

Ear to Asia podcast

Title: How do Cambodia's ever closer ties with China affect Southeast Asia?

Description: Cambodia has for decades been aligning itself ever closer to China, with substantial economic and political consequences for the Southeast Asian nation – and with geopolitical implications for its neighborhood and beyond. China's economic influence in Cambodia has been huge, with large-scale Chinese investments and infrastructure projects fueling growth and development. Meanwhile, Cambodia's neighbors, Vietnam and Thailand, who also continue to benefit economically from ties to China, maintain a more cautious stance towards the northern giant. So why does Cambodian leader Hun Sen insist on aligning so closely with Beijing? Who are the real beneficiaries from this apparent fealty? And how does this affect ASEAN, especially member states directly impacted by China's vast territorial claims in the South China Sea? Southeast Asia historian Dr Matthew Galway joins host Ali Moore to examine how Cambodia's tight bond with China affects the region and beyond. An Asia Institute podcast. Produced and edited by profactual.com. Music by audionautix.com.

Voiceover:

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Ali Moore:

Hello, I'm Ali Moore. This is Ear to Asia.

Matthew Galway:

You know there's been this growing kind of perception that Cambodia is fully in China's camp whereas Vietnam and Thailand are hedging to some degree; there's certainly a wariness but they're open for business. In Cambodia, their perception of the decline of the United States, certainly its shying away from the region, that the PRC's economic influence and military strength, since they're on the rise, they are much more appealing.

Ali Moore:

In this episode, Cambodia's close China ties: what do they mean for the region?

Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialists at the University of Melbourne.

Under Hun Sen, prime minister and strong man leader for almost four decades, Cambodia has been aligning itself ever more closely with China, with some substantial economic and political consequences for the Southeast Asian nation and with geopolitical implications for its neighbours and beyond. China's economic influence in Cambodia has been huge with large scale Chinese investments and infrastructure projects fueling growth and development. Yet concerns have been raised both in the country and abroad about this increasing dependence and what it could mean politically.

Cambodia's immediate neighbours, Vietnam and Thailand both maintain a more cautious and ambivalent stance towards China, but still benefit from its economic largesse. So why is Hun Sen throwing his lot and that of his country so decisively towards Beijing? Who are the real beneficiaries of this apparent fealty? And what's the impact on ASEAN, to which Cambodia belongs, particularly on fellow member states directly affected by China's claim to 90% of the South China Sea?

Joining me to look at the China Cambodian relationship and what it means for the region and beyond is Southeast Asia and China historian Dr. Matthew Galway of the Australian National University. He's also the author of the 2022 book, *The Emergence of Global Maoism, China's Red Evangelism, and the Cambodian Communist Movement* published by Cornell University Press. Welcome back to Ear to Asia. Matt,

Matthew Galway:

Thank you so much, Ali. Great to be here.

Ali Moore:

Before we delve into the details of the Cambodia China relationship, can we just step back a bit and look at China and Southeast Asia more broadly because we know China shares a border with three of the five mainland Southeast Asian nations, and I guess it's logical to a point that it wants to draw them into its geopolitical orbit as it's done in the past. So Matt, what does China offer as incentives for engagement? Is it all about money?

Matthew Galway:

It's certainly a lot about money, yes. Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, which does not share a border but it's definitely part of this orbit, and Thailand are very much aware that with the United States' move away from the region strategically, that they needed an ally to fill that vacuum economically. And China, the People's Republic of China represents that emerging market, this enormous growing economic powerhouse that is keen to invest in these countries.

Now of course, the three of the five countries, Thailand, Vietnam, and Laos are certainly very wary of China and have a long history of cooperation and wariness of this emerging power. And all three of them have approached China very much with their kind of unique skepticisms as well as optimism about the future with engagement with China.

Ali Moore:

So let's look at the major neighbours, if you like, Thailand and Vietnam and as you say, they have the unique approaches to China. If we start with Thailand, historically Thailand's been in the orbit of the US, hasn't it?

Matthew Galway:

Absolutely. And it has a staunch history of anti-communism in its political culture. In terms of its strategy regarding China, it's very much one of you scratch my back, I scratch yours, especially with regard to military equipment, technological exchange and raw materials.

For instance, Thailand imports from the PRC computer components, motors, consumer electronics, machinery, metal products, chemicals, you name it, VT4 main battle tanks. Military of course, very important in Thai politics and society. Meanwhile, the PRC imports a lot from Thailand, much of the same, but instead of military equipment, they get a lot of raw materials like rubber, refined oil, crude oil and wood products.

Whereas Vietnam has this long, long storied history of rivalry with China. Much of Vietnamese nationalist identity is forged in the crucible of resisting various different imperial powers, their inquests into Vietnamese territory. And that patriotism spurred the nationalism that resisted, of course, French colonial rule ending it in 1954. And then of course the incursion of the United States in the fight against the United States and the Vietnam War.

So as two observers from East Asia Forum note, Vietnam strategy regarding the PRC is to hedge its bets, to avoid opposition against the PRC and dependence on a rising power, engaging in deference

and defiance with a threatening power and diversifying relations with other major powers. And these three features are all present in this strategy towards the PRC and its economic designs for the region.

Ali Moore:

When you talk there about the trade relationship specifically to start with between Thailand and China, does China actually have a big economic footprint in Thailand?

Matthew Galway:

A pretty sizable one specifically with regard to the military sector, right? The Royal Thai Navy in May 2017 signed a big contract with the China Ship Building Industry Corporation for electronic submarines to be delivered actually this year. As one military commentator, Zhou Chenming stated the PRC will also provide technical guidance to the Thai military. And this is just one kind of outgrowth of that investment.

There's further investment of course in for instance, building railways, for instance, the China Railway Construction Corporation Limited has invested billions of US dollars into extending this rail network to connect Bangkok to other regional railways and to be part of this cog in the moving wheel of a grand connection, this ultimately part of the Belt and Road Initiative. Through the development of canals and railway networks, these infrastructural investments will create this huge connection between China and its markets as well as further ones in Southeast Asia, ultimately extending as far as Singapore and Malaysia is the overall goal.

Ali Moore:

So what about Vietnam in terms of economic investment? I mean, as you said earlier, their government also has communist roots. It was a French colony like Cambodia, but it does have this ambivalent relationship with Beijing. So have they welcomed Chinese investment?

Matthew Galway:

They have, but as you mentioned, rightly Ali, it's one of great wariness. Vietnam has this long history of cooperation with communist China, itself now a communist country, but also one of wariness. These two countries went to war in the mid to late 1970s, particularly '78 to 1980, the Sino-Vietnamese war or the third Indo-China war. And part of that was part of the Cold War kind of triangulation, the Cold War tripartite allegiances between the Soviet Union, China's warming up to the United States and vice versa.

But now ever since the eighties with Đổi Mới and gaige kaifang (改革开放) reform and opening up in China, the PRC has become Vietnam's top trading partner, amounting to 22.6% of the total export values in Vietnam and 30% of its imports. After both sides resumed trade talks in '91 there's just been an enormous annual growth in bilateral trade amounting to almost 517 billion by 2019. But this has coincided with a significant wariness of the CCP, the Chinese Communist Party, and the People's Republic of China's designs on maritime territory, specifically with regard to the South China Seas. So as business is good, there still is this concern that Xi Jinping and the CCPs designs on the South China Seas will ultimately force it to kind of again, hedge its bets. To trust them insofar as business is good, but never at the expense of, of course, Vietnam's territorial integrity.

Ali Moore:

And I guess Matt, Australia sees that with China. China's a very important trading partner, the most important trading partner for Australia, but trade does not mean influence, does it? So how do you see future influence of China in both Thailand and Vietnam?

Matthew Galway:

With Vietnam I think when it comes to the politics or the type of influence, Vietnam is very much staunch that it will determine its own destiny in the region. And as other economies in the region are kind of hedging their bets like Vietnam or linking themselves warily and cautiously, like Thailand, you have a Cambodia which is linking itself so inextricably to China, economically and politically.

So I think Vietnam is again very wary of its neighbours and makes a country like Laos, which shares a border with China, what they're doing with kind of falling into the debt trap diplomacy of the Belt and Road Initiative, it raises alarm bells for Vietnamese leadership. They of course, again, are happy that this exchange is happening. Each country has signed memorandums of understanding for the Belt and Road Initiative, but they're of course not willing to cede again, their political sovereignty for this.

Cambodia becomes this very interesting story in the situation. A thorn in the side of Vietnam in some ways because for a long time, of course, Vietnam occupied Cambodia during the eighties and China was a big player in of course criticising that occupation. But what's happened is since Hun Sen has risen to power and he's been in office through various undemocratic means for three decades plus, he's really kind of turned Cambodia into again this client state of China. And that of course has alarm bells ringing amongst all of these as ASEAN countries in the region who are again willing to do business with China but not cede their political sovereignty in so doing.

Ali Moore:

You use the term there client state, I mean, I suppose it is accurate, isn't it, to call Cambodia the most unequivocal supporter of China in the region. Why is that?

Matthew Galway:

Well, it's a host of reasons, and I love this question because my book, *The Emergence of Global Maoism*, which came out in 2022 really traces the roots of the emergence of Cambodia as a client state. Now of course, through ideological support, rhetorical and even military support, Cambodia became this massive China friend in the region, particularly during the Khmer Rouge years. But even before that, before ideology and military really factored into the equation, it was a big supporter of non-aligned independent states, newly independent states like Cambodia, which is independent from French rule in '53. And Sihanouk, who was the first head of state of the country, was a very close personal friend of many top ranking CCP leaders, even though he disagreed with them ideologically. And that kind of charm offensive or cultural diplomacy that manifested in the fifties and sixties blew up into the red guard diplomacy of the PRC and the Cultural Revolution where Sihanouk starts to criticise China more openly.

And then over time, that will turn in the eighties and the nineties into China really trying to again support Cambodia to offset Soviet influence in Vietnam and American influence in Thailand. Into the 1990s up till now, having Hun Sen as a voice in support of China has been important for the PRC as it receives international backlash. In particular, now we think of what's going on in Xinjiang, Hun Sen has been unequivocal in his support for the PRC. We think of Taiwan and China, the so-called argument over whether there are two Chinas, Hun Sen has been a vocal advocate of the one China policy. And it's again, kind of returned Cambodia into this positionality as China's most reliable mouthpiece and most staunch advocate in the region. And that is important as it tries to continue to build its influence in mainland Southeast Asia.

Ali Moore:

So what does Cambodia get, I guess, what does a close China relationship mean in practise?

Matthew Galway:

Well, in terms of aid and in terms of some of the investment, it's really kind of a mixed bag. So Cambodia will get of course through this, a significant amount of investment in things that matter for Cambodians. So for instance, China has invested hundreds of millions of dollars into restoring Angkor Wat, which is the quintessential symbol of Cambodia. It's in the flag, it's one of only a handful of flags that has a monument in it. So it just kind of shows the centrality of Angkor Wat symbolically. The PRC has also committed two hundred million dollars in low interest loans for the construction of bridges that span the Mekong and Tonlé Sap rivers. The CCP has access to Cambodian seaports through Chinese state companies to exploit oil reserves in the Gulf of Tonkin. And this is just the tip of the iceberg, of course. Sihanouk once called the PRC, our number one friend and the number one friend of all peoples in Asia. Hun Sen, upon Wen Jiabao's visit in 2006 described the PRC as Cambodia's most trustworthy friend.

So it's a amazing how the rhetoric is the same in this regard. That China is like a bulwark in support of Cambodia in investing in Cambodia and in so doing, there's just a lot of important infrastructure developments, important restoration of those important symbols, those kind of cultural relics of Cambodia's past. And this has allowed the leadership like Hun Sen to point to all of that investment, to point to all of these developments and say, "Look how good China is to us. Look how good I am at turning Cambodia into an emerging economy." And that has been one of the main kind of things that has propped up his continued political rule over these last four decades.

Ali Moore:

Indeed, I suppose Hun Sen is inextricably linked to China. Would he still be there after all these decades if it wasn't for China?

Matthew Galway:

Well, I think when it comes to Hun Sen, it's always good to have powerful friends in high places. It's undeniable that having the PRC, having Beijing supporting him as somebody who keeps a status quo in terms of China friendliness in the region, in terms of providing Cambodia as a market for Chinese investment, whether that's the savoury in terms of infrastructural development or the unsavoury in terms of turning a place like Sihanoukville into a very, very dangerous place, but a haven for gambling and organised crime. I think it's undeniable that the PRC support of Hun Sen has kept him in office. I'm also quite confident in saying that Hun Sen has also done a lot in his own right, absent the PRC. As is importantly, something that I've talked about in my book and Andrew Mertha talks about in his work, *Brothers in Arms*, Cambodia has often turned the PRC into the subordinate party, whether that's through diplomacy, political engagement, or in the case of these types of economic diplomacy. Cambodia is always going to wedge between Thailand and Vietnam. It's always going to put its sovereignty and autonomy first. So as the PRC is investing all this money in infrastructure, as it wants to prop up Hun Sen to keep him in office, Hun Sen is a wily operator. He's not going to risk depending too much on one side when he can use another to get what he wants. So I think that Hun Sen is again happy to have China support him, but at the same time I'm also quite confident in thinking that he would just as easily pivot away from them if he found it politically expedient.

Ali Moore:

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You'll find articles by some of our regular *Ear to Asia* guests and by many others. Plus you can catch recent episodes of *Ear to Asia* at the Melbourne Asia Review website, which again you can find at melbourneasiareview.edu.au. I'm Ali Moore and I'm joined by Southeast Asia historian Dr. Matthew

Galway. We're discussing China's footprint in Cambodia and the implications for neighbouring countries.

Matt, you just said there, you think Hun Sen would pivot away if he thought that was in his interest. He doesn't want to risk too much, too many eggs in one basket. But I guess the question would be how dependent is the economy on China? And if he doesn't want to put too many eggs in one basket, what other eggs would there be?

Matthew Galway:

Cambodia of course, under Hun Sen has accrued a significant trade deficit with China, imports over 3.9 billion in raw fabrics constituting the largest constituent of that in comparison to its exports of 830 million. Nearly 60% of products in Cambodian markets are Chinese made by 2006 and 24% of Cambodian imports were from the PRC by 2015. And these numbers have only grown since.

There's also multiple large scale PRC investment projects in Cambodia, such as the Lower Se San 2 Dam, which has accrued almost a billion dollars and they're 3.8 USD billion deep water port project on a 90 kilometre stretch of Cambodian coastline. So there's this huge trade deficit that has emerged. So economically they're almost inextricable. Politically, it's a little bit different. I think that Hun Sen has been in power for a long time. He of course emerged in power by dint of Vietnamese feat to try and again, oust the Khmer Rouge and have someone reliable in office who wasn't going to be both a China ally and somebody who was going to engage in open warfare with them.

And somebody who over time was able to marshal that closeness, that close allyship with Vietnam into a long-lasting position in political power in Cambodia. So as he's been able to kind of pivot away from that reliance on Vietnamese support, he knows what to do when he is betwixt and between two major forces. And I think that Cambodia's political distrust of Vietnam and Thailand will always dictate how it views China. If they feel that they're getting sandwiched or isolated because of these much more populous and much more economically strong countries in Vietnam and Thailand, China's prominence, the primacy that Cambodia places on China, will increase. But again, as I mentioned earlier as the United States has kind of pivoted away from this region and Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia have really kind of thrown more of their eggs into the Chinese basket, it just makes sense for Cambodia to continue its unequivocal support and open door policy when it comes to Chinese investment.

Ali Moore:

Yeah, that's the interesting thing, isn't it? That there's definitely an economic imperative, but there's very much a geopolitical imperative and these perceptions of security threats from Thailand and Vietnam do push Cambodia closer to China. But I do wonder, would China, for want of a better word, allow a Cambodia to have a very different geopolitical view, to express a different view than it has been expressing in regional organisations like ASEAN for example?

Matthew Galway:

I have to say because of Hun Sen's political longevity and how he's been such a bulwark in support of the PRC, from saying that what's going on in Xinjiang under CCP rule is completely fine and that there's no genocide or ethnic cleansing or whatever you want to call it, it's hard to imagine. And the thing is that Hun Sen has invested so much importance on his familial dynasty remaining in political power. So I think that to imagine what role China would have if say Hun's successor, Hun Manet is his ordained successor, his eldest son, if he were to say, "Oh, I'm going to disaggregate Cambodia economically from China, I'm going to disaggregate it politically from China," it would be such an abrupt volte-face that I really cannot imagine what that would do. One would hope that as these debts continue to accrue between Cambodia and China, and as the country realises it cannot just

bury these debts and socioeconomic inequality in Cambodia is as stark as ever that people will become dissatisfied with this.

And certainly there's a fair amount of animus in Cambodia today and in the past towards the Chinese and ethnic Chinese Cambodians or Sino-Khmers over that wealth inequality. So one can only imagine what might happen if this equilibrium remains as stark as it is now. And when it comes to Hun's ordained successor, I see a lot of business as usual. He's someone who I think will want to do the same thing as his father, maintain the familial dynasty in office. And it seems to me that China is really hedging its bets on business as usual in the Cambodian political arena,

Ali Moore:

A at the same time debt issues aside and the point that you make whether people will lose patience with that, does aligning with China actually have broader support in the Cambodian political sphere? Is it considered in many ways the best strategic option? Because I mean Sam Rainsy for example, the former president of the opposition CNRP, does he support the China focus?

Matthew Galway:

Well, Sam Rainsy is sadly because of the 2017 outlawing of the Cambodian National Rescue Party, Sam Rainsy is sadly not somebody who's going to be able to do anything politically in terms of influence and bringing about change. I've been a Cambodian observer for almost two decades, and optimism does not come to the Cambodia observer. It's going to be the Cambodian People's Party again with the upcoming elections. And it will probably be the same for the subsequent elections if there are subsequent elections. So in terms of what Sam Rainsy or any kind of opposition party might view vis-a-vis China and its continued investment in Cambodia, it's hard to imagine where they might stand. It might be expedient to come out and say, "Hey, we cannot continue this China-Cambodia relationship. It's not beneficial to most Cambodians for one. And it isolates us from our neighbours who are our immediate..." I don't want to say threat, but they're certainly more pressing in terms of direct engagement.

So whether or not anybody who occupies that space, whether there is some miraculous return of Sam Rainsy to the political arena and he's actually allowed to reform the National Rescue Party, or if there's another political opponent who poses a genuine threat to Hun Sen's continued autocratic rule, it would, I guess have to depend on what they're campaigning on. Sadly, in the Cambodian political arena, it is far too easy to target Vietnam. And this is something that Andy Mertha has looked at as well in his work, and he and I have discussed at length about is that Vietnam rather than China, is the eternal bogeyman. Blaming Vietnam for X, Y or Z seems to be what riles people up, it gets them to go to the ballot boxes. It is something that both parties, even Sam Rainsy and the royalist predecessors have done in their campaigning is to blame them rather than to look at a country like China where you have this massive trade deficit. So we'll see, but it's sadly might be business as usual, so we might not actually see any change in this regard.

Ali Moore:

You did touch on what people think earlier, but if Vietnam is painted as the eternal bogeyman, is the relationship with China at the forefront of the Cambodian people's mind? Is it something that people are very conscious of, the level of ties and how the relationship is perceived outside the country?

Matthew Galway:

That's a good question. I think generally I wouldn't say so. In terms of the cities, absolutely. People are very cognizant of it. You're in Phnom Penh, you're in Siem Reap, you're in Battambang, Sihanoukville, it's something you can't avoid. And this is kind of a resurgence of animus towards, again, whether it's ethnic Chinese or the PRC now, where it's, oh, that's Chinese companies, oh,

that's Chinese products that are over flooding the markets and pushing Cambodian produced goods or handicrafts out of the market. 50, 60 years ago many of these Khmer Rouge leaders were writing economics dissertations lampooning foreign investment into consumer goods that are flooding the market and pushing Cambodian products, particularly handicrafts out of the commercial sector. So I'd say in the rural sector it's not the same. I think the issues are much more about land. The Cambodian People's Party of course has immense rural support because CPP propagandists will say, look at all the good we're doing. While it's systematically not improving their lot on the whole, and the issues kind of are more about land reform and whether day-today they will see their standards of living improve. The issue is less about this foreign boogeyman, so to speak.

However, because Vietnam has occupied that role so much under the French rule, of course, it's kind of got this collective consciousness where you can just say, "Oh, we'll blame the Vietnamese." And believe you me, the Khmer Rouge and their slogans and in their broadcasts were able to rally a lot of support around an impending Vietnamese invasion and destruction of Cambodia rather easily among rural workers. Whereas in the cities, people are a lot more discerning. They see the emergence of China as the second-largest economy in the world, soon to be the world's largest economy and can't help but think, okay, this is good for us in some ways, but probably for most of us, not something that's beneficial. So I think there's a lot more wariness among intellectuals, people who are urban dwellers than the level of either fear or scepticism that you see in the rural sector.

Ali Moore:

What about how other countries view the closeness of China and Cambodia? You did touch on this with Vietnam and Thailand, but are those two countries, and I'll ask about the West in a minute, but are Vietnam and Thailand acutely aware with anything they do that they may not just be dealing with Cambodia?

Matthew Galway:

I think that's certainly true. There's been this growing kind of perception that Cambodia is fully in the PRC camp, whereas Vietnam and Thailand are hedging to some degree. There's certainly awareness, but they're open for business for sure. In Cambodia their kind of perception of the decline of the United States, or certainly it's shying away from the region really since the ascendance of the Trump presidency that the PRC's economic influence and military strength, since they're on the rise, they are much more appealing than, say, linking Cambodia to the United States, which some policymakers in Phnom Penh view it as having lost its prestige and supremacy in Asia.

The majority of countries in Southeast Asia see a rising China as an opportunity and a challenge, whereas Cambodian leaders view a rising China as an opportunity strategically and economically. However, like Vietnam, which is hedging its bets with China, Cambodia seems to view the strategic direction of Southeast Asia towards the great powers with China at the centrepiece of these things. Whereas for instance, a country like Laos and Myanmar, there isn't the same kind of privilege of strategic manoeuvrability because of that.

Ali Moore:

So what about the impact on regional groupings like ASEAN for example, which Cambodia joined in 1999? I mean, is Cambodia considered to be China's leverage point inside ASEAN?

Matthew Galway:

I'd say so at this stage, and that's something that of course Vietnamese and Thai officials are well aware of, Laos as well. Laos of course has also amounted an enormous trade deficit and debt with China and the BRI, there is constant fear of the debt trap diplomacy that might go with signing on to these memorandums of understanding. So there's indeed that wariness again as I say, if Cambodia is

a client state, continues to be a client state, yet the rest of these countries are not what happens in ASEAN? Is Cambodia China's voice in ASEAN? We'll have to wait and see, but so far they've given no indication otherwise. All I know is that Cambodian leaders thus far in ASEAN have been unequivocal in their support for China in defiance of evidence of human rights violations. That's for sure.

Ali Moore:

Talking about human rights violations, it has to be acknowledged, doesn't it that of course the impact of economic sanctions imposed by the US and the EU over human rights violations, that impact has been blunted, hasn't it because of China's support?

Matthew Galway:

Most definitely, yes. And it's amazing that Cambodia, just referring to the earlier question about Hun Sen's stranglehold on political power that again, pointing to China, pointing to Beijing as this loyal ally, having someone like Xi Jinping paying a state visit to Cambodia, and you had [inaudible 00:28:59] earlier in his 2006 visit, the first since 1963 of a major CCP leader, Liu Shaoqi and his wife visited there, and it's the symbolism of having China as the big guy, the person you can fall back to, the person you can rely on. That's something that has been almost an unbroken constant in Cambodian politics since independence, certainly since 1955, 56.

Whether that means that Hun Sen will aggregate even further into China's camp economically and politically to ensure the security of his family dynasty in political office, we'll have to wait and see. I'm still wary to say that he would give up certain things if China asked him to, because I do think that he's very aware that Cambodia has been able to marshal this relationship into a point where the CCP is often the subordinate party. And I do think that if there were other opportunities that he thought were better, for instance, if the United States were to enter the... or Australia were to say, "Hey, we're going to start targeting small states and investing in these smaller states in Southeast Asia," whether he might see that as beneficial and to try and do what Sihanouk did in the fifties, play the US and the Soviet Union and China off each other as much as he possibly could so he didn't rely on too much on one.

Ali Moore:

That's a difficult diplomatic game though, isn't it, as even he found it.

Matthew Galway:

Absolutely true. Absolutely true. It's a marvel he did it for as long as he did, but of course we sadly know how that turned out. He was removed through a bloodless coup that the CIA allowed to happen in 1970 and the rest is history.

Ali Moore:

So we've talked quite a lot about this from Cambodia's point of view and Hun Sen's point of view, and we are almost out of time, Matt, but I do want to ask about this from China's perspective. What do you think ultimately China's ambitions are in Southeast Asia and do you think they're fairly happy with the status quo? Do they want to see themselves able to exert greater influence in the region?

Matthew Galway:

I think yes, the PRC certainly sees these economies and we're looking at Thailand and Vietnam. These are large populations emerging, if not emergent economies. Vietnam has since Đổi Mới in the eighties has really succeeded in many respects in establishing a planned economy that is open to liberal marketization. Thailand, of course, military rule for many years. There's a few bright spots where there was hope of democracy, but what have you, but it's a large economy, it's a very

populous nation. Laos and Cambodia are emerging economies. Laos and Cambodia both remain two very, very poor countries with great wealth inequality, but there's a lot of potential there. So I think that the PRC through the Belt and Road Initiative sees these countries as great opportunities for Chinese investment and political influence. And Cambodia, its restoration as a client state in the region is very important politically for China.

It can count on Cambodia to say you're not doing anything wrong. It will be the most vocal advocate for the things that China does well, and it will never criticise it for things like Xinjiang for instance. And that's important. There's a long history of Cambodia doing that and a long history of China establishing relations with smaller countries to gain that diplomatic voice. For instance, before there was international recognition or UN recognition of the PRC as China, of course the Republic of China in Taiwan was occupying that seat in the UN up until the seventies, countries like Cambodia were the ones to say there was one China. Sihanouk himself supported the one China policy and he was not alone. And it was through that kind of cultural diplomacy that those nice kind of exchanges where it's like, okay, we'll send a dance troupe over here, you can send a student delegation here to study, that China was able to turn those soft power initiatives into ones that were much more economically rooted in the seventies and eighties, and those continue to this day.

So I think ultimately, yes, I think ultimately their goal is to regard these emerging markets in Cambodia and Laos as an opportunity for investment, as an opportunity to get Chinese products into these markets. And that is one side of a two-sided coin that will involve eventual political influence, which will again create either a status quo in the region or certainly provide a bulwark against, say a Vietnam or a Thailand holding power in a place like ASEAN.

Ali Moore:

And if China sees both those countries, Laos and Cambodia as great opportunities, Cambodia is the bigger one, isn't it? Because I guess Hun Sen and the role that he has created for himself over decades in the region.

Matthew Galway:

Absolutely, 100%.

Ali Moore:

It's a fascinating time in history for this region, isn't it?

Matthew Galway:

Oh, I can't get enough of it. It's amazing. One again, looks with a great amount of pessimism about the political future of a country like Cambodia when it comes to democracy. There's all this optimism in Thai politics because two anti-Junta parties registered first and second in their recent elections. Meanwhile, I look to Cambodia with a great amount of sadness, knowing full well that the elections will not have that type of optimism or any kind of change. Yet it is fascinating. It is a fascinating country with a very fraught and troubled history that because of this China relationship that is not new, one that has six, seven decades of history in terms of PRC-to-Cambodia relations, I can't seem to get enough of it. So I hope that listeners will also find it interesting and dig more deeply into it as well.

Ali Moore:

I am absolutely sure that they have found it interesting. Matt, thank you so much for your insights and for joining once again Ear to Asia.

Matthew Galway:

Thank you so much, Ali.

Ali Moore:

Our guest has been Dr. Matthew Galway from the Australian National University. Ear to Asia is brought to you by Asia Institute of the University of Melbourne, Australia. You can find more information about this and all our other episodes at the Asia Institute website. Be sure to keep up with every episode of Ear to Asia by following us on the Apple Podcasts app, Spotify, or wherever you get your favourite podcast. Please rate and review us. It helps new listeners find the show and put in a good word for us on your socials. This episode was recorded on the 29th of June 2023. Producers were Kelvin Param and Eric van Bommel of profactual.com. Ear to Asia is licenced under Creative Commons copyright 2023, the University of Melbourne. I'm Ali Moore, thanks for your company.