

# China-Cambodia Relationships: Phnom Penh as Beijing's Permanent Client State

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## ABSTRAK

*Tujuan paper ini adalah untuk menganalisis hubungan antara Kamboja dan China dengan menggunakan perspektif sejarah dan data sekunder. Kamboja dan China terkenal memiliki hubungan diplomatik sangat akrab, meskipun mereka tidak berbatasan wilayah secara langsung. Hubungan antara kedua negara tersebut berkembang sejak Kamboja mendapatkan kemerdekaan dari Perancis pada tahun 1953. Dari rezim Raja Norodom Sihanouk hingga pemerintahan Perdana Menteri Hun Sen, China telah memberikan dukungan finansial bertujuan untuk menyokong keberlangsungan negara Kamboja. Hubungan antara kedua negara mempunyai ketimpangan dalam hal kekuatan; hard power maupun soft power. Selain itu, 5 poin koeksistensi perdamaian China, telah berhasil dalam membangun hubungan dekat dengan Kamboja. Makalah ini menyimpulkan bahwa setelah dicanangkannya program Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) pada tahun 2013, hubungan antara kedua negara mulai bergeser dari Kamboja sebagai teman terdekat China di Asia Tenggara menjadi negara klien permanen China. Tentunya, ini menyimpan latar belakang normatif dan memancing opini regional maupun internasional. Seperti pada persengketaan wilayah Laut China Selatan dan Pertemuan Tahunan ASEAN ke-45, Kamboja menunjukkan posisinya sebagai negara pendukung China dan menunjukkan kesetiaannya kepada China sebagai bentuk balas budi sokongan dana untuk pembangunan Kamboja selama dekade terakhir.*

**Kata Kunci:** Hubungan Kamboja-China, BRI, Klien Permanen China, dan Pembangunan Kamboja

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the relationship between Cambodia and People's Republic of China (PRC) using historical approach and secondary data regarding the topic. Although Cambodia and PRC do not share direct border, their relationship has flourished since Cambodia gained their independence from France in 1953 under the regime of Norodom Sihanouk up until the administration of Prime Minister Hun Sen. Since then, China has been injecting Cambodia with financial aids, which is helping Cambodia to establish its nation. Noting the power gap between two nations that would complicate the relationships between two states, China with its famous five peaceful coexistence has managed to build closer ties with Cambodia. This paper concluded that after the implementation of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, the relationship began to shift from China's closest friend in Southeast Asia towards something beyond diplomatic ties, which is that Cambodia becomes a permanent client state of PRC and has strong normative background, and the ties itself invites many critics both from regional and international. For instance, during the dispute of South China Sea and 45th ASEAN annual meeting where Cambodia shown their firm positions in line with China. Cambodia appeared to show its loyalty to China as a form of payback for years of Chinese financial aids and investment for decades.

**Keywords:** Sino-Khmer Ties, BRI, Chinese Permanent Client, and Development of Cambodia

### 1. Introduction

Being one of less developed country (LDC) in Southeast Asia tends to push a country to choose whether being a follower or stand on their feet. Cambodia, officially the Kingdom of Cambodia is one of illiberal states of ASEAN CMLV (Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam) (Gomez, J., & Ramcharan, R., 2014) which still heavily influenced by the involvement of military. Gaining independence from France in 1953 and housing around 16 million people in 2017 (World Bank, 2017) makes Cambodia becoming a suitable country to be influenced by external actors.

Cambodia with its capacity and national interest realized the necessity to exercise their foreign policy through various diplomacy practices. As a former client state of Soviet Union, Cambodia felt the urgency to redirect their political and economic foundation, since the menace of bipolar world during post Cold War era. Because the Soviet Union became dysfunctional and state members became independent and established CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States), Cambodia seen this as a better future prospect to exercise its national interest.

Also, the collapse of bipolar world creates an entrance for emergence rising powers in international system including state actors and non-state actors, such as, the importance of non-governmental organization, regional institution, multilateral cooperation, and religious center. Since there were no political issues affecting form of interaction between states, and the vision to create international integration (Kosal, 2009).

As a constitutional monarch, Cambodian parliamentary led by the Prime Minister, currently Hun Sen as a successor of People Republic of China (PRC) influences in Southeast Asia, especially in the section of Indo-Chinese Peninsula. During the "Khmer Rouge" era, PRC continued to supply the Khmer Rouge with military supports and aids. Later in 1997, the election of Hun Sen as a Prime Minister of Cambodia became the cornerstone to the spread of the political hegemony. Noting that Prime Minister Hun Sen becoming the object of Beijing patronage until today, and Cambodia is still one of the China's closest friends in Southeast Asia, second to Myanmar.

However, being China's closest friends meaning either their trade partners or their followers. Cambodia with its ability is choosing to become Beijing followers or one of their subordinate countries. A client state or sub-ordinate state is a state that is economically, politically, or militarily sub-ordinate to another more powerful state in international affairs (Graham, Michael, Erik Golstein, & Richard Langhorne, 2002). There are few types of client states, such satellite state, vassal state and puppet state.

A satellite state is a country that is formally independent and has full sovereignty status, but under heavy political, economic, and military influence or control of bigger country (NATO, 2001). The term of satellite is referring to smaller moon orbiting around the larger planets. Vassal state is a nation that has full sovereignty but gives full military support to its dominant nations or parent state when requested in exchange for certain privileges. The last is, puppet state is a nation that completely dependent upon larger power and effectively controlled in financial interest, economic and military support (Marek, 1954).

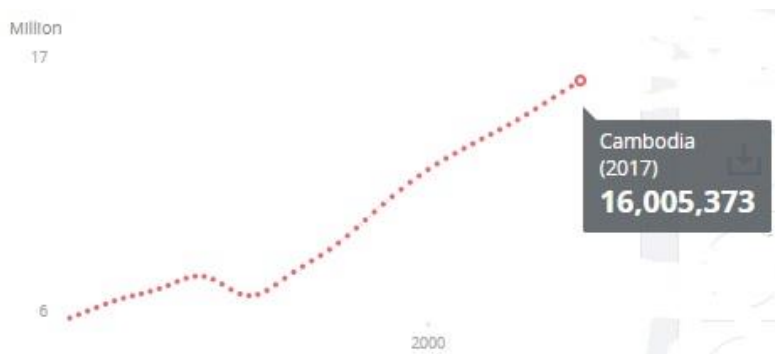
Although Cambodia and China do not share a direct border, they shared a historic, cultural and commercial relationship. Not only when China supporting the Maoist Khmer Rouge against Lon Nol's regime during Cambodian Civil War in 1975. Mao Zedong had fostered good relations with Prince Norodom Sihanouk. After Vietnam withdrawal from Cambodia, the United Nations sponsored elections in 1993, and the election of Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen in 1997 after coup, China still maintains the closer ties with Cambodia.

In modern era, after Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) from Xi Jinping administration which will connect the world through win-win cooperation. The BRI itself was deeply

influenced by ancient Chinese philosophy, Confucianism, which emphasizes on harmony and will be affecting in Cambodia-China relations in the present. Because as Confucius taught that there is need to encourage and sustainable approach “not to impose on others what yourself do not desire”. However, this paper will analyze why Cambodia decided to become China’s Client State and its implication to regional stability.

## 2. Socio-Economic Circumstances in Cambodia

Cambodia, officially the Kingdom of Cambodia is one of the ASEAN member states which located in the southwestern section of the Indo-Chinese Peninsula bordering Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and the Gulf of Thailand, covering 181,035 square kilometers area with more than 16 million population in 2017 (World Bank, 2017) (see Figure 1). The capital and largest city is Phnom Penh, as the center of political, economic and cultural center of Cambodia. Cambodian governmental system is elective constitutional monarchy, with a monarch Norodom Sihamoni, chosen by the Royal Throne Council as a head of state. With Prime Minister Hun Sen as the head of government of Cambodia and led the nation since 1985.



**Figure 1.** Population of Cambodia (Source: The World Bank data: Cambodia 2017)

Most Cambodians consider themselves to be Khmers who are speakers of the Khmer language, the official language. As a former colony of France, French once become the language of government. Therefore, French is still spoken by many older Cambodians and some schools or universities that are funded by the government of France. But since 1993, English has been widely used and has been taught widely in schools and universities. Due to this shift, most Cambodians are bilingual in Khmer and English (Xin Hua News, 2010). Theravada Buddhism is the official religion of Cambodia where the Buddhism itself is deeply influenced by Hinduism and native animism.

Cambodia has experienced strong economic growth over the last decade. GDP grew at an average annual rate over 8% between 2000 and 2010 and about 7% since

2011 but hitting 6.8% in 2019 (World Bank, 2019). The tourism, garment, construction and real estate accounted for the bulk of growth. Although rapidly increasing, Cambodia remains second to Myanmar as the poorest countries in Southeast Asia. Cambodia was promoted to Lower Middle Income in 2016 by the World Bank after experiencing the development and improvement of its nations (World Atlas, 2018). Cambodia's graduation from low-income country will reduce its eligibility for foreign assistance and will challenge the government to seek new sources of financing. Since Cambodia has been working with bilateral and multilateral donors, including the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank, and IMF in order to fulfill country's needs, including China as the biggest bilateral donors to Cambodia (CIA, 2019).

### **3. Historical Background of China-Cambodia Relationship**

The Sino-Khmer relationship has been sharing a historic and commercial relationship since the early twelfth century even though they do not share direct border. The first diplomatic ties of China-Cambodia led by Zhou Daguan, a Chinese diplomat under the Emperor Chengzong of Yuan, through diplomatic expedition mission. He arrived at Angkor in 1296 and remained at the court of King Indravarman III until 1297 (Hingham, 2001). He was the first Chinese representative to visit Khmer Empire and he later wrote a detailed report on life in Angkor, *The Customs of Cambodia* (Rossabi, 2014). The book itself gives detailed descriptions of Yasodharapura, the capital city at the center of Angkor, and as a source to understand historical Angkor and the Khmer Empire.

At modern time, Cambodia gained full independence from France in 1953. The first diplomatic relations China-Cambodia were established on July 19, 1958. At personal level, King Norodom Sihanouk was able to cultivate a friendly relationship with different generations of Chinese leaders. It has become a solid foundation for long-standing cooperation between two nations. As the Vietnam War progressed, King Norodom Sihanouk adopted a policy of neutrality in the Cold War which allowed Vietnamese communists to use Cambodia as a sanctuary and a supply route for their arms and other aids. However, the beginning of Sino-Cambodian relations was while King Norodom Sihanouk visiting Beijing in 1970, the military coup was succeeded by Prime Minister General Lon Nol and Prince Sisowath Sirik Matak. Sino-Cambodian relationship was experiencing downhill on their history during 1975-1978. China's patronage of the communist Khmer Rouge regime which led to genocidal regime and mass killing of around 1.7 million of Cambodians. China's role is supplying the notorious regime with weaponry along the Thai-Cambodian border during 1979 to 1990. However, once the coup was succeeded, the new regime which immediately demanded the Vietnamese communists to leave Cambodia gained the political support of the United States.

The North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces desperately retaining their sanctuary and so they began to attack new government with hardest fight and resulted in the surrender of Lon Nol government in Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975. Under Pol Pot government, they changed the official name of Cambodia to Democratic Kampuchea. The new regime modelled itself on Maoist China. The new kingdom established in 1993 with Norodom Sihanouk as the King of Cambodia after the UNTAC sponsored elections. But then, the stability of Cambodia was shaken in 1997 by another coup coming from the co-Prime Minister Hun Sen against the non-communist parties in the government (UN OHCHR, 2019). Through another political crisis of Cambodia, China-Cambodia relationship would shift to a 'friendly' relationship. Although the formal diplomatic relations between China and Cambodia which started in 1958 and never officially broke during wartime. By building trust and confidence, slowly Sino-Cambodian restored politically, militarily, and economically. From there China has been gradually developed their relations through various stages in the past two decades through patronizing Hun Sen as its "trustworthy friend" in order to consolidate political hegemony. In recent years, China has emerged as a major foreign player in Cambodia. Prime Minister Hun Sen once said Cambodia's development growth in past years has owed a great deal to China's investment and steady financial assistance (China Daily, 2012).

#### **4. Sino-Cambodian Aid Relationship and the Implications**

The 1997 coup marked a dramatic turning point for Cambodia-China relations. After the military conflict broke out, Cambodia's major aid source partners suspended the aid flow to contain CPP (Cambodian People's Party) under Hun Sen and warned Western countries to not interfere Cambodia's internal affairs. With domestic instability and international suspension, Hun Sen turned to China for diplomatic support and financial aid. From there, China seized the opportunity to expand its influence in Cambodia. China's economic profile in Cambodia has officially pronounced. During his official visit to Cambodia, Wen Jiabao expressed temptations to further enhance economic, political and military interaction through a comprehensive partnership of cooperation. China responded by generously granting a US\$10 million loan. Between 1997 and 2005, China provided a further US\$600 million in investments, grants, and aid marked for the construction of hydro-electric dams and bridges. Also, Chinese companies became very active in Cambodia post-1997 and in 2004 had emerged as the number one foreign investor. China has used this aid to maximize the political advantages through the financing high profile, but relatively low-cost infrastructure projects, such as luxury offices and facilities for Cambodian government. Cambodian officials often stress their appreciation for Chinese non-interference and the "China talk less but does a lot", as Hun Sen declared after receiving US\$600 million.

The background behind the aid flows and China full financial support to Cambodia is its famous five peaceful coexistence principles of foreign policy from the Confucianism thought such as, mutual respect, territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-

aggression, mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and cooperation for mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence. In exchange for its generous financial support, since July 19, 1958, Cambodia is strongly committed to the One China Policy and firmly opposes Taiwan's move toward independence. Hun Sen shut down Taiwan's de facto embassy, the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative. Also, Cambodia considered Taiwan as an inalienable part of Chinese territory. Since then, Cambodia has become one of ASEAN's loyal supporters of the One China Policy and has been flourishing their close relation in every dimension.

In 2006, during the visitation of Premier Wen Jiabao's official visit to Cambodia symbolized the relationship between Cambodia and the PRC. Both nations signed several bilateral agreements and treaty of "Comprehensive Partnership of Cooperation" to enhance economic, political and military interaction. Premier Wen laid the foundation stone for a new PRC-financed US\$49 million Cambodian Council of Ministers building (Ian Storey, 2006). Beijing stepped up aid to Cambodia through 11 bilateral agreements covering eradicating trans-national crime, health cooperation, internet services, protection of Angkor Wat temples, and establishing a national botanical garden. Not only supporting the infrastructure development, but also encouraging the foreign direct investment of private-owned corporate to Cambodia. The patterns of Beijing-Phnom Penh relationship as a donor-recipient soon become a model of China's international aid model of diplomacy which can fulfill both China's influences and consolidating its recipient demands.

Trade between Cambodia and China has increased since Cambodia becoming a full member of the ASEAN in 1999. In 2016, trade between Cambodia and China rose to US\$ 4.8 billion. However, Cambodia is still unable to maximize the benefits from the cooperation due to its lack of resources, quality products, information on the markets, and means (Sotharith, 2010). Also, China's investment in Cambodia has increased yearly and was distributed among many sectors (e.g., garments, textiles, apparel, hotels and resorts, power plants) and most of the investors come from state-owned.

The foreign direct investment (FDI) flows are seen as the main factor on Cambodia's economic development and liberalization after foreign financial assistance. Due to mainly unexplored natural resources, low labor costs and attractive investment incentives, Cambodia managed to attract inflow FDI from China, South Korea, the United States, Malaysia and Thailand. As we mentioned before, Cambodia's foreign financial assistance mostly come from China. China became Cambodia's biggest donor in 2009, pledging US\$ 257 million (Palit and Palit, 2011).

Since China has also been a major source of foreign assistance to Cambodia. Noted in 2019, China has pledged four billion yuan in aid to Cambodia until 2021 amidst the European Union threat of trade sanctions (Reuters, 2019). Usually, Chinese financial assistance usually comes from three categories, such as, grants, interest-free loans and concessional loans. Cambodia has been accepting China's ODA in concessional loans, and mostly on infrastructure projects. The distinctive characteristics of Chinese assistance are "no-string-attached" assistance. Unlike the traditional donors who tend to help with strict requirements, China's assistance come with no conditions. For instance, the requirements of traditional donors are

democratization, human right principles, and good governance which are not so suitable for current environment in Cambodia (Pheakday, 2012).

Regarding the financial aid, by adopting peaceful development principles, Chinese government believes that by lending loans and help to recipient countries, it would strengthen their national development and will improve the livelihoods of their people, promote economic growth, and social progress. In fact, China's ODA aims to secure natural resources since China has become the major consumer in energy during the emergence of China; establishing strategic diplomacy through BRI (Belt and Road Initiative); and spread Chinese values, confucianism in recipient countries (Lengauer, 2011).

Acknowledging that Cambodia is one of China's closest friends in ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), Cambodia appeared to be more comfortably accepting China's assistance and began to bandwagoning. In July 2012, the foreign ministers of the ASEAN assembled in Phnom Penh for their 45th annual meeting. The agenda of their 45th annual meeting is to produce a joint communique as a response to China's far-reaching claims in South China Sea (SCS) disputes. The ASEAN members that directly affected by China's claims sought to deliver a unified message through the joint communique that typically follows the ministers' meeting, such as Vietnam and the Philippines who stressed the claims was a "serious concern." The affected countries expressed that the claims were violating UNCLOS on Exclusive Economic Zone and emphasizing the need for a regional Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea directed to China. But, as a chairman, Cambodia has failed to deliver the South China Sea issue, even to echo China's efforts to reject the request to respect the Arbitral Tribunal on 12 July 2016 through statement from Prime Minister Hun Sen that the CPP (Cambodia's ruling party) is opposing and against any possible declaration by ASEAN to support arbitration court's decision on South China Sea (Xinhua, 2016).

However, Cambodian Foreign Minister Hor Namhong as the meeting's chair, refused to accept that language of joint communique and citing there was a lack of consensus and arguing that ASEAN should avoid "strong wording" that could "escalate tension (Carlyle A. Thayer, 2012)." The 45th annual meeting is over, the negotiations broke down and for the first time in 45 years, and no joint communiqué was issued.

For an outsider, Cambodia appeared to show its loyalty to China as a payback for years of liberal Chinese aid and investment for decades. Former Singaporean diplomat Kishore Mahbubani added, "The whole world, including most of ASEAN countries, perceiving Cambodia's stance as the result of enormous Chinese pressure (Mahbubani, 2012)." In response, Cambodian foreign ministry official Kao Kim Hourn called Mahbubani's claim an "unfair accusation" (Kate, Daniel ten and Nicole Gaouette, 2012) and accused Vietnam and the Philippines of trying to "hijack" the ASEAN meetings and hold the communique to their national interests. Yet the evidence of Chinese influence was clear. Two months after the ASEAN failed annual meeting, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen visited Beijing, where his counterpart Wen Jiabao announced more than US\$500 million in new soft loans and grants to Cambodia. The Chinese government also voiced high appreciation for the part played



by Cambodia as the chair of ASEAN to maintain good cooperation between China and ASEAN (China Post, 2012).

## **5. Cambodia as a Client State**

Despite the rapid economic growth on the rise of China, China has been called as 'the loneliest superpower' (Pei, 2012) because Beijing has few close diplomatic friends. This is the main reason why China deploying its influences to advance its politic agenda, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region. Since the declaration of China global foreign policy Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China's massive investments in weaker countries giving a warning sign that China are impeding the possibility to develop a 'client state'. A client state means that a country that received the assistances of China willing to repay Chinese patronage through a diplomatic supports (Ciorciari, 2014).

Since the beginning of Khmer Empire to this day, Cambodia has been flourishing the good relationship with China even though they are not sharing a direct border. Cambodia has received substantial investment through economic assistance and political backing from Beijing and referring themselves as 'trustworthy friends'. For instance, to repay Chinese assistance, Cambodian government has repatriated Uighur asylum-seekers, defending China's construction of Mekong River dams, and the notable evidence would be Cambodia helped China by adopting a unified position on the South China Sea which affects to Cambodia's relationship with ASEAN member states.

The fundamental principles of any patron-client arrangement is a voluntary and asymmetrical exchange of benefit (Scott, 1972). Voluntary means it based on consensual nature of exchange and the client's willingness to take risks and bear costs to support the patron's vital interests, even in the absence of coercion. Asymmetrical means the extent and the benefits exchange on patron-client arrangements apart from friendly relations between unequal states, typically the client repays the assistance and protection by supporting the patron's diplomatic agenda, economic interests, and military.

Although China seems to be a patron states to Cambodia, for centuries the concept of patron-client have been projected on colonization. European colonial power gave a patronage to favored constituencies to win the 'partial consent' upon their rule (Loomba, 2007). So, the patron-client and colonialism shared a common goal on seeking authority without enforcing costly coercion. For instance, the Soviet Union cultivated clients, such as Castro's Cuba, Nasser's Egypt, unified Vietnam, and Cambodia. United States with its history on patron-client partnerships through democratization.

Usually, the great power patronage comes in military protection which can give the weaker states protection that will lead to considerable leverage to request for reciprocity in autonomy form. Recipients states usually considering the territory, political gain, economic growth before bandwagoning a great power. Chinese patronage characteristic on Cambodia comes in economic booster (e.g., China has become the major FDI investors and lending Cambodia great loans with small

interest through ODA) and political patronage (e.g., Cambodia's reciprocity on supporting China's diplomatic decision). A great power's patronage does not automatically lead to weaker recipients' reciprocity in costly way. China has built the good relationship with Cambodia since the imperial dynasty and the rise of China as a great power gives Cambodia a consideration to rely economically, military, and politically to China.

Even though Cambodia has been receiving assistance and considered as China's permanent client, there is no government wishes to decrease their sovereignty and independence for being a client. Because client-state status may undermine domestic government legitimacy, being alienated by its neighbors, raise the risks of entrapment or abandonment, and may jeopardize both a state's autonomy and security.

The other distinctive characteristic of China's patron-client arrangement is China's model appears less intrusive form than the Western model (colonialization) due to normative commitment between patron-client countries. Through China's 'peaceful development' with the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, which emphasize sovereignty and non-interference to other nations, China has managed to be more successful to gain devotion from its client state. This is also limits on what kind of 'devotion' or reciprocal from its partners, except the 'core' policy issues, such as Taiwan status, the implementation of BRI, and South China Sea disputes.

Cambodian behavior after the failure in 45th annual meeting, there is a growing indication from global view is drifting from a position as "China's closest friend in Southeast Asia" toward something beyond a diplomatic friendship, as a permanent client state or a sub-ordinate state of China. The portrayals of Cambodia as a Chinese permanent client state have had strong normative background, as many critics would implied that Cambodian officials spoke not for themselves but instead as Chinese puppets towards South China Sea disputes.

As a part of ASEAN member, Cambodia fails to address the prime issue on ASEAN's agenda such as the probability of UNCLOS violations on Exclusive Economic Zones in South China Sea. From here, Cambodia has suffered from many allegations from ASEAN member states but still trying to defend China as the effort to repay China's patronage. Cambodian foreign ministry spokesman argued that China prefers to deal bilaterally with each rival South China Sea claimants and resisted to 'internationalized' the disputes by involving the United States and other non-claimant states in negotiations. Also, Cambodian position in ASEAN gave a harder time for other ASEAN Members States (AMS) to exercise their regional interest on South China Sea, because ASEAN was adopting consensus-based diplomacy which gave Cambodia a prime opportunity to imply their diplomatic influence on behalf of Beijing.

Although small states often seek great-power support, their leaders seldom if ever wish to become "clients" because they think that their own freedom of action and the legitimation of their sovereignty. So that the identification as a client state may damaging domestic and diplomatic bad names. Thus, Cambodian leaders have responded fiercely to such claims. In April 2012, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen

said angrily "...What I hate and am fed up with is talk about Cambodian working for China and must be under some kind of influence. That is completely wrong (South China Morning Post, 2012) and added that Cambodia was "not going to be bought by anyone."

In fact, the Sino-Cambodian partnership has taken on a title of patron-client. Ties have strengthened over the past fifteen years largely because policymakers in Phnom Penh have been able to reap considerable economic and political gains from China. However, Cambodia's political economy has evolved to render the country and its elites to be reliant on Chinese aid and thus beholden to the PRC's policy concerns.

In its ideal form, a patron-client relationship, which a patron of superior power and status deploys its resources and influence to provide protection and benefits to the client, who reciprocates with other forms of support and assistance. The contemporary Beijing-Phnom Penh partnership is highly unequal in material terms. Cambodia's population, gross national product, and military spending are all less than 1 percent the size of China's. Therefore, this will give China clear pathway to benefit Cambodia especially in terms of aid and investment.

After One Belt One Road (OBOR) now Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) announced in 2013 under Xi Jinping administration, there is a shifting of China-Cambodia relations especially on financial aids. However, unlike the aid and trade pattern before the BRI, the BRI has changed the original aid pattern and decision making of China's foreign policy, with more clear industrial focus on infrastructure, energy, communication technology, and finance. The initiative has created holistic and focused foreign policy and aid pattern for China's regional strategy.

Sino-Khmer relation is no longer just partnership of goodwill exchanges between two countries who share the same demand on ruling a country. China's Cambodian policy is neither a simply economic clientelism bilateral relation for China to influence a local spokesperson in Southeast Asia. The implementation of BRI has transformed China's recognition of Cambodia's regional function and role in Southeast Asia. And with new aid pattern, Cambodia is become the key hub of Maritime Silk Road in Indochina Peninsular Corridor that would have to join the bidding competition for China's spillover capital and productivity.

Even though having patron-client relationship, China-Cambodia relationship is still based on a consensual exchange. It shown from China's limiting military reach and the implementation of "balancing" option by convincing neighbor states of its peaceful intention without showing coercion. China has shown its good deed to pursue stronger relationship with Cambodia by following the Confucianism thought "not to impose on others what yourself do not desire". So far, the relationship of China-Cambodia is still weighing about the mutual reciprocity too.

Acknowledging that China-Cambodia has a very massive power gap, both in materials (weaponry and economy) and non-material (soft diplomacy), it doesn't necessarily mean there are the needs to exchange the benefits that only favor stronger state (Robert O., Keohane, 1986). In fact, it depends on the value that each party attaches to the benefits that other party provides. For instance, the smaller partner (client)

usually gets their benefit from an economic assistance and various political or military protections in exchange for (some degree) risk of dependence and lessen autonomy. And for the stronger state (patron), usually get a direct access to natural resources (oil, coal, and mines) and special status in certain diplomatic matters, which usually invite critics to label the weaker party a "client".

Any reciprocal partnership entails an exchange of benefits. Although China provides some big economic aids to Cambodia, which reciprocate to some degree of policy deference. Also, China get economic benefits from the relationship, and the Cambodian government gets more funding for development, it gets assistance in a form that win domestic elites but invites foreign critics upon the "reciprocity" acts. Hun Sen and the CPP enjoy genuine appeal in the countryside for delivering relative peace and stability and uneven but significant economic growth to Cambodia. However, their control over the flow of money through key patronage of China remains an important pillar for China interest and the sustainability of China – Cambodia relationships.

## **6. Conclusion**

A client state is a condition of one nation that is economically, politically, or militarily subordinate to another more powerful state in international affairs. For Cambodia as one of less developed country (LDC) and second to the poorest state in Southeast Asia pushing Cambodia to choose to become a client state from a bigger power, People Republic of China right before and after economy boom.

Even though gaining their independence in 1953 from French colony, Cambodia still experiencing shifting from coup to coup, even with the shifting of government, China is still supporting Cambodia as a sovereignty entity. Although Cambodia and China do not share the direct border, they shared a historic relationship from the regime of Norodom Sihanouk until the Prime Minister Hun Sen administrations. After the embargo from Western donors, Cambodia turned to China for a diplomatic support and financial aid. China has used financial aids to maximize the political advantages in Cambodia.

China with its famous five peaceful coexistence principles of foreign policy from the Confucianism thought such as, mutual respect, territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs, quality and cooperation for mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence – gave a chance for Cambodia to grow and use it as a reciprocity deeds.

But even though there has been a closer bilateral ties between China-Cambodia, the relationship began to shifting from Cambodia as "China's closest friend in Southeast Asia" towards something beyond a diplomatic friendship, which is as a permanent client state or a sub-ordinate state of China after the implementation of Belt and Road initiative (BRI) in 2013. The portrayals of Cambodia as a Chinese permanent client state have had strong normative background, as many critics would implied that Cambodian officials spoke not for themselves but instead as Chinese puppets towards South China Sea disputes.

The terms of client state have been rejected by Cambodian officials, for instance Prime Minister Hun Sen angrily confirmed that Cambodia would not be bought by anyone. But in fact, during the 45th ASEAN annual meeting in Cambodia it said the otherwise. Cambodia, as the meeting chair decline the result of joint communique that emphasize the needs of regional Code of Conduct (COC) and response China's far-right claims in South China Sea disputes because the chair thought that it would raise a tension between ASEAN and China. Many ASEAN diplomats condemn what Cambodia officials did. But then, within the ASEAN non-interference norms, the ASEAN states couldn't determine Cambodian stances toward the issue.

However, as it has been discussed above that the financial aids resulted in limitation of Cambodia's economic autonomy and independence. The economic relation between two side, on the one hand, can stabilize Cambodia in infrastructure development. On the other hand, it could encounter high risk of its sovereignty and its credibility in the region. Especially upon the South China Sea disputes, the geopolitical imbalance, and backing up China may create doubts and criticism on Cambodia's membership and engagement integrity within the ASEAN body.

To conclude, even though the China-Cambodia was based on financial aids and heavier to weaker state. But, as long as the relationship still gaining the mutual reciprocity and consent from both nations the relationship will still growing.

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