PUNCHING ABOVE ITS WEIGHT: CAMBODIA'S STRATEGIC STATECRAFT IN AN ASYMMETRIC REGIONAL ORDER

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The geopolitical reverberation from the May 2025 border skirmish between Cambodia and Thailand near the Techo Morakot village illustrates not only the persistence of contested sovereignty in mainland Southeast Asia but also the strategic resilience of small states navigating asymmetric regional landscapes. For Cambodia, the incident marks a critical juncture in the articulation of its foreign policy strategy not only to assert territorial integrity but also to reaffirm its growing reputation as a "small" yet capable and principled actor in the international system.

In defiance of traditional realist assumptions that small states are mere objects of great power manipulation, Cambodia exemplifies a growing body of scholarship that smaller powers can be active, agile, and smart in how they deal with regional and international challenges, a perspective advanced by Diana Panke's work on small states in international negotiations. While material constraints remain, Cambodia's foreign policy behavior suggests that small states can develop and deploy multi-pronged strategies to preserve sovereignty, manage regional rivalries, and shape external environments in ways conducive to their national interests.

Small states and strategic agency

Classical realist theory has long portrayed small states as "system-ineffectual" actors structurally marginalized by virtue of their limited material capabilities. However, contemporary scholarship, particularly constructivist and liberal institutionalist perspectives, has foregrounded the ability of small states to strategically maneuver within the international system by leveraging ideational resources, legal norms, and multilateral institutions.

Constructivist analyses, as discussed by Godfrey Baldacchino and Anders Wivel, highlight how small states can actively shape international outcomes through identity construction, norm entrepreneurship, and coalition-building to exert influence disproportionate to their size. Complementing this, liberal institutionalist perspectives demonstrate how institutions enhance small-state agency: Robert Keohane argues that small states can enhance their bargaining power by embedding themselves within institutional frameworks, while Baldur Thorhallsson illustrates how institutions provide "shelter" that enables small states to secure political, economic, and security interests that would otherwise be unattainable.

In addition, recent scholarship has highlighted hedging as a key strategy for small states seeking to navigate great power rivalries. Rather than aligning exclusively with one great power, hedging allows small states to diversify partnerships, maximize economic and security benefits, and mitigate risks associated with overdependence. Scholars such as Kuik Cheng-Chwee have shown how Southeast Asian states employ hedging to preserve autonomy and strategic flexibility in the face of shifting US-China power dynamics.

Cambodia's response to the recent border tensions with Thailand—which unlike Cambodia is considered a middle power—exemplifies this theoretical evolution. Rather than resorting to reactive bandwagoning or isolationism, Cambodia has pursued a hybrid strategy that combines internal capacity-

building with external shaping efforts. This includes military modernization, legal-institutional development, economic diversification, and proactive engagement with multilateral forums and international legal mechanisms. Such strategic behavior shows that small states, though materially constrained, are far from passive.

Capacity-building strategies: Strategic foundation

Over the past two decades, Cambodia has invested significantly in military and institutional development. Though it lags behind Thailand and Vietnam in terms of aggregate military strength, its focus has been on cost-effective defense capabilities, particularly in anti-air and anti-tank systems. These capacities reflect the kingdom's commitment to safeguarding its national sovereignty through credible and proportionate means, while deliberately avoiding any posture that could be perceived as a military threat to its neighbors.

The establishment and expansion of institutions such as the National Institute of Diplomacy and International Relations further underscore Cambodia's recognition that foreign policy capacity depends on trained personnel, institutional memory, and professional coherence. Legal institutional development has also been essential. Cambodia has improved its ability to operate within international legal frameworks to articulate its claims more forcefully and consistently on global stages such as the ICJ, ASEAN, and the UN Security Council.

On the economic front, Cambodia has reduced its historical overreliance on neighboring markets by diversifying its trade partners and attracting foreign direct investment from a wider array of countries, including the US, China, Japan, South Korea, and the European countries. The economic diversification outlined in the Royal Government's Pentagonal Strategy further enhances Cambodia's strategic autonomy and serves as a safeguard against external pressure, particularly during periods of bilateral border tensions.

Shaping strategies: Legal leverage and normative framing

Cambodia's resort to international legal mechanisms highlights the normative dimensions of its statecraft. Following Thailand's repeated rejection of Cambodia's proposal to bring the latest border dispute before the ICJ, Cambodia independently submitted a legal case to the court. Such behavior underscores Cambodia's effort to ground its sovereign claims in international law and norms to reinforce its legal legitimacy and enhance its standing in the global arena.

The historical precedent for this approach was established in 1962, when the ICJ ruled in favor of Cambodia in the case of the Preah Vihear temple, a ruling reaffirmed in 2013. Cambodia's legal strategy, anchored in multilateral institutions, serves not only a means of conflict resolution but also as a form of norm entrepreneurship. This has positioned the kingdom as a principled, law-abiding state committed to upholding the rules-based order against arbitrary power.

Cambodia's strategic use of narrative framing and nationalist mobilization further intensifies its shaping efforts. Through media and public discourse, the government has cultivated a compelling narrative of defensive nationalism. This image of Cambodia as a country shaped by past tragedies but guided by dignity and principle continues to resonate at home and abroad through Cambodia's diplomatic messaging in ASEAN, UN, and international media, where it emphasizes sovereignty and principled foreign policy. Such narratives help Cambodia project legitimacy and moral authority in regional negotiations, while also signaling reliability to external partners.

In addition, the Solidarity March of June 2025, organized through coordinated local networks and civic groups, drew over 100,000 participants and garnered coverage in regional media to demonstrate Cambodia's unity and sovereignty beyond its borders. This demonstration reflects Cambodia's longstanding practice of strategic positioning in international affairs, ranging from Sihanouk's Cold War balancing to the internationalization of the UNTAC era and the prior

Preah Vihear dispute, contexts analyzed in detail in existing scholarship.

Foreign policy as domestic legitimacy

Cambodia's external strategy is deeply intertwined with its internal political logic. Foreign policy, in this context, often serves to reinforce regime legitimation. The ruling Cambodian People's Party frequently emphasizes its role as the guardian of national sovereignty, with external tensions, especially those involving Thailand, often contributing to efforts to bolster public support and sideline political rivals.

This dynamic reflects a broader phenomenon in small state politics, where international engagement is often utilized to reinforce domestic political stability. Sovereignty becomes not only a foreign policy objective but also a symbolic resource that reinforces regime authority, mobilizes public sentiment, and preempts political dissent. Comparative studies of other small states, such as Luxembourg and Singapore, illustrate how these strategies can be adapted to local contexts and demonstrate a consistent pattern in which international visibility and engagement serve as tools of domestic governance as much as foreign policy.

Risks, limitations, and regional implications

Cambodia's strategic maturity should not obscure its enduring vulnerabilities. Nationalist overreach, if not carefully managed, can provoke unintended consequences, including regional escalation or diplomatic isolation. Prime Minister Hun Manet's repeated calls for restraint during peaceful public protests against Thailand reveal a recognition of this danger.

Furthermore, Cambodia's increasing alignment with China though rational from a defense and development standpoint risks reinforcing external perceptions of strategic dependency. Managing these perceptions while pursuing diversified external partnerships remains a critical challenge. Cambodia's strategic engagement with ASEAN, the US, Japan, and Western partners signals an attempt to balance this alignment through strategic hedging.

Therefore, Cambodia's capacity to navigate such tensions will depend on its ability to maintain internal political cohesion, uphold legal and diplomatic credibility, and avoid the pitfalls of ultranationalism.

Conclusion

Cambodia's evolving foreign policy underscores a profound truth in international relations: power is not only measured by size, but by strategy, foresight, and institutional capacity. By investing in its own resilience while actively engaging with the international legal order, Cambodia has demonstrated that even small states can exert disproportionate influence.

In doing so, Cambodia challenges structuralist assumptions in IR theory and offers a model of how small states in Southeast Asia and beyond might reclaim agency in an increasingly multipolar and uncertain world. Its trajectory affirms that sovereignty, when strategically defended and normatively articulated, remains a powerful asset in the foreign policy repertoire of even the most constrained states like Cambodia.

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