



**INDIA-CAMBODIA RELATIONS:  
DIVERSIFYING DIPLOMACY IN AN  
ERA OF FLUX**

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Amid the world's current geopolitical flux, exacerbated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the US-China rivalry, states find it difficult to create strategic space for themselves. However, India and Cambodia are working within these constraints and operationalizing independent strategies, particularly by strengthening bilateral relations. This diversification strategy is an attempt to maneuver as geopolitical tensions rise. This relationship is based on converging interests to strengthen bilateral ties and extend cooperation in Southeast Asia, ensuring stability and security.

**Converging Foreign Policy Templates:  
Independence and Multi-Engagement**

Although both countries' strategic aims differ, the approach to new partnerships is the same—that is, through multi-engagement. Cambodia has adopted a diplomatic strategy to develop new strategic relations, particularly with countries of the Global South and middle powers. Similarly, India's multi-engagement strategy aims to strengthen relations with states in its extended neighborhood. Due to its strategic location and history, Cambodia shares close bonds with India. Meanwhile, India fits in Cambodia's strategic equation to expand its engagement beyond the region.

India has presented itself as the voice of the Global South, which has echoed in many countries, including

Cambodia. Before G20 planning started, India [invited](#) Cambodia to the Voice of Global South summit, exhibiting a commitment to South-South cooperation. This showed New Delhi's inclusive approach emphasizing multilateralism on issues of interest for developing countries, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. Both countries' independent foreign policies go against what many see as a necessary choice between the United States and China. Even as a member of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue ("Quad"), India has not shied away from pursuing relations with Russia, supporting BRICS expansion, and maintaining membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, against the United States' preference.

Cambodia, which is seen as having a close relationship with China, has [condemned actions](#) by Russia—China's "no limits" partner—and is eager to [improve](#) ties with the United States. Of note: [India](#) and [Cambodia](#) also do not want to create alliances, the former through its strategic culture and the latter via its constitution.

**Strengthening Bilateral Cooperation**

The partnership between India and Cambodia dates back a millennium. But the two countries continue to work to further build ties, cooperating in the defense, trade, health, and technology sectors. During the Cambodian king's visit to India this year, the Indian President [expressed](#) her privilege in partnering with Cambodia on human resource, socio-economic, and capacity-building projects in agriculture and irrigation. During the pandemic, India [supplied](#) Cambodia with the first tranche in 2021, and subsequently, [Cambodia](#) also became the first country to receive vaccines under the Quad Vaccine Partnership initiative. This year, [defense relations](#) and cooperation touched a new milestone with the [first visit](#) to India by the commander of the Royal Cambodian Army, Hun Manet, now the prime minister. India has also supported Cambodia in [demining](#) projects with aid and equipment. People-to-people is another domain where both governments cooperate to boost the tourism sector, and direct flights are [expected](#) to start in 2024. In education, India is trying to [attract](#) Cambodian students across premier institutions,

particularly in technical fields like engineering and medicine. For education, scholarships are provided by the government of India under the CLMV program and [ICCR Scholarships](#). This partnership has been beneficial particularly in the technical field, where India has shared its knowledge and skills, helping around 2,600 Cambodians since 1981, working under several ministries through programs like [Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation](#).

### **Beyond Bilateral Partnership**

Strengthening relations with Cambodia is an attempt by New Delhi to step up its diplomatic outreach and show its presence in Southeast Asia. [Conducting](#) its first maritime exercise with ASEAN members was a step in this direction, showing its strategic commitment to the region. This also aligns with the strategic thinking in Phnom Penh on cultivating cooperation with other countries like the United States, India, and the European Union in its efforts to reduce dependence on Beijing. This was reiterated during PM Hun Manet's UN General Assembly visit, where he met with the Indian external affairs minister and [discussed](#) vital developmental issues and future trajectories.

Even though Cambodia expects to strengthen its ties with the West, it will not be easy due to its political culture and worldview. Meanwhile, a partnership with India, a growing economic and technological powerhouse, will help its own development goals. This aligns with the [ISEAS Institute survey](#), which puts India in third place as the strategic partner for ASEAN. It will also help get closer to Western powers through groupings like Quad and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework.

As both countries want to ensure stability and security essential for their development, forging closer relations will be the first step, followed by expanding cooperation beyond their comfort zone.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.*