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# ASEM in the Eyes of Cambodia: A Key Diplomatic Option for Her Future Global and Regional Integration

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## Introduction

Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) since its inception has been viewed as a non-binding platform for not only fostering soft and hard connectivity between Asia and Europe but also enhancing relationship and cooperation in both continents for the spirit of equal partnership and mutual interests. For the last 20 years, ASEM has, through its various informal dialogues, contributed to sharing policies conducive to addressing common global, international and regional challenges. Nevertheless, many observers note that it so far has yet to produce any tangible outcomes but a talk shop.

Since becoming an ASEM member in 2004, Cambodia is always active in attending all relevant ASEM meetings/events, including summits, foreign ministers' meetings, and other ministerial meetings just to name a few by devoting her own time, financial and human resources, even though concrete outcomes from this proactive engagement is yet to be seen. Notably, Cambodia has been honoured to host the 13th ASEM Summit in 2020. Therefore, this article is to seek answers to a pertinent question, "How does ASEM fit Cambodia's foreign policy?". To achieve this end, the article will cover three key aspects: Overview of ASEM characteristics and its roles, Cambodia's engagement in its process and how it fits the kingdom's foreign policy.

The study contends that ASEM fits well into Cambodia's current foreign policy thanks largely to its characteristics and roles. More importantly, ASEM is compellingly regarded as an excellent venue to raise Cambodia's image in the international arena, to enhance her bilateral cooperation with other member states, to develop human resource, and to

provide vibrant connection linking Cambodia to other member states in both regions. It enables the kingdom to attain her foreign policy objectives of protection of national interests, sovereignty and independence, as well as of further integration into global and regional contexts.

## Overview of ASEM Characteristics and its Roles

ASEM was created in March 1996 in Thailand with initial 26 partners, including 15 EU member states, the European Commission and 10 Asian countries, with the reciprocal recognition of inter-dependence and rapid development growth in both Asia and Europe. As a platform for cooperation between countries in Asia and Europe, ASEM is characterised as an informal and non-binding dialogue process for leaders from both continents to frankly discuss and share views on regional and global issues ranging from climate change to the complex matter of terrorism and radicalisation. Its core objectives are to strengthen partnership, promote peace and security and to enhance sustainable socio-economic development between the two regions and beyond with a main focus on three pillars of political, economic and socio-cultural aspects. The four utmost unique characteristics of ASEM encompass informality, multi-dimensionality, emphasis on equal partnership and dual focus on high-level and people to people.<sup>3</sup>

One of the most noticeable outcomes of ASEM is its enlargement from 26 (1996) to 53 members at the present time, of which 31 from Europe and 22 from Asia. This enables ASEM to be one of the largest inter-regional

3 ASEM InfoBoard, "Fostering Dialogue & Cooperation between Asia & Europe," ASEM InfoBoard, 2019, <https://www.aseminfoboard.org/about/overview>.

fora in the world, representing around 65% of the global economy, 60% of world population, 55% of world trade and 75% of global tourism.<sup>4</sup>

Many scholars and diplomats have expressed divergent views of the roles of ASEM, ranging from colloquial dialogue to a dynamic connection between Asia and Europe. On one hand, ASEM has generally been viewed as the informal process of dialogues and cooperation among 53 members. For instance, prior to the ASEM-11 in Mongolia in 2016, Swiss Federal Councillor Didier Burkhalter and Foreign Minister of Mongolia Lundeg Purevsuren shared their common view that ASEM had been an essential forum for various stakeholders to join and shape the process of globalisation and a process on which we all can take action. They emphasised the significance of these meetings that helped to strengthen relations between partner countries, and to progress on issues of common interest.<sup>5</sup>

ASEM also plays a crucial role in creating opportunities for exchanging experiences and knowledge between Asia and Europe, as well as helping to build a common understanding of international and regional issues. Before the commencement of the ASEM-12 in Brussels in 2018, director of policy at the Friends of Europe Shada Islam emphasised that ASEM was a platform for achieving some issues of common interest through improved channels of communication, provision of global public goods, better governance and wider engagement of civil society. She contended that ASEM Summit should be built as a platform where Europe and Asia can

work together to reform and modernise the World Trade Organisation (WTO), to enhance connectivity and to expand their security dialogues. These security dialogues cover a wide range of security issues that both regions are likely to encounter. They include hybrid threats, cooperative security, regional approaches to peacemaking, preventive diplomacy and crisis management.<sup>6</sup>

To obtain tangible results from this forum, many diplomats and specialists from both regions recommend that the future of ASEM focus on connectivity. Though physical connectivity is not a great deal in Europe, it is the case in point in Asia. There have not been many initiatives that support the infrastructure development in this region, except that of China's Belt and Road initiative. Therefore, building connectivity (both hard and soft) is pivotal. Chinese Ambassador Zhang Xiaokang, Chinese Ambassador-at-Large in charge of the European Affairs, underlined the need for the establishment of a working group on connectivity, emphasising that this channel could embrace all stakeholders in the ASEM process. Similarly, Henrik Hololei, European Commission Deputy Secretary, stated that ASEM had presented an opportunity to tap into Asia's high-growth economies, and one of the pragmatic ways to foster solid partnership might be through connectivity.<sup>7</sup>

In short, ASEM is a dialogue platform necessary for enhancing cooperation, fostering relations, establishing Asia-Europe connection

4 ASEM InfoBoard, "ASEM in Numbers," ASEM InfoBoard, 2019, <https://www.aseminfoboard.org/>.

5 Didier Burkhalter and Lundeg Purevsuren, "20 years of ASEM: An important link between Asia and Europe," March 1, 2016, <https://www.letemps.ch/opinions/vingt-ans-dasem-un-trait-dunion-important-entre-lasie-leurope>.

6 Shada Islam, "The Show Must Go on: ASEM Summit Is Test of Europe-Asia Working Together," Friends of Europe, October 2, 2018, <https://www.friendsofeurope.org/publication/show-must-go-asem-summit-test-europe-asia-working-together-shada-islam>.

7 Friends of Europe, "ASEM AT 20 - The Challenge of Connectivity," September 9, 2015, <https://www.friendsofeurope.org/event/asem-20-challenge-connectivity>.

and engaging stakeholders in its process for mutual benefits of the two regions. Its members may be able to take advantages of this mechanism for their respective national interests through their involvements and commitment to partnership under its framework. To attain more practical outcomes from this regional cooperation, the ASEM countries are expected to focus on multi-layered connectivity.

However, contribution and engagement by ASEM participating countries vary depending on their levels of commitment, resources at disposal and political willingness in the ASEM process. This study sheds light on Cambodia's dynamic engagement in this process, and explores underlying reasons for her active involvement.

## Cambodia's Engagement in the ASEM Process

Having seen the importance of inter-continental cooperation, Cambodia decided to join this platform on the occasion of the 5th ASEM Summit in Hanoi on 08 October 2004. This was the first round of ASEM enlargement in which 14 new members — 3 from Asia and 11 from Europe — started their engagement in the ASEM process. Though ASEM is just an informal dialogue, Cambodia has allocated significant resources for her engagement in the process.

The Kingdom will host the 13th ASEM Summit in 2020 and seven other side events in conjunction with this Summit. Those events include Asia-Europe Parliamentary Partnership Meeting, ASEM Cultural Festival, Asia-Europe Economic and Business Forum, ASEM Young Leader Summit, ASEM Editors'

Roundtable, Asia-Europe Labour Forum and Asia-Europe People's Forum.

Even though the 2020 ASEM summit and its related events require Cambodia to struggle on several fronts ranging from human resource, finance, technical expertise, physical infrastructure to diplomatic protocol and comprehensive security arrangements for leaders from both regions, the Kingdom has shown her strong commitment to the success of the aforementioned event. Chairing this Summit would be a new historical milestone for Cambodia, for it helps to boost her image in the international arena after her bitter experience of the civil war for almost 30 years. Such a commitment is clearly evidenced by the following remark of Prime Minister Hun Sen at the 12th ASEM Summit in Belgium last year: "Cambodia is committed to ensuring a successful summit".<sup>8</sup> Thus, the pertinent question being raised here is —why has Cambodia been so dedicated to this process, in spite of its informal and non-binding nature of the forum.

## How ASEM Fits Cambodia's Foreign Policy

The world has rapidly evolved and become more unpredictable, significantly affecting global cooperation, security and stability. The withdrawal of the United States from Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and from Iran Nuclear Deal, the rising populism and protectionism, US-Sino trade war, the launch of Indo Pacific Strategy, and Trump-Kim Summits are some examples of the evolving events the world has experienced thus far. The global uncertainty

<sup>8</sup> Khmer Times, "Cambodia to Benefit by Hosting 2020 ASEM," Khmer Times (blog), March 11, 2019, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/50585851/cambodia-to-benefit-by-hosting-2020-asem/>.

and unpredictability as well as the geopolitical rivalry have exposed Cambodia to an awkward position in implementing her grand foreign policy strategy.

Against the above backdrop, Cambodia resorts to engage in more secure global and regional platforms in a bid to safeguard her national interests, sovereignty, enduring peace and economic prosperity. In this aspect, ASEM is an ideal option for Cambodia given its characteristics, roles and objectives. ASEM fits well into Cambodia's current foreign policy objectives of protecting the national interests, securing sovereignty, maintaining independence and peace, further integrating into regional and global arena, as well as raising Cambodia's image and prestige globally. The following will illustrate how the ASEM process fits in Cambodia's modern foreign policy.

### **Protection of National Interest, Specifically National Sovereignty and Independence**

Safeguarding national sovereignty and independence is the foremost core priority for Cambodia's current foreign policy. The Kingdom's top concern is the repetition of her past bitter experiences during the Cold War, during which the country was utterly dragged into the political and ideological rivalries among superpowers. These rivalries resulted in the chronic civil wars that claimed millions of lives of Cambodian innocent people, especially during the Khmer Rouge regime from 1975 to 1979.

To realise this objective and to struggle for long-term survival, Cambodia has coherently embraced six foreign policy principles, as enshrined in Article 51&53

of the 1993 constitution, which include unequivocal neutrality and non-alignment, non-interference into domestic affairs of other states, non-military alliances, peaceful co-existence, non-foreign military bases and rights to receive military aid from others.<sup>9</sup> Cambodia is open and friendly to all countries and regions around the world, and is committed to building friendship and partnership with them based on the principles of mutual respect and reciprocal benefits.

In order to enhance friendship and closer cooperation with ASEM member states, Cambodian leaders, including His Majesty King Norodom Sihamoni, head of government and foreign minister, have, over the last few years, increased a number of official visits to different ASEM countries such as Japan, China, India, Indonesia, Vietnam, Turkey, Hungary and Romania. In addition, Cambodian leaders have actively attended international and regional meetings and programs with other ASEM member state leaders so as to maintain and promote cooperation with the latter group in all fields.

Those activities have earned the Kingdom's higher degree of political trust and multifaceted cooperation from the ASEM countries.

For example, during an official visit by Cambodian Prime Minister to India on 25-27 January 2018, Cambodia was able to sign four official documents with her Indian counterpart, covering the aspects of human trafficking prevention, reciprocal legal assistance, culture program and provision of Indian concession loan for the water resource development project in Cambodia. Similarly,

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<sup>9</sup> The Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia, "Cambodia Constitution" (Constitutional Council, September 21, 1993).



*The photo shows the Mekong river that 70 million people rely on for drinking water, food, irrigation, hydropower, transportation and commerce.*

during another official visit of Cambodian Prime Minister to Turkey on 20-22 October 2018, both Cambodia and Turkey signed nine agreements to further enhance bilateral cooperation in the spheres of tourism, economy, agriculture, de-mining, diplomatic institute, education, sports, water resources and investment protection.<sup>10</sup>

Some observers argue that Cambodia is tilting toward China, and turning her back against Western countries, the U.S in particular. This argument does not totally hold, as it has overlooked the core objectives of Cambodia's foreign policy as enshrined in her Constitution's article 51 and 53. Those observers have neglected Cambodia's great efforts to mitigate her dependency on foreign aid through the introduction of various economic reforms and active engagement with global and regional institutions like the United Nations, WTO,

Mekong-Lancang cooperation, Mekong-Japan cooperation, Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS), Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD), and ASEM.

Although Cambodia and the U.S have some different views about democracy and human rights situation in the Kingdom, Cambodia has still maintained good ties with the latter in order to promote regional peace, trade and economic growth. Both countries have still benefited from their cooperation in the fields of military, trade and investment, mine clearance, education and cultures. On 19 March 2019, both countries signed a bilateral military cooperation agreement for two-year period (2019-2020), aiming at strengthening ties in humanitarian affairs, education and military trainings.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, at the 5th coalition council meeting on the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement between

<sup>10</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, "2018 Annual Outcomes and Ways Forward Report" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, March 1, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> Phnom Penh Post, "Cambodia Strengthens Military Ties with the US," March 21, 2019, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/cambodia-strengthens-military-ties-us>.

Cambodia and the US in January 2019, Cambodian Minister of Commerce said that both countries' trade volume in 2018 rose up to more than US\$ three billion, 27 per cent increase compared to that in 2017. The US is still Cambodia's second largest market. Cambodia's export to the U.S reached US\$2.88 billion, whereas her import from the latter valued at \$426 million.<sup>12</sup> In terms of the cultural cooperation, Cambodia received a grant of US\$ 200,000 from the U.S for the conservation of the ancient Preah Vihear temple's ladders.<sup>13</sup>

ASEM is also an important platform for Cambodia to make more friends and extend more cooperation with other state members based on reciprocal respect and mutual interests. The past experiences of civil wars and foreign meddling in the Kingdom's internal affairs have haunted Cambodia. Hence, it has become very cautious about her foreign policy implementation so as not to repeat the past catastrophe. The best lessons learnt from her contemporary history were that some foreign countries were aimed at interfering into the Kingdom's internal affairs through their divide-and-conquer policy, support of different factions and the provocation of internal conflicts. Such an interference led to the various regime changes and government's failure to obtain legitimacy and international recognition from 1970 to 1998.

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*cooperation with other state members based on reciprocal respect and mutual interests.”*

In short, Cambodia has steadfastly upheld the six core principles of her foreign policy, while, at the same time, remaining open for more friendship and committing to deepening cooperation with all countries around the world so long as they respect her sovereignty and absolute independence. Owing to the bitter experience of foreign meddling, Cambodia is always cautious of making foreign policy options, especially when coming to term with major powers. Cambodia consistently made it clear that she would never exchange her sovereignty for any foreign aid. The Kingdom is doing her best to integrate herself into global and regional frameworks aiming at avoiding foreign intrusion, and fostering economic cooperation and friendship with more countries. ASEM is, of course, one of the ideal platforms, whereby Cambodia can harness in order to realise this objective.

## **Flexible Diplomacy in Response to the Potential Geopolitical Rivalry Among the Great Powers**

Today, global uncertainties have been mainly driven by geopolitical rivalries between the existing and revisionist powers. This has, at times, put Cambodia in a very awkward position. The Kingdom is required to have a balanced foreign policy. Concretely, her foreign policy should be flexible, smart, and responsive to the dramatic shifts of the geopolitical competition among the great powers. Nonetheless, the Kingdom has to consistently embrace the principle of peaceful neutrality and non-alignment. By so doing, the peace and stability will prevail.

12 Phnom Penh Post, “Trade between US and Cambodia Rises 27 per Cent on Previous Year,” Phnom Penh Post, January 30, 2019, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/business/trade-between-us-and-cambodia-rises-27-cent-previous-year>.

13 Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, “2018 Annual Outcomes and Ways Forward Report.”

Domestic policy and foreign policy are indeed complementary and interconnected in nature. Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn once said:

*We are implementing the government motto – making internal reforms and increasing external friendship with the aim of strengthening the independence and national sovereignty. We continue to extend our external relations and diplomatic activities to strengthen and increase friendship and cooperation with countries around the world in order to further our interests and national prestige”. Cambodia needs to create new markets and incentives for an influx of investment.<sup>14</sup>*

In this respect, Cambodia keeps diversifying her foreign relations to make more friends and increase cooperation in all fields with all countries, including all powers, not just with any particular power.

To ward off external threat to her security and peace, Cambodia has done her utmost in making substantial reforms, including but not limited to human resources development. At Cambodia’s Foreign Ministry, in order to effectively connect the Kingdom with the outside world, continuous capacity building programs have been developed and provided to all Cambodian diplomats in the areas of diplomacy and strategic analysis. Specifically, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation established the National Institute for Diplomacy and International Relations (NIDIR) in 2016 in order to equip Cambodian diplomats with diplomatic, administrative, analytical and soft skills, crucial to their

daily work. In this connection, ASEM has substantially contributed to Cambodia’s human resources development of both public and private institutions through its assistance with seminars, workshops, trainings, dialogues and other related activities of the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF). Cambodia has kept sending her delegates to take part in ASEF projects pertaining to intellectual exchange, cultural exchange, people-to-people exchange and public affairs. Further, the Kingdom has joined activities of ASEM education centres so as to promote her cooperation with ASEM in the higher education sector. In 2019, Cambodia will organise two training courses on Asia-Europe diplomacy and the 8th Asia-Europe Summit on Sustainable Development Dialogue under the theme of Promoting Maritime Partnership for Growth and Sustainable Development.

### **Promotion of Economic, Commercial, Cultural and Tourism Diplomacy through Cambodia’s Economic Diversification**

Economic pragmatism is one of the key elements in shaping Cambodia’s foreign policy strategy. Cambodia has strived to transform her traditional politics-driven foreign policy into economic-driven one through two main approaches — diversification of strategic partnerships and the unleashing of potentials of regional integration. Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn stressed that Cambodia’s modern diplomacy had attached her great importance to economy, tourism and culture in response to the current context of the today world. To carry out modern diplomacy, Cambodia has moved forward to attract foreign investors and tourists, as well as to promote Khmer culture to the international arena. To reap economic benefits from regional integration, Cambodia

<sup>14</sup> Phnom Penh Post, “Foreign Affairs Minister Lays Out Core Foreign Policy Values,” Phnom Penh Post, March 12, 2019, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/foreign-affairs-minister-lays-out-core-foreign-policy-values>.

is expected to accelerate people-oriented and people-centred regional community building.<sup>15</sup> This expectation coincides with an ASEM's key characteristic, which mentions about connectivity projects, especially people-to-people one. In this regard, he underscored that Cambodia "has benefited a lot from ASEM in terms of economy, development, human capacity building, trade, tourism, people-to-people exchange".<sup>16</sup>

*"To reap economic benefits from regional integration, Cambodia is expected to accelerate people-oriented and people-centred regional community building."*

In the wake of Khmer Rouge regime which killed more than one fifth of its 7 million population from 1975 to 1979, Cambodia strongly relied on emergency relief, foreign support and development assistance provided by international community. Nevertheless, the above situation has gradually changed after the end of the civil war in 1998. The kingdom, in addition to foreign assistance, also had other means at her disposal to support her sustainable economic development and long-term survival. Cambodia decided to integrate itself into regional and global institutions such as ASEAN and WTO in 1999 and 2004, respectively.<sup>17</sup> This integration has encouraged the Kingdom to open her market

and introduce macroeconomic policies conducive to trade, investment, and inflow of FDIs in order to attract more investment and enhance its fragile economy.<sup>18</sup>

To further integrate into international mechanisms for more economic benefits and further prestige, the Kingdom decided to join ASEM in 2004. Ever since, it has been active in the ASEM process by frequently organising a series of events to promote awareness of the ASEM process and its related events. For example, Cambodia has, since 2017, organised a series of public lectures on ASEM Day with the total participation of about 2,000 students.

During the ASEM day 2019, Foreign Minister Prak Sokkhonn laid out four core foreign policy values that Cambodia needs to focus on in the current global context, one of which was the increase of trade, economic and cultural diplomacy so as to absorb more sources of economic growth through diversification.<sup>19</sup> In this regard, ASEM is the best option for Cambodia to realise this objective since ASEM comprises 51 countries, representing 55% of world trade and 75% of global tourism.<sup>20</sup>

It is an ideal place for strengthening bilateral cooperation with other members. Typically, on the sidelines of ASEM high-level meetings such as the ASEM Summit and Foreign Ministers' Meeting, Cambodia organises bilateral meetings with other members to boost cooperation and development in the

15 Chheang Vannarith, "Economic Pragmatism in Cambodia's Foreign Policy," Khmer Times (blog), July 16, 2018, <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/511996/economic-pragmatism-in-cambodias-foreign-policy/>.

16 Cambodia News Gazette, "Cambodian Top Diplomat Reaffirms Cambodia's Commitment to Host 13th ASEM Summit," March 11, 2019, <https://cambodiannewsgazette.com/cambodian-top-diplomat-reaffirms-cambodias-commitment-to-host-13th-asem-summit/>.

17 Prak Sokkhonn, "Understanding Current Situation in the World and Cambodia's Foreign Policy," Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (blog), September 14, 2017, <https://www.mfaic.gov.kh/site/detail/13587>.

18 Hil Hall and Jayant Menon, "Cambodia: Rapid Growth in an Open, Post-Conflict Economy," Australian National University, no. 2014/12 (May 2014).

19 Phnom Penh Post, "Foreign Affairs Minister Lays Out Core Foreign Policy Values."

20 ASEM InfoBoard, "ASEM in Numbers."

spheres of agriculture, trade, investment and tourism.

Another most important aspect that ASEM may fit well into Cambodia's foreign policy is the promotion of connectivity initiatives between the two continents. At the 11th ASEM Summit held in Ulaanbaatar in 2016 under the theme of 20 Years of ASEM: Partnership for the Future through Connectivity, all ASEM member leaders, including Cambodia's, spelled out their commitment to leading ASEM successfully into its third decade through reinforcing their partnerships, focusing cooperation for tangible benefits, fostering connectivity in all dimensions and promoting informality, networking and flexibility. They reiterated "strong resolve to work together to energise ASEM, promote further connectivity, mutually beneficial partnership and cooperation between Asia and Europe".<sup>21</sup>

Regarding the connectivity enhancement, the Cambodian foreign minister also stressed on the utmost importance of ASEM connectivity for Cambodia's future economic cooperation, security and deeper integration into the global and regional platforms. He stated that ASEM's infrastructure, institutions and people-to-people connectivity initiatives not only strengthened the strength of the two regions, but also provided another momentum for sustainable development and growth in the world. He pointed out that ASEM might be able to create value-added cooperation through concrete plans over this connectivity projects. To maximise benefits from ASEM connectivity, he also recommended to strengthen the security system to prevent risks arising from

those kinds of connection such as infectious diseases, terrorism, transnational crimes and so on<sup>22</sup> In this regard, China's Belt and Road Initiative and ASEAN Master Plan on Connectivity are some crucial regional cooperation mechanisms that Cambodia may reap the benefits from the Asia-Europe linkage.<sup>23</sup>

### Contribution to Active Participation in Maintaining Peace and Addressing Global Challenges

Another foreign policy objective Cambodia is striving to achieve is to become a global peace builder based on the principle of equal footing and same rights as other nations.<sup>24</sup> To achieve this end, the Kingdom is expected to consistently make her great efforts in promoting the country profile and prestige regionally and internationally through her active engagement in peacebuilding activities. For instance, Cambodia, which used to be a war-torn country and to receive UN peacekeeping forces during 1992-1993, has now become one of the most active ASEAN countries, which have regularly contributed peacekeeping forces to the UN peacekeeping missions. Since 2006, Cambodia has sent nearly 6000 troops to eight countries in the African continent and Middle East under the UN umbrella.<sup>25</sup>

21 ASEM Chair's Statement, "11th ASEM Summit (ASEM11)," ASEM InfoBoard, July 16, 2016, <https://www.aseminfoboard.org/events/11th-asem-summit-asem11>.

22 Cambodia News Gazette, "Cambodian Top Diplomat Reaffirms Cambodia's Commitment to Host 13th ASEM Summit."

23 Chheang Vannarith, "Cambodia Reasserts a Neutral Foreign Policy," Vannarith Chheang (blog), January 25, 2018, <https://vannarithchheang.com/2018/01/25/cambodia-reasserts-a-neutral-foreign-policy/>.

24 Rectangular Strategy-Phase III, "2013 Rectangular Strategy-Phase III," Council for the Development of Cambodia, 2013, <http://www.cambodiainvestment.gov.kh/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/2013-Rectangular-Strategy-III-En8.pdf>; Vannarith, "Economic Pragmatism in Cambodia's Foreign Policy."

25 Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, "2018 Annual Outcomes and Ways Forward Report."

*“From Cambodia’s perspective, chairing the said summit may help the Kingdom achieve her foreign policy objective of playing a more active and vibrant role in the regional and global integration as stated above.”*

Apart from this, Cambodia has firmly dedicated to hosting the 13th ASEM summit, although realising that the organisation of such an event is quite a daunting task. From Cambodia’s perspective, chairing the said summit may help the Kingdom achieve her foreign policy objective of playing a more active and vibrant role in the regional and global integration as stated above. Prime Minister Hun Sen, at 12th ASEM Summit in Belgium last year, accentuated the significance of hosting the summit in the following year, expressing his positive prospects for close and mutual beneficial partnerships among member countries for the sake of global peace and security, as well as for the attainment of the United Nations’ 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, on the occasion of 2019 ASEM Day celebration in Cambodia last March, Foreign Minister Prak Sokkhon firmly stated that “ASEM Summit next year will raise Cambodia’s profile on the world stage”. He underlined that this summit would allow the Kingdom to showcase its achievements, boost bilateral cooperation and provide many opportunities that benefit Cambodia.<sup>27</sup> In short, Cambodia has firmly committed to joining with other state members in tackling the global problems, and

to strengthening dialogues and cooperation with them based on the principle of equal partnership.

## Conclusion

After the end of the civil wars and the attainment of peace and social development over the last two decades, Cambodia has become more proactive in engaging herself in the regional and global integration. However, due to the mounting global uncertainties, the Kingdom’s foreign policy needs to be flexible in order to effectively respond to the global challenges, while still putting a strong emphasis on the protection of national interests, independence, sovereignty and peace, economic development and the boosting of country’s image. The Kingdom’s dynamic engagement in the ASEM process is one of the ideal options to materialise the above foreign policy tools. Hosting the ASEM summit in 2020 signifies Cambodia’s deeper integration into the region and the world for the sake of economic cooperation, exploring new markets, building more friendship with all countries around the world and raising the Kingdom’s image in the international fora.

In the eyes of Cambodia, ASEM is one of the most appealing means to connect Asia and Europe. Given its non-binding, informal and flexible nature of dialogue, ASEM is a useful platform for Cambodia to promote bilateral and multilateral cooperation with other members in the fields of investment, trade, education and tourism. It is also an important forum, whereby Cambodia and the other 50 ASEM countries can tackle global challenges together. Further, ASEM is the best platform to promote Cambodia’s image internationally, regardless of the country’s size, economic development and limited human resource.

<sup>26</sup> Khmer Times, “Cambodia to Benefit by Hosting 2020 ASEM.”

<sup>27</sup> Cambodia News Gazette, “Cambodian Top Diplomat Reaffirms Cambodia’s Commitment to Host 13th ASEM Summit”; Khmer Times, “Cambodia to Benefit by Hosting 2020 ASEM.”

Considering its characteristics, roles and core value, ASEM fits very well with Cambodia's modern foreign policy.

To attain some tangible outcomes from hosting the upcoming ASEM meetings next year, Cambodia should introduce some outstanding issues of her interest the ASEM Chairman's statements and/or declarations. Those issues may include research and development (R&D), landmine clearance, climate change, physical infrastructure connectivity and human resource development.

One of the most feasible options is the extension of cooperation with the other ASEM members over the issues of mine clearance and the scope of work of the ASEAN Regional Mine Action Center (ARMAC) headquartered in Phnom Penh. The existing landmines and other explosive remnants of war (ERW) still pose a credible threat to people' lives, socio-economic development in many parts of the world, including the ASEAN region. This threat undoubtedly runs counter to the main ASEM goals — the promotion of peace, stability and sustainable development across regions. Cambodia should, therefore, take the opportunity of being the host to seek more cooperation with other members in clearing landmines inside the Kingdom, as well as in extending the ARMAC's mandate beyond ASEAN.