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Trump trumped in Phnom Penh

The US' shoddy treatment of Cambodia has lost it the moral high ground in the region

Shortly after taking office in January, US President Donald Trump received a letter from Cambodia's autocratic ruler, Hun Sen, asking the USA to cancel $506 million of debt owed by his country. This is according to a*New York Times* report, which explained that Washington loaned the former Cambodian regime under General Lon Nol $274 million in the first half of the 1970s as part of a programme called "Food for Peace". The programme allowed the regime to buy rice, wheat and other foodstuffs from the USA to prevent its people from starving. With interest, the total debt has now risen to over half a billion dollars.

The USA has been calling for the debts to be repaid since 1990, but Cambodia still refuses to pay up. According to the US Embassy in Phnom Penh, only Congress has the authority to officially cancel the debts. But Washington's insistence on repayment allows Hun Sen to present himself as a defender of national interests and to invoke memories of the USA's historical injustice. "How can this be? You attacked us and demand that we give money," he said to a local paper.

In early April, Cambodia's prime minister felt his position was strong enough to expel the "Seabees", the US Navy construction unit operating in Cambodia for almost ten years. He was responding to US criticism of a vote in the Cambodian parliament – dominated by Hun Sun's Cambodian People's Party – allowing political parties to be dissolved if their leaders have a criminal record.

The law is aimed at opposition leader Sam Rainsy. In 2016, Rainsy returned to exile in Paris after a controversial conviction for alleged defamation. He had accused Hun Sen's government of assassinating Kem Ley, a critic of the regime, in July 2016. A man has since been convicted for the murder, which he claims to have carried out because the victim owed him money. Many Cambodians see the conviction as a diversionary tactic by the regime.

Cambodia defaults, America's fault?

Though US criticism of Hun Sen's dictatorial leadership style is justified, its own reprehensible policies in Cambodia mean it has no leg to stand on. Many Cambodians believe with justification that if anyone owes a debt, it is Washington and not Phnom Penh.

Cambodia's present government is certainly the legal successor to the regime established by Lon Nol. However, it is justified in branding US demands for repayment illegitimate. The threat of starvation that the original loans were intended to stave off would not have existed (or not on such a scale) had it not been for US military intervention in the first place.

In 1970, the pro-American Lon Nol overthrew King Norodom Sihanouk's government with Washington's support. Sihanouk had declared Cambodia neutral in the war in neighbouring Vietnam and opposed US military intervention in his country. The USA wanted to destroy the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which ran through Cambodian territory and was used by North Vietnam to provide supplies to the Vietcong in the south. The USA had already carried out secret air strikes against targets in Cambodia. After Sihanouk was deposed, Lon Nol officially gave the USA free rein to carry out more attacks. Carpet bombing resulted in anywhere between 200,000 and 1.1 million deaths. Hundreds of thousands of Cambodian farmers fled their fields, leading to drastic food shortages.

A disastrous legacy

The USA's massive war effort failed to prevent either the victory of the Communists in South Vietnam or the Khmer Rouge's rise to power in Cambodia. Lon Nol's Washington-backed putsch led King Sihanouk to form alliance with the Khmer Rouge, which gained in strength as more Cambodians joined following the US bombings.

Following its 1975 victory over Lon Nol's brutal and corrupt regime, the Khmer Rouge killed up to two million people in one of the worst mass killings of the 20th Century. The chaos and misery only came to an end after military intervention from the Vietnamese in 1979. Later though, the USA (which always viewed Cambodia through the lens of Vietnam) allied with the Khmer Rouge and China against Vietnam. The alliance lasted until 1990, after Vietnam withdrew its troops from Cambodia in 1989. Until that point, the USA turned a blind eye to the Khmer Rouge's human rights violations.

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In 1990, the USA began calling for the repayment of loans made to Lon Nol. Cambodia initially refused, pointing to widespread poverty in the war-ravaged country. With more foresight, the US could have developed a Marshall Plan for Cambodia, investing heavily in the country instead of calling in debts. But unlike Western Europe after the Second World War, Cambodia no longer held any particular importance for Washington after the defeat in Vietnam.

In 1985, Hun Sen, a former Khmer Rouge commander, became Cambodia's prime minister aged just 32. Today, he is one of the world's longest-serving leaders. By means of manipulation, intimidation, patronage and strategic alliances, he has clung on to power and massively enriched his family.

Siding with China

In 1988, Hun Sen described China as the "root of all evil". Now China is Cambodia's "most trustworthy friend". A rapprochement developed after Hun Sen ousted his co-premier in 1997. Western governments froze their aid following the coup – but China continued its support.

Vast amounts of aid from Beijing have allowed Hun Sen to shrug off US criticism and send the "Seabees" packing. In January, he cancelled planned military manoeuvres with the USA. Last year, Cambodia carried out its first joint naval manoeuvre with China.

Today, China not only provides Cambodia with generous credit but has cancelled the debt from the Khmer Rouge period. In 2016, Beijing wrote off further Cambodian debts to the tune of $89 million. Chinese leaders refrain from criticising Hun Sen.

But China's support comes with strings attached. Cambodia acts as the country's mouthpiece in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), preventing the body from reaching joint positions on disputes between China and its neighbours over islands in the South China Sea.

Whether the USA cancels the debts or continues to insist on repayment, Hun Sen will claim he is defending his country's interests. If the debts are cancelled, he will have successfully stood up for Cambodia. If Washington continues to insist on repayment, he can present himself as both a victim and opponent of immoral US policy. China will also look

good next to the hard-hearted USA.

This means that when it comes to Cambodia's debts, Donald Trump is stuck between a rock and a hard place. Hun Sen has outsmarted him.



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