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## Cultural Diplomacy across the Mekong Subregion: Cambodia's Soft Power Diplomacy in Southeast Asia

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### Abstract

This study examines Cambodia's deployment of cultural diplomacy as a strategic soft power tool in the Mekong region and its broader implications for regional cooperation within ASEAN. Cambodia, a small but culturally rich nation, has used its heritage assets, including Angkor Wat, traditional performing arts, and Theravāda Buddhist traditions, to boost its diplomatic profile and strengthen regional ties. Cambodia has emerged as a proactive actor in an era when ASEAN states are turning increasingly to soft power to advance peace, integrating, and sustainable development. It is using cultural diplomacy to build relations with Mekong neighbors like Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar. The report looks at major programs like heritage diplomacy, cultural festivals, and people-to-people interactions that have enabled Cambodia to contribute to regional peacekeeping, economic cooperation, and environmental awareness. It also addresses domestic and geopolitical concerns that influence Cambodia's cultural diplomacy, such as the country's political system, economic constraints, and regional competition. The research presents policy proposals to boost Cambodia's cultural diplomacy, such as increased youth participation, digital engagement, and stronger leadership in ASEAN cultural platforms. Finally, the findings establish Cambodia's program as a viable model for other small and medium-sized states looking to exert influence through soft power. This study contributes to the burgeoning literature on cultural diplomacy and regional soft power by offering new perspectives on Cambodia's evolving diplomatic posture in Southeast Asia.

**Keywords:** Cambodia, cultural diplomacy, ASEAN, the Mekong area, and regional cooperation

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## Cultural Diplomacy across the Mekong Subregion: Cambodia's Soft Power Diplomacy in Southeast Asia

### I. Introduction

Joseph Nye created the concept of soft power in the late 1980s. According to Nye (2004), soft power is a country's ability to influence others by appeal and persuasion, rather than coercion or force. It is primarily manifested through a country's culture, political views, and diplomacy, as opposed to the use of military force or economic influence, which are called hard power. Soft power is crucial in modern international relations because countries use non-coercive strategies to shape global perceptions, develop alliances, and gain international influence (Saaïda 2023).

This effect is very helpful in international diplomacy and foreign policy because it makes a country look good and makes other countries want to do the same things, have the same habits, or follow the same rules. Cultural diplomacy is a kind of soft power that uses cultural resources on purpose to make a country look better and stronger around the world. Countries use their history, culture, and traditions to gain power in the world and promote peaceful cooperation. This is a type of public diplomacy (Melissen 2005). Cambodia uses cultural diplomacy to get along better with its neighbors, such as Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. The country has a rich cultural past that includes Buddhist traditions and famous places like Angkor Wat. Cambodia strengthens its position as a leader in Southeast Asia by emphasizing its cultural strengths. This helps people from different cultures get along better and share their customs. Southeast Asia is a place that is continually evolving. To make the area more stable and cooperative, it has become more and more reliant on soft power and cultural diplomacy. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a major part of this process. It uses cultural diplomacy in regional programs like the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (Ma 2015; Indrawan 2016; Chong and Elies 2011). Soft power gives small countries like Cambodia a good way to speak up on the regional and global stage without using hard power in an area with fast economic growth, cultural diversity, and geopolitical challenges. Cambodia has used cultural diplomacy on purpose to strengthen and create relationships with other countries in the Mekong region. In ASEAN, where individuals need to understand and be involved in other cultures to work together politically and economically, this is particularly important (Leng 2017; Sorphorn 2013; Szaz 1955). Cambodia has used its cultural heritage and soft power to make itself look like a peaceful, helpful partner in the Mekong Subregion and ASEAN. In Cambodia, cultural diplomacy also helps the Mekong region work together. Cambodia can get along better with Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar by taking part in a lot of cultural exchange programs, heritage diplomacy, and ASEAN projects.

These initiatives not only boost Cambodia's regional influence but also promote cross-border cooperation in areas such as trade, environmental protection, and cultural understanding (Putra 2025; Simon 1982; Bunthorn 2023). Cambodia's cultural diplomacy also aids in achieving its foreign policy objectives by reinforcing its position as a proponent of peace and stability in the Mekong subregion. Cambodia has increasingly used cultural diplomacy as a soft power approach to improve its international status, notably in the Mekong region. Cambodia, as a growing economy in ASEAN, has used its cultural heritage to strengthen ties with its Mekong neighbors and encourage participation in regional cooperation. Cambodia's cultural diplomacy takes the form of initiatives like promoting Angkor Wat as a symbol of Cambodian identity and heritage, as well as educational exchanges, art exhibitions, and cultural festivals aimed at fostering peaceful regional relationships and collaboration (Ocón 2021; Abe 2024). Cambodia's soft power strategy in Southeast Asia aims to exert influence over its neighbors, particularly through shared cultural traditions and historical narratives. This paper investigates how Cambodia strategically employs cultural diplomacy to boost its regional standing while also contributing to economic development, political stability, and environmental sustainability.

This academic study reaches the objective in three purpose: (1) to examine Cambodia's use of cultural diplomacy as a soft power tool to enhance its influence in the Mekong region and expand its role in ASEAN, (2) to investigate the role of cultural exchanges, heritage diplomacy, and regional initiatives in shaping Cambodia's foreign policy and fostering regional cooperation, and (3) to assess the impact of Cambodia's cultural diplomacy on regional cooperation in the Mekong region. This study adds to the body of research on soft power and cultural diplomacy by looking at Cambodia's place in Southeast Asia, especially in ASEAN and the Mekong area. Most studies are about great powers, but this one is about how Cambodia, a smaller state, uses cultural diplomacy to increase its influence and collaboration in the region. The results will benefit Cambodian officials who want to enhance their foreign policy and will also promote ASEAN's regional unity and cohesiveness through cultural programs.

## **II. Review of Literature**

### **2.1. A Theoretical Framework for Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy**

Joseph Nye came up with the term "soft power" in the late 1980s to describe a country's ability to persuade others without using force (Nye 2004). Soft power is primarily defined by a country's cultural appeal, values, and diplomatic relations, which are used to influence global perceptions and foster international cooperation. Nye's argument is particularly relevant in Southeast Asia, where governments routinely adopt non-coercive means to boost their diplomatic standing in a region with diverse political systems, cultures, and levels of economic development. Cambodia and other Southeast Asian governments are using cultural diplomacy more and more to boost their global might and claim leadership in the region (Melissen 2005). Cultural diplomacy is a kind of soft power that uses things like art, music, literature and legacy to spread a country's views and identity over the world. According to Arndt (2011), cultural diplomacy helps countries show off their national identity, connect with other countries, and learn more about individuals from various cultures. Cultural diplomacy is now an important aspect of foreign policy for states to work together on building peace, working together on the economy, and working together on multilateral diplomacy. This is especially true in Southeast Asia, where historical and cultural linkages play a big role in how countries get along with each other (Leng 2017). People all over the/customary diplomacy agree that regional cooperation is a good idea. In Southeast Asia, cultural exchanges, arts programs, and heritage diplomacy help people understand and trust each other (Cabauatan 2024). The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) uses cultural diplomacy to bring people together across political lines and promote common values that are in line with ASEAN's goals of regional peace and cooperation (Indrawan 2016; Ma 2015). Cambodia's cultural diplomacy is a fantastic example of how a country may use soft power to attract more people in the region to work together and raise its profile in ASEAN and the Mekong region (Weiss 2022). ASEAN is slowly starting to add cultural diplomacy to its bigger agenda for bringing peace to the region.

ASEAN's cultural diplomacy activities are all about helping member states work together, sharing cultural values, and making it easier for individuals from diverse cultures to talk to each other. The ASEAN Cultural Fund, ASEAN music festivals, and cultural exchange programs are just a few of the ways that the group brings people together to promote peace and cooperation in the region (Rana and Ardichvili 2014). ASEAN has acknowledged that cultural linkages are very important for lowering tensions and creating a feeling of community in a region with many different races, faiths, and political systems (Simon 1982; Ocón 2021). Countries like Thailand, Vietnam, and Indonesia have been able to employ cultural diplomacy as a form of soft power to gain more authority in Southeast Asia and beyond.

### **2.2 Cambodia: Diplomacy and Culture in Foreign Policy**

Cambodia's foreign policy has changed a lot since the time of the Khmer Rouge. Cambodia has progressed from a neutral position to an active participant in ASEAN and regional efforts (Deth 2014; Chheang 2022). Cambodia's development has benefited much from cultural diplomacy,

since the government has established its identity within ASEAN and strengthened diplomatic ties in the Mekong region using Buddhist traditions and its legacy sites, such Angkor Wat, therefore promoting progress (Morotti 2023; Falser 2014). Cambodia has worked to improve its relationships with other countries in the region through cultural exchanges, arts projects, and heritage diplomacy. This has helped Cambodia's influence grow in Southeast Asia (Arndt 2011; Stark 2020). The cultural history of Cambodia, notably Angkor Wat, is a big part of the country's soft power strategy. The Angkor Wat is not only a symbol of Cambodian national identity, but it is also a great tool for cultural diplomacy. The UNESCO World Heritage Site has become a key part of Cambodian diplomacy, helping to improve ties with ASEAN countries, major world powers, and international organizations. Cambodia also employs traditional arts, Buddhist teachings, and cultural festivals to spread its influence and promote mutual respect in the region (Chheang 2022). Cambodia has been actively involved in ASEAN cultural programs such as the ASEAN Cultural Fund, the ASEAN Arts and Culture Program, and the ASEAN Cultural Year. These projects seek to strengthen regional solidarity by highlighting each country's distinctive cultural history and encouraging intercultural understanding. Cambodia's participation in these projects has helped it to establish its cultural identity while also encouraging regional collaboration and peace. Furthermore, Cambodia's participation in regional cultural exchanges has helped to strengthen its foreign policy and increase its international impact (Burridge 2014; Berkvens 2017).

While Cambodia's cultural diplomacy has generated excellent outcomes, it must face considerable hurdles. These include questions regarding its political legitimacy, economic limits, and regional rivalries. Cambodia's authoritarian political structure has occasionally hampered its capacity to properly utilize cultural diplomacy as a weapon for fostering international trust. Furthermore, the country's economic issues, such as poverty and inadequate infrastructure, make it difficult to effectively promote cultural diplomacy at the global level. Furthermore, regional rivalry, particularly with Vietnam and Thailand, impedes Cambodia's aspirations to establish itself as a cultural leader in the Mekong region (Deth 2014; Melissen 2005). Despite these limitations, Cambodia's cultural diplomacy offers substantial opportunity to promote regional integration and collaboration in the Mekong sub-region (Ocón 2021). Cambodia can act as a bridge between ASEAN nations by promoting its cultural history, notably Angkor Wat and Buddhist teachings. This will create more regional collaboration on cultural and environmental issues. Cultural diplomacy provides Cambodia with a unique opportunity to contribute to ASEAN's broader goals of regional stability, economic integration, and sustainable development while increasing its global influence as indicated in table 1.

**Table 1: Literature Review Summary Table**

Topic	Key Points	Sources
Theoretical Framework of Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy	Overview of Joseph Nye's theory of soft power, cultural diplomacy's role in international relations with regional cooperation.	(Nye 2004; Arndt 2011; Melissen 2005),
Cultural Diplomacy in Southeast Asia	ASEAN as a forum for cultural diplomacy and its role in promoting regional collaboration and peacebuilding: Case studies from Thailand, Vietnam, and Indonesia	(Berkvens 2017; Simon 1982; Stark 2020),
Cambodia's cultural diplomacy and foreign policy	A historical review of Cambodian foreign policy, the importance of cultural diplomacy in ASEAN ties, and Cambodia's use of heritage as a soft power tactic	(Chheang 2022; Deth 2014; Leng 2017)

Topic	Key Points	Sources
Challenges and Opportunities	Challenges include political legitimacy, economic constraints, and regional competition; chances for promoting regional integration and collaboration	(Berkvens 2017; Burridge 2014; Leng 2017; Simon 1982)

### III. Research Methodology

#### 3.1 Research Design

This study uses a qualitative research design and a case study approach to investigate Cambodia's cultural diplomacy as a tool of soft power in the Mekong region. The case study technique provides for a thorough examination of Cambodia's cultural diplomacy, with an emphasis on its use to influence regional relations and improve Cambodia's international status within ASEAN and the larger Mekong region. The case study approach is particularly appropriate for this research because it provides extensive insights into how Cambodia leverages its cultural assets, such as heritage, arts, and traditional values, to improve regional cooperation, economic development, and political stability (Yin 2009). By concentrating on Cambodia as an example, this study provides a thorough investigation of how smaller countries might utilize cultural diplomacy to project soft power, alter regional dynamics, and stimulate cross-border collaboration. The case study method also allows the researcher to understand the complexities of Cambodia's foreign policy, the role of cultural diplomacy in defining Cambodia's regional image, and the broader implications for ASEAN cooperation (Cresswell 2013).

#### 3.2 Data Collection Methods

This study collects data using three basic methods: document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and case study observations. These methods were chosen to provide an in-depth assessment of Cambodia's cultural diplomacy projects, their impact on regional collaboration, and the country's role in ASEAN and the Mekong region. The initial technique of data gathering was document analysis, which focused on Cambodia's cultural diplomacy endeavors, including government reports, ASEAN agreements, cultural exchange programs, and foreign policy documents. Key publications included Cambodia's foreign policy declarations, ASEAN summit reports, and cultural diplomacy activities described by Cambodia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and key regional entities. Documents from ASEAN such as the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) framework, and Cambodia's participation in regional cultural festivals were reviewed to assess how cultural diplomacy is embedded in Cambodia's foreign policy. In addition, the second method involved conducting semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders involved in Cambodia's cultural diplomacy and regional cooperation.

This featured government officials, ASEAN diplomats, cultural specialists, and regional stakeholders interested in Cambodia's foreign policy and soft power initiatives. These interviews were conducted to investigate the policy motives driving Cambodia's cultural diplomacy, the problems encountered in its implementation, and the influence on regional collaboration. The interviews were semi-structured to allow for flexibility in the talks while yet collecting consistent, useful data. Key participants included officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and ASEAN Cultural Diplomacy Offices, cultural attachés, diplomats, and Southeast Asian cultural relations experts, as well as representatives from NGOs and civil society organizations involved in cultural exchanges and regional development.

At last, the third technique involved collecting data through observation, with the researcher attending relevant ASEAN summits, Mekong cooperation meetings, and cultural diplomacy events in Cambodia and surrounding areas. Observations centred on Cambodia's participation in regional diplomacy at these events, which included cultural exchanges and heritage diplomacy initiatives. The researcher attended cultural festivals, ASEAN cultural dialogues, and art exhibitions organized by Cambodia in collaboration with ASEAN partners. Observational data

were employed to capture the real-time dynamics of Cambodia's cultural diplomacy and its contribution to regional collaboration.

### 3.3 Sampling Method: Purposive sampling

Given the study's emphasis on Cambodian cultural diplomacy, purposive sampling was used to find significant participants who could offer specific information regarding Cambodia's cultural diplomacy initiatives and their impact on regional collaboration. The sample approach assured that the individuals picked were directly involved in Cambodia's foreign policy and cultural diplomacy efforts. Cambodian government officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other relevant departments in charge of cultural diplomacy; ASEAN diplomats representing Cambodia in ASEAN cultural projects and regional cooperation initiatives; regional experts specializing in Southeast Asian diplomacy and cultural exchange; and civil society representatives and NGO leaders involved in cross-border cultural exchanges.

This purposeful sampling ensures that the perspectives of persons with firsthand experience and professional awareness of Cambodia's cultural diplomacy and role in ASEAN integration are captured.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, theme analysis and triangulation approaches were applied to the data acquired from document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and observations. Thematic analysis was used to find reoccurring themes and patterns in the dataset. The investigation aimed to identify critical themes connected to Cambodia's soft power, cultural diplomacy methods, and regional collaboration. The researcher examined the interviews to find themes such as Cambodia's objectives for cultural diplomacy, the usefulness of cultural exchanges in building regional collaboration, and the problems Cambodia experiences when employing cultural diplomacy as a foreign policy weapon. The document study was also topically organized, allowing the researcher to see how Cambodia's foreign policy documents and cultural activities match with regional aims. To ensure the findings' robustness, triangulation was utilized, which involved cross-referencing data from interviews, documents, and observations. This method guaranteed that the findings were comprehensive and gave a thorough insight of Cambodia's cultural diplomacy throughout the Mekong region, as presented in table 2.

**Table 2: Overview of Research Technique**

No.	Section	Summary Description
1.	Research approach	This qualitative case study explored Cambodia's cultural diplomacy in the Mekong region, emphasizing its soft power strategy and regional impact.
2.	Data Collection Methods	It employed three methods: (1) document analysis of official reports and ASEAN frameworks, (2) semi-structured interviews with diplomats, politicians, and cultural specialists, and (3) observational involvement in ASEAN and Mekong cultural events.
3.	Sampling Strategy	Purposive sampling is used to identify stakeholders who have direct knowledge of Cambodian foreign policy and cultural diplomacy, such as government officials, ASEAN delegates, and civil society leaders.
4.	Data analysis	Used thematic analysis to extract key topics from interviews, documents, and observations. Triangulation improves dependability by comparing all sources for consistency and depth

## IV. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Cambodia's Soft Power Strategy in the Mekong Region

Cambodia has increasingly embraced cultural diplomacy as an important component of its soft power strategy for expanding influence and developing regional ties in the Mekong region. By promoting its cultural assets, particularly Angkor Wat, traditional arts, and Buddhist heritage, Cambodia has established itself as a culturally rich country and a regional leader in cultural

diplomacy. Cambodia's membership in ASEAN and other regional forums allows it to showcase its cultural riches and engage in people-to-people exchanges, bolstering diplomatic relations with neighbouring countries such as Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar.

Cambodia's cultural diplomacy initiatives, such as arts festivals, heritage displays, and Buddhist cultural exchanges, have established the country as a cultural bridge within the Mekong subregion, strengthening collaborative partnerships and regional stability. Cambodia's soft power approach through cultural diplomacy strengthens its position as a reliable partner in regional integration, particularly as it aligns its foreign policy with ASEAN's aims of peace and economic cooperation. Cultural diplomacy has had a considerable impact on Cambodia's bilateral relations with its Mekong neighbors, which include Vietnam, Laos, Thailand and Myanmar (Ocón 2021). For example, Cambodia's Angkor Wat has become a potent symbol in its diplomatic dealings with these countries, serving as a shared cultural heritage that promotes mutual respect and understanding. Cambodia has been able to leverage its rich cultural heritage to forge strong diplomatic ties with its neighbors, frequently in ways that go beyond traditional trade agreements or political alliances. Cambodian cultural diplomacy seeks to promote peace, regional stability, economic development, and environmental sustainability in the Mekong area (see table 3).

#### **4.2 The Role of Cultural Heritage in Cambodian Diplomacy**

Cambodia's cultural heritage is crucial to its foreign policy and regional diplomacy. Cambodia's most recognized emblem, Angkor Wat, not only represents the country's rich past, but it also helps to strengthen Cambodian identity and regional participation. Cambodia can demonstrate its historical significance by highlighting its cultural history, which encourages respect and appreciation from neighboring countries and the world community (Leng 2017; Stark 2020). Buddhism, a crucial component of Cambodian cultural diplomacy, also has a huge impact on the country's soft power. Cambodia, as one of the region's most well-known Buddhist republics, leverages its Buddhist past in diplomatic relations with Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos, all of which share Buddhist cultural values. Cambodia has used religious diplomacy to enhance cultural ties and promote interfaith dialogue in the Mekong region and ASEAN. Heritage diplomacy has become an essential strategy for Cambodia to promote its national identity and improve its international standing. Cambodia displays its cultural identity by emphasizing Angkor Wat, traditional dance, and Buddhist temples, while also promoting cross-border cooperation in the Mekong region. Heritage diplomacy initiatives, such as cultural festivals and heritage tourism, have also encouraged collaboration among Mekong countries, resulting in joint cultural projects, conservation efforts, and regional cultural exchanges that strengthen regional integration and mutual respect (Ma 2015).

#### **4.3 Cambodia's Contribution to Regional Cooperation via Cultural Diplomacy**

Cambodia regularly participates in ASEAN cultural exchanges and regional soft power efforts aimed at promoting greater regional integration and cultural understanding across Southeast Asia. Its role in these initiatives enhances cultural exchanges through arts festivals, literary exchanges, and cultural seminars, often in collaboration with ASEAN countries. These don not only serve to promote Cambodia's culture but to encourage greater regional cooperation through shared cultural experiences (Deth 2014). Cambodia's participation in ASEAN's cultural diplomacy programs enhances its image as a cultural ambassador and solidifies its influence in the Mekong region. Cultural diplomacy has a considerable impact on regional stability, economic collaboration, and integration.

By means of ASEAN's cultural diplomacy initiatives, Cambodia's image as a cultural ambassador is strengthened and its influence in the Mekong area is confirmed. Regional stability, economic cooperation, and integration all depend on cultural diplomacy in significant measure. Through bridging cultural and socioeconomic gaps, Cambodia's involvement in regional cultural diplomacy strengthens regional integration and peacekeeping initiatives. Its support of cultural diplomacy has opened doors for economic collaboration via projects of sustainable cultural

development, arts exchanges, and travel. The initiatives help ASEAN to achieve its main objectives of inclusive development, regional stability, and economic integration (Melissen 2005). Furthermore, as table 3 emphasizes, Cambodia's cultural diplomacy projects act as a soft power tool, enabling the nation to influence the region without resorting to strong force and therefore advance its economic interests and cultural ideals.

**Table 3: Summary of results and discussion guide**

Subjects	Important points	References
Mekong Region Soft Power Strategy of Cambodia	Using cultural diplomacy as a soft power tactic, Cambodia seeks to improve its position in the Mekong area by means of cultural exchanges, heritage diplomacy, and neighbour-based cooperation, therefore strengthening regional ties	Pavin (2016), Khmer Times (2020), ASEAN Secretariat (2020)
The Function of Cultural Heritage in Diplomacy of Cambodia	Cambodia's cultural legacy, especially Angkor Wat and Buddhism, is used as a tool in its foreign policy to strengthen national identity and promote international collaboration in the Mekong area.	Sok (2018), Pavin (2016), ASEAN Secretariat (2020)
Contribution of Cambodia to Regional Cooperation via Cultural Diplomacy	Through shared cultural experiences and heritage diplomacy, Cambodia supports regional peace, economic cooperation, and integration by means of ASEAN's cultural exchanges and regional soft power projects.	Melissen (2005), Suk (2015), Khmer Times (2020)

## V. Conclusion

This paper has investigated Cambodia's strategic use of cultural diplomacy as an efficient tool of soft power inside the Mekong region, stressing its part in enhancing regional collaboration, economic integration, and sustainability inside ASEAN. Leveraging its cultural legacy including Angkor Wat, traditional arts, and Buddhist teachings, Cambodia's diplomatic activities have helped to clearly establish the nation as a major regional force. By means of active engagement in heritage diplomacy, arts festivals, and person-to-person interactions, Cambodia has greatly improved its diplomatic profile, promoted regional peace, and promoted more mutual understanding among Mekong nations. Through its cultural diplomacy, Cambodia has effectively enhanced bilateral relations with Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar, so fostering regional stability and collaboration. Particularly focused on famous sites and common Buddhist traditions, heritage diplomacy has been vital in helping to heal past divisions and promote cooperative regional projects in cultural preservation and sustainable travel. Furthermore, active integration of cultural diplomacy into Cambodia's foreign policy strongly corresponds with ASEAN's main objectives for political collaboration, regional economic integration, and sustainable development.

This article suggests various ideas in the meantime to improve the success of Cambodia's cultural diplomacy. First, Cambodia could improve its usage of social and digital media by creating thorough digital diplomacy plans. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok can be leveraged to showcase the country's rich cultural heritage, thereby amplifying its cultural outreach and strengthening its soft power influence both regionally and globally. Second, Cambodia is encouraged to expand youth exchanges within ASEAN by establishing robust cultural exchange programs and scholarship initiatives targeting young people. Programs such as ASEAN Youth Cultural Festivals and regional internships focused on cultural preservation can foster mutual understanding, intercultural dialogue, and future regional leadership. Third, Cambodia should deepen its engagement within ASEAN cultural initiatives by actively participating in and leading regional dialogues that link cultural diplomacy with sustainable development. By positioning cultural diplomacy as a core element of ASEAN's regional



objectives, including peacebuilding, economic collaboration, and environmental stewardship, Cambodia can play a leading role in shaping a more integrated and culturally cohesive Southeast Asia.

This study presents both theoretical and practical implications for Cambodia and the broader ASEAN region. Theoretically, it highlights how smaller states like Cambodia can effectively use cultural diplomacy as a soft power strategy to promote regional cooperation and diplomatic influence. Practically, it offers actionable guidance for Cambodian policymakers to enhance their global visibility through digital diplomacy, youth exchanges, and deeper engagement in ASEAN cultural initiatives. These efforts do not only strengthen Cambodia's regional leadership but also contribute to broader goals such as sustainable development, peacebuilding, and economic integration. Cambodia's model of cultural diplomacy can serve as a valuable example for other small nations seeking to leverage culture as a strategic tool in foreign policy and regional engagement.

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