

65 Years of Cambodia-Russia Relations: An Overview

By Kin Phea



Today marks the 65th anniversary of Cambodia-Russia relations. Looking back 65 years ago, on 13 May 1956, Cambodia and the Soviet Union established diplomatic relations. Over the 65 years, the relations between Cambodia and the Soviet Union then the Russian Federation have been impacted by national as well as regional and global politics. Despite geographical partition and distance, people of the two countries have lived in amity with each other as partner in cooperation underpinned by the principle of mutual respect and support.

From historical perspective, the relations between the two countries can be divided into five major periods:

From 1956 to 1970, Cambodia and the Soviet Union enjoyed very special relations. During early years of relations, the Soviet leaders highly commended the diligent efforts of King Sihanouk in transforming Cambodia into a resilient and independent state where people would live in peace and prosperity. The Soviet Union then backed the initiatives of King Sihanouk who was one of the founding figures of the non-aligned movement. In 1957, Cambodia and the Soviet Union signed the trade agreements and cultural and scientific cooperation. The Soviet Union also supported the membership of Cambodia in the United Nations. Moreover, the Soviet Union reaffirmed its loyalty to the people of Cambodia by condemning the Lon Nol's military coup 1970.

From 1970 to 1979, the relations between Cambodia and the Soviet Union were not good because of political change in Cambodia, Lon Nol staged a coup to

overthrow King Norodom Sihanouk while he was abroad. This situation put the Soviet Union in very difficult diplomatic position toward Cambodia making the country host two embassies in Moscow, one represented King Sihanouk's exile government and another one represented Lon Nol's regime government. And between 1975 and 1979, the confrontational politics between China and the Soviet Union negatively impacted the relations between Cambodia and the Soviet Union as well.

From 1979-1991, the two countries enjoyed very healthy relations. In early 1979, the diplomatic relations between the countries were re-established. From 1980 through 1990, the Soviet Union provided substantial economic and military aid as well as technical assistance to Cambodia. The Soviet Union contributed pro-actively in restoring and building Cambodia's socio-economic foundation in areas of energy, transport, post, agriculture, residential housing, health care, civil servant and military training, equipment and other machineries. The academic interactions since 1980s resulted in about 8,000 Cambodians receiving education in the USSR and Russia. Currently, those fellow graduates are holding positions of importance in government, line departments, and higher education institutions across the country. Some of them are successful businesspersons, civil servants, medical personnel, engineers and architects.

From 1991 to 1993, the relations between the two countries were at the crossroads. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the former Soviet Union in 1991, the overall Russian influence in Southeast Asia receded rapidly. In December 1991, King Norodom Sihanouk announced the recognition of the Russian Federation as the successor state to the Soviet Union. The Military ties and developmental assistance, which used to be the cornerstone of Moscow's ties with countries in the region such as Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos were no longer there. The relations between the two countries were not strong due to the obstacles of the post-Soviet transition including political reform, civil war, economic restructuring and the redrawing of political boundaries. The transitional period in post-Soviet Russian politics came to an end when a new constitution was approved by referendum in December 1993. However, Cambodia recognized the Russia's active role in Cambodia's peace process, preparing and concluding the Paris Peace Agreements on Cambodia (23 October 1991), and implementing the UN peacekeeping mission (1991-1993).

Since 1993, the relations between the two countries have significantly strengthened and broadened, politically, diplomatically, economically and in the area of people-to-people contacts.

Politically, Cambodia and Russia are well-trusted partners, with good cooperation politically while addressing common issues and problems that arise globally and in the region. Both states are cooperating within various

international and regional structures, including active interactions in the UN and its bodies, and ASEAN proposed platforms.

Diplomatically, frequent exchanges of high-level visits took place during 2015 and 2016. In 2015 there were many noticeable official visits of Cambodian leaders to Russia, including the visit of former Foreign Minister Hor Namhong in March, Deputy Prime Minister Sok An and Deputy Prime Minister Sar Kheng in May, and Minister of Environment Say Samal in October. More importantly, the first visit of the prime minister of the Russian Federation to Cambodia in November 2015 and Prime Minister Hun Sen was in Russia in May 2016 for the first time in 30 years marked the new heights of the relations.

Economically, bilateral trade between the two countries has risen substantially over the last decade. According to the Russian Federal Customs Service, the import to Russia from the Cambodia last year totaled more USD200 million, and export from Russia to Cambodia was nearly USD20 million.

For people-to-people contacts, more than 60,000 tourists from Russia visit Cambodia every year. There is also a significant number of Russian expats in the Cambodia as well, mostly living in Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, and Sihanoukville. More importantly, more than 8,000 Cambodians have studied in the former Soviet Union and Russia since 1979. Many of them now hold senior positions in the Royal Government of Cambodia.

The issue on the Russian vaccine “Sputnik V” was also raised during the meeting of Russian Ambassador to Cambodia with Prime Minister Hun Sen. The Embassy immediately notified the relevant Russian authorities about the discussion with the Prime Minister. The working groups of the two countries have worked on the issue.



In conclusion, Cambodia and Russia are connected by the ties of traditional friendship and long-standing mutual respect; the two countries have close approaches to the issues of the world order. Russia and Cambodia accumulated considerable experience of cooperation throughout all these years. The two countries interacted fruitfully in the world arena. It is quite clear that over the 65 years, Cambodia-Russia traditional friendship has grown from strength to strength in various fields, however, the bilateral trade volume is not very high and the Cambodia's request of Covid-19 vaccines would have positive feedback.

In order to extend broad relations with Cambodia as well as with Southeast Asia in term of politics and economy, it is strongly recommended that Russia should consider the possibility of investment in energy sector such as gas and petroleum, agricultural sector as former Soviet Union had made during the cold war, restoration of traditional relations of former Soviet Union with other countries in the region concerning with human resource, industry, military affairs, cultural promotion. In addition, Russia should play more active role in fighting against Covid-19.

It is believed that the relations between the two countries would continue to grow stronger and diversify into numerous areas of common interest. The solidarity between the two countries in addressing pressing international challenges, solid experience in bilateral dialogue, acceleration of all-level contacts on different platforms, deeply-rooted mutual understanding and respectful approach will undoubtedly navigate us to greater achievements both nationally and globally.

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