EU Cries "Human Rights" as Cambodia Turns to China

What should the world make of the West's attempts to pressure the Southeast Asian nation of Cambodia on humanitarian grounds when the West is guilty of the worst (and still ongoing) abuses of the 21st century?

Wikipedia provides a quick and simple definition of the psychological concept of projection, stating: a defense mechanism in which the human ego defends itself against unconscious impulses or qualities (both positive and negative) by denying their existence in themselves while attributing them to others.

A recent “op-ed” in the Bangkok Post which reads more like a paid-placement for the US and European-funded front, Human Rights Watch and its sponsors, was clearly an extreme exercise in projection.

The op-ed would claim:

"The European Union should add this outrage to the long list of rights abuses that need to be resolved in negotiations over 'Everything But Arms' (EBA) trade preferences," said Phil Robertson, deputy Asia director of HRW.

Under the EBA scheme, Cambodian exports get tariff-free access to the EU market. In February, the EU announced plans to suspend access for about 20% of Cambodian goods, citing democratic and human rights setbacks in recent years. The EU is implementing a "phased approach", which could see the EBA status fully revoked if Phnom Penh fails to restore democratic rights.

The op-ed concludes by claiming:

"However, Cambodia is seemingly already looking for ways to offset financial losses caused by a potential full EBA withdrawal. The country is looking to partner with China on a free trade agreement (FTA). "This very huge [Chinese] market access enables Cambodia to diversify its products and markets and reduce over-reliance on a few trading partners, ie, Europe, US and Canada, who traditionally trade with Cambodia on a concessional basis such as EBA," Commerce Minister Pan Sorasak said.

Apparently, the CPP is willing to risk a full EBA withdrawal as long as it has options. Or maybe Mr Hun Sen and the CPP simply can't be bothered to uphold Western standards of human rights.

Western standards of human rights?

Are these the same standards that enables the United States and United Kingdom to provide weapons, intelligence and other forms of military support for the Saudi government in its ongoing war with neighbouring Yemen? The UN has stated that this conflict is in fact the world's worst humanitarian crisis. And it is a crisis that is only possibly with the US and Europe's complicity.

How about the Western standards of human rights that allow, unopposed, the continued military presence of the United States in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan?

Iraq's elected representatives went as far as voting to demand US forces withdraw, demands that were blatantly ignored by Washington who, among other lies, insisted its involvement in Iraq was to foster democracy.
Today and every day since the 2003 invasion, the US tramples Iraq's collective democratic and human rights by ignoring the will of the Iraqi people within their own borders and regarding their own sovereign affairs by maintaining a military occupation predicated entirely on false premises.

Phil Robertson of Human Rights Watch has little to say about any of this while insisting nations targeted by the West fall into line behind whatever "Western standards of human rights" actually are.

These are standards that are surely nothing demonstrated or observed by or within the West itself and seem more like standards imposed on others as an excuse for what could otherwise be best described as naked coercion. Phil Robertson and organisations like Human Rights Watch appear then to be political tools used to deny targeted nations basic dignity, sovereignty and human rights, not uphold any of the above.

The West Really Wants to Cry "China"

Let's take a look at that op-ed again. It claims:

"This very huge [Chinese] market access enables Cambodia to diversify its products and markets and reduce over-reliance on a few trading partners, ie, Europe, US and Canada, who traditionally trade with Cambodia on a concessional basis such as EBA," Commerce Minister Pan Sorasak said.

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And there it is. It is Cambodia's pivot to China that has the EU and its partners across the Atlantic truly upset. That and the fact that having failed to overthrow Cambodia's government after years of trying, the West has very little to offer Cambodia to pivot back in its direction.

Cambodia's pivot toward China isn't recent. It, along with much of Southeast Asia, has been unfolding over the past two decades and has accelerated in the last 10 years to a point where it has visibly transformed the region as well as visibly reduced the West's influence in Asia-Pacific as a result.

China is offering nations like Cambodia and its neighbours Laos and Thailand economic opportunities, major infrastructure projects, military cooperation and political ties the West simply cannot provide any attractive alternative to. China is building a high-speed rail network through Southeast Asia. The US and its European partners have no ability to built such a network in the region, with the US having not a single kilometer of high-speed rail within even its own borders.

China's massive manufacturing base means that Southeast Asian nations find it their largest import partners. And now with China's massive domestic markets risen out of poverty, China is many of these nation's largest export partners as well.

This also translates into larger numbers of tourists from China travelling across Southeast Asia and like many nations in the region, China provides the vast majority of visitors travelling to Cambodia annually.

China's production of cheap but effective arms has become increasingly popular in Southeast Asia with nations like Cambodia already long-time customers and even neighbours like Thailand replacing their inventory of aging US weapons with new Chinese systems.

Finally, China's economic rise means greater foreign direct investment (FDI) in the region. China is easily Cambodia's largest investor.

When Cambodia's own government expresses little concern over Europe's tantrum and threats, it is hardly a bluff. Cambodia not only has options, it has better options.

Diversification is important for any economy and one of the main reasons nations in the region still strive to preserve business ties with the West, but the West by overplaying a weak hand and resorting to coercion and even subversion, leave these nations with little incentive to continue trying.

The US and its European partners, by being overly dependent on rackets and coercion dishonestly disguised as "human rights" and "democracy" promotion have squandered opportunities that should have instead been exploited through doing actual and relatively honest business in Southeast Asia.
By assuming the West could simply remove governments in the region who refused to give up better ties with nations like China and remain underfoot within Washington, London and Brussels' "international order," they have left themselves with no other tools at a time when regime change (or even the threat of regime change) is no longer as effective as it once was.

Cambodia is an extreme example others in Southeast Asia may (albeit to a lesser degree) follow if the West continues to cling to notions of primacy over the region rather than shifting to genuine and mutually beneficial partnerships with it.

Synergies between Cambodia and other nations in Southeast Asia likewise targeted by pressure from the West to roll back ties with China based on disingenuous concerns over "human rights" and "democracy" will only compound the West's declining influence in the region. Clearly the US and EU need a new strategy to engage with not only Southeast Asia but with the world at large.

Multipolarism hasn't exclusively benefited China and offers the West possibly the best model to reform its relationship with a world it has for too long attempted to stand above rather than work within and alongside. For centuries Western hubris was matched by its economic and military superiority. Today, with just hubris alone, it is building resentment, not empire and a corner it is painting itself into at an alarming rate.

The EU’s threats were meant to make Cambodia fear isolation. Yet by wielding this brand of antiquated geopolitics it has only succeeded in placing Cambodia further in China’s orbit and isolating itself in the process.

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