

Interview – Chheang Vannarith

Written by E-International Relations

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Dr Chheang Vannarith is a public policy analyst and government relations strategist. He has over a decade of research experience in geopolitical and political economic analysis, with a focus on Southeast Asia. He is currently serving as President of the Asian Vision Institute (AVI) where he leads projects on geopolitical risk analysis, regional security, smart village development, inclusive digital economy, and leadership development. He was honoured as a Young Global Leader by the World Economic Forum in 2013 and Southeast Asia Young Leader by the IISS-Shangri-La Dialogue in 2016.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

As the global power shift is happening and the geopolitical rivalry between the US and China is intensifying, the realist school and great power politics have gained more traction and relevance in explaining international relations. The key questions in the field relate to the future of multilateralism and US-China relations. Asian theories of International Relations are another interesting development in the field given the growing influence of China and other Asian countries on a new world order. As yet, there are no coherent and structured Asian theories.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly shaped the way we live, think and behave. The pandemic has also accentuated pre-existing geopolitical rivalries and inequalities including gender inequality. International relations need to be restructured, moving towards strengthening global governance in response to emerging global issues and challenges. I am deeply concerned about the decline of multilateralism and the forceful return of “might is right” strategic thinking. Therefore, as international relations scholars, we are compelled to construct narratives and develop sound arguments that can affect positive changes such as building a rules-based international order and promoting open and inclusive globalization. Some of the key questions are how to restore, revive and nurture a rules-based multilateral system. I believe that small state like Cambodia can contribute to shaping a new world order that can protect the independence, sovereignty and interests of small states. To realise that, small states have no other choices but work in unison, forming a collective agency that can impact positive changes in the international system.

How has the Mekong sub-region contributed to Asia regional development in recent years?

The Mekong region is a new growth centre as well as strategic frontier of Asia. Various initiatives and mechanisms have been created by key economic partners, including Mekong-Japan cooperation, Mekong-Korea Cooperation, Mekong-Lancang Cooperation (with China), Mekong-US Partnership, and Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (with India). These initiatives have contributed to the development and connectivity of the region. The Covid-19 pandemic outbreak has severely affected the economy of the region in 2020. Thailand is the worst hit country with an estimated contraction of 7.8 percent, followed by Cambodia with a contraction of 1.8 percent. Vietnam is the most resilient economy with a growth rate of 3.1 percent in 2020, followed by Myanmar with 1.1 percent and Lao PDR 0.5 percent.

What are the implications of the increasing presence of China in the Mekong subregion, as well as China’s intensifying rivalry with the US?

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The increasing presence of China in the region contributes to regional economic dynamism and development, regional production networks and supply chains. However, there are certain concerns and issues relating to the quality of Chinese investment and development projects. It is strongly recommended that Chinese companies should adopt ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) standards in order to promote the image and positive impact of Chinese presence. The US-China rivalry has caused a security dilemma for the Mekong countries as they are not interested in taking sides, or worse being forced to take sides. Economic security and interests are the key national interests and foreign policy objectives of the Mekong countries. Therefore, China's political influence and strategic space have been expanded in the region more significantly than that of the US.

How has minilateralism emerged in Southeast Asia and what are the associated risks and opportunities?

Minilateralism refers to a flexible, functional cooperation arrangement on specific issues among countries or localities in a geographically defined area or region. It has gained more traction recently due to its functionality and flexibility. But minilateralism is a double-edged sword, it could either complement or undermine multilateralism. Economic minilateralism is regarded as positive force towards regional integration and connectivity. Security minilateralism, which is mainly influenced or led by major power(s) such as the Quadilateral security arrangement among Australia, India, Japan and the United States, could potentially undermine the ASEAN-driven regional security architecture.

What impact is the development of China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative having on Cambodia's political and economic development?

Deep political trust, strategic convergence, and common economic interests are the foundations of the bilateral relationship and the key factors that have formed Cambodia's positive perceptions, particularly among governing elites, towards China's foreign policy initiatives. Cambodia has fully embraced China's proposed Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which is believed to assist Cambodia to develop its infrastructure and strengthen its economic competitiveness. In this connection, economic rationale best explains Cambodia's perception and approach towards China.

Since infrastructure development is the core of growth and the main reason for Cambodia's engagement in the BRI, the Cambodian government must integrate the principles of sustainability in infrastructure decision-making: Infrastructure must be planned from the very beginning through integrated environmental and social planning approaches, which allows sustainability requirements to be included to the largest extent possible. Chinese companies can also be a real catalyst for sustainable growth in Cambodia if they, together with the local government, put more effort into embracing international best practices and significantly improve the transparency and accountability of their investment and development projects.

You are the director of a think-tank in Cambodia and well-connected with academia. What advantages does this link provide? What is the biggest obstacle to creating an effective synergy between academia and policy?

Trust is the most important capital especially in building synergy between the think tank community and policy makers. To build and nurture trust requires constant frank dialogue and consultation. Personal relationships matter the most. As a think tanker, we need to understand the needs of the policy makers, think ahead of them in terms of identifying issues and proposing solutions, developing multiple futures and scenarios, and develop a trust-based partnership.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of international relations?

Firstly, we should invest more time in interactions with those who have different worldviews and analytical frameworks so that we can broaden our knowledge horizon. No single theory or conceptual framework can explain international relations. We need to always open our heart and mind to new or opposing ideas and perspectives. The fact of the matter is that a diversity of views is critical for creative and smart thinking.

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Secondly, perception is a reality. Therefore, we need to interact with policy makers to understand their perception, which we can use as a base to construct an analytical framework and structured argument. Exploring and constructing alternative theories or non-Western theories of International Relations would help us see and analyze the world in a more holistic and integrated manner.