

Cambodia-Japan ties: Robust in political trust but lacking strategic substances

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Khmer Times

The end of tenure of Japanese Ambassador to Cambodia, Mr. Horinouchi Hidehisa, offered fond memory for the two countries and peoples.

Under his leadership and stewardship, the bilateral ties have been significantly enhanced. It is fair to say that both countries have enjoyed robust political trust.

Although both countries have slight differences over democracy and human rights, Japan has shown understanding and respect to Cambodia's sovereignty and independence.

Japan remains committed to consolidating democracy in the Kingdom as it understands that democratization is a long journey, which sometimes need critical adjustments. Hence, Japan supports Cambodia to realise its long-term and "peaceful democratization."

One of the initiatives by Japan is the capacity building program for the young political leaders from various political parties in Cambodia to get inspired and learn from Japanese experiences in democratic consolidation through sustaining peaceful and meaningful dialogues between and among different political parties.

High level political exchanges between the two countries, from executive to legislative bodies to youth leadership, are testimony of solid political trust and consistent efforts to enhance mutual understanding.

From 2015 to 2018, the bilateral trade volume increased from USD 994.5 million to USD 2 billion. From 1994 to 2018, the accumulated investment capital reached USD 2.486 billion. The number of Japanese enterprises registered in the Japan Business Association of Cambodia (JBAC) has increased from 223 in 2015 to 269 in 2019.

The ecosystem to support Japanese community living Cambodia has been improved, ranging from AEON malls to Japanese catering industry and Japanese school and Japanese medical care. The Sunrise Hospital is a success model of Japanese investment in healthcare sector in Cambodia.

People to people exchanges have also increased remarkably. Since the inauguration of Tokyo-Phnom Penh direct flight in 2016, the number of Japanese visa issuance has increased about threefold. In 2018 alone, more than 20,000 Cambodians visited Japan and that does not include the number of visits by Cambodian officials that do not require entry visa.

Japan's active role in cultural cooperation through preservation of heritage sites is well known domestically and internationally. Cross-cultural exchanges and learnings and heart-to-heart relations between the two peoples are the bedrock of long-term bilateral friendship.

Looking forward, there are some potentials to enhance cooperation by building upon the existing momentum.

Although both countries have enjoyed deep political trust and economic and people-to-people exchanges, there is still a thin line of cooperation which are strategic in nature.

It is worth noting that Japan is one of the two strategic partners of Cambodia, after China. Nevertheless, military exchanges such as joint exercises, strategic dialogues, defense meetings, port calls, etc., are still minimal. Cambodia does not even have military attache in Japan yet provided that activities are not robust enough for the stationing of military attache.

Strategy is not confined to military matters.

Another point that shows the lack of strategic substance is the under-utilization of Japanese Official Development Assistance (ODA) by the Japanese private sector. For example, Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) has participated and invested heavily in the development of Sihanoukville port since 1999.

However, the presence of Japanese private sector was minimal until the flooding of Chinese investors after 2015. Meaning, the Japanese private sector missed the opportunity to strategize the 15 years of Japanese government's investment through ODA in Preah Sihanouk province.

Maritime security cooperation, especially maritime law enforcement capacity, between the two countries can be an important strategic substance of the bilateral partnership.

It is important that Japanese public and private sector should better synergize their efforts to leverage Japan's presence through ODA projects such as, among others, the project for the development of the southern economic corridor that links land road from the Thai border to the Vietnamese border.

Cambodia needs to strategize what areas that it can learn from the best knowledges that Japan has to offer. Cambodia can also learn from Japan in digitalising the management system of foreign immigrants to better enhance the control and enforce management over foreign immigrants in a more systematic and scientific manner based on internationally acceptable rules and regulations.