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Journal of Mathematics Instruction, Social Research and Opinion
Vol. 5, No. 4, December 2026, pp. 2875 – 2897, https://doi.org/10.58421/misro.v5i4.1630
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Cambodia-U.S. Security Cooperation in the Era of U.S.–China Strategic Competition

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Article Info

Article history:

Received 2026-05-18
Revised 2026-06-18
Accepted 2026-11-23

Keywords:

Cambodia-U.S. security cooperation
Constrained hedging
Neoclassical realism
Qualitative thematic analysis
Small state strategy
U.S.–China strategic competition

ABSTRACT

This article examines Cambodia–U.S. security cooperation amid intensifying U.S.–China strategic competition in Southeast Asia. Despite the image of Cambodia as China's geopolitical pawn, it has selective security cooperation with the United States. Despite previous studies emphasized Cambodia's China-oriented alignment, a critical gap remains regarding the persistence of limited and functional security cooperation with Washington. This study aims to investigate how Cambodia navigates this security cooperation and underlying factors shaping its selective character. This study employs a qualitative research design, and conduct semi-structured interviews with 14 key informants, comprising Cambodian policymakers, diplomats, military officials, senior officials, and academics. Thematic coding was employed in the data analysis within MAXQDA 2020, which was further complemented by academic literature, policy documents, and official statements. The finding contends that Cambodia's security cooperation with the United States is selective, cautious, and concentrated in politically low-risk areas, including capacity-building military training, peacekeeping, demining, humanitarian assistance, counterterrorism, and nontraditional security cooperation. Crucially, this cooperation is constrained by domestic political imperatives, elite threat perceptions, regime-security considerations, sovereignty issues, economic dependence, and the strategic sensitivity of Beijing's influence over Cambodia's foreign policy. The study concludes that Cambodia's approach reflects constrained hedging as it seeks pragmatic security benefits from the United States while limiting the depth and visibility of cooperation to preserve sovereignty, regime stability, and strategic flexibility between Washington and Beijing. This article contributes to the debate on small-state behavior, hedging and neoclassical realism by demonstrating how systemic pressure is filtered through domestic political constraints and elite calculations. The Cambodian case illustrates how small states can navigate their security and economic interests amid great power competition.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The growing strategic rivalry between the United States and China has significantly changed the security scenario in the Asia-Pacific region, exerting greater pressures on small and middle powers to realign their foreign and security policies. The Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN) has emerged as a key arena of strategic competition between China and the United States and is facing unprecedented challenges, foremost among them the intensifying strategic, economic, and institutional rivalry between the United States and China [1], [2]. This rivalry is evident not only in military behavior and alliance politics, but also in the economic sphere, institutional competition, and normative competition [3]. China is increasing its influence in the region by using economic statecraft and more assertive measures to strengthen its claim to the South China Sea [1], [4].

Under these conditions, smaller states with limited material capabilities must pursue strategies that preserve autonomy, reduce vulnerability, and avoid risk of being aligned and dependent on any single major power [5], [6]. In this regard, Cambodia has become a case in this small-state dilemma. In policy debate and academic literature, Cambodia is often described as China's client state [7], a case of China's patronage [8], or a Chinese proxy [9], which implies its constraint in external relations. Such interpretations have empirical basis, considering the extensive Cambodia–China relations in infrastructure investment, diplomatic support, development finance, political backing, and security cooperation. However, these accounts risk exaggerating Cambodia’s structural dependence while downplaying its strategic agency in an asymmetrical international environment [10]. More importantly, they do not fully explain why Cambodia continues to maintain selective security cooperation with the United States despite its close relationship with China and despite recurring political tensions with Washington [11]. Cambodia has a wide range of economic, infrastructure, diplomatic and defense ties with China, but Phnom Penh has not entirely given up on security cooperation with the United States. Rather, Cambodia remains engaged with Washington in low-risk and capacity-building activities such as military education, peacekeeping, counterterrorism, demining, humanitarian assistance, disaster response, maritime security, prisoner of war and missing in action cooperation, and some military exercises [12].

This article examines the selective and conditional nature of Cambodia–U.S. security cooperation in the context of U.S.–China strategic competition. Cambodia is not a true ally of the United States, and it is not a complete adversary of Washington. Meanwhile, Cambodia's proximity to China does not mean that it cannot have a viable security relationship with the United States [13]. This poses an important empirical question: how can Cambodia maintain a limited yet meaningful security partnership with the United States, while at the same time maintaining a close and politically sensitive relationship with China? The puzzle is particularly significant because there are multiple areas of tension between Cambodia and the U.S. that affect the nature of their relationship, such as U.S. concerns about Cambodia's democratic practices, human rights issues, sanctions, concerns about Ream Naval Base, and Cambodia's geopolitical sensitivity regarding its relationship with China [14].

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The current scholarship offers valuable insights but is incomplete. Another strand of literature focuses on Cambodia's reliance on China and the foreign policy of Phnom Penh as a clientelist, patron, bandwagoner, or strategic ally of Beijing [7], [8], [9]. These studies highlight the importance of Chinese economic assistance, diplomatic support, infrastructure financing, and regime-security benefits. A second strand focuses on small-state agency, which holds that Cambodia is not just a passive object of great-power competition, but an active diplomatic player who is pursuing autonomy, sovereignty, regime security, and development benefits [10], [11]. A third strand of scholarship on Southeast Asian hedging suggests that weaker states may not have to make an either-or decision but instead can pursue multiple powers at once by engaging in selective cooperation, diversification, and risk management [15], [16]. A fourth strand, based on Cambodia's post-Cold War diplomatic history, reveals that Cambodia-U.S. relations have been characterized by cooperation and normative tension, especially regarding democracy, governance, human rights, and regional security [17], [18], [19], [20], [21], [22]. These studies are helpful, but there are still significant unanswered questions. First, the literature has tended to focus more on Cambodia's China alignment than on the continued existence of Cambodia–U.S. security cooperation. Second, research on Cambodia–U.S. relations frequently focus on the diplomatic tension or functional cooperation between the two countries but fails to provide a satisfactory account of the reasons why cooperation persists in some security areas and is lacking in others. Third, existing scholarship has not fully integrated systemic pressure, small-state vulnerability, hedging behavior, and domestic political filters into a single explanatory framework. Consequently, the way in which Cambodia governs its selective security cooperation with the United States in the context of U.S.-China competition has not been studied in detail [23], [24].

This article fills this gap by analyzing Cambodia–U.S. security cooperation within an integrated theoretical framework based on the small-state theory, the hedging theory, and neoclassical realism. The small state theory is used to account for the structural vulnerability, material powerlessness, and autonomy-seeking tendencies of Cambodia [5], [25]. Hedging theory provides the rationale for Cambodia's simultaneous involvement in multiple major powers through selective cooperation, diversification, and risk avoidance, instead of balancing or bandwagoning [16], [26]. Neoclassical realism offers a causal mechanism at the domestic level by explaining how systemic pressures are mediated by domestic political institutions, regime-security concerns, elite threat perceptions, and sovereignty narratives [27], [28]. These views, taken together, account for the fact that Cambodia is willing to engage with the United States in certain security areas, but not others, and that the extent, visibility, and strategic significance of that engagement is limited.

The novelty of this study is that it examines Cambodia–U.S. security cooperation, not just Cambodia–China relations. While existing studies have examined Cambodia's close relationship with China, this article explains why limited but functional cooperation with the United States persists despite the structural and political constraints created by U.S.–China strategic competition. Empirically, the study relies on semi-structured interviews with 14 key informants, comprising of Cambodian policymakers, diplomats,

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military officers, senior officials, and academics. Analytically, it builds on the concept of constrained hedging to account for Cambodia's selective engagement with the United States: Cambodia wants to benefit from U.S. capacity-building and nontraditional security cooperation, but does not want to become more deeply involved in strategic alignment that might compromise regime security, sovereignty narratives, or relations with China.

This study aims to examine how Cambodia navigates security cooperation with the United States in the era of U.S.–China strategic competition. It poses three key questions: What are the perceptions of the Cambodian elites on the U.S.-China strategic competition and its impact on Cambodia's national security and sovereignty? Second, what kinds of security cooperation do Cambodia and the United States have? Third, why is Cambodia still cooperating with the United States in some security areas but not in others?

The article makes three contributions to the scholarship of international relations. It can be used theoretically in discussions of small-state behavior, hedging, and neoclassical realism, as it demonstrates how the pressure of the system is mediated by domestic political factors and elite calculations. It offers empirical evidence based on interviews with Cambodia–U.S. security cooperation, which is less developed than the literature on Cambodia–China relations. In practice, it provides policy-relevant perspectives on the potential for continued cooperation between Cambodia and the United States in politically low-risk fields like military education, peacekeeping, demining, humanitarian assistance, disaster response, counterterrorism, and nontraditional security.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Empirical Scholarship on Cambodia–U.S. and Cambodia–China Relations

Scholars are sharply divided about how to describe Cambodia's alignment behavior, and the terms of that debate directly reflect the theoretical gap that this article is intended to address.

The first strand of literature portrays Cambodia as a typical China pawn, emphasizing the depth and durability of Sino-Cambodian ties to the detriment of other diplomatic relations. Po and Primiano [29], in their most systematic empirical analysis of the issue, identify four explanatory factors driving the Chinese embrace of Cambodia: regime survival, economic dependency, and the historical experience of U.S. interventionism and the lack of credible alternative security guarantors. Their analysis, based on elite interviews conducted in 2018, directly anticipates the findings of the study, notably the centrality of regime survival as a constraint on U.S. engagement with Cambodia, but does not theorize why selective U.S. engagement with Cambodia remains a more active strategic variable than China. In further this analysis, So et al. [14] demonstrate that the Chinese multidimensional assistance operates as a key structural buffer; it severely weakens the influence of Western normative leverage, and it allows Cambodian elites to avoid U.S. pressure regarding human rights and democracy. Leng [30] extends the bandwagoning argument by situating Cambodia's support for the Belt and Road Initiative at three analytical levels — systemic, nation-state, and elite decision-making — demonstrating that Hun Sen's pragmatic calculus of domestic legitimation through economic performance is as important as structural dependency in explaining

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Cambodia's China embrace. Yet Leng's framework, like Po and Primiano's, focuses overwhelmingly on the China axis of Cambodia's foreign policy and does not systematically theorize the logic of Cambodia's concurrent U.S. engagement.

Second, more comprehensive strand acknowledges Cambodia's strategic agency without adequately specifying its constraints. Leng and Chheang [31], in the most direct empirical engagement with Cambodia–U.S. relations available in the peer-reviewed literature, trace the evolution of bilateral ties since 2000 and demonstrate that both countries possess genuine incentives for cooperative engagement—arguing that 'mutual respect, noninterference, and equal sovereignty' can provide a basis for expanding security partnership. Their empirical inventory of U.S. security cooperation — documenting the Angkor Sentinel exercise series, CARAT naval programs, demining assistance, and defense dialogue frameworks — provides the most comprehensive factual baseline for the present study. Critically, however, Leng and Chheang frame Cambodia's limited U.S. engagement primarily as a relational problem amenable to diplomatic repair, rather than as a structural outcome of domestically mediated elite calculations that resist repair through relationship management alone. Chheang [32], in the most theoretically sophisticated treatment of Cambodian foreign policy agency, argues that Cambodia is not merely a passive object of great-power competition but an active strategist that adjusts its 'foreign policy posture to adapt to and navigate the fast-changing geopolitical landscapes' in pursuit of independence and strategic autonomy. This argument is congruent with the constrained hedging framework advanced here, but it does not specify the domestic political filters — elite threat perception asymmetries, regime survival constraints, constitutional limitations — that bound the exercise of that agency.

Third, structurally oriented strand focuses on the role of domestic legitimation dynamics in Cambodia's foreign policy realignment. Luo [23], in the most recent comprehensive treatment, places Cambodia's align-and-realign behavior vis-a-vis China, Japan, and the United States in the perspective of domestic political challenge management, arguing that the more severe the domestic political challenges, the more Hun Sen and his ruling party need China's support. Luo and Un [33] take this argument further, showing how the CPP's growing economic dependency on China after Western aid cuts which in turn were a result of democratic backsliding, created a structural reinforcement of China dependence which progressively made Cambodian strategic options narrower. Heng [34] provides an early but complementary perspective, examining Cambodia-China relations in a positive-sum game organized by Chinese economic statecraft and Cambodian development imperatives and structured around an implicit negative-sum proposition of U.S. conditionality-laden engagement, from the Cambodian government's perspective. Var [35] records the details of the security and defense policy architecture of Cambodia, backed up by the multi-tiered and domain-segmented structure of the country's security protection partnerships, which the current study's interview data supports.

In short, this body of Cambodia-specific scholarship establishes three crucial empirical anchors for the present study: first, that Cambodia's China orientation is primarily regime-survival-driven rather than ideological; second, that U.S. engagement carries genuine normative costs for the Cambodian government that structurally limit

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alignment depth; and third, that selective U.S. security cooperation persists despite these costs for functionally important capacity-building reasons. What the existing literature has not provided is a theoretically specified account of how these domestic political conditions translate into the pattern of security cooperation observed as the domain selectivity, the depth calibration, the incremental trust-building logic. This explanatory gap motivates the integrated theoretical framework developed in the following subsections.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

2.2.1. Small State Theory: Structural Constraints and Strategic Vulnerability

The small-state theory provides a structural basis for understanding the Cambodian foreign policy environment. Keohane [5] seminal paper on the 'Lilliputian' dilemma establishes the preservation of autonomy, not the maximization of power but as the primary goal of small states, whose defining characteristic is their limited capacity to shape systemic outcomes. Vital [36] expands on this by pointing out that the vulnerability of small states is not only military but also sensitive to economic pressure and political manipulation, a dynamic he calls 'state inequality. Handel [37] explains that small states exist in a state of permanent strategic uncertainty, prone to prudence, multilateral integration, and strategic ambiguity. More recently, Thorhallsson and Steinsson [6] drew a distinction between material and institutional affinities, arguing that institutional affinities could compensate for material deficits by providing legitimacy and diplomatic leverage, a distinction that is directly applicable to Cambodia's ASEAN membership as a source of normative resources that partly offset its material constraints. Maass [38] confirms, by means of a comparative analysis, that small states that have successfully integrated into international institutions have qualitatively different foreign-policy outcomes, while Hey [39] identifies a consistent preference for rule-based multilateralism as compensatory institutionalism. Cooper and Shaw [40] add that niche diplomacy, specialized contributions in selected international areas, is a tool of strategic visibility that can compensate for substantive shortcomings. But the small-state theory retains a residual structural determinism that Sutton [41] rightly challenges: material constraints do not mechanically determine policy, because elite agencies and domestic politics impose systematic distortions.

This constraint is particularly acute in Cambodia, where the observable pattern of protectionism reflects as much a deliberate elite choice as a structural need.

2.2.2. Hedging Theory: Managing Uncertainty between Competing Powers

Hedging theory has become the dominant explanatory framework for Southeast Asian alignment behavior, yet it contains internal debates that the Cambodia case both illuminates and extends. Goh [15] defines hedging as part of a broader enmeshment strategy through which weaker states engage great powers in institutional frameworks; for her, hedging is fundamentally structural — a response to power distribution uncertainty. Kuik [16] introduces a more granular typology, distinguishing profit-driven from risk-containment, and identifies domain selectivity as a key operational characteristic: countries choose which functional areas to engage with which partners partly based on the

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geopolitical sensitivity of these areas. Roy [42] and [43] map the spectrum from pure hedging to accommodation, arguing that most Asian countries are in a shifting intermediate position. Tessman [44] contributes to the concept of system-based hedging as selective engagement with the normative and institutional frameworks of the dominant power, while avoiding those that threaten the autonomy of the regime which is closely related to the model described in this paper on U.S. security engagement in Cambodia. Lim and Cooper [45] introduce omni-enmeshment as a more complex hedging option that requires institutional capacity that is not available in all small countries. The most significant challenge to the standard hedging theory is the comparative finding by Ciorciari and Haacke [46] that hedging deteriorates in the context of permanent power asymmetry, a finding that directly makes the application of hedging frameworks to Cambodia more difficult. Applied specifically to Cambodia -U.S. relation, Leng [47] account of Cambodian protectionism towards Vietnam shows that even in a highly asymmetric power balance, Cambodia uses influence denial and selective engagement as hedging instruments as albeit in modified and limited methods. This insight bridges Cambodian-specific scholarship and general hedge theory in a productive way: the question is not whether Cambodia is hedging, but how the specific form of hedging practiced by Cambodia differs from the underlying theoretical assumption, and how domestic political conditions explain this divergence. This study addresses this specification gap by means of the concept of hedging limits: the systematic suppression of hedging depth by national policy filters that make the commitment of a single sponsor more exclusive than structural uncertainty alone. Unlike the bandwagoning characterizations of Po and Primiano [48], which treat Cambodia's China orientation as a primary strategic choice and U.S. involvement as a residual factor, the containment narrative treats both orientations as active, albeit asymmetric, strategic outcomes of the same domestic political process.

2.2.3. Neoclassical Realism: Linking Systemic Pressure to Domestic Constraints

Neoclassical realism provides a causal structure that links external structural pressures to observable policy outcomes. Rose [27] shows that systemic forces filter through domestic political institutions, the perception of threat by the elite, and the priorities of the regime. Lobell et al. [28] systematically expand on this framework, showing that the composition and coherence of the foreign policy leadership determine the decoding of structural incentives. Schweller [49] notion of under-balancing which a tendency for countries to balance less than structural theory predicts, driven by internal fragmentation and regime uncertainty, despite structural incentives to diversify, applies directly to Cambodia's failure to hedge more aggressively against the United States. Christensen [50] shows how the dynamics of domestic coalition politics determine whether elites mobilize support for pro-competitive foreign policies or for moderate behavior to deal with legitimacy problems, a finding that is directly applicable to Hun Sen's handling of U.S. normative pressure as a domestic issue of legitimacy. Taliaferro [51] adds that resource-rich capacity shapes the range of strategies that countries can pursue, and Cock [52] explains why Cambodian elites exercise a high degree of autonomy in managing China's economic dependence, but a low degree of autonomy in managing it. Sterling-

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Folker [53] synthesizes these contributions to explain the divergence in foreign policy between countries facing the same structural incentives-and that is the comparative puzzle that distinguishes Cambodia from its more assertive ASEAN counterparts. Taken together, these neo-conservative realist interventions explain Cambodia's limited hedging as a predictable result of asymmetric elite threat perceptions, regime survival imperatives, constitutional neutrality principles, and different degrees of executive autonomy, all of which systematically suppress hedging to a degree that would have been predicted by structural analysis.

Integrating these theoretical traditions with the empirical literature on Cambodia's specific security cooperation with the U.S. reveals a pattern of limited engagement, limited to low-risk, capacity-building, and non-traditional security domains, driven by asymmetric elite threat perceptions, rooted in U.S. normative imperatives. This proposal qualifies the bandwagon characterization offered by Po and Primiano [29] as Cambodia does not follow a bandwagon, but rather a limited hedging strategy, the U.S.-facing part of which seems to be marginal, precisely because domestic policy filters maximize asymmetries of costs. It also expands on the argument of Chheang [54] concerning the Agency by specifying the national political constraints under which it operates. Chheang bridges the gap between Luo [23] domestic policy of alignment and the hedging theory, showing that the same domestic mechanisms that explain Cambodia's Chinese embrace also determine the depth of its security partnership with the United States.

3. METHOD

3.1. Research Design

This study employed qualitative research design to examine Cambodia-U.S. security cooperation in the context of U.S.-China strategic competition. Qualitative approach was appropriated because it is capturing the elites' perceptions, policy interpretations, and strategic calculations [55], [56]. This study was conducted in Cambodia from August to December 2025 and included an analysis of Cambodian perceptions of U.S.–China strategic competition, Cambodia–U.S. security cooperation, and Cambodia's strategic options as a small state in a contested regional environment. The study was conducted with 14 key informants, including Cambodian policy makers, diplomats, military officials, senior officials, and academics. The participants were selected by purposive sampling due to their professional knowledge, institutional experience, or direct involvement in Cambodia's foreign policy, diplomacy, defense, and security affairs.

3.2. Sampling, Data Sources, and Collection

This study used both primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 14 key informants, a sample size considered sufficient to achieve thematic saturation in qualitative research [57], [58]. The interview was conducted between August and December 2025. Participants for this study were recruited using a purposive sampling technique. The criteria for recruitment were senior politicians, senior defense officials, high diplomats, policymakers, and academicians (as

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shown in Table 1) who are directly involved in or closely observe Cambodia–U.S. security cooperation.

Table 1. Demographic information of research participants

Participant Code	Gender	Age	Position	Specialization	Exp. year	Country
P1	Male	49	Military Diplomat	Political science	7	Cambodia
P2	Male	38	Professor University	IR	4	Bangladesh
P3	Male	51	Prof. UC/Civil servant	IR	15	Cambodia
P4	Male	47	Prof. of Law/Civil Servant	Political science	9	Cambodia
P5	Male	55	Senior police officer and prof.	Political science	25	Cambodia
P6	Male	49	Senior military officer	Military Science	10	Cambodia
P7	Male	53	Leader's advisor /prof.	IR	28	Cambodia
P8	Male	55	Ambassador	IR	35	Cambodia
P9	Male	54	Deputy Dir. of EOD	Military/Political Science	33	Cambodia
P10	Male	38	Deputy Dir. of EOD	Military/Political Science	35	Cambodia
P11	Male	29	Dean	International Business	11	Cambodia
P12	Male	38	Secretary of State	Rural development	9	Cambodia
P13	Male	39	Deputy Dir. of U.S. Department	IR	15	Cambodia
P14	Male	42	Ambassador	Political science	18	Cambodia

Secondary data included academic literature, official statements, policy documents, government publications, think-tank reports, and relevant media sources on Cambodia–U.S. relations, Cambodia–China relations, U.S.–China strategic competition, small-state foreign policy, hedging, and neoclassical realism. The findings from the interviews were used to provide context to the findings from the empirical sources, and to triangulate the evidence.

3.3. Data Analysis, Trustworthiness, and Ethics

The interviews data were conducted anonymously and used open-ended questions designed to identify factors contributing to security cooperation between Cambodia and the United States. The interview data were analyzed through qualitative content analysis, and thematic coding using MAXQDA 2020 [59], [60]. The analysis proceeded in two main stages: first, an open coding to identify key concepts; second, a focused coding to group these concepts into main analytical themes presented in the findings. The major themes including factors contributing to strained relations, factors facilitating cooperation, Cambodia's strategic choices amid U.S.–China competition, and approaches to navigate this rivalry to derive benefits from the competition. Following the coding process, a thematic synthesis was carried out to organize the identified concepts and themes into a coherent analytical narrative. This involved systematically reviewing the coded data to uncover patterns, relationships, and higher-order insights that directly address the research

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questions. The resulting structure provides the foundation for the findings section, presenting the empirical evidence from the interviews in a clear and organized manner.

The discussion section then applied a multi-theoretical framework to interpret these empirically derived themes which combines small-state theory, hedging theory, and neoclassical realism. To enhance methodological trustworthiness, the research adhered to established standards of credibility [61]. Triangulation of interview data with secondary data and member checks with some chosen informants was used to increase credibility. Reliability has been guaranteed through a clear audit trail of coding and memo processes. The confirmability was strengthened by reflexive note-taking to reduce researcher bias. Ethical issues were adhered to during the research process. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed about the purpose of the study before the interviews. Confidentiality of participants was ensured by using codes. Sensitive information concerning diplomacy, foreign policy and security was treated with care.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, it is explained the results of research and at the same time is given the comprehensive discussion.

4.1. Results

This section presents the results obtained from the data collected from the interviews and the thematic coding. The results are organized around five main themes: the perspective of Cambodia in security cooperation with the US, factors affecting bilateral security cooperation, cooperation challenges, military training and cooperation program, and long-term strategic implications. These issues show how Cambodia has maintained a selective and cautious security co-operation with the US, while managing the pressures of strategic competition between the US and China.

4.1.1. Perspective on Cambodia–U.S. Security Cooperation

Cambodia–U.S. security cooperation has a long but fluctuating history, beginning in the 1970s and experiencing periods of interruption due to shifts in domestic politics and regional geopolitics. A military diplomat (P1) explained, "The cooperation between the two countries had built since the 70s decade then disconnected due to political situation in the country had changed according to Cambodian constitution and geopolitics in the region and world." Engagements include both traditional and nontraditional security measures, such as military exercises, cultural exchanges, demining, disaster relief, and UN peacekeeping operations, with the military diplomat (P1) noting "Trade-industry and military exercise such as exchange culture, combating terrorism, landmine clearance, bilateral exercises and UN blue helmets." Cooperation is selective and conditional, focusing on low-risk initiatives to build trust, as highlighted by a professor of IR (P2): "Focus on low-risk cooperation, disaster relief, KPO, Naval vessels, military cooperation, because they want to build trust and enhance front ties." Officials also emphasized the importance of neutrality due to Cambodia's small-state status, with a deputy director of EOD (P9) and a deputy director of EOD (P10) both observing that "Cambodia-U.S.

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cooperation relies on circumstance... neutrality (small country) cannot take aside deeply to other country."

Overall, Cambodia engages pragmatically, maintaining ties with the U.S. while carefully navigating political sensitivities.

4.1.2. Factors Affecting Bilateral Security Cooperation

4.1.2.1 Political and Geopolitical Considerations

Political and geopolitical dynamics strongly influence Cambodia–U.S. security cooperation. Several correspondents noted that U.S. policy is volatile and dependent on presidential administrations. A military diplomat (P1) observed, "U.S. always change their policy rely on presidential election," while a senior military officer (P6) highlighted the broader regional impact: "the challenge of geo-power countries between two balances of power countries (U.S.-China)." Cambodia's small-state status makes it highly sensitive to U.S.–China tensions, particularly regarding strategic locations such as Ream Naval Base, as a senior police officer and professor (P5) noted: "Geopolitics between China and U.S. such Ream military base..." Historical mistrust also shapes engagement, with a professor and civil servant (P3) stating that "U.S. doesn't trust on Cambodia " and a professor of IR (P2) adding: "Human right concern, political trust engagement, China is also influence."

These insights indicate that Cambodia must carefully navigate both external geopolitical pressures and internal political considerations.

4.1.2.2. Economic Considerations

Economic interests play a significant role in Cambodia–U.S. security cooperation. A military diplomat (P1) emphasized that "Economic and political factors are certainly affected..." An ambassador (P8) noted Cambodia's strategic economic position: "Economic is also slow down... Cambodia is central for chain of supply," while a deputy director of EOD (P9) pointed to specific trade measures, "restore a tariff rate, results from 49, 36, and 19 %." A professor of IR (P2) also highlighted the U.S. perspective: "U.S. needs interests come from partnership."

These statements show that economic and security considerations are closely intertwined in Cambodia's foreign policy calculations.

4.1.2.3. Diplomatic Flexibility and Regime Survival

Diplomatic flexibility is central to Cambodia's strategy, allowing it to maintain sovereignty and regime stability. A military diplomat (P1) explained, "Cambodia has to balance its relation and cooperation with U.S. and China," a view echoed by a deputy director of EOD (P10): "Cambodia must balance with two superpower countries (U.S.-China)." A professor of law and civil servant (P4) added, "Cambodia has to be flexible diplomacy," while a senior police officer and professor (P5) noted the practical goal of maximizing engagement: "Cambodia should make a good cooperation between U.S.-China." These perspectives suggest that Cambodia's hedging strategy is deliberate, balancing engagement with both superpowers while minimizing risks.

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4.1.3. Challenges in Security Cooperation

Several challenges constrain the depth of Cambodia–U.S. security cooperation. Domestic political issues, such as human rights concerns, opposition party dissolution, and corruption, reduce trust and limit cooperation. A military diplomat (P1) remarked, "obstacles for law and institution... dissolved the National Rescue Party in 2018," while a senior police officer and professor (P5) added, "Human right, democratic, corruption and dissolved an opposition party." Public scrutiny regarding strategic locations like Ream Naval Base also presents challenges, as a senior military officer (P6) noted: "Some Cambodian people sometimes criticize the gov't on Ream naval base."

Finally, institutional weaknesses, including limited legal frameworks and administrative capacity, further complicate implementation, reflecting the complex interplay of domestic politics and institutional capacity in shaping engagement.

4.1.4. Military Training and Cooperation Programs

Military cooperation is structured and multi-dimensional, encompassing three levels of training: basic courses, command and staff courses, and strategic-level defense education. A military diplomat (P1) explained, "three levels of training course — basic course, command and staff course, defense strategic level," while a professor of IR (P2) highlighted training in diverse domains: "Military training in the fields: air forces, army, artillery...drone, AI..." Joint exercises, including the Angkor Sentinel Exercise (2010–2017), serve as practical platforms for capability enhancement, with a senior military officer (P6) noting, "Military Education from all levels (three levels)... Maritime training... Angkor Sentinel Exercising." Nontraditional security cooperation, such as humanitarian aid, health initiatives, and transitional crime training, complements military engagements, as noted by a leader's advisor and professor (P7) and an ambassador (P8).

Overall, these programs are designed to enhance Cambodia's capabilities while maintaining a low-risk, confidence-building approach.

4.1.5. Long-Term Cooperation and Strategic Implications

Long-term cooperation is framed as a strategic partnership, emphasizing trust-building and balance in a multipolar environment. A military diplomat (P1) observed, "Exchange our delegate to visit, organize meeting..." and a professor of IR (P2) added, "should start small point but build trust." Officials emphasized the importance of incremental engagement to safeguard sovereignty while expanding cooperation, with a professor and civil servant (P3) noting, "Now new multipolar, balance of power," and a senior police officer and professor (P5) highlighting the broader objective: "keep balance power between superpowers states." A deputy director of EOD (P9) summarized the strategic aim as a Comprehensive Strategy Partnership, while a deputy director of EOD (P10) emphasized the continuity of this approach: "Long term cooperation is our foreign policy."

Collectively, these insights illustrate that Cambodia pursues a hedging strategy, balancing relations with the U.S. and China to maintain sovereignty, stability, and regime resilience in a contested regional security landscape.

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https://doi.org/10.58421/misro.v5i4.1630

In summary, the results indicates that Cambodia-U.S. security cooperation persists but remains limited. Cambodia continues to engage with the U.S. in practical areas such as military training, peace-keeping, demining, humanitarian aid, disaster response, and non-traditional security. However, the depth and visibility of the cooperation is limited by strategic rivalry between the U.S. and China, domestic political concerns, sovereignty sensitivities, political mistrust, economic dependency, and the close relationship of Cambodia with China. These findings provide an empirical basis for discussion in the following section.

4.2. Discussion

The results indicate that security cooperation between Cambodia and the U.S. continues, but is still limited, cautious, and politically driven. Cambodia continues to engage the United States in low-risk and capacity-building areas, including military education, peacekeeping, demining, humanitarian assistance, counterterrorism, maritime security, and nontraditional security cooperation. This cooperation, however, is influenced by the broader strategic competition between the U.S. and China, the political climate in Cambodia, sovereignty issues, elite threat perceptions, economic reliance, and the political sensitivity of Cambodia's ties with China. The overall significance of the results is that Cambodia's security cooperation with the United States is not a step towards formal alignment. Instead, it is a limited hedging policy that aims to gain tangible security advantages without incurring political and strategic costs.

4.2.1. Cambodia's Perspective on U.S.–China Security Cooperation: Historical Context and Small-State Behavior

The interviews revealed that Cambodia–U.S. security cooperation has a long but uneven history, reflecting both internal political developments and the broader geopolitical environment. A military diplomat (P1) noted: "The cooperation between the two countries had built since the 70s decade then disconnected due to political situation in the country had changed according to Cambodian constitution and geopolitics in the region and world," while a professor and civil servant (P3) added: "It is the whole relations both economic and defense since 18 April 1970s, involve geopolitics, it is not strong, Cambodia has not a lot of natural resources, U.S. needs Cambodia voices for ASEAN."

These findings are in line with small state theory, which posits that small states must navigate complex international environments carefully and are highly sensitive to external pressures from a theoretical standpoint [5]. The reluctance of Cambodia to commit fully to either superpower is evident in Keohane's argument that small states pursue autonomy preservation rather than power maximization. Thorhallsson [10] expands this by emphasizing that Cambodia's engagement with multilateral peacekeeping and demining frameworks demonstrates how small states leverage institutional membership, such as ASEAN, to amplify their diplomatic weight. The professor of IR (P2) highlighted Cambodia's selective involvement and emphasis on low-risk initiatives. This approach is consistent with the concept of compensatory institutionalism, which emphasizes the importance of small states establishing strategic visibility through specific contributions

rather than broad alignment commitments. This approach is exemplified by the concept of "Focus on low-risk cooperation, disaster relief, KPO, Naval vessels, military cooperation, because they want to build trust and enhance front ties." This historical pattern of selective U.S. engagement has persisted across administrations, not as passivity but as deliberate calibration, according to Leng and Chheang [31]. The consistent elite perspective across diverse institutional positions further supports Chheang's [62] claim that Cambodia's behavior reflects genuine foreign policy agency rather than structural constraint alone. The selective approach is embedded in a sustainable strategic culture of sovereignty preservation, as evidenced by the convergence between the military diplomat's (P1) historical account and the professor and civil servants (P3) geopolitical framing. When combined, these insights indicate that Cambodia's approach to U.S. security cooperation is more suitable for analyzing rather than focusing on weakness-driven accommodation. Instead, it is viewed as a deliberate small-state strategy of engagement calibration, which has its roots in the past of U.S.–China rivalry.

4.2.2. Political, Geopolitical, and Economic Drivers of Cooperation

The findings show that Cambodian security cooperation is shaped by a combination of political, geopolitical, and economic factors, each of which influences the extent and nature of the cooperation between the two sides. Politically, the shifting priorities of the U.S. administration and domestic concerns are affecting bilateral relations. A military diplomat (P1) pointed out that the U.S. always changes its policy depending on the presidential election, and a civil servant (P3) pointed out the lack of trust: “the U.S. does not trust on its policy and contested political party.”

Geopolitical considerations, including the sensitive military base at Ream, are also a sign of Cambodia's vulnerability in the contested regional environment, as a senior police officer (P5) noted: “Geopolitics between China and the U.S can affect the political, military, economic investment, and relations for peace and stability in the region”. The Ambassador (P8) stressed that “Cambodia's strategic position in global supply chains, the economy is also slowing down... Cambodia is central in the supply chain,” while the Deputy Director of the EOD (P9) noted: “tariff adjustments as reduce tariff rates from 49, 36 to 19 percent.” These observations suggest that Cambodian security cooperation cannot be understood in purely military terms but reflects a broader strategic calculus that incorporates economic and geopolitical considerations, in line with the neoclassical realist view that domestic factors are the vehicle of international pressure [27], [35].

Scholars have divergent opinions on how to categorize these drivers. Luo and Un [22] point out that Cambodia's economic dependence on China, exacerbated by the reduction of Western aid following democratic backsliding, is gradually narrowing the political space for visible U.S. alignment, framing economic factors as structurally restrictive. On the contrary, Chheang [32] argues that Cambodia retains a meaningful agency to manage these pressures and selectively accepts U.S. economic exposure in supply chain and trade areas, while limiting security alignment. The data from elite interviews suggest a synthesis of both views: the professor and civil servant (P3) and the professor of political science (P2) describe U.S. normative conditionality as a lack of trust,

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while the ambassador (P8) and the deputy director of the European Economic and Development Office (P9) frame economic engagement as a pragmatic necessity rather than a strategic preference. This layered dynamic where economic interdependence creates incentives for security co-operation that at the same time constrain governance reflects the neoclassical realist argument that domestic incentive structures always act as a brake on structural pressures [27], [28]. Cambodia's position thus exemplifies how small states navigate the balance between economic rationality and political risk in asymmetric environments, selectively strengthening ties when the benefits outweigh the risks [11], [63].

4.2.3. Diplomatic Flexibility and Hedging Strategy

The findings underscore Cambodia's diplomatic flexibility as a core mechanism to maintain sovereignty and regime stability. A military diplomat (P1) emphasized: "Cambodia has to balance its relation and cooperation with U.S. and China," while a deputy director of EOD (P10) reiterated: "Cambodia must balance with two superpower countries (U.S.-China)." A professor of law and civil servant (P4) added: "Cambodia has to be flexible diplomacy," and a senior police officer and professor (P5) noted: "Cambodia should make a good cooperation between U.S.-China."

This is consistent with the hedging theory, which proposes that small states engage in partial cooperation and careful balancing to minimize vulnerability in a multipolar world [15], [16]. Goh [15] argues that entente majeure, involving large powers in multiple institutional and security frameworks, allows smaller states to constrain the behavior of large powers without provoking retaliation as Cambodia's continued security links with the U.S. and China exemplifies this logic. However, Kuik [16] introduces an important refinement: hedging is not one strategy but a spectrum of strategies, from profit-driven to risk-prone.

The Cambodian case is more closely aligned with risk-capital hedging, where the primary motivation is to avoid the costs of full alignment rather than maximize returns, a distinction that is evident from the emphasis on the balance of the military diplomat (P1), the law professor (P4), and the senior police officer (P5) as well as the neutral position. Leng and Chheang [31] note that Cambodia's incremental approach to U.S. engagement which starting with technology cooperation in low-risk areas and gradually increasing trust as a strategic relationship strategy, not a structural constraint. Tessman [44] provides further theoretical grounding with the concept of system-based hedging: states selectively engage with the institutional frameworks of the dominant power, while avoiding those that directly threaten the autonomy of the regime. The model described by the Deputy Director of the EOD (P10) “long-term cooperation as a foreign policy rather than a situational response”, suggests precisely that Cambodia is not merely responding to the pressure of the big powers but is actively building a durable engagement structure that preserves strategic flexibility in a changing government.

Taken together, these factors confirm that Cambodia's hedging is deliberate, institutionally grounded, and aimed at preserving sovereignty, rather than strategic

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opportunism, a pattern that distinguishes limited hedging from outright bandwagoning and assertive hedging.

4.2.4. Domestic Challenges in Security Cooperation

Despite its strategic maneuvering, Cambodia faces internal constraints that limit the depth of its cooperation with the U.S. Domestic politics, human rights concerns, corruption, and institutional weaknesses create obstacles to sustained engagement. A military diplomat (P1) highlighted: "obstacles for law and institution... dissolved the National Rescue Party in 2018," and a senior police officer and professor (P5) emphasized: "Human right, democratic, corruption and dissolved an opposition party." Public scrutiny over foreign military presence, particularly at Ream Naval Base, adds another layer of constraint, as a senior military officer (P6) noted: "Some Cambodian people sometimes criticize the gov't on Ream naval base."

These findings reinforce neoclassical realism, which holds that the influence of systemic pressures on state behavior is mediated by domestic factors, such as political structures, bureaucratic capacity, and public opinion [27], [49]. Schweller [49] is particularly instructive: the tendency for countries to balance less than structural theory predicts is driven by domestic political fragmentation and elite insecurity, conditions that are clearly at work in the Cambodian government's handling of U.S. prescriptive pressure. Cambodia's cautious and selective engagement with the U.S. reflects a balancing act between external pressures and domestic political realities, which demonstrates the primacy of domestic considerations in shaping foreign policy. Luo [23] places these domestic constraints in the broader context of managing political challenges, arguing that the severity of domestic political pressures is a direct factor in determining how much the government depends on outside patrons for legitimacy. The dissolution of the opposition, underlined by both a military diplomat (P1) and a senior police officer and professor (P5), is precisely that dynamic: a political choice with direct security implications, which has deepened American normative disapproval, thus increasing the political costs of U.S. alignment. Recent study by So et al. [14] pointed that to navigate this friction, the Cambodian government systematically institutionalizes the strategy of a managed contradiction through taking advantage of the offer of unconditional multi-dimensional aids by China as a buffer in the system, Cambodian elites can effectively block Western normative leverage. Strangio et al., [64] argue how the Cambodian government systematically manages the external normative pressure by limiting the visibility of any security engagement that could be considered strategic convergence. The controversy over the Ream naval base, which a senior military officer (P6) has pointed out, further illustrates how domestic public opinion acts as a self-limiting factor. Ripsman [28] explains it precisely: Cambodian elites exercise considerable autonomy in limiting the scope of U.S. cooperation, but face less autonomy in managing domestic legitimacy, where public scrutiny of foreign military presence limits the extent of permissible engagement. Consequently, the domestic sphere not only filters out external pressure, but actively creates a political ceiling that confines Cambodia's defense strategy.

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4.2.5. Military Training, Nontraditional Cooperation, and Capability Building

Military cooperation is a core component of Cambodia–U.S. engagement, encompassing multi-level training and joint exercises designed to enhance operational capability while minimizing political risk. A military diplomat (P1) described the training hierarchy: "three levels of training course — basic course... command and staff... defense strategic level," and a professor of IR (P2) emphasized training in advanced domains: "Military training fields air, army, artillery...drone, AI..." Joint exercises such as the Angkor Sentinel Exercise (2010–2017) provide practical platforms for operational coordination, with a senior military officer (P6) noting, "Military Education from all levels (three levels)... Maritime training... Angkor Sentinel Exercising." Nontraditional security initiatives — including humanitarian assistance, health programs, and transitional crime training — complement military engagement, as a leader's advisor and professor (P7) highlighted: "U.S.-Cam: Nontraditional: Military Aids training, supply materials... humanitarian, health, demining..."

These programs support Cambodia's incremental capability-building strategy, allowing it to enhance defense capacity while avoiding political friction. The combination of traditional and nontraditional cooperation reflects a holistic security approach, consistent with small-state strategies of cautious engagement and risk minimization.

From a theoretical standpoint, Goh [15] enmeshment framework explains the domain logic: embedding U.S. military engagement in humanitarian and technical frames — demining, peacekeeping, disaster relief, health — structures the relationship as functionally beneficial and geopolitically non-provocative, enabling Cambodia to benefit from U.S. military expertise without triggering Chinese counterresponses. Cooper and Shaw [40] add that niche diplomacy — specialized contribution to international security tasks — provides small states with strategic visibility that compensates for material weakness. Cambodia's sustained participation in UN peacekeeping operations, highlighted by the military diplomat (P1) and the professor of IR (P2) constitutes exactly this kind of niche contribution: it signals multilateral commitment, builds interoperability with U.S.-standard military practices, and generates international legitimacy that is difficult to achieve through bilateral alignment alone. Chheang [65] documents how this multi-tiered structure has persisted across administrations precisely because it delivers concrete capability gains — documented in areas ranging from EOD expertise to drone operation — while keeping the strategic footprint of U.S. engagement sufficiently low to avoid Chinese concern.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that Cambodia's military and nontraditional cooperation with the United States is neither marginal nor accidental but constitutes a strategically calibrated architecture for extracting military capability from a relationship whose political visibility must be carefully managed.

4.2.6. Long-Term Cooperation and Strategic Implications

The study finds that Cambodia approaches long-term cooperation with the U.S. as part of a strategic hedging and trust-building strategy. A military diplomat (P1) noted: "Exchange our delegate to visit, organize meeting..." and a professor of IR (P2)

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emphasized incremental trust-building: "should start small point but build trust." Maintaining balance in a multipolar environment is central to this approach. A professor and civil servant (P3) highlighted: "Now new multipolar, balance of power," and a senior police officer and professor (P5) stated, "keep balance power between superpowers states." A deputy director of EOD (P9) described this framework as a "Comprehensive Strategy Partnership," and a deputy director of EOD (P10) emphasized its continuity: "Long term cooperation is our foreign policy."

From a theoretical point of view, the Cambodian strategy reflects a combined application of the small-state theory, hedging, and neoclassical realism. The state is strategically utilizing limited resources, adeptly navigating external challenges, and demonstrating diplomatic adaptability to safeguard its sovereignty and the stability of its regime. This combination of incremental trust, low-risk commitments, and strategic balance demonstrates a sophisticated approach to navigate U.S.-China competition while protecting national interests. The incremental trust-building logic by Professor of International Relations (P2) “start small but build trust”’ reflects what Leng and Chheang [31] identify as a relational condition for the expansion of Cambodia-U.S. relations. Cooperation: trust must be built on proven reliability in low-stakes areas before deeper engagement becomes politically acceptable. Luo [23] frames this in the broader context of Cambodia's great power balancing, pointing out that Cambodia's approach to the U.S. is always calibrated with its approach to China, which means that any level of engagement risks provoking Chinese economic or political retaliation. The EOD Deputy Director (P10) formulation that 'long-term cooperation is our foreign policy' suggests that Cambodia views this calibration as a permanent institutional commitment, not a temporary expedient. This is in line with what Kuik [16] defines as the essence of sustainable hedging: not reactive adjustments, but proactive management of relations between the various major powers in a way that preserves future strategic options. In a multipolar situation, where structural incentives for cooperation constantly shift, Cambodia's deliberate, long-term approach to U.S. security cooperation is a clever exercise in small-power diplomacy, in which it refrains from making a strategic choice based on a single great power relationship.

The overall results indicate that Cambodia–U.S. security cooperation is selective, cautious, and politically constrained. Cambodia engages the United States in practical areas, including military training, peacekeeping, demining, humanitarian assistance, counterterrorism, maritime security, and nontraditional security, while avoiding more in-depth cooperation that might create domestic political costs or strategic tension with China. This pattern reinforces the notion of small state theory, in which Cambodia's perception of vulnerability and autonomy is a key driver of foreign policy decisions [5], [10], extends hedging theory by highlighting selective engagement with competing major powers [15], [16] and strengthens neoclassical realism, in which the elite's perception of threat, regime-security concerns, institutional constraints and sovereignty narratives influence foreign policy choices [27], [28], [49]. The results further corroborate earlier research that highlights the strategic agency, domestic political considerations, and adaptive diplomacy of Cambodia [23], [31], [32]. The primary theoretical implication is that Cambodia's strategy can be seen as a form of ‘constrained hedging'—a policy that aims to gain tangible

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security benefits from the United States but restricts the extent and visibility of cooperation where it could impact on sovereignty, regime stability, or ties with China.

5. CONCLUSION

This study explored Cambodia's approach to security cooperation with the U.S. during an era of heightened U.S.-China strategic competition. It aimed to answer the question of why Cambodia would continue to involve Washington in specific security aspects while having close political, economic, and strategic ties to China. The results indicate that the security cooperation between Cambodia and the U.S. is not formal alignment, but a pragmatic and cautious approach driven by geopolitical pressures, domestic political limitations, sovereignty issues, economic vulnerabilities, and perceptions of regime security among the elites.

This study concludes that Cambodia's cooperation with the United States is primarily limited to lower-risk and capacity-building areas such as military education, peacekeeping, demining, humanitarian assistance, disaster response, counterterrorism, maritime security, and nontraditional security. Cambodia can obtain security advantages without incurring greater strategic commitments that result in domestic political costs or tension with China in these zones. The conclusion to the central research question is therefore that Cambodia hedges against U.S.-China competition by maintaining functional cooperation with the U.S. while simultaneously maintaining a certain degree of strategic flexibility and regime stability while not being too transparent or deep in its relations with the United States.

Theoretically, the study contributes to debates on small-state behavior, hedging, and neoclassical realism. It demonstrates that Cambodia's security cooperation is not only structural dependency on China or a mere bandwagoning. Rather, it is mediated by domestic political considerations, the perceptions of threat of the elites, institutional limitations, and concerns about regime security. From a policy perspective, the conclusions indicate that Cambodia-U.S. security cooperation is best achieved through smaller steps of trust building and less political sensitive aspects of cooperation, not through any major alignment or pressure diplomacy.

This study has several limitations. It uses a qualitative single case design and is primarily based on the views of the Cambodian elite, which limited broader generalization. Further studies could be conducted to compare Cambodia with other ASEAN small states that face similar pressures of Chinese influence, regime-security concerns, and asymmetric dependence to determine if constrained hedging occurs among small states navigating great power navigation. Further studies could also incorporate more direct perspectives from U.S. and Chinese policymakers to provide a more balanced understanding of how Cambodia–U.S. security cooperation is perceived by all major actors involved.

Overall, Cambodia's response to U.S.-China strategic competition is cautious, contextual, and historically shaped. Cambodia aims to manage the great-power competition through a combination of diplomacy, selective engagement in security matters, and prudent deployment of scarce resources to maintain national sovereignty, regime stability, and national interests.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the anonymous and editorial teams of MISRO for their insightful comments and constructive feedback which have enabled the publication of the article in the academic world. Their contribution really helps to advance the field of future research and publications. The first author also thanks the University of Cambodia for the opportunities it provided for him to make a significant step forward in his academic career towards a Ph.D. in international relations.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

This article is part of Ph.D. dissertation research project summited in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a Ph.D. in International Relations at the University of Cambodia, Phnom Penh. The study was officially approved by the university.

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