Introduction

Cambodia in 2015 is a nation the international community has forgotten. Through a long series of circumstances that have developed over many years, the horrors exerted on its people have left the nation’s soul empty and twisted in ways that erode domestic and foreign trust in Cambodia’s major private and public institutions. Aside from a brief moment of foreign attention and assistance in the early 1990s, Cambodia has existed in the shadows of other states and crises for the last two centuries. Even United Nations (UN) involvement was superseded as conflicts in Africa and the Balkans began to spiral out of control, demanding the bulk of international attention. However, from this tragedy of geopolitics, ultimate success for Cambodia remains salvageable. A prolonged and concerted effort by the international community including investments in human and physical capital, agriculture, and security will engender the best possible environment to empower Cambodians to engage and change their nation’s present course. The United States (US) will need to lead the effort to rally international investors, as support to Cambodia reinforces the broader US Rebalance to the Pacific initiative. Just as important, Thailand will play a significant role in providing technical expertise on location; because stabilizing Phnom Penh reduces long term expenses Bangkok will have to undertake in supporting refugees and fighting cross-border security issues (i.e. smuggling and deforestation). In taking a holistic approach to development, motivated by strong ethical underpinnings, Bangkok and Washington have an opportunity to spearhead a worthy and noble pursuit in Phnom Penh’s development.

Areas of Development

Human capital must be the central theme in creating the dynamics necessary for sustained growth. In examining personal development, prudence requires the recognition that, according to recent World Bank data, Cambodia’s total secondary school enrollment as a percentage of age-eligible students has hovered at approximately 40%. A number of components are necessary to endow the people with a comprehensive education and training regimen to overcome today’s obstacles. First, technical experts will be made available to provide assistance for Cambodians in various disciplines, the fields of which will be identified as the program matures. These advisors can provide on-the-job training to enhance effectiveness, efficiency, and ethical foundation of the nation’s infrastructure. Second, higher education, both in terms of developing domestic capacity and enabling learning abroad, offers unique opportunities for the young to mature intellectually and ethically. Challenging academic environments will foster a community for young Cambodians that promotes creativity and ingenuity, and which will set the foundation for greater growth over the long term. Third, a basic education level is lacking throughout much of Cambodia. Improving the foundation for the nation’s scholarship will raise the general
discourse, motivations, and moral fortitude of the people. Developing holistic education that includes prioritizing ethics in the curriculum will directly impact everyday actions in Cambodia, because it likely will reduce abuses of power by those in positions where temptations exist. In a similar fashion, the positive conduct of advisors serves to demonstrate a new standard of acceptable behavior that will have an indirect impact. Fittingly, its lasting impact lies in the domestic populations’ exposure to the notion that strong leadership can be achieved in parallel to high moral standards. The promotion of ethical and moral values can be emphasized through integrity and transparency; not only to reduce corruption, but to bolster the reliability and compliance of day-to-day activities and agreements. Above all other areas for cooperation, human capital development offers the most enduring platform because people endure even as the physical infrastructure may erode.

Bolstering physical capital investments is a vital element to promoting sustainable long term growth. Implementing measures to develop a more vibrant and diverse economic outlook will raise standards of living, thereby reducing some of the temptations for unethical behavior. Taking a look back, not only did the Khmer Rouge and the upheavals that followed gut the state of its intellectual capacity, but they also eliminated much of the production potential. For a number of reasons, both domestic and foreign, the emphasis on rebuilding and restructuring this sector has been lacking. Yet from out of the devastation there remains hope for a more robust and ethically resolute business climate. Financed by the US and broader international community; and with a combination of American, Thai, and other technical experts; joint public and private ventures can be developed that raise the ceiling on potential physical capital investments. Focusing on areas like research and design, modernizing manufacturing and irrigation systems, and improving public services (i.e. hospitals, telecommunications capacity, and points of entry accessibility) can strengthen revenue streams, thereby raising standards of living over the long term. As has been seen in China, Japan, and South Korea in recent decades, targeting infrastructure modernizations is vital to creating and sustaining the sort of tremendous economic growth needed to pull Cambodians out of their desperate conditions. Addressing physical capital investments, with an eye on ethics, is prudent for the designs of both Bangkok and Washington in building a suitable framework for Phnom Penh’s growth.

The ability to feed a population is a rudimentary requirement for growth above and beyond the most basic level of sustainability. In recent decades Thailand has undertaken an extraordinarily complex and forward-thinking series of programs to bring its agricultural field into the modern age. In the words of Andrew Walker, author of *Thailand’s Political Peasants*, “Government funding in the form of infrastructure, price supports, economic development, health, welfare, and education has become an integral part of the complex livelihood of rural Thai life. Half a century ago, 96 percent of Thailand’s rural dwellers were living in poverty. As a result of rapid economic growth and diversification, the official poverty rate has plummeted to about 10 percent. Life expectancy has increased, infant mortality is close to first-world standards, and primary schooling is near universal.” Using Bangkok’s approach as an initial blueprint will encourage international fundraising efforts and give technical advisors a working model to build upon. In particular, three elements to the Thai model must be replicated to some extent. First, the emphasis the Thai government placed on developing infrastructure in rural
communities, while having a mixed record, is of paramount importance in Cambodia. Second, encouraging the locating of agribusinesses, private business interests, locally will offer an additional source of financing for machinery and may broaden options for both what crops to plant and growing techniques. Third, emphasizing overseas development assistance as a tool to improve rural infrastructure, specifically irrigation and flood prevention, are necessary elements to setting the stage for more reliable, frequent, and robust crop cycles. Private foreign direct investment will play a part as it is ideally suited for working with individuals and small groups of farmers. Consequently, agribusiness offers the best solution for a readily available source of funds for experimenting with new crops. Diversification will allow for a more stable and commercially attractive yield in the long run. The combination of public and private investments will play value-added roles in strengthening the agricultural sector to a point where it can produce multiple crops per year.

Non-traditional security and the promotion of ethical conduct are important concepts in the modernization of the Cambodian state security system. In the twenty-first century, global connectivity and internationally accepted standards for police conduct have changed considerably from historical perceptions. However, principally due to limited foreign exposure Cambodian policing techniques have struggled to keep pace. Thailand and the US must offer training opportunities abroad to give Cambodian police personnel the opportunity to not only develop their operational skills, but see how police in other cultures interact with their civilian counterparts. This interplay will be an important educational experience for many young Cambodians seeking careers in law enforcement. Beyond ethical development, they will start honing techniques necessary for non-traditional security practices. For instance, emphasizing public relations and community involvement are value-added elements to effective policing that are being practiced elsewhere around the world, but are missing in Cambodia. Turning the tide on ethical internal security practices can begin to occur in the short term at the local level to tear down some of the negative stereotypes associated with Cambodian security forces. Early success can begin to build momentum and garner meaningful public support for potential legal reforms that build enduring and systemic national policies and practices. In so doing, domestic and foreign entities will be more assured that involvement in Cambodia is not only a worthy endeavor, but a pragmatic one. Developing a more proactive and modern police force is essential for the long term stability of the state, which will, in turn, encourage greater investments.

**Ethical Considerations**

For far too long the plight of the Cambodian people has attracted marginal international interest. During the 1970s the world turned a blind eye to Pol Pot’s genocidal reign. International negligence was further compounded in the 1980s as assistance was denied due to accusations of Vietnamese occupation – setting aside of course the potential future victims Hanoi liberated. Conversely, in the early 1990s, with the end of Cold War stratification, the UN finally led a humanitarian assistance program. Tragically, that quickly became plagued by a lack of adequately distributed manpower. Minimal security forces and rural assistance led to investments being concentrated in Phnom Penh. The failures of that endeavor have greatly
contributed to the world’s loss of interest in the plight of the Cambodian people. The international community’s blind eye allowed for a continued downturn with no end in sight. It is truly an ethical, human, and moral imperative that the US and Thailand lead an international effort to change Cambodia’s future for the better.

Washington has a long track record of helping those in need and the disenfranchised. It is equally well understood that foreign aid represents a very small fraction of overall US spending. As the largest economy in the world more can be done to help the plight of others internationally. Some will argue the US cannot afford such an ambitious program at this time, but, to the contrary, small sacrifices for the greater good is nothing new. President Lincoln risked everything in the pursuit of abolishing slavery, President Roosevelt spared no expense in defeating the Nazis, and even more recently in places such as Somalia, Kosovo, and North Korea, US officials have gone to great lengths to help those less fortunate. Requiring basic financial and technical support, Phnom Penh warrants assistance from Washington. The act of rallying international attention and resources is an additional net positive for the US as it once again demonstrates Washington’s leadership mantle when it comes to supporting the downtrodden. Offering assistance to Cambodia is an ethical imperative for the US that holds the potential to achieve meaningful change in Southeast Asia.

Even in today’s world of finite resources, in lieu of Washington introducing its Rebalance to the Pacific, engagement in Cambodia presents both ethical and pragmatic value. US attempts to resolve territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas have been regarded as the primary instruments of Washington’s foreign policy shift. The genesis of these territorial conflicts is deeply grounded in overlapping historical claims, making it very difficult to assign blame, and, consequently, determine any real metric to articulate the moral rectitude of US actions. In sharp contrast to coastal disputes, active engagement in Cambodia represents a departure from the divisive nature of territorial dispute resolution. Rather than having to choose sides in an effort to reduce regional confrontations; working with Bangkok, Phnom Penh, and others is best characterized as an attempt to raise the standards of living for a long-neglected people. The worthy pursuit of assisting a people in dire need is an ethical imperative of the strongest nation on the planet. From a practical standpoint though, it provides Washington an opportunity to change the tenor of the dialogue on the Rebalance. Rather than focusing on the confrontational element, fostering infrastructure development throughout this impoverished state helps improve the lot of millions. The potential value in this ethical pursuit lies in the fact that, when successful, it will serve as a blueprint for similar efforts across the Asia-Pacific region; thereby providing a refocus on the ethical benefits of the policy.

In a similar vein, there are considerable ethical concerns for Bangkok that should motivate Thailand to assist in Cambodia’s development. From a historical viewpoint a number of senior Thai leaders have enabled the sustainment of disparate centers of influence in Cambodia. In so doing, Bangkok has inadvertently contributed to Phnom Penh’s decentralization and instability. And yet, particularly because of Thailand’s proximity and its own domestic accomplishments, the potential exists for Bangkok to have a tremendous influence across Cambodia. Over the last fifty years Thailand made incredible progress in developing its
human and physical capital, strengthening its agriculture, and modernizing its domestic police force. The experience, knowledge, and techniques harnessed in the last few decades can be applied in Cambodia. With international funding and Thai understanding of the region, experts sent from Bangkok have the necessary cultural and geopolitical expertise to maximize development opportunities. Because there is no requirement that Thailand provide assistance, in doing so it is demonstrating ethical and moral rectitude. Supporting the Cambodian people, not predicated on pragmatic purposes, but rather because Bangkok has the resources to do so demonstrates the values imbued in Thailand. Ultimately, its work to provide on-site assistance to Cambodia is vital in harnessing that nation’s growth potential.

With Thailand and the US backing a holistic effort to bolster Cambodia’s infrastructure, rallying international support to what is an ethically grounded cause becomes plausible and timely. The international community had for over a decade ignored the damage wrought by the Khmer Rouge and the ensuing Vietnamese actions. Sadly, the first global attempt to assist in the early 1990s had been ill-conceived and hurried. The UN-led effort failed because it lacked the security apparatus necessary to ensure demilitarization. Compounding matters further, they did not have a cohesive management structure that would be needed to enact infrastructure development projects. Consequently, billions of dollars were spent, but the results were lacking. A second effort, led by Bangkok on the ground and Washington’s finances and management carries with it a far greater opportunity for success. Focusing on the areas previously mentioned will enable far greater and more direct support to the people who need it most. Global donations, both financial and technical, when focused by the proper infrastructure on site, can do substantial good works in raising the standards of living for the Cambodian people. A successful program that improves standards of living, both monetarily and ethically, will serve as a blueprint for similar policies elsewhere.

A concerted effort by all parties involved can turn the tide in Cambodia. Particularly through the employment of advisors Thailand, the US, and others can begin to set a new standard for ethical conduct. Transposing their values is necessary to improve integrity in security, education, and business. This will encourage greater involvement in Cambodia on the part of both private and public entities. Consequently, outside assistance carries the potential to greatly improve the quality of everyday life for millions of people. The process of introducing more stable and reliable ethical practices followed shortly thereafter by burgeoning prosperity will rally domestic opinion in favor of Thai and US assistance. Arguably more important, coupling noticeable quality of living improvements with a strategic messaging effort will forever link ethics with prosperity, thereby cementing the value of strong and virtuous character in Cambodian society. There is no greater role a state(s) can play than passing along ethical values.

Possible Obstacles

One would be remiss without appreciating the potential challenges involved in such an ambitious endeavor. The immediate challenge will be advocating Thailand and US involvement in Cambodian affairs to China. However, Beijing has always expressed an interest in assisting the people under Phnom Penh’s rule. In keeping with that promise, Bangkok and Washington are taking an innovative approach to achieving the same end. Consequently, Thailand and the
US should pursue China’s participation in this mission. Over the long term, and symbolized in the short run by Prime Minister Hun Sen, the larger issue for Cambodia is potential objections from domestic officials. Their fears over the forfeiture of sovereignty should not be dismissed lightly. Officials in Bangkok and Washington must work to include them in the decision making processes. While it would be unreasonable to suggest consensus buy-in from government offices in Phnom Penh, tacit approval from Hun Sen today, and from future administrations, is vital. Most importantly Cambodian governmental backing gives the program greater likelihood of success. Taken in parallel, both domestic concerns and pessimism from China, particularly in light of the broader Rebalance, must be carefully addressed throughout this program’s implementation to assuage reasonable consternation.

**Conclusion**

Thailand and the US have an ethical imperative to help bring the Cambodians out of destitution. As the progenitors of the strongest economy in the world, officials in Washington have the resources needed to reenergize aid. From an ethical viewpoint a nation with such wealth must do all it can to help the disenfranchised. A strong demonstration of their commitment and resolve will indicate to other prospective donors that the US is serious about developing the Cambodian infrastructure to create long term growth. As a result, the willingness of other likely aid providers to participate will increase. While Washington’s financial support in particular is necessary to rally global assistance, Bangkok’s expertise on location is crucial. By utilizing technical advisors Thailand can target specific programs and areas of need that demand attention and/or represent deliverables. As one of the principal leaders in Southeast Asia, Bangkok may not have the financial resources Washington enjoys, but it has manpower assets that necessitate its involvement. Working jointly, Thailand and the US can identify programs worthy of investment, as well as areas where training and other assistance can bolster the Cambodian infrastructure. There is no greater reward for people that have enjoyed success than to help those who have not.