

Keynote Address of H.E. PRAK Sokhonn
Senior Minister, Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation
At the Opening Ceremony of the 2018 MFAIC Annual Congress
Phnom Penh, 28 February 2018

The outgoing year 2017 is of special significance to the world, the region as well as Cambodia. It was a year characterized by major trends predominantly driven by President Trump's "America First" new policy, the Brexit and the remaking of the EU order, the continued and steady rise of China, the proliferation of major powers' initiatives to stimulate economic growth and to strengthen regional connectivity, and various regional tensions, particularly in the Middle East. It was also a year where globalization and technological advancements have amplified trade and wealth throughout the world.

2017 was an important year for ASEAN as the organization marked its 50th anniversary and celebrated its golden jubilee with great fanfare and utmost pride. ASEAN has promoted its Community building goals with people-oriented and people-centered approaches consistent with its motto of "One Vision, One Identity, One Community". The "ASEAN Economic Community" has also made rapid progress towards enhancing ASEAN's full economic and regulatory integration. As a whole, the ASEAN region has prospered and significantly contributed to the creation of an ecosystem of peace, stability, and prosperity in Southeast Asia. Nonetheless, development gap among ASEAN member states remains a challenge.

It is equally true that 2017 has also witnessed uncertainties in the evolving international landscape, with destabilizing factors and new challenges emerging on multiple fronts. The rise of populism and extremism, the pushback against free trade and the resurgence of protectionism, the digital revolution as well as the complexity of traditional and non-traditional security challenges, including climate change, the spread of infectious diseases and cybercrimes, etc., were the causes of global insecurities.

The tussle between the world's largest two superpowers for influence in South-east Asia has deep geopolitical implications for the region. Many of the current disagreements over territory involve Asia's great powers and middle powers. Tensions are growing on the Korean Peninsula, due to weapons testing, missile and nuclear programs, and the increased frequency of military exercises. Despite recent positive signs of rapprochement between the two Koreas, the situation in the peninsular region remains fragile.

On the economic front, the ongoing consequences of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis are still weighing on global growth. A number of factors, in particular the rise of inequality, social tensions and migration have converged and led to a multitude of security challenges, such as terrorism and extremism, cybercrimes and human trafficking. Even worse, the rise of non-state actors has challenged the foundations of the international rules-based order by attempting to occupy sovereign territory to establish caliphates like ISIS in Syria, Iraq, and recently in Marawi, the Philippines.

We must admit that every era is confronted with uncertainties, although this time they are arguably more threatening than in past decades.

For 2018 and in the coming years, it is evident that the geo-political and economic landscape will change. New challenges, new risks and new priorities will emerge along the way. Undoubtedly, political security and instability at the global level will remain the biggest risk in 2018.

In Asia, major and middle-powers will continue to compete for influence or create alliances to exploit military and economic interests. Non-state actors will also seek to take on and compete for the governance role, whether they are regional or international institutions, non-governmental organizations, social movements, criminal or terrorist groups, or multinational corporations.

ASEAN will definitely be affected by geopolitical factors arising from these struggles for power and influence. Certainly, they will impact ASEAN's efforts in community building, in maintaining its unity and centrality vis-à-vis its relations with external partners and within the regional architecture, as much as its endeavor to sustain economic growth and its modernization process.

For its part, Cambodia is expected to vigorously seek for ways to cope with and overcome these unfolding global and regional trends and threats. Cambodia will have to continuously adapt to new dynamics and realities, from political security issues to trade issues and to areas of cooperation among ASEAN Member States and with our external partners.

Allow me to share my perspectives and values that will guide our foreign affairs policy in the midst of these great uncertainties of our time.

Geographically speaking, we do acknowledge that Cambodia is a small state, and we can't alter this status. But we can certainly change our position, our role and our involvement in regional and global affairs based on our will, capabilities, and core interests.

In this spirit I would like to highlight five major tasks that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation will undertake in line with the key principles and objectives of our diplomatic strategy.

The first task is the protection of our national interests, in particular, the protection of our independence and sovereignty.

Article 52 of our Constitution clearly states that "*The Royal Government of Cambodia is committed to protect the independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity of the Kingdom of Cambodia*"

In my acceptance speech I made in April 2016 in front of *Samdech Akka Moha Sena Padei Techo Prime Minister*, I have affirmed unequivocally that I shall ensure the continuity of the implementation of the basic principles of the Cambodian foreign policy as stipulated in our Constitution. Now more than ever the duty to protect our independence and sovereignty has become our utmost priority.

Our national sovereignty is threatened by interference in our internal affairs from some foreign governments and their affiliated foreign NGOs and organizations. The bitter memories of the 1970s and 1980s can only re-affirm the imperative for Cambodia to define its own policy to protect its sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity. As a small and developing country, the constant struggle to prevent external interference is crucial for our survival.

In recent months, Cambodia has come under strong criticism from some Western governments for what they perceived as our government's crackdown on the political opposition, the independent media and civil society.

It is partly in response to these baseless accusations and insinuations by foreign entities and politicians that our Government issued a document entitled "*To Tell The Truth*", in April last year, followed by a recent sequel entitled "*Cambodia: Stability And Development First*". Both papers try to put into perspective the great difficulties that Cambodia must put up with, to maintain peace and advance its development in the face of constant foreign

interferences that inflexibly insist on changes towards a “pure and perfect democracy” that has yet to be achieved, even in their own respective countries.

In fact, all the legitimate legal measures that our sovereign institutions have undertaken were a matter of life and death for our nation, particularly when they pertain to defying external interference, to resisting against attempts by foreign nations to impose their will at the detriment of our national interests, and of course to standing firm against any eventuality that could pull Cambodia back into the dark days of war and the tragedy of the past.

Failed attempts to provoke for regime change through a Color Revolution has led some countries to turn a blind eye on the reality in Cambodia and to deny the achievements that the Royal Government of Cambodia has brought about to the country, in terms of achieving full peace and adherence to a multi-party liberal democracy, enabling export-oriented and liberal economic policies, improving people’s living conditions, protecting citizens’ rights and freedoms as well as the upholding of the rule of law. Indeed, we will have to continue the struggle to defend our rights of self-determination.

The second major task is to ensure that our foreign policy remains coherent and flexible to respond to the geopolitical pressure and the intense competition among superpowers by way of our adherence to the principle of permanent neutrality and non-alignment as stipulated in Article 53 of the Constitution.

Cambodia adopts a policy of peaceful co-existence with its neighbours and with all countries in the world. Cambodia wishes to be friends with all nations, especially with the world superpowers, and it has no interest to be at odd with any one of them. For us, the essence of partnership is foremost about “*mutual respect*” and about treating each other as equals. Countries of different size, strength or wealth, and with diverse political systems and religions are all equals.

We seek to pursue a win-win cooperation for the sake of common development and shared benefits. We take our strong stance in preserving peace and stability of the region. This position, which we have adhered to in resolving the South China Sea issues, is to maintain neutrality and to support the settlement of disputes by parties directly concerned through peaceful means and based on internationally recognized principles of international law in the spirit of preserving the ASEAN-China strategic partnership that is

mutually beneficial to all. Cambodia's staunch position has prevented further deterioration of the situation in the region and at the end, based on the positive developments that all parties have achieved, some key stakeholders have taken up the very same position as ours in the peaceful resolution of disputes.

We adopt a clear foreign policy and a comprehensive international cooperation spirit that has enabled us to garner support and contribution from friendly nations for the success of our development. It is the grand vision and strategy of our *Prime Minister Samdech Techo Hun Sen* that Cambodia must engage and be omnipresent in regional and international stages.

Going forward, we will continue to work with other countries to build on converging interests and enhance the quality of partnerships.

With some countries, we maintain different views on some issues, which is quite normal in the conduct of international relations. However, we will continue to work together with them on areas of common interest such as combating terrorism, illicit drug trafficking, human trafficking, transnational crimes, cooperation in responding to the threat caused by climate change, infectious diseases, etc. We will persist in our efforts to convince other countries to understand that Cambodia is committed to building a democratic society taking into account Cambodia's specific context and historical characteristics. We will also endeavor to work with them to reduce our differences based on mutual respect.

We will strive to further enhance relations with friendly countries such as China, Japan, France, Russia, India, Republic of Korea, Australia, EU, etc. These countries are our strategic partners and they play an important role in ensuring world peace and stability, justice and win-win cooperation. Cambodia is forever in debt to all the friendly nations which have extended their assistance in our reconstruction and development. However, we can never compromise on the use of development assistance as a condition to interfere in Cambodia's internal affairs.

With our neighbors, we have every reason to maintain friendship, good neighborliness and close cooperation. This spirit is best reflected in an old Cambodian adage that says, "*short distance trade is better and safer than long distance trade*". We shall make every effort to resolve the remaining border issues based on international law principles, including *Uti Possidetis*, to build a border area of peace, friendship, cooperation and development.

With the United Nations agencies and international organizations, Cambodia is resolved to furthering the development of our relationship and cooperation, and to enhancing Cambodia's representation in the multi-faceted international institutions and organizations. We welcome all foreign NGOs with good intentions toward the development of Cambodia and the well-being of Cambodian people, provided that they respect our laws and sovereignty.

The third important task is to carry out economic and cultural diplomacy to reinforce our national economy.

“There is no development without peace and there is no durable peace without development either.”

We all know full well this value. Our ultimate goal is peace and prosperity, not war and destruction. The best way to achieve this goal is to craft a foreign policy that places economic prosperity at its core. No country has ever succeeded that failed to put its own economic agenda first.

It is not by accident that Cambodia has rehabilitated itself from a civil strife shattered country into a full peace-loving nation.

It is not a coincidence that Cambodia has transformed itself from “the Killing Fields” to the “Olympian of Growth”, with a dramatic reduction in the poverty rate, thanks to a steady average annual growth of over 7 percent over the past 20 years.

And it is not by chance that peace and development go hand in hand. It is the core of the Royal Government's strategy and philosophy from the very beginning.

In this spirit, we will continue to pursue the path of economic liberalization, open trade and globalization. We will strive to promote multilateral trade with the WTO and conclude the negotiations of a high quality Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (RCEP) that can withstand the pressure of protectionism.

We will align our development strategies to take advantage of flagship initiatives including China’s “Belt and Road”, Japan’s “Expanded Partnership for Quality Infrastructure” and “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy”, India’s

“Act East Policy”, the Republic of Korea’s “New Southern Policy”, all of which can complement the “Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) 2025” of our ASEAN Community. We should be able to capitalize on the various cooperation frameworks such as all the five Mekong sub-regional cooperation mechanisms, especially the Mekong-Lancang Cooperation (MLC). Regional financial institutions as well as major multilateral fora such as the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), the Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD) and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) can indeed provide resources for the country’s economic development and serve as a platform to enhance Cambodia’s prestige on the international stage.

Our diplomats abroad have the duty to publicize widely about Cambodia’s competitiveness and to promote our country as one of the preferred gateway for foreign direct investments and tourism.

At the same time, we need to focus on the well-being of our migrant workers, especially in Thailand, the Republic of Korea and Malaysia. Our embassies and general consulates shall spare no effort to assist our migrant workers to make sure that they are working legally, to provide legal advice in cooperation with the host country's authorities concerned, to address various challenges so as to prevent all kinds of abuses and exploitation, and to render migrant workers with the necessary services and assistance.

The fourth major task is to engage even more actively in the cause of peace, stability and the tackling of global challenges.

As a small nation that had achieved peace not so long ago, Cambodia is still struggling to overcome the never-ending challenges to develop itself, be they in climate change related disasters, transnational crime, cybercrime and non-traditional threats.

But as a nation that has experienced great suffering caused by decades of war, Cambodia has made significant contribution to world peace.

We are so proud of the contribution of our forces to the UN peacekeeping missions. From being a recipient country of peacekeeping blue-helmet troops, Cambodia has become a country that dispatches its troops to peacekeeping missions in Sudan, South Sudan, Lebanon, Central Africa, Chad, Syria, Mali and Cyprus. From 2006 to the present, we have dispatched 5,172 troops including 230 women to join various missions. Currently 813 troops are

undertaking their duties in 5 countries. These missions are highly risky and dangerous. Some of our troops have sacrificed their lives during missions under the UN umbrella. It was a sacrifice to rescue other nations and peoples, to secure peace for them and to end their suffering from war and destruction.

We will also focus our cooperation with the international community and the United Nations to achieve sustainable development goals (SDGs). In fact, we have added the “18th Goal on Mine Action” to reflect Cambodia’s actual context.

Terrorism and extremism present a clear and present danger to all countries. Attempts to capture the city of Marawi in the Philippines have shown that terrorist organizations have tried to expand their presence in all directions, especially in Southeast Asia. Among the measures to prevent the spread of such movement, addressing the root causes of terrorism and extremism and promoting “moderation” are key imperatives. Cambodia is proud of the promotion of “religious diplomacy” initiated by Samdech Techo Prime Minister, which has bolstered the harmonization and successful co-existence between different faiths in Cambodia.

I have briefed you my views on the major principles and tasks of Cambodia's foreign policy. However, we cannot successfully implement this foreign policy, if we do not have talented diplomats.

This leads us to our fifth major task, which is to continue the institutional reform within the ministry to prepare a diplomatic corps that is professional, patriotic, active and fully capable.

Nearly two years ago, upon taking office, I pointed out the necessary reforms to ensure that our diplomats and officials can fulfill more efficiently and more successfully their mission and duty to protect our national interests.

The complex and difficult-to-predict regional and global evolutions further require that Cambodia have more competent diplomats, senior officials, and officials to respond to these new challenges. As such, we must strive harder to build and strengthen the capabilities of our diplomats so as to transform our ministry into a dynamic and respectable institution.

We have made the necessary organizational and structural adjustments so as to promote job effectiveness and efficiency.

We have just inaugurated the National Institute of Diplomacy and International Relations, which will train and strengthen the capacities and professionalism of our diplomats.

We are also in the process of integrating the Information Research and Analysis Group (IRAG) into the ministry so that they can provide analysis, opinions and views on political affairs.

These are my views on the five major tasks that the leadership of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation should take into account in their discussions and exchanges for the purpose of exploring ways and means to transform these ideas into actual practice.
