



Cambodia: China's Special Partner?

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In what may be perceived as a move to strengthen its maritime capabilities and step up ties with China, Cambodia has requested China for the supply of two warships. The request was made on the sidelines of the first-ever joint naval exercise between China and Cambodia, which concluded on February 26, 2016. The joint military drill, conducted over the span of five days, took place in Preah Sihanouk where China also displayed two warships with guided missiles as also a supply ship. Considering that the exercise was conducted amid escalation of tensions in the South China Sea, which is also witnessing greater involvement of the extra-regional powers, such as the US, Japan and India, makes the Chinese moves to reach out to Cambodia (and Malaysia and Thailand recently) worth analysing. On the successful completion of the exercise, Rear Admiral Yu Manjiang, Commanding Officer of the Chinese fleet visiting Cambodia, stated that visiting Cambodia was “like visiting a sibling’s home”. It may be noted that similar expressions (Pauk Phaw, a Burmese word which means siblings) were used for Myanmar in the 1990s when the latter was facing international isolation. Clearly, China considers Cambodia as its important partner, which has been confirmed by the Cambodian side on more than one occasion.

This is not the first time that Cambodia is looking towards China for military and economic cooperation. In fact, it is a two-way process for both the countries. While China has been helping Cambodia militarily as well as economically, Cambodia is backing China's

position on the outstanding strategic issues and helping it expand its sphere of influence in the region. Cambodia is a strong supporter of the “One-China Policy”, and has remained committed to China’s security priorities. One such instance was in 2009 when Cambodia repatriated 22 Uyghur asylum seekers. In 2012, when Cambodia hosted the Association of Southeast Asian States (ASEAN) Summit, for the first time in the history of ASEAN, the joint communiqué could not get issued. This was a result of divided approach of ASEAN member states on the issue of the South China Sea. While the Philippines wanted Cambodia to include the confrontation between the Philippines and China over the Scarborough Shoal in the agenda, China was pressing Cambodia to keep that issue out. Due to differences of opinion, the summit was concluded without issuing the joint communiqué. While other ASEAN member states, such as the Philippines and Vietnam accused Cambodia of dealing with the issue with partiality towards China, Cambodia was successful enough in wooing the Chinese as both countries have come closer since 2012. One may argue that post-2012 ASEAN Summit, China has rewarded Cambodia for its behaviour.

Cambodia, the second poorest country in the ASEAN region after Lao PDR, with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of US\$ 16.78 billion in 2014, has been a major beneficiary of China’s military supplies and economic aid. From the year 1992 to 2014, China has granted US\$ 2.85 billion soft loan to Cambodia mainly for infrastructure development, and for the modernisation of the agriculture sector. It may be noted that majority of Cambodian population is rural and depends on agriculture. In 2013, Cambodia bought 12 Chinese Z-9 military helicopters with US\$ 195 million line of credit provided by the Chinese government. In the name of military aid, in February 2014, China provided 26 Chinese trucks and 30,000 sets of military uniforms to the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces. Later in November 2014, during Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen’s China visit, China pledged to grant US\$ 500-700 million economic development loan to Cambodia. In July 2015, Cambodian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for National Defence, Tea Banh along with 23-member delegation from the three forces visited China. China also provided shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles in November 2015 to Cambodia. The year 2015 saw an increase of US\$ 40 million in China’s development fund for Cambodia. In 2014, it granted US\$ 100 million.

China is the second largest trading partner of Cambodia after Thailand. In 2015-16, China-Cambodia bilateral trade crossed US\$ 4.20 billion and is expected to reach the US\$ 5 billion mark by the end of 2017. While military and economic assistance from China is one of the major reasons for Cambodia to side with China, there are following other major factors:

First, Cambodia is in dire need of financial resources to boost its economy. In such a case, China seems to be a viable and faster option for Cambodia as aid from China comes with almost “no strings attached” policy and mostly on the basis of mutual benefit.

Second, amid ongoing Cambodia-Vietnam border dispute, Cambodia is in the process of strengthening its military capabilities. Both Cambodia and China have territorial tensions with Vietnam. Vietnam is assertive both with China and Cambodia in terms of representing its case on territorial disputes. Hence, it makes sense for Cambodia to reach out to China. For China, strengthening Cambodia’s military capabilities works on two fronts – rewarding a partner; and preparing it to work as deterrent against Vietnam.

Third, on the domestic front, Hun Sen’s political control over the country had been criticised. Several human rights organisations are calling for democratic reforms in the country. For the sake of regime survival, the Cambodian leader will, in the long run, put to use China’s model.

Considering the recent developments, it is clear that China is ‘rewarding’ Cambodia so as to achieve a broader objective of cultivating a long-term alliance spreading across politico-strategic and economic domains. China needs Cambodia as much as Cambodia needs China, for completely different reasons though. Cambodia is now seen as China’s strategic gateway to the Southeast Asian region and beyond. Due to its location, it will eventually provide China access to the Gulf of Thailand and the South China Sea, particularly when the US is also trying to renew its ties with the countries of the region. China needs Cambodia more than ever in the region as the competition in the region is intensifying, where half of the countries are either showing concerns against China’s

assertive postures or are neutral. The successful implementation of China's One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative requires as many countries' support as possible. The Sihanoukville port has already been identified by the Cambodian authorities for potential investments by China as part of the OBOR initiative. While several countries of the Southeast Asian region are still apprehensive of China's moves in the region, Cambodia's support will prove beneficial for China's strong footing in the region.

Cambodia's ASEAN chairmanship and the failure of issuing the joint communiqué were as much a diplomatic success for China as it was a diplomatic faux pas for the ASEAN. The stalemate in negotiations on the South China Sea dispute, and failure to arrive at a mutually agreeable and legally binding Code of Conduct pose challenges for ASEAN's credibility. Cambodia's leaning towards China has the potential to further exacerbate ASEAN unity.

Robust cooperation between China and Cambodia is alarming for the countries of the region, particularly those that are still engaged in a long-drawn-out maritime conflict with China. Cambodia's tilt towards China might contribute to a divided approach of ASEAN member states, leading to further stalemate with respect to the South China Sea dispute. As the politico-strategic and economic situation in the region is unfolding, exchange of visits between Chinese and Cambodian leaders and display of high-level trust between the leadership of the two countries suggest that China-Cambodia friendship is likely to gain further momentum in the times to come. In essence, a stronger Cambodia is in the long-term interest of China, which perhaps is the reason why the China has started terming Cambodia as its "sibling".

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