



EVERYTHING BUT ARMS (EBA): THE CAMBODIAN CASE

An interview with Dr. Chanborey and Dr. Schmücking

Reading Time: 4 Minutes

Note: This article has been collected in the period from February to April. Due to the proofreading, editing and design process, some facts might be outdated.

The world is currently going through the Covid-19 pandemic crisis and all related challenges. In this interview, we talk about another remaining challenge, the EBA withdrawal.

The EBA trade preferences have been an economic boost for Cambodia and have fueled exports to the European market. Cambodia's exports to the EU (mostly shoes and clothing), have grown by 630% since 2008, and now make up 39% of the country's total exports. This in turn has partly contributed to a steady economic growth of 7% annually, and to lifting one-third of the country's population out of poverty between 2007 and 2014. Moreover, around 2 million Cambodians depend on the textile industry, including approximately 750,000 employees. These facts show the relevance of EBA itself but also the relations with Europe.

However, the EU announced in 2019 that it would launch an EBA withdrawal procedure due to the erosion of democracy and human rights violation in Cambodia. In the interview, we speak with Dr. Cheunboran Chanborey, Advisor to the Asian Vision Institute, and Dr. Daniel Schmücking, Country Director of KAS Cambodia, about the case, its context and next steps.

Dr. Chanborey, the topic of the first Diplomatic Briefing is "New Decade, Old Challenges?" Nowadays, we are living in turbulent times. What are the biggest challenges at the moment related to Cambodia's foreign relations?

Dr. Chanborey: There are a number of challenges that Cambodia is facing at the moment and towards the end of this decade. The first challenge is the Covid-19 pandemic, a major challenge for all nations, not just for Cambodia. The second challenge will still be the economic development of Cambodia. And here I am particularly looking at sustainability, green growth and inclusiveness. The third is the relation with Europe and in this regard the EBA case is of high interest.

The launch of the EBA withdrawal came to many experts not as a surprise. Why is the Cambodian EBA case so interesting?

Dr. Chanborey: The case is interesting, because it is the first case in history that the EU is withdrawing parts of the EBA scheme. Keeping in mind that 49 countries have this status and that EBA is in place since 2001, it is a historical moment.

Cambodia is exceptional and to get a better understanding why it happened to Cambodia, we need to do more research. What we know right now is that the EU is withdrawing trade preferences at cases where they have an economic leverage, when they have significant trade with a country, and when they don't have strategic or commercial interest in the country and of course, when there are human rights violations. And we have to acknowledge this. Without human rights violations

in Cambodia, the European Union would never have withdrawn parts of the EBA status.

Dr. Chanborey, we are at an early stage to analyze and see the entire scope of this decision and that the predictions are difficult. What is the needed strategic response of Cambodia to the EBA withdrawal?

We still believe in multilateral solutions, even if the decision was perceived as highly unfair and unjust by diverse actors in Cambodia. Cambodia and the EU have been long and firm believers in multilateral systems and the rules-based international order. The two sides need to continue promoting these principles ideas.

As far as the EBA is concerned, it is just only one particularly unfortunate issue in the bilateral relations. As COVID-19 is posing challenges to the public health systems and socio-economic development across the globe, including Cambodia, the EU should reconsider



Dr. Cheunboran Chanborey during the interview

its decision on the EBA to Cambodia. In this regard, I do hope that leaders in Brussels and leaders in Phnom Penh start a constructive dialogue in good faith in the near future to preclude the issue from clouding the mutually beneficial relations between Cambodia and the EU.

Dr. Schmücking, people speak about asymmetries in the European-Cambodian relations and conflicts of values. From your perspective as a European political scientist, what do you expect to see in the next months?

Dr. Schmücking: Expectations in this time are hard to formulate. But I can tell you what I want to see: That we are getting back to multilateral dialogue and real compromises like Dr. Chanborey mentioned. I can understand that people in Cambodia are frustrated about the decision of the EU and that it should be critically reflected also against the backdrop of double standards.

Nevertheless, we need good relations with everyone. The Covid-19 crisis is just one paramount example of the world we are living in today. We have to deal it altogether with the EBA, the Covid-19 and the coming challenges like climate change. Wasting time on abstract value discussions will not bring us forward. I believe in pragmatic, innovative and same same eye-level approaches. That would mean Cambodia needs self-confidence and independent foreign policy approach to deal with all the big powers, but also flexibility and space for new ways of thinking to adjust parts of its communication and strategic orientations.

What do you mean by its communication and strategic orientation?



Dr. Daniel Schmücking during the interview

Dr. Schmücking: I mean to think beyond development aid. Of course, Cambodia will still depend on it for a while but at the end of this decade, it might look different. When it comes to trade decisions, EBA is something that is given by the European Union to the least-developed countries. So when Cambodia is stronger, they can negotiate a free trade agreement with the European Union, maybe even on the ASEAN level. Arriving in the 21st century means also leaving the past behind to a certain degree and to shape new narratives and values. Finding a balance between Europe, the US and China will remain a big challenge and should be framed by a more balanced and friendly communication style.

For the Europeans, this means also that they have to do their homework. What we see so far in its foreign and security policies is that it is too weak to become a self-confident and independent global player. Their approaches should be based on clear values while still leaving enough space for development and diversity.

Dr. Chanborey, what is your opinion about the future of the EU-Cambodia relations? What do you wish to see at the end of this decade?

Dr. Chanborey: I wish to see Cambodia and the EU realizing that they have a lot of things in common. They have a lot of shared agendas including the most important topics of humanity like multilateralism, climate change, women empowerment and the role of women in peace and security, green growth and of course, the promotion of democracy and human rights.

I also want the European partners to be more understanding of the Cambodian context and challenges. Sincerely putting effort into understanding instead of technocratically following rules might add important spices to the common shared dish.

How about you, Dr. Schmücking? What is your take looking into this decade?

Dr. Schmücking: At the end of the decade, I want to see the European Union as a strong foreign policy player, strong in security, strong in business, but also strong in human rights and democracy. I think this is the role that the European Union has to play.