

# China in the Eyes of Young Cambodians and Implications for Cambodia's Foreign Policy

Neak Chandarith, PhD\*; Heng Kimkong, PhD\*\*; and Gu Jiayun, PhD\*\*\*

China's global image suffered when it was found that the novel coronavirus that caused the global COVID-19 pandemic originated from Wuhan city in the north of China back in early 2020. Discrimination against Chinese people was reported in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak. The blame was particularly placed on China and how it suppressed critical information until it was too late for the rest of the world to prepare for what was coming. In addition to its early mishandling of COVID-19, China's image problem also stemmed from other actions and approaches that have generally not been well received by the international community, particularly democratic countries. For example, it was argued that "China's growing assertiveness and territorial claims in the South China Sea; its practice of no-strings-attached development assistance; its use of debt-trap diplomacy; its Wolf-Warrior diplomacy; and other behavior such as alleged intellectual theft all have had a negative impact on China's regional and international image as well as its efforts to raise its international reputation as a responsible global leader" (Heng, 2020b, para. 13).

A couple of years into the pandemic, however, the narrative has changed. China's ability to control the

spread of COVID-19 became an envy of much of the world. While the rest of the globe was suffering to cope with the irreversible spread of COVID-19, China embarked on its vaccine diplomacy—donating millions of doses of Chinese-made vaccines, Sinovac and Sinopharm, to many countries.

In the case of Cambodia, China has donated 8.3 million doses of Sinovac and Sinopharm vaccines to the country (Huy & Heng, 2022; Royal Government of Cambodia, 2022). It has also offered technical support to help Cambodia fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. The image of China has somehow improved among Cambodian people due in part to China's successful vaccine diplomacy and a continuing inflow of Chinese investment into Cambodia driven by China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative.

## China in the Eyes of Young Cambodians: An Improvement

Back in 2017, a survey of around 500 university students conducted by Heng et al. (2017) revealed that the student participants had an unfavorable view toward China, with less than 30 percent of them wanting Cambodia to have closer relations

\***Dr. Neak Chandarith** is the Designated Director of the Institute for International Studies and Public Policy, Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP). He is also the founding director of Cambodia 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Research Centre at RUPP and a member of Board of Directors at Cambodia Development Center.

\*\***Dr Heng Kimkong** is the Co-founder and Editor-in-Chief of the Cambodian Education Forum. He is also a lecturer at Pāññāsāstra University of Cambodia and a Visiting Senior Research Fellow at Cambodia Development Center.

\*\*\* **Dr. Gu Jiayun** is the Director of the Center for Cambodian Studies, Beijing Foreign Studies University.



with China than the United States. About 20 percent of them believed that the Chinese presence (people, businesses, investment, etc.) in Cambodia was negative. Moreover, almost two-thirds (63.5%) of them thought that China's engagement with Cambodia was more about Chinese interests.

Nonetheless, the status quo of the Chinese image seems to have changed in the eyes of young Cambodians, at least based on a recent survey co-conducted in 2021 by the Center for Cambodian Studies at Beijing Foreign Studies University and the Cambodia 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Research Center at the Royal University of Phnom Penh (Gu et al., 2022).

The survey involved 342 participants who were university students (57.31%), civil servants (12.57%), educators (10.53%), corporate employees (7.02%), and others (about 12%). The results showed that around 70 percent of these young Cambodians (three-quarters of them aged between 21-30) rated between 7 to 10 on a scale of 0 (no contribution) to 10 (enormous contribution) for the contribution of Chinese companies to Cambodia's economic development. Likewise, around 67% of them rated 7 to 10 for Chinese companies' contribution to improving Cambodian people's livelihood.

When asked whether they would like to work in a Chinese-funded company, more than 70 percent of them chose "Yes," indicating the attractiveness of Chinese enterprises to young Cambodians. Moreover, more than 60 percent of the participants wanted to see more Chinese companies investing in Cambodia. They also expressed their desire to study in or travel to China.

Based on the results of the survey, it appears that the perceptions of Cambodian people about China have changed, in a positive way. The results could be explained by looking at a few points. Firstly, the foreign direct investment—much of which has come from China in recent years—has made a great impact on Cambodian society. Although Chinese investment in Cambodia has had negative

consequences on the lives and livelihoods of some segments of the Cambodian population (Po & Heng, 2019), the investment has in general contributed to positive socioeconomic development, particularly in terms of employment and infrastructure development. Notable infrastructure development includes 3,000 kilometers of national roads, the USD 2 billion Phnom Penh-Sihanoukville Expressway, eight large-scale bridges, seven hydropower plants, and other China-funded infrastructure projects (Xinhua, 2022).

Secondly, it is about the reliability of China. Many small states like Cambodia turn to China for a reliable source of economic and political support. Not only does Chinese aid come without strings attached, but such aid also tends to be given as what was previously pledged or promised and in a substantial amount. Chinese aid and investment, for example, has significantly transformed Cambodia and the Cambodian way of life (Heng & Po, 2017).

Thirdly, it is the rise of China that has shaped the new world order and influenced how the world sees China. Although experts have put forward conflicting arguments regarding the end result of the rise of China—a global threat or an international peace—China has not waged war on or directly colonized any country (Heng, 2017). In addition, although China is a communist country, its economic might and no-strings-attached aid have made many countries, including Cambodia, see China in a favorable way.

All of these three points, together with the increasing uncertainty in the global world order and the growing unreliability of the United States as a world leader (Walt, 2018), have contributed to increasing China's soft power and influence. It is only a matter of time, given the current trends and global developments, until China surpasses the US to be the leading world leader.

### **Implications for Cambodia's Foreign Policy**

In the eyes of young Cambodians, the image of China has improved, as confirmed by the results of the above-mentioned survey co-conducted by

Chinese and Cambodian research institutes. This change in perceptions has implications for Cambodia-China relations and how both countries can further strengthen their ties. However, at the same time, the Cambodian government needs to ensure that the Chinese investment and aid are effectively and transparently managed to avoid backlash that may affect how China and its assistance are perceived by the Cambodian people. In addition, it is imperative for the Cambodian government to ensure that its ties with China do not undermine its relations with other major powers, particularly the United States, Japan, Australia, and other Western countries.

To further improve Cambodians' perceptions of China and the Chinese people, as well as strengthen Cambodia's ties with China and other countries, the Cambodian government needs to be proactive in strategizing its foreign policy and international relations. The goal is to ensure that the Sino-Cambodian relations are not seen as biased toward China at the expense of Cambodia's relations with other countries. There is also a need to dispel doubt regarding Cambodia's alleged secret agreement with China in relation to the Ream Naval Base (Page et al., 2019).

Although Cambodia has tried to deny the allegations and show to other countries that it did not sign a secret deal with China to allow the latter access to its naval base, the Cambodian government also needs to carefully navigate its ties and foreign affairs with China in a way that showcases Cambodia's neutrality and independence.

Without doubt, Cambodia's tight alignment with China will continue to draw attention from the West, especially the US. As a result, Cambodia continues to be on the radar of the US and appears to be caught in the middle of the US-China rivalry in the Southeast Asian region and the wider Indo-Pacific (Heng, 2020a). In this regard, it is essential that the Cambodian government needs to be mindful of this critical issue and how it is perceived by the Cambodian public and the international community.

Moving forward, a pragmatic and flexible foreign policy will be a top priority for Cambodia's international affairs to maximize socioeconomic interests and sustainable development. However, at the same time, a foreign policy that is seen as neutral and independent is also crucial to ensure Cambodia's positive image on the regional and global stage as well as how the country is perceived by its own people and the international community. Cambodia and the Cambodian diplomats, therefore, have a huge task to accomplish to project Cambodia positively in the international arena.

## References

- Gu, J., Xu, L., & Wang, C. (2022). *China in young eyes: Results of a 2021 survey on young Cambodians' understanding of China*. Center for Cambodian Studies and Cambodia 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Research Center.  
<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/lv4Si82UDr7ETBbf9NnvhA>
- Heng, K. (2020a, June 17). Cambodia: Caught in the middle. *The Interpreter*.  
<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/cambodia-caught-middle>
- Heng, K. (2020b, July 27). China's image problem during Covid-19 crisis. *Asia Times*.  
<https://asiatimes.com/2020/07/chinas-image-problem-during-covid-19-crisis/>
- Heng, K. (2017). China's rise: Global threat or international peace. *UC Occasional Paper Series*, 1(1), 1-18.
- Heng, K. & Po, S. (2017). Cambodia and China's Belt and Road Initiative: Opportunities, challenges and future directions. *UC Occasional Paper Series*, 1(2), 1-18.
- Heng, K., Toch, S., Sao, C., Chet, V., & Chan, D. (2017). Perceptions of Cambodian university students on Cambodia's foreign policy toward the US and China. *UC Occasional Paper Series*, 1(1), 41-67.

Huy, A., & Heng, K. (2022). Cambodia's successful COVID-19 response: A showcase of a whole-of-society approach. *Cambodia Development Center*.  
<https://www.cd-center.org/cambodias-successful-covid-19-response-a-showcase-of-a-whole-of-society-approach/>

Page, J., Lubold, G., & Taylor, R. (2019, July 22). Deal for naval outpost in Cambodia furthers China's quest for military network. *The Wall Street Journal*.  
<https://www.wsj.com/articles/secret-deal-for-chinese-naval-outpost-in-cambodia-raises-u-s-fears-of-beijings-ambitions-11563732482>

Po, S. & Heng, K. (2019). Assessing the impacts of Chinese investments in Cambodia: The

case of Preah Sihanoukville province. *Issues and Insights Vol. 17, Working Paper 04*, Pacific Forum.

Royal Government of Cambodia. (2022). *Development cooperation and partnerships report*. Phnom Penh: Cambodian Rehabilitation and Development Board, Council for the Development of Cambodia.

Walt, S. M. (2018, April 10). America can't be trusted anymore. *Foreign Policy*.  
<https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/04/10/america-cant-be-trusted-anymore/>

Xinhua. (2022, May 28). *Cambodian PM praises China as key contributor to country's infrastructure, electricity development*.  
<http://english.news.cn/20220528/e4d55fed332148029b6bd44b3e6c2929/c.html>



Cambodia Development Center



Cambodia Development Center (@cd.centerkh)



Cambodia Development Center



Cambodia Development Center (t.me/cdcenterkh)



Kampus Building, Unit D1, Street 93, Sangkat Tonle Bassac, Khan Chamkarmon



info@cd-center.org |



(+855) 10 950 456



www.cd-center.org

