

U.S. Policy Toward Cambodia Requires Nuance

By Charles Dunst

On November 16, a number of U.S. lawmakers, including Senators Ed Markey and Elizabeth Warren, wrote to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, urging him to “address the alarming deterioration in human rights protection and democratic rule in Cambodia” by imposing sanctions on senior government and security officials.

This was only the most recent congressional request for action. The Gardner-Markey Asia Reassurance Initiative Act of 2018 imposed human rights and democracy-related conditions on U.S. assistance to Cambodia. The Cambodia Democracy Act of 2019 sought to freeze assets of and restrict visas for Hun Sen’s senior officials. During the Trump administration, these requests have found purchase, with the White House condemning Hun Sen’s crackdowns and curtailing some aid programs.

Yet none of these moves have had their intended effects. With Cambodia firmly ensconced in China’s orbit, U.S. sanctions alone are unlikely to either force Hun Sen from office or into compliance. While these sanctions may be necessary, they are not sufficient for dealing with Cambodia. But now, with President-elect Joe Biden soon to take office, the legislative and executive branches must recalibrate their approaches to Cambodia, and collaborate on a new strategy that, while including sanctions, truly deals with the Kingdom as it is, rather than as they might wish it to be.

Nearly every U.S. condemnation of Cambodia decries the “alarming deterioration in human rights protection and democratic rule in Cambodia,” “setbacks to democracy,” or something of the sort. Senator Lindsey Graham asserted in 2018 that “democracy is dead in Cambodia today because the Cambodian government is under the influence and control of China.”

None of these is quite right. Since the 1991 Paris Peace Accords that ended Vietnam’s occupation of Cambodia, the Kingdom has never been a democracy. When Hun Sen lost the 1993 United Nations-run elections, which were neither fully free or fair, he stoked and “solved” a secession crisis; the election’s winner, Norodom Ranariddh, agreed to share power with him in an interim government. This undemocratic outcome of the international community’s democracy-building project came back to bite the United States when Hun Sen seized power in a violent 1997 coup. It is biting again today, as Cambodia is poised to host Chinese military assets off the Gulf of Thailand, from which Chinese military planes could strike targets throughout the region.

For decades, though, U.S. lawmakers have believed that Cambodia was recently a democracy and American pressure will bring the country back to its liberal senses. This naïve assumption has informed years of aggressive U.S. policy at which Hun Sen has balked.

By deepening ties with Vietnam and Thailand, countries with abysmal human rights records, while castigating Hun Sen for similar abuses, the United States pushed Hun Sen, who was already distrustful of the West, toward China, whose support comes without human rights-related strings attached. Washington, though, considered Cambodia a strategically unimportant country in which the United States could push its human rights agenda. Ironically, the upshot is that Cambodia has now — thanks to Hun Sen’s closeness with China and according fears that China could post armed forces there — become strategically important in Washington’s eyes.

Charles Dunst,
Visiting Scholar at the
East-West Center in
Washington, explains
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Now, the United States needs to adopt a long-term strategy aimed at planning for a post-Hun Sen Cambodia rather than naively hoping to render him a reformer or remove him from power. This strategy comprises at least four steps.

First, the United States should invest in independent digital Khmer-language media and encourage U.S. diplomats to appear on such media to compete with pro-China and pro-Hun Sen outlets. Cambodia is a young country with high levels of both technological connectedness and pro-American sentiment, not to mention growing frustration with China. It is a willing audience for the United States.

Second, the United States should expand its aid to Cambodia, and make a big show of doing so. Hun Sen's kleptocracy has left Cambodia struggling to provide basic public goods to its citizens; the United States should fill these gaps. China, meanwhile, might be Cambodia's biggest investor, but Beijing's money flows into projects staffed by Chinese workers and does not trickle down to Cambodians. Targeted American aid would expose not only Hun Sen's failures but also those of China.

Third, the United States must increase its engagement with Cambodian civil society. The majority of Cambodians still have "a paternalistic view of the role of government," while "general societal trust" is "almost non-existent," according to the Asia Foundation. Addressing this by aiding civil society organizations not only in Phnom Penh but throughout the country should thus be a U.S. priority. There can be no democratic Cambodia without a democratic culture.

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Fourth, the United States should maintain its hardline with Hun Sen's government by continuing to impose targeted sanctions on leaders responsible for human rights abuses, ratcheting back assistance for the counter-terrorism forces that Hun Sen wields as a secret police force, and limiting the facetime that top American diplomats give Hun Sen. The Cambodian Prime Minister is not popular in Cambodia; by sanctioning and criticizing his regime, the United States will only further demonstrate itself to be on the side of the Cambodian people, rather than their autocratic leaders.

Ultimately, U.S. lawmakers must realize that Cambodia will not become a democracy anytime soon, and that it may liberalize only following Hun Sen's death or abdication. His power is tied directly to his political and personal capabilities, as well as his massive patronage network; sanctions will not force him to step down. On the other hand, investing in Cambodians, while maintaining a hardline towards its ruling regime, will enable them to better lead their country when he is out of the picture.

Admittedly, the problem does not admit a quick or easy solution: Hun Sen is only 68 years old and recently said he planned to rule for another ten years before elevating his son, Hun Manet. Yet this transitional moment will be when the ruling regime will be weakest, for reasons both inherent to patrimonial successions and unique to Cambodia, and will be when the country's opposition needs to be able to push back.

Sanctions alone may serve U.S. politicians' interests by appealing to their Cambodian-American constituents, but they do not serve those of ordinary Cambodians. If the United States continues to rely seemingly exclusively on sanctions while failing to improve Cambodians' quality of life and establish a democratic culture, Hun Sen's exit could be followed by another form of autocracy, with Cambodia's generals, potentially backed by a Palmerstonian China — which has no permanent allies but only permanent interests — seizing upon the moment's chaos to grab power.

Indeed, democracy rarely follows the end of a hereditary autocracy. For Cambodia to break this mold, the White House and Congress must cooperate to produce a coherent U.S. policy toward the country, rather than continuing only to slap more sanctions on its ruling regime.

Charles Dunst is a Visiting Scholar at the East-West Center in Washington and an Associate at LSE IDEAS, the London School of Economics' foreign policy think tank. He can be contacted at charlesdunst@gmail.com

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