Chapter 4
Cambodia’s Response to COVID-19 and Its Impacts on Cambodia–China Relations

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4.1 COVID-19 Situation in Cambodia

In late 2019, an unknown type of coronavirus spread throughout Wuhan-capital city of Hubei province, China, which marked the start of a global health catastrophe officially known as COVID-19 pandemic. By the end of August 2020, more than 25 million people around the world contracted the virus, and more than 844,000 people lost their lives.¹ During that same period, the number of COVID-19 cases in Southeast Asia was approximately 468,000, with more than 11,000 deaths.² By the time of writing, the Philippines was reported to have the most cases among countries in the region, whereas Laos had the least. Meanwhile, Cambodia had less than 300 cases and zero death. Although there was belief that the country might have underreported cases, such a thing is impossible in this era of social media. These confirmed cases in Cambodia were discovered in the capital city and 12 other provinces. The country identified the first confirmed case in late January in Preah Sihanouk-a seaside province where many Chinese investment projects had taken place. The patient was a 60-year-old Chinese man who had recently travelled from Wuhan.³ Since then, Cambodia started to register rising number of cases, most of

¹WHO coronavirus disease (COVID-19) dashboard (2020).
²CSIS (2020).
³Kimmarita and Khorn (2020).

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which are imported. It is worth noting that the spike in daily confirmed cases in Cambodia occurred in March and July. Between March 17 and 22, more than 70 cases were identified. These patients are French tourists who arrived in the country in mid-March and Cambodian citizens who attended a four-day religious gathering in the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.\(^4\) On the other hand, the significant jump in July occurred on July 21 and 25. Most of the cases were Cambodian students who returned from study in Russia and Egypt.\(^5\)

To prevent local transmission of COVID-19, Cambodia imposed various levels of travel restriction. Public transport in the capital such as city buses and water taxis, for instance, was temporarily suspended.\(^6\) The government imposed temporary prohibition on inter-provincial travelling and suspended the Khmer New Year holiday to avoid nonessential travelling.\(^7\) As the number of cases was increasing, the government moved to implement more extensive measures to cope with the spread. An early-than-usual vacation for all educational institutions was put in place to prevent the spread at schools and universities.\(^8\) Businesses with enclosed environment such as gyms, fitness clubs, casinos, cinemas, and karaoke houses were shut down.\(^9\) All kinds of public gatherings were banned, and people were advised to stay home and adhere to hygienic practices.

Meanwhile, entry into the country was also restricted. Travelers visiting Cambodia were temperature-scanned, quarantined, and tested at border checkpoints and airports. From March to May, foreigners from hard-hit countries such as France, Germany, Iran, Italy, Spain, and the US were denied entry to Cambodia, whereas Cambodian citizens returning from these countries would be admitted to a two-week quarantine.\(^10\) Cambodian citizens and government officials were further instructed to avoid traveling to Europe, the US, and Iran. Throughout the country, the government designated and reserved various hotels, guesthouses, and school buildings totaling 3,000 rooms as COVID-19 treating sites, in addition to designated hospitals and healthcare centers.\(^11\)

The situation of COVID-19 in Cambodia is so far manageable as the number of cases is among the lowest, with neither mortality nor community transmission. All of these resulted from three main underlying factors. First of all, to contain the spread of the virus, Cambodian government has uphold only the best practices of health regulations and measures in testing and tracing. For instance, Cambodia

\(^4\)Updates of COVID-19 in Cambodia (2020).
\(^5\)Vantho (2020); Niseiy (2020).
\(^6\)Sokhean (2020).
\(^7\)Bunthan (2020).
\(^8\)Announcement about early-than-usual vacation for public and private educational institutions in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap (2020).
\(^9\)Nationwide temporary suspension of gyms and fitness centers (2020); Vantha (2020).
\(^10\)Travel restrictions issued by the royal government of Cambodia in relation to the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) (2020).
\(^11\)Narim (2020).
uses only the Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR), which is considered the gold standard in COVID-19 detection, in testing. The resort to alternative and less expensive testing methods is not tolerated due to the high risk of false result. Travelers who enter the country are quarantined and obliged to test for COVID-19 using PCR method. The measure is even stricter for air passengers. If one of the passengers in an airplane is tested positive for COVID-19, all other passengers have to be quarantined for 14 days at designated sites. If nobody in the plane is tested positive, each passenger is still subject to self-quarantine at home monitored by their local authorities.\textsuperscript{12} This is because the government and Ministry of Health needed to prevent the imported cases from spreading domestically. It is believed that once the community transmission takes place, it will be tremendously hard to contain, given the limited health infrastructure and impossible social distancing at workplace such as garment factories. Thus, the wisest choice is to detect the virus at the points of entry. In addition, Cambodia also possesses effective contact tracing capability. Cambodian Ministry of Health has worked collaboratively with WHO, Pasteur Institute, and US Center for Disease Control and Prevention in conducting swift and comprehensive contact tracing.\textsuperscript{13} It is required for the people who have tested positive for the virus to provide a list of people or establishments they came into contact with so that potential community transmission in the country can be prevented. So far, health response including detection, quarantine, contact tracing, and treatment is central to the country’s response strategy. Secondly, Cambodian policy makers did not underestimate the extent and potential risk of the outbreak, especially during the early period. It is admirable that the country leaders, especially the Prime Minister, recognized the severity of the outbreak and did not steer into political denial evident in many countries. Instead of arm wrestling with health experts, political leaders in Cambodia follow their advice and suggestion. This allowed for necessary and decisive actions to be implemented early so as to prevent the spread of the virus. Furthermore, the Prime Minister himself is the head the National Committee for Combating COVID-19. With the highest level of decision maker at the helm of the committee, necessary measures can be implemented swiftly, and central-regional policy incoherence can be avoided. Last but not least, high level of COVID-19 infection in Cambodia can be avoided because public health has been prioritized over economic agenda. Cambodia bravely moved to restrict entry into the country and impose ban from highly affected countries, although this affected economy, especially tourism sector. Even if some countries were reluctant to impose lockdown and other travel restriction measures in fear that it might affect the economy, Cambodian government believed it needed to sacrifice economic benefits for the safety of the people.

\textsuperscript{12}Information on Cambodia travel restrictions (2020).

\textsuperscript{13}WHO works closely with the royal government of Cambodia in the fight against COVID-19 (2020).
4.2 Impacts of COVID-19 on Cambodia

The COVID-19 outbreak resulted in an unprecedented outlook for Cambodian economy. According to ADB, Cambodia’s annual growth for 2020 would be 2.3%—the lowest since the global financial crisis.\(^{14}\) Within the first half of 2020, the Royal Government of Cambodia’s revenue collected dropped by a slight of 0.7% compared to the same period in 2019.\(^{15}\) Among this, the revenue from import and export decreased by 16%, while interior revenue increased by 12%. This fallout was a result of detriment to vital economic sectors, especially country’s growth drivers: tourism, garment, and construction. The tourism sector, according to ADB’s estimate, would suffer a loss of US$ 850 million in revenue, equivalent to 1.7% of GDP.\(^{16}\) The loss was mainly contributed by the dramatic decline in number of international tourists, specifically Chinese tourists. According to the Ministry of Tourism, tourists visiting Cambodia registered a year-on-year decrease of 52% within the first four months, causing closures of about 3,000 businesses and affecting 45,000 workers employed in the industry.\(^{17}\) According to the State Secretariat of Civil Aviation of Cambodia, by May the number of international flights at the country’s Phnom Penh, Preah Sihanouk, and Siem Reap airports dropped by 96.7%, 98.4%, and 100% respectively.\(^{18}\) Meanwhile, garment and footwear industry was forecast to slow down by 6.5% mainly due to the shortages of raw materials from China and the lack of demand from the US and European markets.\(^{19}\) Moreover, approximately 150,000 workers were made redundant by early July as 400 footwear, garment, and travel goods factories suspended operation.\(^{20}\) On the other hand, the future of the construction sector was uncertain as travel restriction reduced the number of foreigners in the country, who were the main source of high-priced real estate investments.\(^{21}\) According to the forecast by Ministry of Economy and Finance, construction sector will face a negative growth of 5.3% due to the decrease of FDIs, investors’ confidence, and construction demand in tourism sector.\(^{22}\) Besides these sectors, other revenue earners such as rice was also affected as the government ordered the ban of white rice export in order to ensure adequate supply for domestic consumption during this outbreak.

As the number of COVID-19 cases kept increasing in March, the government decided to close border and restrict travelling. With the news of border closure, many Cambodians reverted to panic buying and stocking of necessities—most of which are

\(^{14}\) Asian Development Bank (ADB) (2020).
\(^{15}\) Cambodia collects $2.95 Billion as fiscal revenue in first half of 2020 (2020).
\(^{16}\) The ASEAN Post (2020).
\(^{17}\) Vantha (2020).
\(^{18}\) Chan (2020).
\(^{19}\) Mccready (2020).
\(^{20}\) 400 factories in Cambodia suspend operations, affecting over 150,000 workers due to COVID-19 (2020).
\(^{21}\) Pisei (2020).
\(^{22}\) Bunthoeun (2020).
imported-and products’ price increased dramatically.\textsuperscript{23} The soaring demands for surgical masks, hand sanitizer, and alcohol, for instance, led sellers to increase the price by 30–100\%.\textsuperscript{24} In contrast, in late April and early May when there was no new confirmed case for several weeks, public behaviors changed. Demands for supplies dropped; people resumed their daily livelihood; some even disregarded the hygienic precautions previously maintained.\textsuperscript{25}

### 4.3 Measures to Mitigate the Impacts of COVID-19

As mentioned above, the pandemic took its toll not just on human health but on economy as well. Thus, several monetary and fiscal measures were put in place to cope with this backsliding. To sustain liquidity within the economy, the National Bank of Cambodia (NBC)—the country’s central bank-postponed the implementation of Capital Conservation Buffer (measure expected to decrease solvency rate), reduced interest rate on Liquidity Providing Collateralized Operation (NBC’s lending to financial institutions), and lowered interest rate on Negotiable Certificate of Deposits (bank deposits with NBC).\textsuperscript{26} The interest rate of reserve requirement in domestic currency was also decreased to 7\%, allowing the local banks to provide more loans and to enable US$ 1.8 billion in circulation.\textsuperscript{27} Meanwhile, registered hotels, guesthouses, restaurants, and travel agencies located in the capital and other six provinces were exempt from tax payment from February to July.\textsuperscript{28} Tax holiday was also provided to factories whose production lines were disrupted by the lack of materials and decline in purchasing orders.\textsuperscript{29} In addition, the government, through its Agricultural and Rural Development Bank, provided loans with favorable terms to small and medium enterprises to help them survive during this period.\textsuperscript{30} The government also rolled out emergency salary package for workers in garment and tourism sectors whose jobs were suspended due to the side effects of the pandemic. In particular, the government and employers jointly provided 30\% of the minimum wage on a monthly basis.\textsuperscript{31} Furthermore, the government, through its IDPoor program, provided social assistance in terms of monthly allowance to family living in poverty and vulnerable groups such as the invalids, children under five years of age, the elderly, and

\textsuperscript{23} COVID-19 lockdown highlights cambodia’s dangerous reliance on imported food (2020).
\textsuperscript{24} Pandemic causes rise in consumer price index (2020).
\textsuperscript{25} Lamy and Sonyka 2020.
\textsuperscript{26} Chan (2020). The Central Bank announces measures to boost lending.
\textsuperscript{27} Chan (2020), National Bank of Cambodia to reduce reserve requirement interest rates.
\textsuperscript{28} Urgent measures of the royal government to support tourism sector, garment sector, and economic growth (2020).
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{30} O’Connell and Thong (2020).
\textsuperscript{31} Lee (2020).
Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) patients. Besides, the government also reduced annual spending of its ministries by 50%—except for Foreign Affairs, Commerce, and the cabinet office—so that it could reserve its budget for fighting the pandemic and for post-pandemic recovery. According to the Prime Minister, between US$ 800 million and US$ 2 billion was earmarked to deal with this crisis.

On legal aspect, the government of Cambodia adopted the Law on the Management of the Nation in State of Emergency (LMNSE) in April 2020. LMNSE is a legal instrument to which the country can refer in times of threats to national security, social order, and the lives of the citizens. It was adopted because Cambodia, until then, had not had any legal provisions with regards to how to manage the country in time of crises like this pandemic. However, the possibility of Cambodia to declare a state of emergency, according to the Prime Minister, was only 0.1% because the government already took effective control over the outbreak, but the country needed this law to prepare for any unexpected things in the future.

### 4.4 Cambodia–China Cooperation in Fighting Against COVID-19

#### 4.4.1 Cambodia’s Expression of Solidarity with China

Cambodia–China joint effort is an outstanding model of cooperation and an affirmative step toward building an effective method in preventing future health crises. Despite difficult time in combating the pandemic, Cambodia always showed strong support alongside her Chinese counterpart. On February 5, during the early period of the outbreak, Cambodia’s Prime Minister expressed full support by making a special visit to Beijing and made a mutual agreement on strengthening bilateral cooperation. Meanwhile, during his routine health check-up in Beijing, King Norodom Sihamoni of Cambodia paid a visit to Chinese Foreign Minister and State Councilor Wang Yi and showed appreciation toward the Chinese government in implementing such effective actions and having the situation under control. Amid the coronavirus outbreak in China, Cambodia showed unimpeachable support for China in fighting the virus contagion, which signifies the dubbed ironclad friendship. While many countries were banning flights to and from China and evacuating their nationals,

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32 O’Connell and Thong (2020).
33 Cambodian PM: Ban of China flights to destroy cambodian economy (2020).
34 Cambodia reserves up to US$2 Billion to solve impacts of COVID-19 (2020).
35 Not the right time to declare a state of emergency yet, Cambodian Prime Minister (2020).
36 China donates medical supplies to Cambodia’s Phnom Penh capital hall for COVID-19 fight (2020).
37 Wang (2020).
Cambodia, on the other hand, took the opposite approach. Prime Minister Hun Sen in a press conference said, “Cancelling flights with China would not be an attack on China. It would be an attack on the Cambodian economy.” His decision remained unchanged even after the Ministry of Health announced the country’s first case of COVID-19 identified as a Chinese national. He claimed that the outcomes of banning the flights would bring more economic risks than the spread of the virus. According to statistics issued by the Ministry of Tourism (2019), Chinese tourists-numbered 2 million-topped the list of foreign visitors to the kingdom. Therefore, prohibiting planes from China would devastatingly affect the tourism sector, one of the main sources of income to Cambodia. Following this announcement, the Prime Minister made it clear that he had no intention to evacuate Cambodia’s diplomats and students who are staying in China. He expressed his disappointment that many students had returned home to Cambodia, suggesting that the decision would jeopardize the possibility of receiving scholarships from Beijing in the future. Cambodia’s decisions not to impose any travel restrictions to Chinese nationals or evacuate Cambodian citizens sent a clear message that they are standing together with Chinese citizens and government.

### 4.4.2 China’s Assistance to Cambodia

Cambodia–China collaboration in combating the pandemic took place in various forms and levels. The effectiveness of China’s responses to counter the outbreak of coronavirus was well known to the world. After successfully keeping the outbreak under control, a team of Chinese medical experts from Guangxi Zhuang was sent to Cambodia within the cooperation framework in healthcare sector. Upon arrival, they shared their experience and provided consultation about the effective measures in containing the pandemic to Cambodian Ministry of Health, along with tons of medical supplies. Meanwhile, Chinese Ambassador to Cambodia H.E. Wang Wentian handed over medical supplies to Phnom Penh governor consisting of face masks and protective suits. Likewise, China’s Ministry of Defense handed out 16 tons of medical supplies to Cambodia’s Ministry of Defense, comprising of masks, PPE, detection kits, and disinfection gel totally worth US$ 1 million. Besides governmental level of mutual assistance, Cambodia also received medical equipment aids from various Chinese corporations and foundations such as Chinese Bacterial

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38Tiezzi (2020).
39Ng (2020).
40Cambodian PM: Ban of China flights to destroy Cambodian economy (2020).
41Sokhen (2020).
42Chinese medical experts arrive in Cambodia to help fight outbreak (2020).
43China donates medical supplies to Cambodia’s Phnom Penh capital hall for COVID-19 fight (2020).
44Chhen (2020).
Molecular Medical Laboratory, China Asia Economic Development Association, and Alibaba foundation. This showcases the comprehensiveness of the level of cooperation between Cambodia and China during this dire circumstance.

4.5 Cambodia–China Economic Cooperation Amid COVID-19

Amid the headwinds caused by the pandemic on economy, Cambodia–China economic cooperation strengthened—primarily to mitigate macro-economic pressure. Cambodia, which depends heavily on export and foreign capital inflow, was hit hard by the disruption of supply chain, dwindling demand, and global travel restriction. Specifically, Cambodia’s garment, textile, and footwear sector, which represented a combination of US$ 7,351 million of export in 2019, faced shortage of raw materials, since 60% of their materials are imported from China. This was due to the suspension of work of the suppliers in China as the country was implementing travel restriction measures. This indicated strong interconnectedness of Cambodian and Chinese economies. This obstruction, nonetheless, could cause closure of factories and drown Cambodian workers in unpaid debt as the country had the highest microloan debt per borrower in the world. These problems, if not addressed swiftly and sustainably, would eventually create domestic recession and social unrest. This was the role which Cambodia–China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership came to play. In late February, Cambodia’s Prime Minister requested, through Chinese ambassador to the kingdom, Chinese suppliers to look into the possibility of delivering crucially needed raw materials to Cambodian factories through air routes so as to prevent the sector from grinding to a halt. In an instant response to the Prime Minister’s request, suppliers in China shipped containers of materials to Cambodia in March, starting with 60 containers, and more than 1,000 containers arriving six days later. This supply of raw materials allowed Cambodia’s garment and footwear industry to stand on its feet at least for some months to come. Nonetheless, to establish a long-term solution and to intertwine the two countries’ economies, Cambodia and China embarked on a more ambitious strategy: Cambodia–China Free Trade Agreement. This initiative will play a complementary role to the existing multilateral free trade agreement between ASEAN and China in fully realizing Cambodia–China trade potential. Bilateral trade between the two countries was US$ 7.4 billion in 2018, and the two countries aimed to reach US$ 10 billion under a free trade agreement. So

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45 Pusparani (2020).
46 Ministry of Commerce (2019).
47 Narin (2020).
48 Turton and Bopha (2019).
49 Over 1,000 containers with garment raw materials arrive in Cambodia from China (2020).
50 Kunmakara (2020).
far, the negotiations were successfully concluded on July 20.\textsuperscript{51} The trade negotiations cover goods, investment, technical cooperation, e-commerce, and BRI cooperation. The trade agreement will bring in more investment, enlarge export market, create employment, reduce input cost, and rejuvenate the kingdom’s economy. China will as well benefit from this bilateral agreement as Chinese companies are looking for offshoring and outsourcing opportunities outside China amid the looming trade war between China and the US. Indeed, the negotiation of Cambodia–China FTA could not have come at a better time. It provides crucial impetuses for Cambodia’s post-pandemic recovery and bulwarks against Cambodia–EU antagonism. In February 2020, EU decided to partially withdraw Cambodia from Everything But Arms (EBA) trade preference scheme due to the ‘serious and systematic violations’ of human rights principles.\textsuperscript{52} This withdrawal of roughly 20\% of Cambodia’s EBA access was estimated to cost Cambodia EUR 1 billion in tariff.\textsuperscript{53} In addition, in May 2020 Cambodia was being placed on the draft-proposal blacklist of the European Union as a country with high risk of money laundering and terrorism financing.\textsuperscript{54} This, if adopted, will cause a knock-on effect and devastating blow to Cambodia’s financial system, investment, and eventually economic recovery. These make Cambodia and China’s economic cooperation even more crucial for the kingdom’s recovery. Besides, the post-COVID-19 recovery of Cambodia will also depend on how quickly the tourism sector, which contributed 32.8\% to GDP in 2018,\textsuperscript{55} can recover. Specifically, it depends on how soon Chinese tourists resume travelling outside of China, since Chinese nationals accounted for 32.6\% of tourists visiting Cambodia in 2018.\textsuperscript{56}

### 4.6 Cambodian People’s Perception on China’s Fight Against COVID-19

The perceptions of leaders are the most important input in directing decision making on foreign policy—more important than pressures in international system and bureaucratic interests.\textsuperscript{57} Meanwhile, the perceptions of general public also played an important role in influencing foreign policy formulation, especially during the period of distress.\textsuperscript{58} Therefore, it is imperative that we look at the perceptions of the government leaders and general public when studying the nature and directions of relations between countries. In particular, let us shine the light on how Cambodians—both leaders and general public—have so far perceived China’s fight against COVID-19.

\textsuperscript{51}Cambodia, China conclude bilateral FTA negotiations (2020).
\textsuperscript{52}European Commission (2020).
\textsuperscript{53}Flynn (2020).
\textsuperscript{54}White (2020).
\textsuperscript{55}Cambodia Contribution of Travel and Tourism to GDP (% of GDP) (1995–2018).
\textsuperscript{56}Pisei (2019).
\textsuperscript{57}Spiegel (1985).
\textsuperscript{58}Herrmann (1986, p. 841).
Cambodia’s Prime Minister Hun Sen is no doubt one of the strongest supporters of China’s fight against the pandemic. His gestures conveyed indefinite buoyancy and optimistic appraisal toward China’s efforts as shown through his ‘special visit’ to Beijing amid the outbreak. The Prime Minister, in fact, had previously wanted to pay a visit to Wuhan—the epicenter of the outbreak. Furthermore, the Prime Minister made it clear that Cambodian nationals learning or working in China, especially in Wuhan, would not be evacuated. The decision came amid the fear that doing so would jeopardize not only the two countries’ good relation but also opportunities for Cambodian students to study in China.\(^59\) State relations and national interests aside, Prime Minister’s stance on not banning travel from China is the result of his trust in China’s anti-pandemic efforts. That is, the Prime Minister perceived China’s efforts to be effective and reliable. This is in contrast to his perceptions about the western countries’ efforts. He might have believed that the measures implemented by the western countries such as Italy, Germany, Spain, France, and the US were not effective enough in curbing the spread of the virus. That is why, in mid-March, he decided to impose prohibition of entry by foreigners from these countries and instructed Cambodian citizens not to travel there.\(^60\) On the other hand, there has not been an unambiguous indicator regarding how Cambodian general public perceive China’s fight against the virus. Nonetheless, the anti-Chinese sensation, which appeared in some countries in Southeast Asia, has not been visible in Cambodia despite the fact that the first confirmed case in the country was a Chinese national. We did not observe any prejudice or resentment towards Chinese nationals or business in the country, at least publicly. There are a few reasons that might explain such phenomenon. First of all, Cambodian people might not view the pandemic spread in the country as the ‘fault’ of China or the Chinese. This is so because most of the confirmed cases in the country were non-Chinese originated. Most of the cases were Cambodian citizens who had travelled to Malaysia or France, while others were foreigners coming from countries other than China. Second, the anti-Chinese sensation might have been neutralized by local media, which tended to avoid spreading information that could be regarded as a blame on China for the spread of the virus. Indeed, while international media outlets such as BBC and Washington Post spread the news about the accusation of Chinese government’s COVID-19 ‘cover-up’ at the early stage of the outbreak, media outlets in Cambodia avoid assimilating such news. Perhaps, they thought doing so would be confronting with the Cambodian government, who tried to maintain good relations with China. Instead, the media outlet projected the news about Chinese assistance to Cambodia in terms of medical and technical assistance for the fight against the virus. This eventually might have shaped the perception of general public towards China, not as a scapegoat to blame for the outbreak but as a victim of the virus and a helpful companion during time of crisis.

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\(^{59}\) Ng (2020).

\(^{60}\) Guiding circular on measures for preventing and curbing the spread of COVID-19 (2020).
4.7 Cambodia Amidst the US–China Rivalry

China–US rivalry has always been looming since the time China became the second economic superpower and thus changing the underlying distribution of power in the international system. As Tunsjø claimed this superpower rivalry has shifted the international order from unipolarity to a new bipolarity. According to him, although China has yet to possess aggregate power equal to that of the US, the country can quickly narrow the gap and stand at the top-ranking tier. True or not, we can observe that competition between the two powers is evident in many aspects ranging from military and geopolitics to trade and technology. For the record, China–US clash has concentrated on trade between the two countries. The US under Trump administration has accused China of unfair trading practices and intellectual property theft, whereas China has interpreted this as an attempt to curb its rise as global economic power. The gunshots ranged from imposing tariff on each other goods worth billions of dollars to persecuting companies believed to have connection with the other government. On top of this, the problem of territorial sovereignty is also a critical hot spot. The US has perceived China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea as an act of aggression. Meanwhile, a new security law of Hong Kong adopted by the National People’s Congress of China prompted the US reactions citing the violation of human rights, Hong Kong’s autonomy, and the ‘one country, two systems’. On the other hand, China perceived the US involvement in Taiwan issue as an act of provocation and interference. As if these were not enough, here comes the COVID-19 blame game. US President Donald Trump scapegoated China for its ‘cover-up’ during the early day of outbreak and accused WHO of collusion with China. He even theorized that the virus originated in a laboratory in China and pushed for an independent investigation. US allies such as Australia followed suit. As a result, Australia was caught amid the fire and thus facing tensions with China. Beyond rhetoric and diplomatic lashing, China and the US also compete in technical aspect: vaccine. The superpowers are competing in the race for COVID-19 vaccine. Both have invested heavily in research and development with the hope to become the first country to mass-produce the vaccine. So the question is how a small country like Cambodia should balance her relations with the two superpowers amid this rivalry. Outright, current Cambodian government deems that relation with China is more favorable and harmonious than that with the US. After all, China is the biggest investor to the country and a generous friend who has provided aids and loans with no string attached. The stance of Cambodian government on the issue of COVID-19 is pretty clear as Cambodian Prime Minister showed solidarity with China.

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61 Tunsjø (2018).
62 Tunsjø (2020).
63 Hu (2020).
64 President Donald J. Trump is demanding accountability from the world health organization [Fact Sheet] (2020).
65 Singh et al. (2020).
66 Takad (2020).
and always praised the efforts of the Chinese government. All of these dates back to the bittersweet relations between Cambodia and the US. Cambodian government has always perceived the US as a hostile force who has always interfered with Cambodia’s political affairs and criticized the country’s human rights records and democracy progress. Let us not forget that the main opposition party in Cambodia was dissolved in 2017 on allegation of collusion and subversion with a foreign country—the US.67 Cambodia, this far, has not enjoyed a good relation the US, let alone stand with it in political drama as contagious as this blame game. However, Cambodia must be smart in balancing her relations with the two countries during this time, at least for the sake of national interest. Let us not forget that the US has, as of May, provided a total of USD 11 million to Cambodia for fighting COVID-19 and for economic recovery process. In addition, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has worked cooperatively with Cambodian Ministry of Health and Pasteur Institute in identifying and tracking the spread of the virus in the country. In short, politics aside, the US is still one of the most important partners during this crisis, not to mention other development assistance the US has been providing to Cambodia for decades. Therefore, although Cambodian government is seen to stand closer to China on this pandemic drama, it has to avoid ‘harassing’ the actions and rhetoric made by the US. In fact, although Cambodia has early on showed solidarity with China, she has avoided showing any opposition or condemnation on allegations made by the US toward China. Unlike, say Australia, Cambodia carefully avoids expressing her support for one side against another. This hedging strategy or active neutral foreign policy has so far proved to be a valuable and effective diplomatic tool to be used now and in the future.68 As a result, we can expect to see more assistance and funding flowing to Cambodia from both sides of the ring.

4.8 Possible Directions of Cambodia–China Relations in Post-COVID Era

Ironically, 2020 is the 10th anniversary of Cambodia–China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, and with all these good deeds and harmonious tie-up going on, it does not take a whole lot of efforts to speculate how the future direction of Cambodia–China relations will unfold. It will undeniably strengthen economically and politically. On the one hand, we should witness increase volume of trade between the two countries after the Cambodia–China Free Trade Agreement is signed into effect. For Cambodia, this free trade agreement open a new market for her products as an alternative to European and the US markets. For China, this agreement provide opportunity for Chinese companies to outsource or relocate their production amid China–US trade war. The kingdom, thus, will receive more investment. According to the result of the fifth meeting of China–Cambodia Intergovernmental Coordination Committee

67Thul and Lefevre (2017).
68Thearith (2020).
which took place in June, both sides further agreed to push for the establishment of one-way or close-loop chartered planes in order to revive tourism industry of the two countries.\(^6^9\) Thus, we expect to see more Chinese tourists visiting Cambodia and vice versa. China also pledged to assist Cambodia in infrastructure development and promised to develop Cambodia’s port-province of Preah Sihanouk into a multi-purpose economic zone through its BRI. In short, cooperation with China will play a bigger and more ambitious role in economic recovery of Cambodia in the future. Politically, Cambodia and China pledged to strengthen their cooperation on national defense with possibility of conducting more joint exercises and improvement of military academies and medics. Furthermore, Cambodia is a supporter of China’s notion of community of a shared future in the Asia Pacific and China’s global view in general.\(^7^0\)

### 4.9 Conclusion

COVID-19, although affected several aspects of society, undeniably acted as a magnifying glass emanating progressive and strong withstanding relation between Cambodia and China, taking note of the new era of solid and ironclad friendship. Reflecting through the slogan emphasized by Prime Minister Hun Sen “A friend in need is a friend indeed”, Cambodia-China has exchanged endless support and cooperation in response to dealing with this human insecurity. In an effort to express solidarity with and confidence in the Chinese government, the Prime Minister made a visit to China, disapproved of the ban of flights to and from China, and rejected the possibility of evacuating Cambodian nationals living in China. China, perceiving authentic concordance, provided Cambodia with expertise and material assistance in the fight against the pandemic and promised to take good care Cambodian citizens living in China. Economically, the countries continued to assist each other in time of this dire situation. The Chinese government, in response to Cambodia’s request, urged its apparel suppliers to provide crucially needed raw materials to Cambodia in order to help prevent the country’s garment industry from a destructive standstill. Ambitiously, the two partners also envisaged a free trade agreement which would help their economies recover after the pandemic, with promises of cheaper input, bigger market, more employment, and more influx of investment. With the goodwill of the governments and harmony among the people, we should see Cambodia and China continue to support each other on various matters and in building a community with a common destiny.

\(^6^9\)China, Cambodia intergovernmental committee holds meeting via video (2020).
\(^7^0\)Xu (2020).
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