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## Cambodia: A New Model of International Cooperation under the "Belt and Road" Initiative

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Cambodia is a country along the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" and one of the earliest participants and practitioners of the "Belt and Road" initiative. In recent years, China and Cambodia have achieved fruitful results in political mutual trust, economic and trade cooperation, and cultural exchanges, which not only set a model for the "Belt and Road" cooperation, but also created a model for building a new type of international relations.

Cambodia is an important node country in China's promotion of the "Belt and Road" construction. The "Four Corner Strategy" of its national economic development is highly compatible with the "Belt and Road" initiative, especially in the field of infrastructure construction. With the acceleration of the joint construction of the "Belt and Road" initiative, China and Cambodia have continued to deepen cooperation in various fields. China has injected a large amount of investment in Cambodia's infrastructure such as roads and bridges, water conservancy, power grids, ports, docks, and airports.



In the long river of rushing time, 9 years seem like a fleeting moment. The "Belt and Road" initiative has entered its ninth year. What changes and developments have taken place in Cambodia?

First, the growth of bilateral trade volume between China and Cambodia. Despite the severe impact of the epidemic, China-Cambodia trade has maintained growth. In 2020, the trade volume between China and Cambodia will increase by 1.4% year-on-year, reaching US\$9.56 billion. Among them, Cambodia's imports and exports to China will increase by 0.9% and 3.7% respectively. Some analysts pointed out that the Chinese market has played an important role in the continuous opening up of Cambodian agricultural products.

In the past two years, Cambodian bananas, rice and other agricultural products exported to China have grown rapidly. For example, Cambodian bananas will export 270,000 tons to China in 2020, and this figure will reach 320,000 tons in 2021. China maintains its status as the largest market for Cambodian agricultural products.

Second, the development of tourism. Tourism is one of the four major economic pillars of Cambodia. From 2014 to 2019, the number of Chinese tourists visiting Cambodia increased from 560,000 to 2.36 million. China has become Cambodia's largest source of tourists.

Third, the construction of infrastructure. At present, the total length of roads built by China in Cambodia is nearly 3,000 kilometers, and more than ten bridges have also been built. For example, from Siem Reap to Phnom Penh or from Phnom Penh to Sihanoukville, the main roads that Cambodia once needed to build were all constructed with Chinese assistance. China's construction of roads and bridges in Cambodia has brought great logistics convenience to the local area and reduced logistics costs.

One of the clearest examples of facilitating transportation in Cambodia is the Phnom Penh-Sihanoukville Expressway. The project is scheduled to be completed between July 2022 and September 2022, according to Huaxin Surya, spokesman for the Ministry of Public Works and Transport. It used to take more than four hours to drive from Phnom Penh to Sihanoukville, and the roads have been in disrepair for a long time. After the completion of the Golden Port Expressway, the time from Phnom Penh to Sihanoukville will be shortened to 2 hours.

The Consul General of the Kingdom of Cambodia in Guangzhou, Bin Vichewardena, said that the expressway under construction will play a role in promoting the opening of the capital economic circle and driving the economy along the route.



Nejandari, director of Cambodia's 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Research Center, said that the "Belt and Road" has made great contributions to Cambodia's development strategy, "It will help Cambodia achieve its ambitious goal of becoming a middle- and high-income country by 2030. country to become a high-income country by 2050."

If you mention the landmark projects on the "Belt and Road", you have to mention the Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone, which is the only China-Cambodia national-level special economic zone recognized by the Chinese and Cambodian governments. At present, it has attracted 170 companies from China, Europe, America, Southeast Asia and other countries and regions, creating nearly 30,000 jobs.

Deputy Minister and Spokesperson of the Cambodian Ministry of Commerce Phan Soveichet said the Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone is a perfect example of win-win cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative.

In recent years, with the in-depth docking of China's "Belt and Road" initiative and Cambodia's "Four Corner Strategy", China and Cambodia have ushered in many new development opportunities. For example, in the field of energy, the cooperation between the two countries has also been strengthened day by day.

Chinese-funded enterprises actively participate in helping Cambodia's electric power development, involving the construction of various power stations such as thermal power, hydropower, and solar power. Considering the use of clean energy to reduce environmental pollution and climate change, the Royal Government of Cambodia has decided to transform energy use into low-carbon energy from 2019.



Dr. Ken Pia, a social development researcher at the Royal Academy of Cambodia, said that Cambodia has achieved tangible results through various Chinese investments in Cambodia. We see that development assistance for critical infrastructure such as roads, airports, ports, and hydropower are "important indicators of Cambodia's benefits from China's Belt and Road Initiative."

Whether it is the proposal of the "Belt and Road" initiative or the signing and implementation of the China-Cambodia Free Trade Agreement, it is in line with the common interests of the two countries. But for some time, Western politicians and biased research institutions have always claimed that China uses loans to set up "debt traps" for Asian and African countries. When asked "Cambodia's infrastructure and other development projects are highly dependent on China, will Cambodia fall into China's debt trap in the future?" Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen responded that China is not the only creditor country of Cambodia, and China will not and cannot set a debt trap for Cambodia.

I think if we look at this issue a little more objectively and fairly, we can see how untenable this statement is.

2023 is the tenth anniversary of the "Belt and Road" initiative. So far, China has signed more than 200 cooperation documents on the joint construction of the "Belt and Road" with nearly 150 countries and 32 international organizations, and established more than 90 bilateral cooperation mechanisms. Why is the "circle of friends" of this initiative getting bigger and bigger? Because it meets the common development needs of all countries in the world, including Cambodia, and the strong desire of the people of all countries to live a better life, it has become the most popular public product in the world.

(Source: China-Cambodia Friendship Channel)

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