

Cambodia-U.S. Paradoxical Relations in Post-Cold War Era: The China Factor

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the structural paradox characterizing Cambodia-U.S. relations in the post-Cold War period, in which the persistence of political and security friction coexists with functional cooperation. The study identifies policy areas in which China's emergence as an unconditional patron creates tension with the U.S., and analyzes mechanisms through which Chinese support enables Cambodia to evade U.S. normative pressure on democracy and human rights. Using an analytic eclecticism approach that combines structural realism and liberal institutionalism, the study conducts a qualitative content analysis of semi-structured interviews with 13 elite informants, including Cambodian government officials, U.S. diplomats, and analysts. The findings demonstrate that China's multidimensional assistance (economic, military, and diplomatic) has significantly undermined Western normative leverage, forcing Cambodia to pursue a dual-track strategy that focuses conflict in the high-politics domain (security, governance) and maintains cooperation in the low-politics domain (trade, development assistance, public health). This pattern generates a state of managed contradiction, which compartmentalizes the coexistence of political hostility and functional cooperation without progressing towards normative convergence or bilateral breakdown. The study makes an empirical contribution by tracing how patron diversification reshapes small-state agencies and by showing that alternative patronage enables states to resist normative pressure while preserving selective cooperation in an era of great-power competition.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The bilateral relations between the United States and Cambodia in the aftermath of the Cold War era are a persistent paradox that defied the conventional expectations of cooperation between a democratic superpower and a developing Southeast Asian state [1], [2]. Despite the United States' significant contribution to Cambodia's post-conflict reconstruction and its continued diplomatic involvement in the country, driven by mutual interest in regional stability, bilateral relations have worsened since 2017 [3]. This erosion does not merely indicate political friction but a structural change heightened by the rise of China as an unconditional patron [4]. The Cambodian foreign policy calculus has been fundamentally altered by Beijing's patronage, creating a landscape of both political conflict and functional cooperation that defies current models for explaining the behavior of small states in the context of great power competition.

Scholarship on this deterioration has developed two significant interpretations. Realist approaches interpret Cambodia's strategic adjustment towards China as a model of bandwagoning amid the U.S.-China rivalry, exemplified by the controversy over the Ream Naval Base agreement [4],[5]. Meanwhile, liberal institutionalist descriptions highlight the erosion of democratic principles and the inability of U.S. conditionality to prevent authoritarian consolidation with the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) [5], [6], [7], [8], [9]. However, these approaches are all siloed: realism places undue emphasis on structural constraints and underestimates the role of regime agency; liberalism foregrounds normative contestation but neglects the impact of diversifying patrons and the bargaining power of small states. As a result, there is still a critical gap in understanding how Cambodia can take advantage of China being a patron to not only survive under pressure from great power pressure but to actively pursue regime-specific interests, specifically its ability to withstand the U.S. normative pressures without sacrificing functional cooperation in non-sensitive areas [10], [11], [12].

To fill this gap, this study poses two research questions: First, which policy areas do interactions between China and Cambodia conflict with those of the United States? Second, in what ways does Chinese patronage augment the ability of Cambodia to resist the pressure by the U.S. on democracy and human rights? Accordingly, this study has two objectives: (1) to identify the principal domains of Cambodia-U.S. contention under intensified patron competition and (2) to explain the mechanism through which alternative patronage enables issue-area compartmentalization, producing managed contradiction. The analysis advances a "dual-track strategy" argument, positing that Cambodia deliberately compartmentalizes its relations to focus conflict in high-politics areas (military affairs, security cooperation, and norms of government) while maintaining cooperation in low-politics areas (trade, development assistance, and public health) [13]. The effect of this pattern is a state of "managed contradiction", which refers to a state of stable equilibrium whereby political antagonism and functional engagement coexist without any normative convergence or a complete bilateral breakthrough [13], [14].

Methodologically, this study employs qualitative content analysis of policy documents, supplemented by elite interviews with Cambodian and U.S. officials and

analysts conducted during 2021-23. The data are interpreted through an analytic eclecticism approach [15] that combines structural realism and liberal institutionalism. The result shows the interaction between material patronage, regulated by logics of power, and institutionalized resistance to norm diffusion, governed by liberal-institutional dynamics aimed at expanding Cambodian strategic agency. In contrast to the liberal anticipation that economic interdependence can drive normative convergence, the results demonstrate that patron diversification can empower small authoritarian states to instrumentalize great-power rivalry to strengthen their regimes. At the same time, the paper advances realist explanations of bandwagoning by demonstrating that compliance with an emerging power need not be passive; instead, it can be an active strategy through which small states secure regime survival and evade structural constraints.

This study contributes in three ways. Theoretically, it contributes to the literature on small-state strategies by demonstrating that diversification of patrons enables not just survival but also the active pursuit of authoritarian consolidation, challenging both liberal assumptions of normative convergence and realist expectations of coercion. Empirically, it provides granular evidence of the compartmentalization mechanisms in Southeast Asian foreign policy, which are usually assumed but seldom documented. In policy terms, it suggests that U.S.-Cambodia relations have evolved into an extended period of managed contradiction, in which value-based tensions must be carefully compartmentalized to preserve functional cooperation. Beyond Cambodia, these findings offer broader implications for understanding how small states navigate rival powers and how the liberal international order is limited in its capacity to enforce unconditional choices.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Existing Scholarship on Cambodia-U.S.-China Relations

The relationship between the U.S. and Cambodia exemplifies liberal optimism versus realist pessimism [16], [17]. Early post-Cold War work was largely optimistic [6], [18], discussing how U.S. normative pressure led to democracy and human rights through the 1991 Paris Peace Accords. However, more critical literature with a realist orientation has emerged, documenting the challenges faced by the Cambodian democratic experiment, particularly after the dissolution of the main opposition party in 2017 [19], [20]. This situation has resulted in the consolidation of one-party state rule, rendering U.S. normative pressure largely ineffective [21]. The existing literature indicates that when a regime's survival and state security take precedence, outside normative influence fails, particularly when authoritarian allies protect the regime.

From a realist perspective, Cambodia appears to be caught in a race with China while diplomatically deferring to ASEAN [22], economically dependent on Beijing [23], [24], and under the command of the Chinese military presence at its Ream Naval Base [20], [25]. Cambodia's foreign policy has a complex hedging strategy, as shown by its multiple levels of engagement with China [26], [27]. However, other scholars, such as Po and West [28] and Luo and Un [29], have emphasized that leaders in Phnom Penh are pragmatic nationalists rather than proxies for foreign powers. This view is further embedded within domestic priorities, where Chheang [30], [31] and Po and Primiano [32], among others, argue that

rapprochement with China serves to achieve national interests through economic growth and stability. This indicates a complex situation in which Cambodia is strategically strengthening its relationship with China, not because of shared ideological beliefs, but because Chinese support directly addresses the ruling regime's need for political survival.

The synthesis of these discussions reveals two gaps in the literature: first, the scope, which is often limited to bilateral frameworks and does not include an integrated tripartite analysis of how U.S.-Chinese relations are interlinked [33]. Second, the extant literature attributes external factors to Cambodia's behavior. However, it often relies on secondary sources and offers little granular evidence on how patron diversification reshapes small-state agency, particularly on how Chinese support neutralizes U.S. leverage in high-politics realms while permitting functional cooperation in low-politics domains. This study addresses those gaps by using primary elite interviews and utilizes a tripartite analytic model that outlines the cause-and-effect relationships between patronage, compartmentalization, and strategic choice.

2.2. Theoretical Framework: Analytic Eclecticism

To analyze this tripartite dynamic, this study employs an analytic eclecticism framework that integrates structural realism and liberal institutionalism [15], [34]. This framework serves an explanatory purpose by clarifying how competing logics operate simultaneously across the different areas of the problem, rather than favoring a single paradigm. Structural realism provides the basic logic for the competitive dynamics of the U.S.-China-Cambodia triangle [35], [36]. In this anarchic structure, small states such as Cambodia are primarily concerned with survival and self-reliance [4], [37]. Cambodia's alignment with China is a rational, realistic calculation: China offers the material capabilities to ensure regime security without the politically costly terms the United States requires. This is consistent with the theory of the balance of threats, developed by Stephen Walt [38], which holds that, for the Cambodian regime, the U.S. normative agenda is a greater threat to its survival than material supremacy.

While realism explains conflict, it cannot explain the persistence of cooperation. Liberal institutionalism [39] is the remedy for addressing these issues. This explains why the Cambodia-U.S. relationship did not completely collapse after the war. First, economic interdependence, particularly Cambodia's dependence on the U.S. as its main export market, creates a constituency for continued engagement [40]. Second, international institutions, especially ASEAN, act as key shock absorbers and moderate bilateral tensions [41]. Liberalism also explains the normative dimension of the conflict because American pressure is rooted in a deep belief in democratic peace [42]. However, the effectiveness of this normative pressure is severely diminished by the presence of an alternative patron [43].

By integrating these perspectives through analytic eclecticism, a dual-track pattern can be explained: realist logics assert primacy in the high-stakes domains where regime security is challenged, and liberal logics in the functional domain, maintained by mutual interests. The alternative patron role of China is pivotal, as it strengthens Cambodia's bargaining power in the realist paradigm while helping protect the regime against liberal normative pressures. The construct of managed contradiction is appropriate for describing

the emergent equilibrium, a compartmentalized coexistence of both conflict and cooperation. This terminology is not a new theoretical suggestion but rather an accurate description of empirically observable trends, thus making the issue of analytical clarity more specific than using a generic reference to hedging by specifying the deliberate separation of issue-areas.

3. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative content analysis methodology with an interpretative approach [44], guided by analytic eclecticism, which integrates insights from structural realism and liberal institutionalism to analyze Cambodia’s relationship with the United States. This approach was chosen for its ability to provide a coherent description of the comprehensive perspectives necessary to address the literature’s gap in identifying the causal mechanisms through which Chinese patronage reshapes Cambodia's strategic calculus [45]. The timeframe covers the post-Cold War period from 1993 to 2023, allowing for a longitudinal analysis of this relationship.

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 13 key informants, a sample size considered adequate to achieve thematic saturation in qualitative research [46], [47]. A purposive sampling strategy [48] was used to ensure that different categories of stakeholders were represented: Cambodian government officials (n = 2), a U.S. diplomat (n = 1), political and think-tank analysts (n = 5), and academic researchers (n = 5), as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic information of research participants

Participant Code	Gender	Age	Role	Nationality
P1	Male	45	Diplomat	American
P2	Male	46	Academic Researcher	American
P3	Male	56	Political, Think-Tank Analyst	American
P4	Male	48	Political, Think-Tank Analyst	Cambodian
P5	Male	42	Political, Think-Tank Analyst	Cambodian
P6	Male	78	Political, Think-Tank Analyst	Cambodian
P7	Male	65	Political, Think-Tank Analyst	Cambodian
P8	Male	47	Government Official	Cambodian
P9	Male	48	Academic Researcher	Cambodian
P10	Male	46	Academic Researcher	Cambodian
P11	Male	67	Academic Researcher	Cambodian
P12	Male	58	Government Official	Cambodian
P13	Male	43	Academic Researcher	Cambodian

Interviews were conducted anonymously, using open-ended questions to identify the factors that strain and undermine cooperation in bilateral relationships. The interview data were analyzed using content analysis facilitated by the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA 2020 [49], [50]. The process consisted of two main stages: first, an open coding exercise to identify key concepts; second, a targeted coding exercise to group these concepts into key analytical themes presented in the findings, such as China’s engagement generating a Cambodia-U.S. strain and China’s strategy against U.S. normative pressure. Following the coding process, a thematic synthesis was conducted to organize the identified concepts and themes into a coherent, analytical narrative. This involved systematically reviewing the

coded data segments to identify patterns, relationships, and higher-order insights that directly addressed the research questions.

Multi-theoretical frameworks were then used in the discussion section to interpret the empirically based topics. To enhance methodological trustworthiness, this study adhered to the standards of credibility [51]. Triangulation of interview data with secondary data and member checks with selected informants were used to enhance the study's credibility. Reliability was ensured through a clear audit trail of the coding and memos [52]. The element of confirmability was sought through reflexive note-taking to reduce the effect of researcher bias. Transferability was also enabled by the rich contextual description of the Cambodia–U.S. relationship.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the research results are explained, and a comprehensive discussion is provided.

4.1. Results

4.1.1. China's Engagement Generates Cambodia - U.S. Friction

Analysis of the interview data reveals that China's engagement with Cambodia creates friction with the United States in four interconnected policy areas: military and security cooperation, diplomatic alignment within regional institutions, economic dependency and development models, and governance and human rights norms. Significantly, these spheres represent the high-politics realm where conflict is concentrated, a trend that corresponds with the dual-track approach recorded in the elite accounts.

4.1.1.1. Military and Security Domain

The military and security sectors are the most acute sources of friction between Cambodia and the U.S., according to American participants. The American concern over Cambodia's military collaboration with China is summarized in the conception of a strategic realignment that does not favor American interests. American respondents consistently voiced concerns that Cambodia's military collaboration with China is perceived as a strategic move away from the U.S., directly undermining U.S. regional interests (P1, P2). A Cambodian analyst provided detailed evidence of this shift:

There is doubt in the U.S. about China's military base at Ream Naval Base in Preah Sihanouk province. Moreover, Cambodia also collapsed a U.S.-donated building without any information and replaced it with a new building donated by China. In 2017, Cambodia also cancelled a military exercise called 'Angkor Protector' with the U.S. and Australia, while maintaining the military exercise with China, 'Golden Dragon', to the present day. (P11)

These actions reflect a deliberate, organized preference for Chinese over American military cooperation, signaling a major strategic and symbolic shift in the country's orientation towards China's influence. Cambodian correspondents conceptualized these military decisions in the context of broader domestic and political factors. One government official explained:

The strain in relations can be attributed to Cambodia's political landscape, which has shifted towards authoritarianism, the dissolution of the main opposition party, and closer ties with China, particularly regarding the Ream Naval Base. (P8)

The ongoing tension in the realm of security highlights the high-politics aspect of the Cambodian dual-track policy, under which alignment with China is a direct threat to American interests.

Another analyst from Cambodia's think tank emphasized the geopolitical ramifications for the region: “Cambodia's increasing reliance on China for economic and political support has raised concerns in the U.S. about its strategic interests in the region, particularly regarding military facilities and defense cooperation” (P10).

This observation shows that military issues are the primary prism through which American policymakers evaluate Cambodia's relationship with China. These issues extend beyond military cooperation between the two countries and encompass a broader regional security framework.

4.1.1.2. Diplomatic and Regional Institution Domain

Diplomatic tensions between the United States and Cambodia mainly concern Cambodia's alignment with China in regional organizations such as ASEAN. Cambodian participants noted that this behavior undermined the neutrality promised by the 1991 Paris Peace Accord, leading to credibility problems with the U.S. and certain ASEAN states. As one Cambodian analyst explained, the core of American frustration with this diplomatic trajectory: “Cambodia's foreign policy does not follow its norms/rules and the existing law as in the constitution and in the Paris Peace Accord 1991, which states about the neutrality of Cambodia. However, even though it is in law/theory, in practice it is different. For instance, Cambodia seems to align with China on major regional issues, particularly within ASEAN forums. This discrepancy between constitutional neutrality and practiced alignment creates credibility problems with the United States and some ASEAN partners” (P11). One American respondent interpreted this alignment as jeopardizing efforts to maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific, particularly on core issues of maritime security, the South China Sea, and freedom of navigation (P2). He contends that “Cambodia's diplomatic alignment with China on issues like the South China Sea creates complications for U.S. efforts to maintain regional consensus on maritime security and freedom of navigation. This has become a persistent source of friction in bilateral relations” (P2). A Cambodian analyst added a strategic dimension that is widely echoed in the U.S. narrative:

The U.S. views Cambodia's tilt towards China as undermining its interests in a free and open Indo-Pacific. American officials have expressed concerns that Cambodia's positions within ASEAN consistently favor Chinese preferences on contentious issues, which they see as eroding ASEAN's effectiveness as a counterweight to Chinese influence. (P4)

Contrary to the U.S. perspective, Cambodian officials characterized these tensions as resulting from differences in interpretation rather than being evidence of an explicit alignment with Beijing. One Cambodian government official observed:

Differences in approaches to regional issues, particularly over ASEAN unity and South China Sea concerns, have at times led to diplomatic tensions between Cambodia and the United States. We see these as differences in how we interpret ASEAN principles and regional interests. (P12)

The determination of specific problem areas, including the South China Sea, maritime security, and freedom of navigation, provides concrete examples of diplomatic conflict.

4.1.1.3. Economic Dependency and Development Models

Economic friction stems from China's dominance as Cambodia's economic partner, which stakeholders perceive as fundamentally altering the leverage dynamics of Cambodia-U.S. relations. American participants observed that efforts such as revoking trade benefits under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) have proven ineffective because Cambodia can easily access alternative sources of economic support. An American diplomat stated the following:

There are disagreements over trade policies, including the U.S.'s withdrawal of trade preferences under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) program. This action was intended to signal concerns about labor rights and governance, but its impact has been limited. (P1)

Cambodian analysts contextualized the situation by underscoring how China's substantial capital deployment across key sectors (ports, roadways, SEZs, and energy production) creates a profound basis for political influence, thereby reducing the effectiveness of American pressure. As a Cambodian analyst contended:

Cambodia's increasingly close ties with China, particularly in infrastructure development and military cooperation, have raised concerns in Washington. The scale of Chinese investment—in ports, highways, special economic zones, and power generation—creates economic dependencies that American officials worry translate into political influence. These developments challenge U.S. interests in the Indo-Pacific region by reducing American economic leverage. (P13)

Cambodia's strategic preferences are centered on the divergence between conditional U.S. assistance and unconditional Chinese backing.

A Cambodian analyst explained: “Cambodia values its sovereignty and often resents what it perceives as U.S. interference in its domestic affairs. However, we also acknowledge the importance of U.S. aid and investment for certain sectors. The challenge is that Chinese economic support comes without governance conditions, while American assistance often includes requirements related to democracy, human rights, or labor standards. This creates a clear preference for Chinese partnerships when regime priorities are at stake” (P6). One American respondent acknowledged the existence of this connection between economic dependence and political positioning, stating that:

Cambodia's growing closeness to China, manifested through massive infrastructure investments and preferential economic arrangements, contributes significantly to bilateral strains. We see economic dependency translating into political alignment that disadvantages U.S. interests. (P1)

This observation captures American concern about how economic relations facilitate broader strategic Influence. Overall, economic ties are viewed not simply as matters of trade and investment, but as crucial instruments for achieving strategic positioning and projecting influence.

4.1.1.4. Governance and Human Rights Domain

Governance and human rights are the primary sources of normative tension in Cambodia-U.S. relations. The most fundamental differences can be found in the governance domain, where American participants consistently cite issues such as human rights, democracy, and governance as the main sources of bilateral tension (P1, P2, P3). As one American think tank analyst stated, “the U.S. remains deeply concerned about restrictions on political opposition, civil society space, and media freedom in Cambodia. These concerns are regularly raised in bilateral dialogue, congressional hearings, and international forums. However, we recognize that our ability to influence these issues has diminished significantly” (P3).

Nevertheless, the Cambodian interviewees recognized these U.S. concerns but explained them very differently, as an unhealthy intrusion rather than justified manifestations of universal principles. A Cambodian think-tank analyst explained: “We see U.S. pressure on governance issues as extending beyond legitimate diplomatic engagement into attempts to influence our domestic political system in ways that threaten stability and sovereignty” (P4).

Another Cambodian analyst provided specific details about governance friction and its ineffectiveness: “even though the U.S. has raised concerns over democratic backsliding and human rights issues in Cambodia under Prime Minister Hun Sen's long rule and imposed some targeted sanctions and visa restrictions, these measures have not reversed authoritarian trends or changed government behavior in the ways Washington intended. (P11)

Despite these tensions, Cambodian respondents recognized the continuity of collaboration across practical domains such as law enforcement, nonproliferation, and humanitarian demining. A Cambodian government official observed, “these governance disagreements have increasingly overshadowed functional cooperation, creating an overall negative tone in the relationship” (P8).

The acknowledgement that the United States’ ability to influence these issues has significantly diminished reveals that governance pressure has become less effective, albeit without abandoning these concerns entirely.

4.1.2. China’s Strategy Against the U.S. Normative Pressure

Interview data revealed three interconnected mechanisms through which China's presence empowers Cambodia to resist U.S. normative pressure on democracy and human rights: material resource provision, alternative development narratives, and regime security enhancement. In the framework of high politics, the primary role of these mechanisms is to facilitate tension reduction in situations where the regime's survival is challenged, while at the same time allowing functional cooperation in other areas, a dynamic later described as managed contradiction.

4.1.2.1. Material Resource Provision

Material resources emerged across interviews as the most direct mechanism enabling Cambodian resistance to U.S. pressure. Material resources, encompassing unconditional economic and military support, serve critical strategic utility by reducing reliance on the United States, bolstering regime security, and conferring domestic political legitimacy. A Cambodian government official emphasized the value of Chinese support that respects sovereignty:

Chinese assistance provides substantial economic support without conditions tied to our domestic governance, making it particularly valuable when we face criticism from Western partners. (P12)

Such unconditional support reduces vulnerability to Western pressures, especially in the fields of governance and security, which form the heart of high-level politics and where normative pressures are most concentrated.

Moreover, a few respondents emphasized that it was the very intensification of Cambodian relations with China that changed the material calculus of Phnom Penh's responses to Western pressure. One of the policy analysts noted that the growing economic and political ties between Cambodia and China have caused worries in Washington. It involves major Chinese investment in the Cambodian infrastructure and military collaboration (P6). The analyst focuses on the terms alignment and significant... investment, suggesting that Chinese resources can serve as a backup system if Western governments impose sanctions or withdraw trade preferences, thereby reducing the United States' leverage and lowering Cambodia's motivation to change its domestic governance to meet American requirements. Additionally, Cambodian officials indicated that China's diplomatic backing, exercised through both bilateral channels and ASEAN mechanisms, mitigates Cambodia's vulnerability to isolation and affirms the legitimacy of its policy decisions (P8). Moreover, A Cambodian researcher noted that “China also provides military equipment, training, and infrastructure support for Cambodia's defense forces. This material military cooperation reduces dependence on Western military assistance and provides regime security benefits” (P11).

By providing extensive economic assistance and investment without governance conditionality, China has effectively reduced Cambodia's vulnerability to Western pressure. When alternative sources of support exist, sanctions or withdrawn preferences become less effective as policy.

4.1.2.2. Alternative Development Narrative

China's non-conditional development assistance provides Cambodia with a powerful counter-narrative, offering ideational resources that challenge Western pressure for democratization. Interviewees described China's development model as an alternative narrative, one that validates economic growth without democratization and reinforces Cambodia's prioritization of stability and incremental institutional development (P5, P13). A Cambodian analyst articulates this perspective: “China's experience demonstrates that rapid economic development, technological advancement, and improved living standards can be achieved without Western-style democratization. This provides a different pathway

that may be more appropriate for countries at our stage of development” (P5). “We see different pathways to development that prioritize stability, economic growth, and gradual institutional development over rapid political liberalization that might create instability or conflict. Chinese development experience validates this alternative approach” (P13). An American academic researcher acknowledged the challenges that alternative models pose: “China's developmental success without democratization complicates Western democracy promotion efforts. It provides authoritarian regimes with empirical evidence that economic development does not require political liberalization, undermining liberal claims about the universal necessity of democratic governance for development” (P2). This recognition reveals American awareness that China's trajectory challenges foundational assumptions about the linkages between development and democracy.

4.1.2.3. Regime Security Enhancement

The participants identified comprehensive Chinese support as enhancing regime security against both external pressure and internal challenges (P3, P4, P8, P11). A Cambodian think-tank analyst made this connection explicit:

From Cambodia's perspective, the U.S. is seen as overly critical of its internal affairs and human rights situation, while pushing a democracy agenda that challenges the ruling party's supremacy and threatens regime stability. Chinese support—economic resources that sustain patronage networks, military cooperation that enhances coercive capacity, and diplomatic backing that prevents isolation—collectively provides insurance against external pressures that might exploit internal vulnerabilities. This comprehensive support package makes it safer to resist U.S. demands that could threaten regime security. (P4)

This comprehensive support enables Cambodia to be resilient when faced with pressure at precisely those moments when stakes are existential in governance and security, while low-politics cooperation remains a consistent element; thus, it is a feature of managed contradiction.

A Cambodian government official explicitly connected authoritarian consolidation with Chinese support.

The strain in relations can be attributed to Cambodia's political landscape, which has shifted towards authoritarianism, the dissolution of the main opposition party, and closer ties with China, particularly regarding the Ream Naval Base. These developments are interconnected—closer ties with China provided confidence and resources to undertake domestic political changes that we deemed necessary for stability, even knowing these would generate substantial Western criticism. Chinese backing reduced the risks associated with actions that we knew would provoke negative Western reactions. (P8)

This statement reveals the causal connection between Chinese support and domestic political action. The admission that “closer ties with China provided confidence and resources to undertake domestic political changes” explicitly links external support to internal political decisions. The acknowledgement that these actions were undertaken “even knowing these

would generate substantial Western criticism" demonstrates that Chinese backing reduced the perceived costs of defying the West.

Another Cambodian analyst observed the ineffectiveness of U.S. pressure in changing behavior.

Even though the U.S. has raised concerns over democratic backsliding and human rights issues in Cambodia under Prime Minister Hun Sen's long rule and imposed some targeted sanctions and visa restrictions on specific individuals, these measures have not reversed authoritarian trends or changed fundamental government policies. The availability of comprehensive Chinese support means these sanctions impose costs but not unbearable costs, allowing the government to maintain its chosen political course despite Western pressure. (P11)

These mechanisms, such as material and diplomatic support, alternative development discourses, and institutional protection, combine to establish a framework that enables Cambodia to resist external pressures and achieve its strategic objectives effectively.

4.2. Discussion

The results of this research, analyzed across the theoretical dimensions, have led to a new and lasting strategic reality governing the Cambodia-U.S. relationship. This reality presents as a dual-track pattern, with conflict concentrated in high-politics areas of security and governance, and functional cooperation continuing in low-politics areas of trade and health, which can be descriptively characterized as a managed contradiction. The empirical evidence is presented in two interconnected themes: structural realignment driven by Chinese dominance and the primacy of regime survival in Phnom Penh as a foreign policy strategy.

4.2.1. China's Dominance and the Changing Structure

The decline in Cambodia-U.S. relations is essentially the result of structural power changes, a phenomenon best understood through the structural realism paradigm [31], [35]. China, as a powerful [53] and non-conditional donor with remarkable material resources (P13), has created a significant opportunity for Cambodia, allowing it to develop a degree of small-state agency that was not available in the unipolar regional order [12], [54]. This structural change is crucial because it fundamentally changed Cambodia's cost-benefit calculus to counter U.S. political pressure. The existence of an alternative sponsor has removed the risk of diplomatic isolation and greatly reduced the economic costs of non-compliance [20]. Empirical evidence of this loss of Western influence is that the U.S. withdrawal of GSP benefits had only a limited impact (P1).

The logic of competitive certainty in this new structure is evident. The systematic replacement of U.S.-donated military infrastructure and the intensification of the annual Golden Dragon exercises with China (P11) are concrete examples of a realist strategic shift. These measures are a calculation in national security, favoring stability and supporting a new patron over the old one. Critically, this realist logic applies primarily in high politics, such as military security and diplomatic alignment, which are the main areas of conflict with the United States. Moreover, the U.S. continued concern about the Ream Naval Base [33], [55]

confirms that both countries operate within a realist logic of relative gain, with geopolitical competition being more important than the liberal pursuit of absolute economic gain.

4.2.2. Phnom Penh's Regime Survival Imperative

While realism explains the external structure, the basic domestic factor driving Cambodia's foreign policy is the survival of the regime [6], [8], [56]. This research shows that political priority is now intrinsically linked to Chinese patronage, a dynamic that is at the core of the study of Modern-Day Authoritarianism [43]. The interview data clearly show that Chinese aid is used to maintain the regime and resist Western pressure for democratization (P8), making regime security the dominant factor in Phnom Penh's calculus [57]. This is consistent with the theory of authoritarian foreign policy, which holds that foreign policy in non-democratic countries is often part of domestic politics aimed at neutralizing the ruling coalition [38]. As Schedler [58] points out, authoritarian regimes use a menu of manipulations to remain in power. Chinese support for Cambodia is essentially expanding that menu, providing the means to neutralize domestic and international pressure [31], [59].

The mechanisms identified in this study function as a comprehensive protective package for authoritarian states. Material resources: Providing material resources reduces vulnerability to economic conditions (P9, P13) and enhances regime security. Providing a cushion against politically risky domestic actions (P8), diplomatic legitimacy shields the regime from Western criticism (P4). These mechanisms are functional in specific areas of high politics, such as governance and security, where normative pressure is concentrated, enabling Cambodia to absorb friction where the stakes are existential. Importantly, this resistance is ideological. The Chinese model provides a powerful basis for normative contestation [33], against which Cambodian elites can frame the U.S. democratic agenda as a threat to national sovereignty. This is similar to the argument of Cambodian academics Po and Primiano [32] and Luo and Un [29], who argue that Cambodian leaders see themselves as pragmatic nationalists, not as proxies, and are fighting for their right to a different development path.

While structural realism and the regime survival imperative explain the deep-seated conflict, they cannot fully account for the persistence of Cambodia-U.S. relations. The findings show that cooperation continues in low-politics domains such as trade, public health, and counter-terrorism (P2, P8), precisely where mutual interests outweigh value-based differences. Liberal institutionalism provides a necessary corrective, highlighting how economic interdependence and institutional frameworks such as ASEAN prevent a total breakdown of relations [39], [41], [60]. In tandem, these dynamics create a managed contradiction that enables functional cooperation and the compartmentalized coexistence of political antagonism without advancing either normative convergence or bilateral disengagement.

5. CONCLUSION

This study examined the structural paradox of Cambodia-United States relations in the post-Cold War era, characterized by recurrent political and security tensions and

selective functional cooperation. The main finding is that China's emergence as a no-strings-attached patron has reshaped Cambodia's strategic calculus. This shift has significantly diminished the utility of Western normative leverage, and Cambodia has been endeavoring to adopt a dual-track approach that accommodates conflict in high-stakes political arenas whilst maintaining cooperation in less contested arenas where mutual benefits persist. The relationship, therefore, is best characterized as a managed contradiction, in which contestation and cooperation are deliberately compartmentalized rather than resolved.

The study's results have both analytical and theoretical implications. Analytically, research suggests that analytic eclecticism is useful for explaining the behavior of small states, as structural realism explains why regime-security concerns and intensifying rivalry between great powers drive strategic convergence toward China. Liberal institutionalism explains why functional cooperation with the U.S. persists despite value-based conflicts. In theory, this finding justifies the standard liberal assumption that, if patron-substitution is possible, interdependence can sustain engagement without producing convergence in human rights and democracy. For small-state strategy debates, managed contradiction refines understanding beyond generic hedging by specifying a deliberate issue-area separation that absorbs friction where stakes are existential, while preserving cooperation for tangible benefits and avoidable political costs. This posture reflects not passive adaptation, but the proactive pursuit of regime-specific interests within structural constraints.

The study's limitation is its qualitative approach to elite perspectives and its single-case design, which limit broader generalizability. Future research could investigate whether this pattern of managed contradiction magnifies in other small states that maneuver patron competition, including Laos or Pacific Island states, where an unconditional alternative patron similarly facilitates the compartmentalized coexistence between political friction and functional cooperation with the Western powers. Mixed-method designs combining quantitative analyses of aid and investment flows with opinion surveys would illuminate the conditions under which this pattern emerges, stabilizes, and persists.

These findings also clarify that small-state foreign policy, which appears inconsistent and paradoxical, often reflects strategic adaptation to shifting structural opportunities. The Cambodian case illustrates how the rise of an alternative patron transforms international political dynamics not by eliminating constraints but by expanding the strategic space within which small states navigate the competing pressures of an increasingly fragmented order.

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