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Chinese Linkage, Leverage, and Cambodia's Transition to Hegemonic Authoritarianism

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Chinese Linkage, Leverage, and Cambodia's Transition to Hegemonic Authoritarianism

This article considers authoritarian linkage politics and its relationship to regime stability. Between 2012 and 2018, Cambodia experienced its worst political crisis in a decade. During this period, China's economic assistance, diplomatic backing and military exchanges have cemented it as the ruling Cambodian People's Party's (CPP) most important foreign partner. This article's findings support the linkage thesis: that ties between authoritarian regimes enhance their survival in moments of crisis. The article provides evidence for the specific forms of linkages that proved vital to the CPP during a transition from competitive to hegemonic authoritarianism. It shows that alongside more familiar linkage ties, the CPP also drew on more diffuse types of authoritarian cooperation and emulation, while Chinese discourses on non-interference and the right to develop provided an authoritarian nexus supporting CPP legitimization narratives in defiance of challengers. The article reflects on Cambodia's variant of hegemonic authoritarianism in light of these observations. Finally, the argument draws attention to leverage exercised on Cambodia by China as a consequence of these linkages, which have been beneficial to China's strategic and military interests in Southeast Asia. In the current moment of autocratization and great power competition globally, this has implications for research beyond Cambodia.

Introduction

This article considers authoritarian linkage politics and its relationship to regime stability. Between 2012 and 2018, Cambodia experienced its worst political crisis in a decade. During this period, China's economic assistance, diplomatic backing, and military exchanges with Cambodia have cemented it as the ruling Cambodian People's Party's (CPP) most important foreign partner during its transition from competitive to hegemonic authoritarianism.¹ These linkages have raised questions as the role China played in Cambodia's transition,² which occurred in the context of increasing great power competition globally.

The article considers Cambodia-China relations through the framework of authoritarian linkage: the ties between authoritarian regimes across a spectrum of political, economic,

¹ Morgenbesser, "Cambodia's Transition."

² IRI, "Malign Influence," 11.

military and/or social dimensions.³ Specifically it uses within-case analysis to examine in detail the process of regime transition in Cambodia, and the ruling CPP's efforts to leverage ties with China to enhance its domestic position during a moment of political crisis. Alongside more familiar dimensions of leverage and linkage, the article draws attention to diffuse processes of cooperation, coordination and emulation, including as related to shared legitimacy justification for autocratic rule. The article reflects on Cambodia's variant of hegemonic authoritarianism in light of these observations. The article situates Cambodia's transition in the context of a changing international environment linked to a rising China and growing US-China rivalry, with linkage politics operating alongside and within broader international political dynamics. These are suggested to have been a factor in CPP calculations in dealing with the political crisis at home, adapting its survival strategies to a new geostrategic context. It also explains the leverage exercised on Cambodia by China in service of its own strategic interests.

The article's findings contribute to debates in the study of democratization and authoritarianism in several ways. First, the study shows that Chinese linkage was a stabilising factor in Cambodia's transition, supporting the authoritarian linkage thesis. Second, China's offer of aid and investment without democratic strings did appear to reduce the efficacy of democracy promotion in Cambodia, contrary to studies that have suggested Chinese presence is a limited threat to US and EU democratization efforts.⁴ Third it draws attention to the CPP's adaptive strategies and adoption of Chinese discourses on the norms of non-intervention in domestic affairs and the collective right to development that suggest the narrative power of shared authoritarian legitimacy claims. Finally, China has leveraged the CPP's reliance on it to advance its military and strategic interests showing, as with theories of democratization, the importance of linkage for exercising leverage. The consequences of that leverage in the present moment of "a third wave of autocratization"⁵ globally in the context of escalating "great power"⁶ and "systemic"⁷ rivalry, has implications beyond Cambodia.

To support its arguments, the article relies on a variety of material collected during more than a year of fieldwork in Cambodia 2017-2020. This includes internal CPP literature, speeches made by Prime Minister Hun Sen, elite and other interviews, online media, non-government

³ Tansey and Koehler, "Ties to the Rest," 1222.

⁴ Hackenesch, "Not as Bad".

⁵ Lührmann and Lindberg, "Third Wave."

⁶ Kroenig, "The Return."

⁷ EC, "EU-China."

organisation (NGO) reports and publicly available government documents. Interviews were semi-structured and related to two broad themes of the research: 1) what explains the CPP's durability in power since 1979 and, 2) how have the CPP's external relations changed over time? Interviews were obtained via a "cascade" methodology and respondents were also selected based on expertise of CPP policymaking and institutional logics. Limitations included respondents wishing to remain anonymous and difficulties cross-referencing information obtained from regime insiders, however every effort was made to corroborate evidence and reach out broadly to obtain information. Interviewees directly cited in this article include CPP and military officials, embassy staff, local and foreign analysts, academics, NGO workers, and business tycoons. This article is structured in three parts following this introduction. First it provides the framework for analysing Cambodia's transition. It then elaborates on the domestic drivers and international context of Cambodia's transition, analysing the types of linkages and shared narratives that were significant during Cambodia's political crisis, and as they relate to Cambodia's hegemonic authoritarian regime. The paper then considers the new dimensions of authoritarian leverage, focusing on military and security ties. The article concludes by restating its main findings and suggesting avenues for future research.

Cambodia and the Third Wave of Autocratization

According to Lührmann and Lindberg, a third wave of autocratization is currently underway.⁸ This amounts to a degradation of democratic traits in democracies and in authoritarian regimes that have adopted democratic-looking practices. In Cambodia's authoritarian regime this has manifested in its transition from competitive to hegemonic authoritarianism.⁹ The literature on Cambodia's recent political crisis has emphasised local-level dynamics to explain this transition.¹⁰ There has been little exploration of its international dimensions.¹¹ However, scholars have shown the need to examine the complex interplay between exogenous and endogenous factors of regime transitions,¹² and there are several reasons to consider international dimensions as significant in explaining Cambodia's autocratization. Over the past two decades, China has become an increasingly important actor in Cambodia's diplomatic, economic and military spheres. It is Cambodia's largest source of foreign direct investment,

⁸ Lührmann and Lindberg, "Third Wave."

⁹ "According to Levitsky and Way, "hegemonic regimes are those in which elections are so marred by repression, candidate restrictions, and/or fraud that there is no uncertainty about their outcome." Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*, 7.

¹⁰ Loughlin, "Reassessing;" Un, *Return to Authoritarianism*.

¹¹ The exception being Un, *Return to Authoritarianism*, 55-8.

¹² Wong, "Chinese Influence."

and human rights monitors interviewed for this research drew attention to the “exponential” growth of Cambodia’s China ties particularly in the context of the post 2013 political crisis as a critical factor in its autocratization and worsening human rights situation.¹³ According to a senior foreign military official with decades experience in Cambodia in 2018, “a year or so ago people talked about China. Now it’s all we talk about.”¹⁴

Emerging literature on authoritarian linkage and diffusion offers the opportunity for such an analysis, as scholars have begun to consider linkages between authoritarian regimes as important for explaining authoritarian outcomes. Consolidating much of this research, Tansey et al identify four causal mechanisms of authoritarian linkage that provide the basic framework of analysis employed in this article. The first emphasises incentives among important domestic backers of the regime such as military or business groups to maintain the status quo and avoid actions that would imperil or challenge the patronage or other benefits they receive through existing foreign ties. The second relates to the ways that linkages with authoritarian regimes will blunt the democratizing and punishment regimes imposed by democracies on governments that challenge democratic norms. In these instances, authoritarian linkage provides an alternative to international pariah status, and a source of continued legitimacy and stability for regimes in crisis. Thirdly, in times of crisis autocratic supporters may provide direct financial assistance to authoritarian partner regimes, providing external sponsorship to ensure their survival. Finally, close ties between authoritarian regimes can facilitate learning processes, and spur the emulation of authoritarian tactics as the regime in crisis seeks to find ways to ensure its survival.¹⁵ These linkages are considered in detail in the following sections, with particular attention paid to Chinese investment sustaining elite patronage relations vital for the CPP to maintain its ruling coalition, and new innovations by the regime in emulating authoritarian tactics and narratives.

The focus on international dimensions of Cambodia’s transition also provides the opportunity to reflect on Cambodia’s variant of hegemonic authoritarianism and the third wave of autocratization. In a recent contribution, Morgenbesser argued that broad regime categories insufficiently capture the complexity within authoritarian regime types and introduced

¹⁴ Author interview with embassy military analyst. Phnom Penh. 9 December 2018.

¹⁵ Tansey et al, “Ties to the Rest,” 1225-1227.

subtypes of retrograde and sophisticated authoritarianism to better capture within category variation. Under this typology regimes are categorised by the extent to which they successfully mimic the attributes of democracy.¹⁶ According to Morgenbesser, Cambodia represents a variant of retrograde authoritarianism that, while having become more sophisticated over time, exhibits signs of decay. However, by drawing attention to Cambodia's China linkages and the international dimensions of its transition, in this paper I suggest that the CPP's hegemonic regime exhibits a level of sophistication missed by focusing on the degree to which it deviates from indicators associated with democracy. The evidence presented here suggest that Cambodia's authoritarianism is adaptive¹⁷ and innovative,¹⁸ with the CPP exploiting authoritarian linkages within a changing international context, adopting shared techniques to ensure regime survival, and foregrounding a shared narrative with China shielding its authoritarian tactics and making legitimacy claims that in some instances pre-date China's influence, but which are strengthened by their mutual recognition.

This focus on the shared dimension of international authoritarianism also serves to highlight the "narrative power"¹⁹ and normative utility of Chinese discourses, which I show are utilized by the regime in Phnom Penh to validate its more authoritarian turn. The literature on international authoritarianism has tended to underplay authoritarianism's soft power characteristics and ideological attractiveness, particularly in contrast to liberal democracy. However, evidence from Cambodia's transition suggest that China's narrative power has been significant for the CPP to make the case for its legitimacy and to justify repressive actions in the service of its regime survival. Like all regimes, the CPP makes legitimacy claims which work in parallel its ability to co-opt important social groups and repress challengers, which together account for regime stability.²⁰ In the absence of electoral or other validity the CPP has turned to mimic discourses emanating from Beijing. This focus on narratives and soft power

¹⁶ Morgenbesser, "Rise of Sophisticated," 8.

¹⁷ Nguon, "Adaptive," 2020.

¹⁸ Recent scholarship by Morgenbesser has noted the CPP's innovations in Morgenbesser 2020, "Menu."

¹⁹ Chang, "Post Pandemic."

²⁰ Gerschewski, "Three Pillars," 14.

provides an added dimension of authoritarian diffusion and cooperation rarely commented on in the literature on China as an international authoritarian actor beyond the more common focus on its geostrategic goals driving its international engagements. However, as I show in the final section of this paper, these are also well served through China's authoritarian linkages with Cambodia.²¹

Authoritarian Linkage and Cambodia's Transition to Hegemonic Authoritarianism

Cambodia's transition to hegemonic authoritarianism was spurred by the emergence of a united political opposition, the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), in 2012. In the national election in 2013 the CNRP was able to channel discontent from among rural communities, youth, and labour dissatisfied with the CPP into an unexpectedly potent electoral force, nearly unseating the CPP in that election. The threat of the opposition only grew over the crisis period and was fiercely repressed by the regime's politicised security forces,²² but which did little to blunt the CNRP's growing electoral popularity. The extent of that popularity was clear in the local election in August 2017, when the opposition's share of the ballot signalled to observers and to the CPP that the CNRP could return a majority in the national election scheduled for July the following year.²³ Amidst a broader crackdown on civil society, greater violations of basic civil liberties, and monopolization of media, and the law, in November 2017 the partisan Supreme Court dissolved the popular opposition party and jailed its in-country leader, Kem Sokha.²⁴ In 2018, for the first time in 25 years, Cambodia held effectively one-party elections marking the denouement of the transition to hegemonic authoritarianism.²⁵

An internal unreleased CPP history provides a rare glimpse into the party's strategic thinking in the early stages of the crisis and the interplay between endogenous drivers and international factors in Cambodia's regime transition.²⁶ This document reflected on China's more assertive position on global matters and perceptions of US decline, and the possibilities it presented to Cambodia as a counterweight to US intrusion in the domestic affairs of small states under the

²¹ Hasenkamp, "China and Autocracy," Chapter 7.

²² Loughlin, "Reassessing Cambodia's Patronage".

²³ Author interview with senior election monitor, Phnom Penh, August 2017.

²⁴ Lawrence, "Outlawing Opposition."

²⁵ "Hegemonic regimes are those in which elections are so marred by repression, candidate restrictions, and/or fraud that there is no uncertainty about their outcome." Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*, 7.

²⁶ Wong, "Chinese Influence."

guise of democratization. It noted: “The top world superpower [មហាអំណាចកំពូលពិភពលោក] [the USA]”²⁷ has promoted a unipolar strategy... [but] is experiencing difficulties and several major tests... making the prestige of the [USA] weak.”²⁸ On the other hand, China and other large powers are increasingly able to curb “the top emperor [អធិបតីកំពូល] intensions of the [USA].”²⁹ In the view of the CPP, “China’s strategy is to continue “to grow strongly... intensifying its ties with regional countries... [and is] determined that the Asia-Pacific region is the region that deals with the most important Chinese interests.”³⁰ Similarly, in July 2015, at a closed private speech to members of his elite Bodyguard Unit, Hun Sen explained the need to move towards closer relations with China, quipping that the government should not allow anyone to “shake its hand in order to step on its feet,” a reference to US meddling in Cambodia’s affairs.³¹

This section provides evidence of the ways in which the CPP leveraged its linkage ties to China to enhance its domestic position through its transition to hegemonic authoritarianism and positioned itself within the changing geostrategic dynamics it sees as unfolding in Asia. The following discussion highlights key areas of cooperation, support, learning and diffusion together with previously relatively neglected discursive aspects of Chinese linkage, which are shown to be highly pertinent in the Cambodian case. Drawing on Gerschewski,³² it also reflects on what this means for regime stability under Cambodia’s adaptive hegemonic authoritarianism. Regime stability is shown to be reliant on exogenous justifications for regime legitimacy reflecting its weakened domestic claims among the electorate, while buttressing the CPP’s support among strategic elite actors and reinforcing the repressive foundations of CPP rule.

Linkage Politics in Cambodia’s Transition

According to Tansey et al “where state revenues depend in significant part on international autocratic linkages, any regime change could put patronage-based benefits at risk,” making elite defection unlikely.³³ This describes the situation in Cambodia, and the CPP has proven

²⁷ Cambodian People’s Party, *History of the Struggle*, 99.

²⁸ Cambodian People’s Party, *History of the Struggle*, 99-100

²⁹ Cambodian People’s Party, *History of the Struggle*, 101.

³⁰ Cambodian People’s Party, *History of the Struggle*, 315.

³¹ Notes supplied to author on a debriefing of an attendee of a meeting at Bodyguard Command on 23 July 2015.

³² Gerschewski, “Three Pillars.”

³³ Tansey et al, “Ties to the Rest,” 1225.

adept at managing its patronage resource to maintain the support of its elite backers, with investment from China now driving this arrangement. Since Cambodia was opened up to free-market capitalism in the 1990s, private capital, state-party and military interests have become deeply entwined in Cambodia's ruling coalition.³⁴ In theory outside investment inserts into a larger strategy pursued by the CPP in securing performance legitimacy amongst the broader population. Under this system infrastructure, construction, and industrial development is presented to the public as evidence of the CPP's performance legitimacy, providing jobs and economic benefits shared by all.³⁵ Internal CPP polling conducted in private in 2016 suggested that infrastructural development of roads, bridges etc was indeed the CPP's strongest source of legitimacy among ordinary Cambodians.³⁶ Yet this has not translated into sufficient electoral support to maintain even a competitive authoritarian system, with corruption and other policies undermining the CPP's developmental legitimacy.³⁷

What this system does effectively prop up is Cambodia's crony-capitalist networks of state-party and economic elites. Opportunities for wealth accumulation is dependent on the support of the Prime Minister Hun Sen and other high-ranking CPP officials, who allocate contracts and other wealth-generating opportunities to strategic actors, with a proportion of this wealth fed back to state-party interests, including to members of the security forces. Chinese investment has become deeply embedded in this system over time.³⁸ China is Cambodia's largest foreign economic stakeholder by far, accounting for 23% of all foreign investment in Cambodia between 2000 and 2018.³⁹ The quid-pro-quo of this arrangement is the political stability guaranteed by the CPP and the Prime Minister protecting Chinese economic interests in Cambodia,⁴⁰ maintaining the inflow of foreign capital investment to the CPP's elite clients. This point was confirmed to me at the peak of the political crisis by one of Cambodia's most prominent tycoons.⁴¹ According also to a leading Chinese realtor in Cambodia, it is this guarantee of stability under the CPP that makes Cambodia a very attractive place for even small-scale Chinese investors, who benefit from access to dollars and the lax regulatory environment, and which feeds back into Cambodia's patronage politics, whereby "a typical

³⁴ Heder, "Hun Sen's Consolidation."

³⁵ For the articulation of this philosophy, see Hun, "Selected Impromptu."

³⁶ SHAVIV, "Public Opinion Research Cambodia" (2016).

³⁷ Loughlin, "Reassessing."

³⁸ Un, "China's Foreign Investment."

³⁹ OECD, "Investment Policy," 49.

⁴⁰ Hughes, "Understanding the Election," 15.

⁴¹ Author interview with leading construction and real estate tycoon, Phnom Penh, 28 February 2017.

joint venture is Chinese bringing money to really carry out the project with a piece of land provided by a local tycoon.”⁴²

There is ample evidence of the success of this stable arrangement for securing patronage benefits to regime-dependent tycoons through Chinese state-backed contracts in the transition period, supported at the highest levels by both the Chinese and Cambodian government. This success was evident in the list of comprehensive deals signed off between Chinese state and private enterprises and the CPP government and tycoons in January 2018 during the visit of Li Keqian, Premier of China’s State Council. As example, one of Cambodia’s leading banking and construction tycoons, Pung Kheav Se, inked a deal with the Chairman of the China Development Bank to develop the new Phnom Penh airport, a project estimated to cost USD\$1.5bn. Inspecting the construction site later following a donation from Pung to build the CPP’s new Headquarters, the Prime Minister noted the tycoon “is also a member of the Cambodian People’s Party; why would he be unwilling to contribute? [...] It is an art of sharing.”⁴³ This circular arrangement, whereby Cambodia’s tycoons’ interests are served by their close relationship with the CPP and its close relations with China provide a strong incentive to support the regime in crisis.

A second critical constituency benefitting from the status quo of CPP-secured Chinese patronage are the security forces. In Cambodia’s blurred military and civilian political apparatus high-ranking military officials are simultaneously CPP Central Committee members, giving them a political role alongside their military functions. The military form the repressive backbone of CPP stability, which the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF) Deputy Commander-in-chief and commander of the powerful military police Sao Sokha described to me as necessary to “make possible investment and economic wellbeing for the country.”⁴⁴ The type of stability provided was emphasised when the security forces brutally suppressed anti-regime demonstrations in 2013 and 2014. The military has received direct financial aid from China during the crisis period (*The Khmer Times*, June 18, 2018), and military officials and lower-ranking soldiers share in the distribution of patronage resources.⁴⁵ This includes the involvement of senior military officials allegedly involved in supporting Chinese business

⁴² Author interview with Chinese real estate broker, Phnom Penh, 22 January 2017

⁴³ Hun, “Excerpts.”

⁴⁴ Author interview with General Sao Sokha, Deputy Head of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF), Phnom Penh, 17 February 2017

⁴⁵ Loughlin, “Reassessing.”

activities in Cambodia (*The Khmer Times*, December 29, 2016). Given the relatively meagre official sums allocated to the RCAF through the central budget compared to its total number of troops, this military aid is a vital line of financial support.⁴⁶ Greater security cooperation and direct aid also results in greater materiel and professionalisation for the army, reportedly a key objective of Hun Manet, the Prime Minister's eldest son and the country's de-facto military commander.⁴⁷

According to Tansey et al, "channels of autocratic linkage... shape the intensity of democracy enforcement likely to be faced by norm-violating autocratic regimes."⁴⁸ At the individual level, in the wake of the political crisis, individual sanctions have been imposed on CPP-aligned tycoons and security officials, for example Cambodia's biggest logging baron, Try Pheap, who was punished by the US under the Magnitsky act in 2019. Blunting any such economic impact, however, in April 2018, he had signed an agreement to build a new seaport in the Southern province of Kampot Guangxi Beibu Gulf International Port Group in Kampot Province, where he also has a USD\$400 million project to build an industrial park and oil refinery (*The Khmer Times*, April 25, 2018). At the macroeconomic level, in 2020 China and Cambodia announced a Free Trade Agreement that will mitigate the impacts of the partial suspension of Cambodia's preferential access to the internal EU market as a result of Cambodia's more authoritarian turn,⁴⁹ a move also being considered by the USA. The US is Cambodia's largest trading partner, while the EU is its largest export market for the critical garment sector, buying 43 percent of these products in 2018. Cambodia's garment sector employs around 750,000 people, and garment workers were key participants in the countermovement to the CPP from 2013.⁵⁰ The significance of this suspension was made clear to me in interviews I conducted with trade officials and union leaders in 2018 and 2020, who noted the threatened suspension raised considerable concern among parts of the CPP's support coalition, including the tycoon business class.⁵¹

In the past, trade preferences had given the USA and the EU considerable leverage over the Cambodian government to push it to follow human rights principles and comply with basic

⁴⁶ World Bank, "Military Expenditure."

⁴⁷ Author Interview with embassy military analyst, Phnom Penh, February, 10, 2017

⁴⁸ Tansey et al, "Ties to the Rest," 1226.

⁴⁹ European Commission. "Trade/Human Rights."

⁵⁰ Un, *Return to Authoritarianism*, 47.

⁵¹ Author interview with Foreign Trade Official, Skype, December 2018.

democratic norms. The FTA offers the CPP the chance to counter this leverage, with support from China. Reports in CPP friendly media that “China will find ways of helping Cambodia” (*The Khmer Times*, April 21, 2019), and “China will support the decision of the Cambodian government in resisting any intimidation or force from the West” (*The Phnom Penh Post*, 13 June 2019) were a direct challenge to US and EU policies in Cambodia. The vitality of Chinese support as a bulwark against these sanctions was confirmed by the CPP in 2020, when Pou Sothirak, Cambodia’s Commerce Minister, noted, “this very huge market access enables Cambodia to diversify its products and markets and reduce over-reliance on a few trading partners, i.e., Europe, U.S., and Canada, who traditionally trade with Cambodia on a concessional basis such as Everything But Arms (EBA), Generalized System of Preferences (GSP)” (*Xinhua*, August 7, 2020).

Chinese support has thus given the CPP a degree of leverage to push back against the constraints placed on it by the US and other actors and avoid international pariah status. This was evident in the language employed in a series of letters between President Trump and Prime Minister Hun Sen in 2019, which provides a window into US strategic re-engagement with Cambodia in the context of renewed great power competition in the Indo-Pacific. The President urged Hun Sen that “it is important for the future of our bilateral relationship that you put Cambodia back on the path of democratic governance,” but he reassured the Prime Minister that “the United States respects the sovereign will of the Cambodian people and we do not seek regime change” (*VOA*, November 28, 2019). Significantly, he urged Hun Sen to “re-evaluate certain decisions taken by your government that the United States firmly believes puts a great risk the Kingdom Cambodia’s long-term sovereignty, stability, and economic development,” a clear reference to the CPP’s own emphasis on stability and sovereignty reframed in the context of the party’s closer relations with China (*VOA*, November 28, 2019). In a number of interviews I conducted in Cambodia in 2020, human rights monitors made the point to me that closer relations with China were curbing the possibility of further action and their influence on countries to pressure Cambodia to respect its international human rights obligations.⁵² This echoed an opinion piece to Japanese media by Human Rights Watch, which accused the Japanese government of being “willing to throw its principles out the window to compete with China.”⁵³ This points to the leverage that the CPP can exercise by virtue of growing strategic

⁵² For example: author interview with development practitioner 4, February 2020; Interview with international human rights monitor 1, Phnom Penh, March 2020.

⁵³ HRW, “Japan Should.”

competition in the region, a point Hun Sen addressed bluntly in a speech in 2020 when he claimed, “if other countries are concerned about China’s presence [in Cambodia] they should increase their investments too.”⁵⁴ The result is that Cambodia’s close economic and diplomatic linkages to China have enabled it to maintain its elite patronage networks, mitigate the impacts of sanctions imposed by the US and other countries, and avoid international isolation.

Shared Narratives, and Cambodia’s Adaptive Authoritarianism

The linkages so far discussed in this paper reside within a broader narrative framework shaping CPP-China relations, and which simultaneously highlight more diffuse areas of convergence and support corresponding with “processes of learning and emulation associated with diffusion.”⁵⁵ This reveals a critical linkage between authoritarian regimes sustaining the CPP in crisis through the CPP’s adoption of Chinese discourses on the norms of non-intervention in domestic affairs, and the collective right to development. It also appears to make explicit a convincing dimension of autocracy’s legitimacy justification in terms of its ideology potential and narrative power.⁵⁶

China has for decades prioritised socio-economic rights in its public discourse deflecting outside criticism of its political and economic policies, recently reconfirming that “safeguarding the right to development is the precondition for realizing economic, cultural, social and environmental rights, and obtaining civil and political rights.”⁵⁷ As Malin Oud has noted, emphasis on the right to development from China has opened the door for other authoritarian regimes to echo this sentiment in support of their own political interests, while pushing back against previous democratic and human rights norms.⁵⁸ In Cambodia this rhetoric has been wholly adopted by the CPP to justify the dissolution of the opposition on grounds that the CPP must protect stability by outlawing the destabilising opposition, thus protecting the right to development. It further exhibits the CPP’s adaptive capacities in shaping and responding to threats to its rule.

At the core of these claims is the CPP as the party of stability, the party of development and the party of peace, rearticulating longstanding legitimacy claims from 1990s when its

⁵⁴ Hun, “Discourse.”

⁵⁵ Tansey et al, “Ties to the Rest,” 1227.

⁵⁶ Chang, “Post Pandemic.”

⁵⁸ Oud, “Harmonic Convergence” 83-4.

democratic illegitimacy was exposed having failed to win elections freely and fairly in that decade.⁵⁹ This suggests now that the regime understands that it cannot continue to disguise that its democratic credibility is a farce, and is reshaping its legitimacy narrative to incorporate the added dimension of a shared authoritarian story with China. The result is that these pre-existing legitimacy claims correspond with, and are strengthened by, their shared narrative tropes and mutual recognition, instrumentalised by the CPP to deal with the political crisis from 2013.

The narrative in its updated form directly privileges “peace, stability, growth and prosperity” above human rights and democracy, a sentiment captured in the text and title of a document released in English by the Cambodian government in the months leading up to election in 2018: “Cambodia: Stability and Development First.”⁶⁰ At the core of this narrative is attention to external forces driving instability, with the USA presented as the key perpetrator. The CNRP is then depicted as a Trojan horse for the USA to pursue its interests via regime change. As the crisis unfolded from 2013, senior CPP officials launched blistering attacks in public against what it perceived as its unfair and biased support of the political opposition by the USA, while in private refining the narrative that would eventually be used to justify the CNRP’s dissolution and the further decline of political relations with democratic countries in favour of closer relations with China. Thus, the CPP claimed in an internal party document shortly after the election in 2013:

[T]he United States continues to stand behind and uphold the opposition party through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the US organizations such as the International Republican Institute (IRI), the National Democratic Institute (NDI), NGOs and other US forces to oppose CPP and the Royal Government of Cambodia.⁶¹

These claims were echoed in an 2016 internal presentation to provincial police laying out the charges against the perceived opposition forces in Cambodia, and the measures needed to suppress them and foreign meddling in Cambodia’s internal affairs.⁶² It was later expanded into 132-page treatise for public dissemination.⁶³

China does not have a monopoly on authoritarianism and the CPP’s claims of outside interference correspond with rhetoric on colour revolutions adapted from other authoritarian

⁵⁹ See for example speech quoted in Eckhardt and Fontaine, “Hun Sen Dwells.”

⁶⁰ MFAIC, “Stability and Development First,” 5.

⁶¹ CPP, “History of the Struggle,” 202.

⁶² Presentation by Chhay Sinarith to provincial police chiefs, 2016. No title. Document in author’s possession.

⁶³ PQRU, “Strengthening of the Nation.”

regimes, most notably post-Soviet nations supported to various degrees by Russia.⁶⁴ However, the case of Cambodia suggests a discursive utility to shared discourses between China and Cambodia, with China playing the vital role in providing international legitimacy to the CPP's claims. CPP assertions of outside meddling in its internal affairs echo concurrent narratives emanating from China in 2015, that "anti-China forces have never given up their attempt to instigate a 'color revolution' in this country."⁶⁵ In China this 'revolution' was suppressed a decade earlier through the same kinds of crackdown on NGOs accused of fostering colour revolution in Cambodia.⁶⁶ Reporting back on the 14th ASEAN EXPO held in Beijing in 2017 an advisor the Prime Minister claimed that Cambodia and China would form a joint think tank "to investigate, to understand more about the root causes of colour revolutions... and submit recommendations, especially on political policy," to the government (*Phnom Penh Post*, September 15, 2017). China's support to the CPP is thus presented as a counterpoint to what the CPP depicts as particularly US attempts to undermine its sovereignty. Hun Sen regularly makes the point in public speeches that sovereignty is the cornerstone of Cambodia-China relations, which is contrasted to meddling and interference from other states. In 2019 he noted "the respect for independence, sovereignty and mutual benefit is the special feature in our relations" (*Xinhua*, September 17, 2019). This rhetoric echoed statements made by the Chinese diplomat, Wang Yi, shortly after Cambodia's elections in 2018, when he stated: "China has always firmly supported Cambodia's efforts in safeguarding its sovereignty, independence and stability and opposed any foreign forces interfering in Cambodia's domestic affairs and will continue to provide assistance for Cambodia to maintain stability and development" (*Xinhua*, September 29, 2019).

This bilateral focus on color revolution had practical manifestations with geostrategic implications. In Cambodia during the crisis NGO workers were arrested, and in August 2017 US-funded organizations IRI and NDI, which were portrayed in CPP rhetoric as complicit in driving Cambodia's instability via colour revolution, were banned from operating in the country. This amounted to an assault on the architecture of democracy built up under decades of democratization efforts by the US and other partners. US-funded independent media organizations were targeted, with licences revoked for stations broadcasting Voice of America

⁶⁴ Ambrosio, "Insulating Russia."

⁶⁵ State Council, "China's Military Strategy," i.

⁶⁶ Yongding, "China's Color Coded,"

(VOA) and Radio Free Asia (RFA).⁶⁷ In contrast, knowledge ties and media linkages between China and Cambodia useful for spreading this narrative have mushroomed. China has provided financial support to Cambodian think tanks, raising concerns among researchers in those think tanks as to their future independence.⁶⁸ There has also been close cooperation between Cambodian and Chinese media outlets, with the popular government aligned *FreshNews* and *DAP* regularly reproducing content translated into Khmer from Chinese state media⁶⁹ and printing pieces by think tanks reproducing CPP rhetoric and China-friendly content.⁷⁰

Linkages, (Il)legitimacy, and the Pillars of CPP control.

What does the legitimacy narrative signal in practice? The CPP's failure to maintain competitive authoritarianism already reflected its relative weakness in developing strong linkages with the society it governs, unlike earlier "paradigmatic"⁷¹ cases of competitive authoritarian socially embedded regimes such as Malaysia under the UMNO in the 2000s.⁷² The CPP continues to govern on contentious foundations amongst the broader population, recognizable by the crackdown on press freedoms, and assault on civil society and dissenting voices that were key elements signifying its transition to hegemonic authoritarianism.⁷³ The CPP's reliance on an outside power for legitimacy has demonstrated the hollowness of those narratives to ordinary Cambodians. Unlike with the broader performance, developmental and good governance legitimacy of hegemonic Singapore, the nationalist credentials of authoritarian regimes in China and elsewhere in Asia,⁷⁴ or even the responsive if repressive authoritarianism in closed Vietnam,⁷⁵ Cambodia's claims to legitimacy is thin gruel. Rather legitimacy in this case appears to be an externally validated façade for repression and buttressing its continued support among strategically important actors in its ruling coalition of CPP-state bureaucracy and coercive apparatus, and the tycoon dependents that together benefit most from this arrangement.⁷⁶ As I now demonstrate, while this arrangement has ensured

⁶⁷ HRW, "Cambodia: Crackdown."

⁶⁸ Interview with development worker, Phnom Penh, November 2019.

⁶⁹ For example, Freshnews Asia, "Fresh News, in Collaboration with Xinhua, Brings you Rich International News" [Fresh News សហការជាមួយ ទីភ្នាក់ងារព័ត៌មានចិន Xinhua តម្រូវឱ្យព័ត៌មានអន្តរជាតិដ៏សម្បូរបែប ជូនលោកអ្នក].

<https://freshnewsasia.com/index.php/en/localnews/15856-2016-01-13-10-39-21.html>

⁷⁰ Some recent examples by Asian Vision Institute include: "Why Should China Embrace Chinese Investment" and "Perspectives on Cambodia-China Relations," all of which are unblinkingly supportive of the CPP's linkages with China. <https://asianvision.org/avi-commentary/avi-commentary-2020/>

⁷¹ Case, "Electoral Authoritarianism," 311.

⁷² Loughlin, "Reassessing," 503-4.

⁷³ Norén-Nilsson, "Fresh News."

⁷⁴ Nathan, "The Puzzle," 162.

⁷⁵ Kerkvliet, "Speaking Out."

⁷⁶ Loughlin and Milne, "After the Grab?"

regime survival, it simultaneously leaves the CPP vulnerable to Chinese interests as it seeks to extract concessions from the CPP's increasing reliance on China for its external validation and support, raising concerns among a population that has long questioned the CPP's nationalist credentials.

Authoritarian Leverage: China's Increasing Military Presence in Cambodia

Scholarship on democratization emphasises the importance linkage for leveraging democratic outcomes. As yet, however, the same level of scrutiny has not been paid to leverage resulting from ties between authoritarian regimes. This section considers Chinese leverage as it has operated and expanded during Cambodia's crisis in the form of the CPP's support of China's strategic and military goals in Southeast Asia, drawing attention to the potential geostrategic implications of such change, and domestic challenges for the CPP.

Cambodia was already close to Beijing in regional matters before the crisis period. At ASEAN 2012 (and again in 2016), Phnom Penh refused to sign a joint communique on the South China Sea disagreeing with China's position, the first time in its history that the bloc had failed to do so. Over the crisis period, however, Beijing's leverage on the CPP has grown to have a strategic dimension that far exceeds the diplomatic coordination that existed previously, extending to China's interests to the military sphere. The result of this leverage appears to be a (still limited) challenge the USA's monopoly of military alliances and total strategic dominance of the Indo-Pacific region, including by China having potentially secured a military foothold in the Gulf of Thailand to strengthen its capacity to project its force.

This trend was evident when the Cambodian government abruptly cancelled its longstanding "Angkor Sentinel" training operation with the US Indo-Pacific Army in 2017, initially for two years. Cambodia justified this cancellation claiming the RCAF had to concentrate on their other work matters, such as maintaining security for the 2017 commune election. Sino-Cambodia Golden Dragon exercises went ahead that year, with no problems. Internationalising the exercises and framing them in terms of Cambodia's political crisis, in March 2018, Chinese People's Liberation Army Deputy Commander Zhou Songhe declared that the exercise purpose was "to show external countries that China and Cambodia will cooperate with each other to maintain security and peace" (*The Phnom Penh Post*, February 12, 2018). The Golden Dragon exercises were wrapped in the narrative of the need to guard against foreign intervention and incorporated into the greater stability narrative supported by Beijing, but which in effect drew

Cambodia closer to China in strategic matters in the region. The exercise between China and Cambodia took place again in 2019 and 2020. The exercises with the US have not resumed. For China, the benefits of this security cooperation is that it comes at a time when the US is developing closer relations with Vietnam as a bulwark against greater Chinese influence in the region.⁷⁷ For the CPP, its closer relationship with Beijing has granted it an additional military patron beyond its traditional ally Vietnam. As one observer noted to me, “military-military cooperation with Vietnam continues, and with China it grows, but military-military cooperation between Cambodia and USA is shrinking.”⁷⁸

The primary concern for US strategic planners is that Chinese cooperation with an autocratizing Cambodia has risen to encompass a greater Chinese military presence in the country. According to the US Senate Select Committee “Cambodia’s slide toward autocracy, which culminated in the Cambodian People’s Party’s retention of power and complete dominance of the national legislature, opens the way for a constitutional amendment that could lead to a Chinese military presence in the country.”⁷⁹ This relates to Cambodia’s constitutional prohibition against the establishment of foreign military bases on its territory.⁸⁰ Since effectively one party elections in 2018, the government easily passes the two thirds majority vote threshold required to amend the constitution.⁸¹

Two developments in particular point to greater Chinese military activity along Cambodia’s south coast. The first relates to a well-publicised commercial development in Koh Kong province at Dara Sakor. In 2008 approximately 20% of Cambodia’s coastline was leased to Chinese company Union Development Group (UDG) as part of a huge tourism investment and development zone. To date only a tiny fraction of the area has been developed for commercial use.⁸² Any military implications appear to mark opportunism on the Chinese side to turn the project’s failure to its military advantage. There is already developed military infrastructure in adjacent Preah Sihanouk province, and a deep-water port that would enable the Chinese military to project force from there without additional capacity in Koh Kong.⁸³ Over the past two years, however, observers have noted infrastructure improvements at Dara Sakor that point

⁷⁷ Tran, “Rebalance to Asia.”

⁷⁸ Author interview with senior human rights monitor 1, Phnom Penh, January 20, 2017.

⁷⁹ Senate Committee on Intelligence, “Worldwide Threat” 29.

⁸⁰ Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia, Art 54.

⁸¹ Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia, Art. 151.

⁸² Author interview with foreign expert with extensive knowledge land development in the area. March 2020.

⁸³ Author interview with embassy military analyst, Phnom Penh, March, 2020

to the potential military usage of the commercial development. This is most evident in the strengthening of bridges, roads and, most surprisingly, a runway longer than those existing in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap, capable of accommodating large military-grade aircraft beyond the need for a commercial tourism development.⁸⁴ This runway corresponds with Cambodian efforts to upgrade its existing air force capabilities with support from China, an agreement that may extend to buying new Chinese military aircraft, and which comes amidst an overhaul of provincial air infrastructure. Given the current state of Cambodia's air force, upgrades would involve considerable Chinese support and an upgrading of operational capacity to use and maintain these jets effectively.⁸⁵

Dara Sakor has risen to become the focus of significant strategic competition between the US and China since 2017. In September 2020 UDG was placed under the Magnitsky Act, ostensibly for the numerous land conflicts linked to the project. Rather than human rights concerns, however, Chinese military activities in Cambodia appear to be the reason for the sanction. There are many other examples of internationally financed land concessions and developments in Cambodia that have resulted in widespread land dispossession and been linked to the Cambodian military, which have not faced similar punishment. An official US statement appeared to confirm the primacy of military concerns when announcing the sanction, warning it could "threaten regional stability" and US support of a "free and open Indo-Pacific."⁸⁶

The second development relates to Chinese military presence at Cambodia's Ream Naval Base, within the Ream Protected Area. There already appears to be significant People's Liberation Army (PLA) activities in Ream, with one foreign military advisor predicting the Chinese want to informally "co-base" there,⁸⁷ as there is no "no need for a [new] base. In a time of conflict, the Chinese could use the Sihanoukville port anyway."⁸⁸ There has been extensive upgrading of infrastructure, including road enhancement between the city of Sihanoukville, and Ream.⁸⁹ This has been coupled with training exercises and Chinese language courses provided to Cambodian Navy officials at the base. This has caused a frenzy of speculation within the US and at home in Cambodia. In November 2018 US Vice President Mike Pence sent a letter to

⁸⁴ Author interview with embassy military analyst, Phnom Penh, March, 2020.

⁸⁵ Personal Communication with Military Analysts, May 2020.

⁸⁶ US Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions."

⁸⁷ Author interview with embassy military analyst, Phnom Penh, March, 2020

⁸⁸ Author interview with embassy military analyst, Phnom Penh, December, 9, 2017

⁸⁹ Pictures of the road enhancement shared with author.

the Cambodian government raising its objection over a possible Chinese base in Cambodia, and in 2019 an unnamed US military official alleged that China had been granted exclusive access to the Ream Naval Base for 30 years, following the rejection of an offer of US assistance to repair and make upgrades to the base in 2019. However, developments in Ream remain shrouded in secrecy. At a meeting of at the Navy Headquarters in June 2020 Vice-Admiral Vann Bunleang disseminated a directive to soldiers reminding them that all soldiers who wish to speak publicly about any military matters must have permission from the Ministry of Defense or else face disciplinary punishment.⁹⁰

Increased Chinese military activity along Cambodia's southern coasts thus suggests that the RGC is facilitating China's strategic interests on its soil to the extent it had never done previously and is a direct challenge to decades of sole US military dominance of the region. However, this has not come without cost for the CPP, demonstrating the extent to which its linkages with China have provided Beijing with uncomfortable amounts of leverage that, like democratic leverage, raise problems for regimes as a result of their international ties.

The now dissolved CNRP leadership have used these developments to internationalise their domestic political interests and bolster their support at home. In an op-ed in 2019, former leader Sam Rainsy suggested Cambodia was a first "domino" in communist China's regional domination. His article appeared intended to directly appeal to US China hawks and tied this development to US military interests in the region, while playing on nationalist feeling and historic fears of a return to communism at home (*Project Syndicate*, August 2, 2019). In Cambodia, anti-China sentiment has been growing over the past five years, stoked by the CNRP. Some of the party's support in 2013 was achieved through channelling anti-Vietnamese xenophobia in Cambodia, portraying the CPP as a puppet regime because of its historic links to Vietnam. In 2014, CNRP leader Sam Rainsy declared the "CNRP is an ally of China... We are not allying with the US because it supports Vietnam" (*The Diplomat*, August 11, 2015). Now however it is China that is presented at pulling the CPP's strings. This appears to resonate more with ordinary Cambodians than official CPP claims over US meddling in its internal politics. In the words of one analyst, "cultural hatred and distrust were never with the Chinese,

⁹⁰ Debriefing from the meeting shared with author. Private Correspondence.

it was Vietnamese. ... But now, as Hun Sen kicks out the US and supports China, we talk less about Vietnam and more about China.⁹¹

This sentiment was echoed in interviews I conducted in Cambodia in 2018 and 2020, which also focused on Chinese business activity in the province of Preah Sihanouk, and particularly the coastal city of Sihanoukville. The city has received large amounts of Chinese private and state capital that has been a great boon to Cambodia's tycoons and CPP officials, but which have intersected with longstanding grievances in Cambodia over corruption and CPP greed, further threatening its domestic legitimacy. As another analyst put it to me, "[before it was Vietnam but] now its China people worry about. Some bad Chinese people, and people say they are doing an invasion. They think politicians are influenced by China."⁹² In this respect, Chinese linkages appear to be exacerbating domestic legitimacy concerns that brought the political crisis in the first place. These problems, the CPP's struggle to build nationalist legitimacy and the country's skewed and uneven economic performance, are now evolving in response to increasing pressures related to greater Chinese presence in the country and being internationalised in the face of global power competition. This leaves the CPP's longer-term political problems in building legitimacy with groups outside its elite coalition of supporters far from resolved, suggesting that while closer linkages with China may strengthen the coercive and elite patronage-based pillars of CPP rule, the party will have to work harder to deliver on the promised developmental benefits of its stability narrative linked to CPP control and Chinese investment, a situation it has thus far struggled to do given the contradictions previously manifest in its elite and mass patronage systems.⁹³

Conclusion

This article considered the authoritarian linkages between China and Cambodia in the context of Cambodia's transition to hegemonic authoritarianism. It drew attention to the specific forms of linkage enhancing Cambodia's increasingly authoritarian position over the transition period. The paper also highlighted more diffuse types of cooperation, convergence, emulation in the face of its domestic electoral challenge and pressure from democratic countries. The article's findings supports the linkage thesis: that autocratic ties stabilise regimes during periods of crises and can lengthen their rule. Close consideration revealed it the CPP to more adaptive

⁹¹ Author interview with Cambodian political Analyst 3, Phnom Penh, November 2018.

⁹² Author interview with Cambodian Political Analyst 2, Phnom Penh, November 2018.

⁹³ Loughlin, "Reassessing."

than previously suggested in existing analyses of its variation of hegemonic authoritarianism, capable of innovating by adopting tactics from other authoritarian regimes. The article provided new insights into shared authoritarian legitimization narratives utilised by the CPP during the transition. It suggested that for the CPP Chinese linkages buttress the elite patronage networks and repressive pillars of its rule, providing external validation in the absence of the popular legitimacy exposed by the regime's need to transition from a competitive authoritarian to a hegemonic system. Future research is needed to consider the extent to which the CPP will be able to leverage its China ties beyond narrowly benefitting the elite in its coalition in order to address its domestic problems over the longer term. Finally, the article raised new insights based on an analysis of changing geopolitical conditions in which these linkages operate. Cambodia's reliance on China is being leveraged by Beijing in support of its strategic interests, particularly in accepting greater Chinese military activity within Cambodia's borders. This dimension: authoritarian leverage, has been largely unexplored in the literature and in a period of escalating great power competition it points to the trade-offs of linkage in stabilising domestic crises. This suggests scope for future comparative research into whether China will be able to replicate its success in exploiting Cambodia's crisis, and the need for careful attention to the complex interplay of exogenous and endogenous forces shaping regime transitions.⁹⁴

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⁹⁴ Wong, "Chinese Influence."

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