

Clinton, China Visits Show Need for Neutrality: Analysts

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With senior-level visits from both the US and China this week, political analysts say Cambodia is rightly pursuing a neutral foreign policy between both powerful countries.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made an official visit to Cambodia on Monday, followed by the arrival of Wu Bangguo, chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress.

Both visits reflect growing attention on Cambodia in international politics, observers said this week.

"In trade and other issues, I think Cambodia needs friendships with the West and the East," independent political analyst Chea Vannath told VOA Khmer following Clinton's departure.

China has rapidly expanded its engagement with Cambodia through military and development aid, infrastructure projects and investment.

But Chea Vannath said Clinton's visit also showed renewed US interest in the country and the region, following the policy of US President Barack Obama.

Cambodia, one of the poorest nations in the world, has typically needed aid from both sides to supplement its annual budget and to develop.

But even though much of that aid is now coming from China, Cambodia still needs to balance its relationships with the West, said Chheang Vannarith, a fellow at the East-West Center and executive director of the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace.

"In my view, what is of interest to the country in foreign relationships is that we should make them in our economic interest, for development and poverty reduction," he said. "So how do we use our foreign policy to serve the interests of economic development?"

Cambodia is now on the radar of economic powerhouses like the US and China, as both sides look to the Mekong Delta region for trade, Chheang Vannarith said.

Meanwhile, Clinton's trip could also bring greater attention to human rights and democratic issues, he said. Clinton also signaled a willingness to creatively solve Cambodia's war-era debt to the US, another possible boon to Cambodia.

She also received many facts on the ground, following meetings with rights groups, opposition figures, students and other groups with vested interests here.

Government spokesman Phay Siphan said this week's US and Chinese visits showed the government's position to "stay in the middle."

Opposition members, meanwhile, say they hope the Clinton visit will encourage a better human rights and democracy record here, where critics say basic freedoms are eroding.

Opposition supporters and rights activists have faced a wide range of challenges lately, including criminal charges and parliamentary obstructions. Meanwhile, the poor and powerless face land grabs, forced evictions and other abuses. Clinton "assured all of us that the US won't walk away from Cambodia," Sam Rainsy Party lawmaker Mu Sochua told VOA Khmer. "On the contrary, the US will continue to support the government, the opposition, democracy-lovers, and civil society to ensure balance and an equal role in democracy-building, human rights and the protection of justice."