant corruption in Cambodia. But more than just investment, Chinese money going into Cambodia serves Hun Sen and his party directly, or indirectly via supporting his supporters in government and business.

Directly, China aids the Hun Sen regime via paying off its party and allies in the government. For instance, in 2006, China provided a concessional loan of US\$37 million to the CPP to construct a new Council of Ministers (the Cabinet) building, and in 2008 converted the loan into a donation (Dreher 2017). Later in 2016, Hun Sen announced that China would donate Cambodia nearly US\$600 million in aid to support election infrastructure and other public projects, just days ahead of the ASEAN Foreign Minister Statement on the Philippines v China (VOACambodia 2016). In addition, Hun Sen also deployed his bodyguard unit to ramp up security for the election, using a unit trained and equipped by Unite International, controlled by a Chinese tycoon (Financial Times 2016). Again in 2018, China announced a US\$259 million in concessional loans to fund a ring road project in Phnom Penh during the election campaign, which no longer had an opposition party (Reuters 2018). It even provided a US\$100 million in

military aid and equipment to ensure that the CPP could hold the election and force higher voter turnout, in anticipation of an illegitimate election without an opposition party (South China Morning Post 2018).

Indirectly, China finances the regime's paying off its supporters within and outside the government. For instance, after the perceived lost election in 2013, the CPP formed a coalition with FUNIPEC, a royalist party which won only 2 seats. In 2014, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) reportedly covered FUNIPEC expense and offered training to younger members. FUNIPEC leader gave the justification that "the royal family of Cambodia ... supporting the one-China policy" and "the CCP also wants to maintain this relationship to balance the political scene in Cambodia so that no one party can claim to have a better relationship with it" (O'Neil 2019, 115).

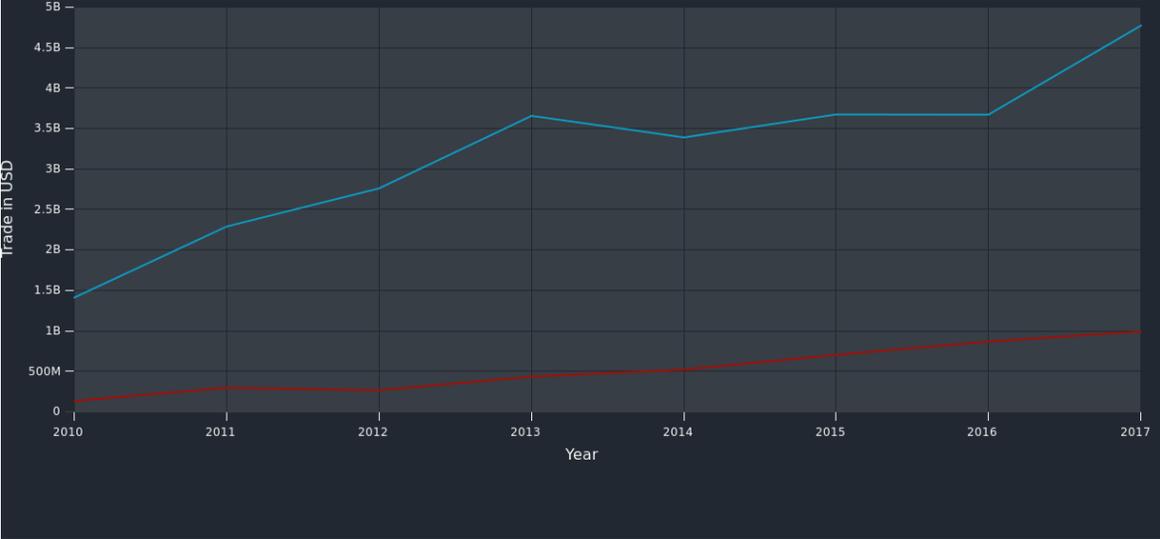
More importantly, Chinese businesses and members of the CPP cooperate over joint ventures to form "mutually beneficial relationships". Chinese businesses fund the joint ventures through Chinese EXIM banks and CPP members provides the political support that allows projects to violate laws without repercussion. In return, the CPP members benefit personally from the project's funding and profits and are reminded of the value of their government positions (Global Witness 2016). For instance, Chinese Farm Corporation Group and Pheapimex, co-owned by CPP senator Lao Meng Khin and his wife, agreed on a Sino-Cambodian joint venture developing a eucalyptus plantation and paper mill in 2001. Chinese EXIM bank financed the project's US\$70 million, 5% of which was paid as interest to Cambodia and 2% of which went into Hun Sen government's pocket, totaled over \$1 million. Similarly, senator Lao's Pheapimex also partnered with Chinese firm Wuzhishan LS in a pine plantation joint venture, whose directors include another CPP senator Sy Kong Triv. Because of the CPP members'

involvement in the project, it got approved of a 199,999 hectares land concession to the Chinese firms, despite the legal limit of 10,000 hectares (O’Neil 2019, 130-131). These instances show that the CPP relations with China is important to secure not only the finance to develop the country’s economy but also the political support of the CPP politicians. This relationship is summed up nicely by Council of Ministers spokesman Phay Siphon’s remark in 2016: “Without Chinese aid, we go nowhere” (Hutt 2016).

Given the network of people benefiting from the Sino-Cambodian relation both politically and economic wise, the foreign policy decision to be friendly with China is not an individual decision. Instead, it is a rational choice that any individual in Hun Sen’s position would make. After the 2013 election win and becoming the opposition in the National Assembly, Sam Rainsy remarked that the opposition party CNRP was an ally of China, that it supported China’s claim in the South China Sea (244). More damning was China’s response to challenger to the Hun Sen regime. In 2008, China invited Sam Rainsy and members of his political party to the Chinese embassy dinners. This invitation, even though token, was because of his performance in the 2008 election in which his party won 21.9% of the vote. More importantly, the invitation came after his party had long been dismissed and despite Sam Rainsy attending the first inauguration of the pro-independence president, Chen Shui-bian, in Taiwan (O’Neil 2019, 115-116).

China is aware of the risk of being too close to Hun Sen. China’s objective in Cambodia is not to establish a puppet regime. Therefore, it does not seek a personal relationship with Hun Sen. In fact, there is real economic downside to being too close. Most of China’s investment in Cambodia comes in the form of infrastructure, which is susceptible to “obsolescing bargain”, the risk of new, post-Hun Sen government unwilling to uphold Hun Sen’s agreement with China.

The Hun Sen government has not legislated anything concrete to ensure continued Chinese economic presence in Cambodia (O’Neil 2019, 122-125). China risks losing all of its investment when a new government replaces Hun Sen and nationalizes their joint ventures. This risk was showed in the responsive government year of 2014-2015 when Chinese trade and investment to Cambodia took a dip (Figure 2 and Figure 3). In Figure 2, the blue line indicates Chinese export value to Cambodia whereas the red line indicates Chinese import value from Cambodia.



**Figure 1. Chinese Trade Balance to Cambodia 2010-2017**

Source: AJG Simoes, CA Hidalgo. *The Economic Complexity Observatory: An Analytical Tool for Understanding the Dynamics of Economic Development*. Workshops at the Twenty-Fifth AAAI Conference on Artificial Intelligence. 2011. Accessed 05/10/2019. <https://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/visualize/line/hs92/show/chn/khm/all/2010.2017/>

Year	Agriculture and agro-industry	Industrial sector	Physical Infrastructure and Services	Tourism	Total
1994–2007	252	1,017	534	920	2,723
2008	45	166	3,805	467	4,483
2009	322	166	70	798	1,356
2010	191	156	no data	482	829
2011	7	324	no data	1,094	1,425
2012	27	487	no data	no data	514
2013	213	490	no data	8	711
2014	141	537	156	50	884
2015	63	316	no data	400	779
2016	304	453	115	114	986
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,565</b>	<b>4,112</b>	<b>4,680</b>	<b>4,333</b>	<b>14,690</b>

**Figure 2. Chinese Investment Capital in Cambodia (US\$ million)**

Source: Chhaeng, Vannarith. *Trends in Southeast Asia: The Political Economy of Chinese Investment in Cambodia*. ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, 2017. Accessed 05/10/2019. [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/TRS16\\_17.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/TRS16_17.pdf)

Aside from the opposition party, CPP does not face opposition from civil society because it controls tightly the space with which NGOs and the media can operation. The CPP coopts the press through coercion or ownership and allows those who reports Hun Sen government’s commitment to a free press. It also quarantines the foreign press to an audience of NGO workers, expatriates, and English-speaking Cambodians in urban areas. Its strategy is to see the press as the opposition, similar to a political party, and coopts it in the urban area where the CPP faces the most opposition (VOA Cambodia 2013). In 2008, one journalist reporting on corruption was killed along with his son while another reporting on Deputy Prime Minister Sok An’s ties to the Khmer Rouge was charged with disinformation and defamation. These arrests and assassinations defined a visible limit to what the press can report. Evidently, news media can mostly report on either the government’s good work or criticism against the opposition party (Strangio 2014, Chapter 10). Because of this control, the CPP does not need China’s assistance in this regard.

This entrenched Sino-Cambodian relationship exhibited in Cambodian domestic politics demonstrates the intrinsic nature of the money-loaded Sino-CPP relations. It extends beyond transactional and evolves into a mutually understanding and beneficial relationship that resulted in foreign policy decision that does not fit the exclusive state-to-state framework. For example, in 2017, Cambodia decided to cancel a contract with a US military unit, the Sea Bees, whose main mission in Cambodia was purely humanitarian and unconditional: building schools and hospitals (VOA 2017). While foreign commentators might be worried about a Cambodia distancing from the US, the decision was clear and logical to its decisionmaker. Cambodia political leadership does not need to rely on other countries to help itself in its domestic matters. It only needs China to ensure its survival. This is the reason why Cambodia decided to block the ASEAN Foreign Minister Statement in 2016.

#### **IV. Conclusion and Implication**

Given examples such as the 2016 ASEAN Foreign Minister Statement, commentators have criticized Cambodia as a bandwagon with China against Vietnam and the US (The Economist 2017). However, defenders of the Hun Sen regime use the principles of non-interference, national sovereignty, and peace and prosperity as justification for its foreign policy decision pertaining to China (Heng 2014, Chan 2018). This paper has argued that it is neither of those things but the Hun Sen regime's survival. China has provided the political and economic support needed for Hun Sen and his political party to thwart domestic challenges.

However, despite such a close relationship, a Sino-Cambodian alliance is unlikely because of the Cambodian national interest. The Cambodian history is a struggle to stay out of bigger powers' influence. Entering an alliance with China is to contradict the national history that will risk provoking domestic opposition. In addition, entering an alliance restrains the

foreign policy options available to the political leadership, a concession of national sovereignty and of political power of Prime Minister Hun Sen. Therefore, it is unlikely for Cambodia to become a formal ally with China, as long as the Cambodian public reminds Hun Sen of its historical struggle.

This paper has an important implication for ASEAN and its integration project. The ASEAN Foreign Minister Statement 2016 could have been a critical moment for China, but instead became a watershed moment for ASEAN and its proponent for integration. Cambodia's veto power can detract ASEAN from further integrating, and it will certainly veto controversial decision concerning security issues such as China and the South China Sea. On the flip side, the Statement offered a glimpse of the potential of ASEAN. At a theoretical level, such a Statement would accelerate the integration by creating and reinforcing a security community that can better provide security and guarantee peace and stability to its members, including Cambodia (Amako 2013). At an empirical level, the Statement would dispel doubts of ASEAN member states' commitment toward integrating ASEAN by forcing China away from its strategy on the South China Sea. China has been keeping the South China Sea a bilateral sovereignty issue between itself and the other claimants. In addition, it has not accepted any other multilateral effort to resolve the dispute except for ASEAN where it has Cambodia as a proxy. If Cambodia had supported the Statement, it would force China change its strategy and perhaps, decrease, if not resolve completely, the South China Sea issue (Weatherbee 2014).

Unfortunately, Cambodia remains a close partner to China and the Statement changed nothing regarding the issue. Moving forward, this paper offers ASEAN proponents a course of action. Given that the Hun Sen regime's survival is the motivation for its foreign policy, ASEAN policymakers can accommodate Cambodia's economic and political needs that do not undermine

Hun Sen's grip on power or empower that grip. Cambodia's economy is underdeveloped compared to other ASEAN economies, coupled with its dependence on foreign aid, provides ASEAN an opportunity to deepen its relations with Cambodia and more specifically with the Hun Sen regime. Alternative, ASEAN can adapt the lesson from Cambodian history and empower an opposition that is more accommodating toward ASEAN than Hun Sen does. However, this course of action directly contrasts with its own non-interference principle, and will further widens the rift between Sino-Cambodian partnership and the rest of ASEAN. Nonetheless, ASEAN must face the question of what to do with Cambodia. As Hun Sen becomes more and more totalitarian (Council on Foreign Relations 2018), ASEAN will have to answer whether it can accommodate a dictator within its rank.

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