The Enemy of My Friend Is My Enemy

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Cambodian Prime Minister after the National Assembly vote to select the members of National Election Committee in Phnom Penh, Cambodia on April 9th, 2015.

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The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), an intergovernmental organization committed ostensibly to economic growth and social progress, is now being used as justification to keep political opposition leaders out of Cambodia. On November 6, Mu Sochua, deputy leader of the Cambodia National Rescue Party, was detained in Malaysia and barred from entering Cambodia. Sam Rainsy, co-founder of the Cambodia National Rescue Party, was also detained in Thailand on Wednesday and restricted access to Cambodia. Why do these states have the power to detain these people who have not broken their laws? This speaks to the power of the geopolitical codes that connect Cambodia to its neighbors.

When asked about the detention of Sam Rainsy, Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha of Thailand referred to the ASEAN resolution detailing the non-intervention policy that declares each state has “the right... to lead its national existence free from external interference”. This speaks to the geopolitical codes that exist between Cambodia and other states in Southeast Asia. Geopolitical codes refer to the relationships that exist between states or non-state actors. This includes relationships between allies or foes and the justification for actions related to these relationships. In this case, Thailand and Malaysia are looking to maintain a good relationship with Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen, and detaining opposition political leaders is a good way to show that. Now, while these states may be maintaining relatively peaceful geopolitical codes in southeast Asia, their actions have been met with distaste in much of the western world due to the utterly undemocratic affairs of kicking out opposition leaders just before a large political event (the anniversary of Cambodia’s independence from France).

What does this mean for relationships between Cambodia and the rest of the world? We have talked mainly about regional geopolitical codes, codes that primarily affect states in the same geographical region where the issue is occurring. Most states have geopolitical codes concerning their neighbors, but some have global codes as well. This issue, for example, will test the geopolitical codes between the United States and Cambodia. This will change the way that the United States sees Cambodia and may even alter their social and economic relationships.