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Michael Taylor Starr

April 10, 2023

Ending the Forever War: Vietnam and the Cambodia Conflict 1986-1991

By

Michael Starr

Dr. Matthew Payne  
Adviser

History

Dr. Matthew Payne  
Adviser

Dr. Sa'ed Atshan  
Committee Member

Dr. Patrick Allitt  
Committee Member

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An abstract of  
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## Abstract

### Ending the Forever War: Vietnam and the Cambodia Conflict 1986-1991

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While many studies have been devoted to the Vietnam War (1955-1975), few have been written in English about the Cambodia Conflict (1978-1991) that followed. Pulling from hundreds of period documents from both Vietnam and Cambodia, the body of this opus explores how Vietnam experienced and influenced the end of the Cold War in Southeast Asia. Through this research, the author brings Western understandings of the end of widespread fighting in Southeast Asia up to the more contemporarily relevant context of 1991, rather than where English-language histories typically taper off, in 1975. This paper introduces a truly Southeast Asian perspective on the key assumptions in modern Southeast Asian international relations into English-language literature, with the aim of more effectively nuancing Western discussions of the region going forward.

This study presents three main arguments: (1) The Cambodia Conflict was the foundational event of modern Southeast Asian geopolitics. With this conflict's conclusion, a half-century of war in Southeast Asia ended. Vietnam's declining foreign ambitions, somewhat paralleling the decline of its Soviet patron, meant that by 1991 China, ASEAN, and the US were no longer tied together by the threat of common enemies. Consequently, the region has transitioned from being a Sino-Soviet battleground to harboring less violent political jockeying between the US and China in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. (2) Vietnam's withdrawal from Cambodia in 1989 was the turning point in the Cambodia Conflict. As a result of ASEAN and the US having achieved this primary objective, the international focus of the conflict shifted from 'stopping Vietnam' to 'stopping the Khmer Rouge'. (3) Exiting the Cambodia Conflict allowed Vietnam to transition from maintaining a foremost ideological (Communist) identity to a foremost regional Southeast Asian identity. As a result of its withdrawal from Cambodia, Vietnam was able to escape its international isolation and exit its alliance with the USSR. By embracing a comparatively politically amorphous Southeast Asian identity, Vietnam gained the flexibility to both adopt a realpolitik foreign policy and introduce free market economic reforms.

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## Acknowledgements

First, thank you to Dr. Matthew Payne for being an outstanding adviser and helping propel me forward in my research on Vietnamese history. I am extremely grateful for his guidance throughout this project. I greatly appreciate his efforts to help me find heretofore hidden resources from the Communist world. Taking his Soviet History class during my Freshman year germinated into my deep fascination with Sino-Soviet relations, which ultimately led to the creation of this thesis.

I also extend my deepest gratitude to Ms. Jenny Vitti, who is Emory's Interlibrary Loan Coordinator. Without Ms. Vitti, this project would have been impossible. Thanks to her unmatched skills and professional energy, I was able to acquire a menagerie of hundreds of unique English-language publications by both Southeast Asian governments and now-defunct Cambodian political factions.

To Dr. Tonio Andrade, I wish to express my gratitude for helping me hone my interest in Southeast Asian history. His passion for Asian history is infectious, and I have never met a single person at Emory who studies this region without hearing some story of how he helped inspire new research. This thesis was a direct result of asking 'what happened next?' after publishing my first academic paper, which itself was built upon the paper I wrote for his "China and the World" colloquium class.

To my Committee members, Dr. Sa'ed Atshan and Dr. Patrick Allitt, I give my deepest thanks for the time and interest they invested in my project. Taking Dr. Atshan's class on Global Peace and Conflict last summer made me begin to dive into the question of 'why did it take 30 years to begin prosecuting the Khmer Rouge?'. Those six weeks of class left me with a lasting appreciation for Anthropology, which I plan to carry over into my next steps after graduation. I greatly enjoyed taking Dr. Allitt's American Foreign Policy class, and I am grateful for his willingness to join my committee at the last moment as a result of Dr. Andrade's lack of Wi-Fi, due to his research in the remote jungles of Indonesia.

Lastly, I would like to thank the three teachers at Pace Academy in Atlanta, GA who inspired me to pursue History. To Mr. Graham Anthony, his 6th grade World History class sparked a passion for the subject which will remain with me for the rest of my life. Ms. Helen Smith, participating in Model UN was the highlight of my high school experience, and, thanks to her guidance, I have gained the writing skills needed to reach where I am today. To Dr. Christine Carter, thank you for encouraging me to pursue History at Emory. Our inspiring discussions in your AP American History class helped me see how the past is the key to the present.

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## Introduction

The fall of the USSR in 1991 can reasonably be said to mark both the end of the Cold War and the collapse of communism in Europe. However, the typical assumption that communism globally ‘ended’ in that year is simply inaccurate. The question of how disparate non-European states, such as Vietnam, China, Cuba, and North Korea managed to adapt to the end of the Cold War is perhaps just as interesting as asking why the USSR floundered. This thesis pursues two primary research questions. First, how did Vietnam successfully transition from fighting a foreign war to normalizing relations with its neighbors? Second, how did the process of ending the Cambodia Conflict (1978-1991) change the geopolitics of Southeast Asia? This thesis will be the first English-language study of the Cambodia Conflict that elucidates how Vietnam experienced and influenced the ending of the war and shaped the current political profile of Southeast Asia.

While the Cambodia Conflict, when it was happening, was largely invisible to the West, the eventual resolution and ending of the war essentially launched the political underpinnings of contemporary Southeast Asia. The fact that a conflict of such significance, which involved Vietnam, Cambodia, China, the Soviet Union, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and even the United States, was and still is largely ignored by historians outside of Asia, is rather surprising but, actually, not all that uncommon. In practice, conflicts where the West has little geopolitical interest rarely warrant prime-time news coverage for the Western general public. When authors only ask “why should this conflict matter to *me*, an [American, German, Frenchman, etc.]” the resulting literature almost inevitably overemphasizes the importance of great powers. As for writings on the conflict from Vietnam and China, there is significant evidence that, as part of negotiations to end the Cambodia Conflict, the two



communist powers concluded a secret agreement to limit studies on the war in order to facilitate the fading of tensions.<sup>1</sup> Fitting this pattern, the 2005 autobiography of Qian Qichen (China's Foreign Minister 1988-1998) conspicuously makes no mention of the existence of the 1979 Chinese Invasion of Vietnam or the following decade of border skirmishes.<sup>2</sup> The reasons why both sides would want to brush past their decade-long war are understandable. Whereas 1975 marked Vietnam's upset victory over the United States, 1989 saw Vietnam pull out of a similar conflict in Cambodia. While the Vietnamese-backed People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) won the conflict, to the extent that any party was a victor in the civil war, the PRK only triumphed after China finally pulled its own support for the genocidal Khmer Rouge. Focusing on the years of 1986-1991, I hope to create a long-overdue history of how Vietnam navigated the end of the Cold War and helped shape contemporary Southeast Asia.

Academic writings on the Cambodia Conflict differ significantly based on the author's nationality, and the impact of the conflict on the involved nations is often obscured in greater national narratives. American literature on the war, such as Amanda Demmer's *After Saigon's Fall*, unfailingly brings up issues like US normalization with Vietnam (1989-1995) and the Indochinese refugee crisis. To the limited extent Chinese scholarship is willing to touch upon the conflict, it looks at Vietnamese reforms as being in the shadow of those achieved by China, as can be seen in Xiaoming Zhang's *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict between China and Vietnam, 1979-1991*. The memoirs of Qian Qichen, China's Foreign Minister between 1988 and 1998, does address the Cambodia Conflict but, surprising to a Western

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<sup>1</sup>Zhang, Xiaoming. "The Road To Conflict Termination." Essay. In *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict between China and Vietnam 1979-1991*, 210. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015.

<sup>2</sup>Qichen, Qian. *Ten Episodes in China's Diplomacy*. London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005.

audience, these papers make no reference to direct fighting between China and Vietnam.<sup>3</sup> Vietnamese studies rarely look at the Cambodia Conflict directly, and instead paper over it as ‘background’ to present international relations, as can be seen in Luu’s *Fifty Years of Vietnamese Diplomacy and the Minh’s Vietnam’s Foreign Policy In The Restoration Period (1986-2010)*. The latter piece recognizes there was a month of fighting between China and Vietnam in February 1979, but then refuses to comment on who won or lost.<sup>4</sup> Analyses from Cambodia often detail the minutia of military history, with the most pertinent books being Borden Nhem’s *The Chronicle of a People's War: The Military and Strategic History of the Cambodian Civil War 1979–1991* and Kosal Path’s *Vietnam’s Strategic Thinking in the Third Indochina War*. Singaporean writings on the conflict, most famously Guan’s *Singapore, ASEAN and the Cambodian Conflict, 1978-1991*, are surprisingly extensive due to the nation’s prominent role in negotiating the political settlement of the war. Previous English-language literature largely succeeds in illuminating the component bilateral-diplomatic and military aspects of the Cambodia Conflict, but underlying conceptual understandings of the wider conflict itself have failed to escape triumphalist Eurocentric tropes of the end of the Cold War which equate the disintegration of the USSR with the disintegration of communism across the globe.

Given that I am fluent in only two languages (English and French), I have had to work around the limitations of not being able to read the numerous languages of all parties involved in the conflict. The ideal historian to write a truly comprehensive history of the era would be fluent in nine languages: Vietnamese, Khmer, Thai, Lao, Chinese, Russian, French, English, and Bahasa Indonesia. In writing my own piece, I have in fact identified two major opportunities for

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<sup>3</sup>Qichen, Qian. *Ten Episodes in China's Diplomacy*. London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005.

<sup>4</sup>Minh, Pham. “External Factors.” Essay. In *Vietnam’s Foreign Policy In The Restoration Period (1986-2010)*, 38. Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 2015.

books that would be welcome in the English-language literature on the conflict: (1) a history of Thai foreign policy (1978-1991), and (2) a social history of Vietnamese war-veterans (1975-2000). Recognizing these challenges, I have devoted much effort to track down primary source publications in English and French from every party in the conflict. I furthermore extend my deepest gratitude to Emory's Interlibrary Loan Specialist, Ms. Jenny Vitti, because without her assistance this project would not have been possible.

I pull heavily from the library of works printed by The Gioi Publishers which has been the primary state-sponsored foreign language publishing house in Vietnam since the 1960s. Among these works, I particularly draw from the 2006 *Fifty Years of Vietnamese Diplomacy*, the 2008 *Vietnam: 20 Years of Doi Moi*, and the 2015 *Foreign Policy In The Restoration Period (1986-2010)* as references for contemporary Vietnamese historiography. In addition, I source from a wide variety of period publications such as *Vietnamese Studies* magazine (published by the Institute of Social Sciences of Vietnam), a 1990 state-published encyclopedia of Vietnam, and a 1995 guide for Western businessmen visiting the country for the first time. As for memoirs, Bui Tin's *Following Ho Chi Minh: Memoirs of a North Vietnamese Colonel* has been quite useful. Active in the Communist Party of Vietnam from the 1940s until his defection in 1990, Tin was the Deputy Editor of the party newspaper. He personally followed the Vietnamese army into Cambodia, and as a fairly high-ranking writer, received a unique view into the process of *Doi Moi* ('renovation') as it first launched.

In the realm of Cambodian primary sources, I am happy to say I was able to track down collections of English-language newspapers published by all the three Cambodian rebel factions in the conflict. Namely, I have a compendiums of the Khmer Rouge *National Army of Democratic Kampuchea* that spans 1986-1990, the Royalist *Fortnightly News* which cover 1988-

1990, and the Non-Communist Resistance *NCR Bulletin* which runs 1989-1990. While I unfortunately do not have newspapers from the PRK, I draw mainly on Heng Samrin's memoir *The People's Struggle: Cambodia Reborn* and Sebastian Strangio's groundbreaking book *Hun Sen's Cambodia*. Heng Samrin was the de facto conservative leader of the PRK from the time of the Vietnamese invasion, but he was sidelined by the reform-minded politician Hun Sen in the late-1980s into becoming the leader of the 'opposition' within the government.<sup>5</sup>

Unlike so many previous studies, I will be using dates that properly frame Vietnam's transformation within a *Vietnamese* context. My thesis will be ordered into four chapters: (1) regional tensions escalate to the point Vietnam invades Cambodia 1978 (2) the slow start of reforms in 1986; (3) how Vietnam navigated the collapse of its Soviet patron between 1987-1989; and (4) how Vietnam transitioned into a post-Cold War world in 1990-1991.

The main analysis begins with the year 1986 because that was when economic concerns replaced security concerns for the first time since the establishment of the communist Vietnamese state, as the occupation of Cambodia was proving unsustainable both in terms of money and political capital. Despite early economic and social reforms being implemented in 1987, there never was a rapid privatization of business as Vietnamese leadership felt it faced moral peril from the collapse of Eastern Europe. The 1989 withdrawal of Vietnamese troops is what I identify as the turning point which enabled Vietnam to begin engaging with the non-USSR-aligned world as Vietnam was no longer seen as an active aggressor power in Cambodia. With Vietnamese troops no longer active in Cambodia, the war was increasingly viewed as an internal matter not worthy of investment by nations such as China and Thailand. With the

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<sup>5</sup>Nhem, Boraden. *Chronicle of a People's War: The Military and Strategic History of the Cambodian Civil War, 1979-1991*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2019.

additional context of the USSR's decline, 1989 marked the moment when Vietnam could finally begin negotiating a permanent peaceful existence in a Post-Cold War world.

Given the previous maneuvering which had slowly taken place between 1986-1990, Vietnam was able to both extricate itself fully from the Cambodia Conflict and normalize relations with China in 1991. Furthermore, Vietnamese citizens, afraid that their nation might find itself in isolation in the coming years, could take solace in the fact that the US offered Vietnam a roadmap for normalization. The government also took a first step towards joining ASEAN. Between 1992-1995, Vietnam effectively escaped its previous isolation and began engaging with the globalized world of the 1990s. Adding the weight of Vietnam to ASEAN in their feuds with China was highly appealing to other Southeast Asian states, and the investment opportunities in Vietnam were lucrative even to other 'developing' countries like Thailand and Indonesia. While Vietnam may have been more comfortable with another familiar patronage relationship, this time with China, the Chinese made it abundantly clear that lukewarm normalization was the most amicable status possible between the two states, at least for the near future. It is for this reason that Vietnam chose to pursue entry into the American and ASEAN spheres of influence.

## Chapter 1: The Origins of the Cambodia Conflict (1975-78)

In April 1975, Communist forces occupied the respective Vietnamese and Cambodian capitals of Saigon and Phnom Penh, thus ending what is referred to in the United States as ‘The Vietnam War’. Ostensibly, the fraternal Vietnamese and Cambodian Communist parties should have been ready to begin an era of peace now that their capitalistic civil war counterparts had been vanquished. Given this context, why did the entire region again erupt into war just three years later? The Cambodia Conflict began as a result of three levels of interconnected disputes which cyclically escalated between the American departure from Vietnam in 1975 and the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1978. Cambodia, then governed by the Khmer Rouge and officially called Democratic Kampuchea (DK), was afraid of Vietnamese regional hegemony, and therefore allied with China (see Appendix for a detailed explanation and diagram of the chronology of Cambodian state naming conventions).<sup>6</sup> Vietnam was afraid of being encircled by China and Democratic Kampuchea, and so then allied with the Soviet Union. China feared being encircled by Vietnam and the USSR, and so was spurred into providing greater support for the Khmer Rouge.

### **Political Economy in Democratic Kampuchea**

The Khmer Rouge is best viewed as a utopian project rather than a traditional nation-state. The Khmer Rouge was not ‘crazy’, which is a term far too easily hurled at those whom we do not understand. The Khmer Rouge acted rationally according to their own ideology. The Khmer Rouge government, Democratic Kampuchea (DK), did not see itself as existing within

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<sup>6</sup>‘Cambodia’ is an Anglicization of the native Khmer word for their country, ‘Kampuchea’. In this paper I use the most common name for each faction, but English documents from both sides of the conflict use the two terms interchangeably from publication to publication.

the morally-gray Western tradition of foreign policy wherein all countries are nominally equal and simply trying to advance their own interests. Khmer Rouge economic thinking did not match how democratic Western nations organically ‘make’ decisions. The Khmer Rouge saw itself to be the vanguard of the side of Good (socialism) against Evil (capitalism) and was dead set on achieving the ‘victory of socialism’ as soon as possible at any cost. Demanding victory at any price meant that, for the Khmer Rouge, there was effectively no upper limit with respect to it incurring ‘acceptable’ costs or losses, whether financial, political, or human. In terms of finance, anecdotes such as how “it was very difficult for Singapore to conduct business with the Khmer Rouge as they did not believe in having any currency” are remarkably common in the records of Cambodia’s neighbors at the time.<sup>7</sup> In terms of human capital, the Khmer Rouge killed over 1.7 million people out a population of 7.8 million in what is now called the Cambodian Genocide, eliminating anyone perceived as disloyal, which in practice meant anyone who was not an ethnic-Khmer peasant farmer.<sup>8</sup> In terms of political capital, the Khmer Rouge almost simultaneously launched attacks on Vietnamese and American targets within weeks of ending its own civil war despite both of these countries being much more powerful than itself. On May 1st 1975, the Khmer Rouge invaded an island disputed with Vietnam, and then just two weeks later seized an American shipping vessel with its crew which resulted in dozens of deaths. The Khmer Rouge saw threats everywhere, and preemptively stuck out in all directions, which only served to escalate these same conflicts. In particular, the Khmer Rouge's obsessive fear of a Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia became a vigorously pursued self-fulfilling prophecy.

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<sup>7</sup>Guan, Ang Cheng. “Introduction.” Essay. In *Singapore, ASEAN and the Cambodian Conflict, 1978-1991*, 10. Singapore: NUS Press, 2013.

<sup>8</sup>“Introduction to the ECCC.” Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia. Accessed October 10, 2022. <https://www.eccc.gov.kh/en/introduction-eccc>.

## Vietnam 1975-1978

As is openly admitted on the ‘History’ page of the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, “in the first ten years of this period [after the Vietnam War], many socio-economic targets were not achieved due to both internal and external reasons. Vietnam’s economy fell into crisis and stagnation and people’s lives were difficult.”<sup>9</sup> In 1975, Vietnam had been at war with little break since 1946 and so it should not be too surprising that leaders who had excelled as generals were not able to fluidly translate those skills into managing a peace-time government bureaucracy. Still trying to wring war-time quantities of aid from the USSR and China, Vietnamese leadership was slow to appreciate that, as noted in a state-published history, “there was a new difficulty because we could obtain the assistance and cooperation of our friends only when our friends found the economic cooperation with us practically advantageous and when we could maintain their confidence in trade relations and cooperation.”<sup>10</sup> An even more critical assessment of the situation was described in the memoirs of Bui Tin, the Deputy Editor of the Communist Party newspaper: “overall our leaders were unaccustomed to handling diverse opinions. Above all, they could not tolerate economic and technical advice. Previously everything from sophisticated weaponry down to basic food supplies had been provided by either the Soviet Union or China. Now in the time of peace after 1975, the leadership failed to study matters clearly and scientifically.”<sup>11</sup> Having won the war, “most of the top leaders were in their sixties and thought increasingly about their families, their children, their homes and property. That is easy to understand. They were human beings not saints. Few of them could resist the lure

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<sup>9</sup>“History.” Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs, January 6, 2016. [https://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/tt\\_vietnam/history/](https://www.mofa.gov.vn/en/tt_vietnam/history/).

<sup>10</sup>Luu Văn Lợi. “National Reconstruction.” Essay. In *Fifty Years of Vietnamese Diplomacy: 1945-1995*, 324. Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 2006.

<sup>11</sup>Tin, Bui. “Arrogance.” Essay. In *Following Ho Chi Minh: Memoirs of a North Vietnamese Colonel*, translated by Judith A. Stowe and Do Van, 103. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1995.



of materialism.”<sup>12</sup> In terms of macroeconomics, as described by the Cambodian author Kosal Path, after the war “Vietnam’s import of raw materials from China drastically dropped to an insignificant level. In 1975, Vietnam’s import of raw materials from China amounted to 750 million yuan, then decreased to 100 million yuan in 1976, and again fell to 43 million yuan in 1977.”<sup>13</sup> Moreover, “Moscow was not forthcoming with its aid delivery because it wanted to pressure Hanoi to cut ties with Beijing.”<sup>14</sup>

With Vietnam having lost the leverage of fighting the ‘Vietnam War’, the USSR imposed a “reduction of its aid to the lowest level in 1976 in response to the [Vietnam’s] rejection of the Soviet proposal for naval access to the Cam Ranh Bay and refusal to join the Soviet-led Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON).”<sup>15</sup> Further worsening the economic crisis, on July 3rd, 1978 China cut off all economic aid to Vietnam, forcing the smaller nation to desperately seek better economic relations with the Soviet Union and the United States. The Americans were unreceptive, and “following the victory of communist North Vietnam over U.S.-backed South Vietnam in 1975, the United States ended virtually all economic interchange with unified Vietnam. The commercial restrictions included not only those that previously had been imposed only on North Vietnam, but also a halt to bilateral humanitarian aid, opposition to financial aid from international financial institutions (such as the World Bank), a ban on US travel to Vietnam, and an embargo on bilateral trade.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Tin, Bui. “Arrogance.” Essay. In *Following Ho Chi Minh: Memoirs of a North Vietnamese Colonel*, translated by Judith A. Stowe and Do Van, 98. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1995.

<sup>13</sup>Path, Kosal. “China’s Economic Sanctions against Vietnam, 1975–1978.” *The China Quarterly* 212 (2012): 1049.

<sup>14</sup>ibid

<sup>15</sup>ibid

<sup>16</sup>Manyin, Mark E. “The Vietnam-US Bilateral Trade Agreement.” Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, 2001.

Vietnam also failed to adapt to a peace-time diplomatic footing. As described in the 2006 state-published *Fifty Years of Vietnamese Diplomacy*, after the end of the ‘Vietnam War’, “we did not fully understand the situation of Southeast Asian countries and were still imbued with the two-camp ideology of the cold war period.”<sup>17</sup> Vietnam did not sensitively negotiate the normalization of relations with the United States after the end of the ‘Vietnam War.’ As noted in *Vietnam: A Country Study*, which was created by the US State Department, “following the war, Hanoi pursued the establishment of diplomatic relations with the United States, initially in order to obtain US\$3.3 billion in reconstruction aid, which President Richard M. Nixon had secretly promised after the Paris Agreement was signed in 1973.”<sup>18</sup> While Vietnam had included war damages in a secret clause of the 1973 Paris Peace Agreement which pulled US troops out of the nation, that same treaty demanded that North Vietnam not invade the South. Therefore, when the topic of normalizing relations was brought up by Vietnam in 1975, “Washington neglected [Vietnam’s] call for normal relations, however, because it was predicated on reparations, and the Washington political climate in the wake of the war precluded the pursuit of such an outcome.”<sup>19</sup> After years of fruitless back-and-forth negotiations, Vietnam dropped its demand for reparations before normalization in mid-1978. In what would remain the last serious effort to advance normalization for nearly a decade, Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Co “Thach urged [renewed negotiations in] November 1978, a date that in retrospect is significant because he was due in Moscow to sign the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union, Washington was noncommittal.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Luu Văn Lợi. “National Reconstruction.” Essay. In *Fifty Years of Vietnamese Diplomacy: 1945-1995*, 326. Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 2006.

<sup>18</sup>Cima, Ronald J. “Foreign Relations.” Essay. In *Vietnam: A Country Study*. Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1989. <https://countrystudies.us/vietnam/62.htm>.

<sup>19</sup>ibid

<sup>20</sup>ibid

Consequently, “policy makers in Hanoi correctly reasoned that the United States had opted to strengthen its ties with China rather than with Vietnam, and they moved to formalize their ties with the Soviets in response” and on November 3 1978, signed The Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) which tied Vietnam’s fate to that of the USSR until the end of the Cold War.<sup>21</sup> The new alliance between the USSR and Vietnam severely aggravated the palpable tension in Southeast Asia. Vietnam was now, in the eyes of its neighbors, an outpost of the Soviet Union and thus this alliance utterly alarmed China, the United States, Cambodia, and Thailand.

### **Escalation between Vietnam and Democratic Kampuchea**

Most historians consider the Cambodia Conflict to have begun on December 25th 1978, when Vietnam invaded, and began a ten year occupation of, Cambodia. In terms of military history, this definition is quite logical because this date sparks the contiguous war wherein the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), established with the backing of Vietnam and the Soviet Union, fought Democratic Kampuchea (DK)/ The Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF) / The National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC) insurgency, which was fostered by the China, the Association of Southeast Asian States (ASEAN), and the United States. In terms of diplomatic history, however, a state of ‘war’ between Vietnam and Democratic Kampuchea more accurately had been the state of affairs since 1977. As noted in an Vietnamese-published pamphlet from 1979, “while in 1975-76 in Kampuchea efforts were concentrated on eliminating the followers of Lon

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<sup>21</sup>ibid

Nol and Sihanouk, from April 1977 onward they were directed against the Socialist Republic of Vietnam now labeled the number-one enemy.”<sup>22</sup> More explicitly, as put in a 1990 Vietnamese state-published encyclopedia, there was an undeclared but “real war in April 1977 along the 1000-km long border between Vietnam and [Democratic] Kampuchea waged by a force scores of thousands strong with support from heavy artillery and tanks of the [Democratic] Kampuchean army” which lasted months until an uneasy ceasefire was established later that year.<sup>23</sup>

### **Opposing Narratives of How the War Began**

In the view of Vietnam and the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), the roots of the ‘Cambodian Civil War’ war could be traced thusly: “The Kampuchean patriots launched a massive offensive by their forces in the spring of 1975 and overthrew the anti-popular Lon Nol regime on April 17. The pro-Peking group headed by Pol Pot, however, took advantage of the victory. By deceiving, intriguing, and secretly eliminating its political opponents, it managed to worm its way into the leadership of the national liberation movement.”<sup>24</sup> Contrasting with the orthodox Marxism practiced by the Vietnamese and aspired to by Cambodian patriots, “the domestic and foreign policy of the Pol Pot-Ieng Sary regime was guided by the ideological and practical principles that once underlied the Chinese ‘great cultural revolution’ and that today have been condemned in China itself.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Essay. In *The Vietnam-Kampuchea Conflict: A Historical Record*, 21. Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1979.

<sup>23</sup>“History.” Essay. In *The Socialist Republic of Vietnam*, 48. Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 1990.

<sup>24</sup>“The Beginning of the Tragedy.” Essay. In *Undeclared War against the People's Republic of Kampuchea*, 7. Phnom Penh: Press Department of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of the PRK, 1985.

<sup>25</sup>“The Beginning of the Tragedy.” Essay. In *Undeclared War against the People's Republic of Kampuchea*, 8. Phnom Penh: Press Department of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of the PRK, 1985.

In contrast, the Khmer Rouge saw the conflict in the frame of “Vietnam [being an] aggressor, annexationist and swallower of territories which, in Hitler’s style, has put conditions on Democratic Kampuchea” and the PRK was seen as an illegitimate puppet government.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, the Khmer Rouge held the position that “if Vietnam immediately stops its aggression against Kampuchea, the war would stop automatically.”<sup>27</sup> Throughout the conflict, the wider Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK), which was created in 1982 to place all the rebel factions under a single UN-seated government, would consistently and “forcefully stress that the nature of the conflict in Cambodia is not at all a civil war among Cambodians, but a war of aggression and a colonization carried out by Vietnam.”<sup>28</sup>

### **The Vietnamese Invasion**

Despite insisting on calling the conflict a civil war, even the Vietnamese sources struggle to make a convincing argument that it was an unplanned intervention in a genuinely organic civil war. More precisely, Vietnam insists that “on December 2, 1978, in the liberated zone of Cambodia, Heng Samrin and the representatives of the patriotic forces opposing the Pol Pot Regime held a congress to found the National United Front for Salvation of Kampuchea (NUFSK).”<sup>29</sup> Soon after, “the NUFSK contacted Vietnam and requested its assistance. When Pol Pot troops attacked Vietnam, the armed forces of the Front, though small, coordinated with the

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<sup>26</sup>“By Way Of Conclusion.” Essay. In *Black Paper: Facts and Evidence of the Acts of Aggression and Annexation of Vietnam Against Kampuchea*, 87. Phnom Penh: Department of Press and Information of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Democratic Kampuchea, 1978.

<sup>27</sup>“By Way Of Conclusion.” Essay. In *Black Paper: Facts and Evidence of the Acts of Aggression and Annexation of Vietnam Against Kampuchea*, 88. Phnom Penh: Department of Press and Information of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Democratic Kampuchea, 1978.

<sup>28</sup>“Joint Statement of the Three Leaders of the Cambodian National Resistance.” *National Army of Democratic Kampuchea*, 1989, 5.

<sup>29</sup> Lư Văn Lợi. “From Democratic Cambodia to People's Cambodia.” Essay. In *Fifty Years of Vietnamese Diplomacy: 1945-1995*, 389. Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 2006.

People's Army of Vietnam and headed for Phnom Penh for the liberation of the capital" in a lightning two-week war.<sup>30</sup>

Regardless of the details that underlie Vietnamese troops entering Cambodia, by spring 1979, Vietnam had largely defeated the Khmer Rouge in a conventional war for effective governance of the nation. While defeating the Khmer Rouge in conventional war was not particularly challenging given the insurmountable power disparity, the following guerilla war (and more particularly the use of insurgency tactics such as hit-and-run attacks on symbolic targets by the rebels) was far more taxing on the Vietnamese state both in financial and political terms. As described in the memoirs of Bui Tin, the Deputy Editor of the Vietnamese Communist Party newspaper, "[one of] our mistakes was to consider the Khmer Rouge as crippled — remnants which would soon be eliminated completely. We ignored the fact that they were likely to receive sympathy and support from the Thais and Chinese. We also totally ignored the role of Prince Sihanouk."<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, Tin explains that "[Vietnamese forces] remained in Cambodia far too long... Within the [Vietnamese Communist] Party, it was explained that we were carrying out our international proletarian duty in strengthening the Revolution and expanding it to other countries. But among the people it was regarded as the equivalent of inviting oneself into a house belonging to somebody else."<sup>32</sup> The invasion may have lasted hardly ten weeks, but Vietnam never suspected it would remain embroiled in conflict within Cambodia for the next ten years. For more than a decade, the Vietnamese-established PRK government would face three Thailand-based, and US/PRC-backed, rebel groups: the Khmer Rouge led by the communist

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<sup>30</sup> Lưu Văn Lợi. "From Democratic Cambodia to People's Cambodia." Essay. In *Fifty Years of Vietnamese Diplomacy: 1945-1995*, 390. Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 2006.

<sup>31</sup> Tin, Bui. "Adventurism." Essay. In *Following Ho Chi Minh: Memoirs of a North Vietnamese Colonel*, translated by Judith A. Stowe and Do Van, 124. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1995.

<sup>32</sup> Tin, Bui. "Adventurism." Essay. In *Following Ho Chi Minh: Memoirs of a North Vietnamese Colonel*, translated by Judith A. Stowe and Do Van, 122. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1995.

genocidaire Pol Pot, the National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC) led by Prince Norodom Sihanouk, and the Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF) led by a former Prime Minister, Son Sann.

### **Questions of Legitimacy at the United Nations**

For the first half of the conflict, Vietnam strongly held the position that “a solution to the Kampuchean problem can no longer be imposed from outside, even if tens of international conferences are held. Everything relating to Kampuchea should be settled directly by the [PRK].”<sup>33</sup> In terms of international law, the PRK and Vietnam considered that “the reactionary Pol Pot–Ieng Sary clique have usurped the leadership of the [Khmer Rouge]”, justifying the creation of the PRK as and its significant ‘fraternal’ support.<sup>34</sup> The United Nations (UN), however, never acknowledged the PRK as the legitimate government of Cambodia. Instead, under diplomatic pressure from ASEAN, the PRC, and the US, the UN simply never acknowledged that Democratic Kampuchea had ceased to be the effective government of Cambodia. ASEAN, in particular, vigorously lobbied on behalf of Democratic Kampuchea (DK), and then subsequently on behalf of DK’s 1982 successor, the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK). Whereas DK was a direct continuation of the Khmer Rouge government, the CGDK was established in 1982 (under US and ASEAN pressure) because it incorporated into the new ‘coalition government’ Norodom Sihanouk’s FUNCINPEC and Son Sann’s KPNLF rebel factions. As described by Fawthrop and Jarvis in *Getting Away with Genocide?: Elusive Justice and the Khmer Rouge Tribunal*, “Prince Norodom Sihanouk, a

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<sup>33</sup>Viên Nguyễn Khắc, and Corrèze Françoise. “Problems of a Recovery.” Essay. In *Kampuchea 1981: Eyewitness Reports*, 7. Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 1981.

<sup>34</sup>“Declaration of the National United Front For the Salvation of Kampuchea.” Essay. In *The Vietnam-Kampuchea Conflict: A Historical Record*, 44. Hanoi: The Gioi Press, 1979.

respected international statesman of the 1960s and a founding member of the non-aligned movement, was the perfect figurehead for the new [CGDK] coalition.”<sup>35</sup> In practice, “little had changed – the Khmer Rouge still retained its diplomats in their postings and Pol Pot’s flag still fluttered outside the UN headquarters.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, all three rebel groups (including the Khmer Rouge) were placed under the umbrella of UN legitimacy.

Between 1979-1989, ASEAN proposed, and successfully passed, an annual resolution called ‘The Situation in Kampuchea’ which reaffirmed the legitimacy of DK (later the CGDK) and demanded Vietnam withdraw its troops from Cambodia. The wording of these annual resolutions can be extremely insightful into trends in international opinion on the Cambodia Conflict over time. Between 1981-1989, every one of these annual resolutions contained an identical clause “Deploring that foreign armed intervention continues and that foreign forces have not been withdrawn from Kampuchea.”<sup>37</sup> Beginning in 1986, as the USSR began to pull its support for Vietnam in the conflict, every following annual resolution even more explicitly included a clause “Noting the continued and effective struggle waged against foreign occupation by the Coalition.”<sup>38</sup> With a careful avoidance of the word ‘genocide’ that would find its way into the final Paris Peace Accords, only in 1988 did the annual resolution begin to include a watered-down clause arguing for “the non-return to the universally condemned policies of a recent past.”<sup>39</sup> As described by Fawthrop and Jarvis, DK and its CGDK successor “continued to sit as Cambodia’s representatives in the Human Rights Commission in Geneva, and they were able to

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<sup>35</sup>Fawthrop, Tom, and Helen Jarvis. “Sympathy for the Devil.” Essay. In *Getting Away with Genocide?: Elusive Justice and the Khmer Rouge Tribunal*, 69. Sydney: UNSW Press, 2005.

<sup>36</sup>ibid

<sup>37</sup>Haas, Michael. “Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly, 26 October 1981.” Essay. In *Documents of the United Nations on Cambodia, 1979-1989*, 1, 1990.

<sup>38</sup>Haas, Michael. “Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly, 27 October 1986.” Essay. In *Documents of the United Nations on Cambodia, 1979-1989*, 2, 1990.

<sup>39</sup>Haas, Michael. “Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly, 22 December 1988.” Essay. In *Documents of the United Nations on Cambodia, 1979-1989*, 2, 1990.



exploit all opportunities to hijack the agenda and bury the genocide issue... diverting attention from their bloody record by introducing resolutions attacking Vietnam's invasion and occupation as violations of human rights and the right to self-determination."<sup>40</sup> Thus, the creation of an internationally recognized court to try the Khmer Rouge on charges of genocide only occurred in 1997 six years after a peace agreement was concluded to end the Cambodia Conflict.

### **The Refugee Crisis**

As a result of the Cambodian Genocide and the conflict between DK and Vietnam, "from 1975 until the Vietnamese 'imposed liberation' in December 1978, which toppled the Khmer Rouge but installed a new communist regime in Phnom Penh, more than 400,000 people had fled Cambodia, with 34,000 going to Thailand."<sup>41</sup> Worsening the situation for these refugees, "Thailand was and still is not signatory to the United Nations 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees or its 1967 Protocol. In agreements signed with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) from 1975 onward, however, Thailand waived enforcement of immigration policy and recognized the competence of UNHCR to assist refugees in designated camps."<sup>42</sup> After Vietnam occupied Cambodia in 1978 and thus had an armed presence on the Thai border, these refugee camps found themselves on the front line of a guerilla war. As put even by Vietnamese sources: "Thailand, the close neighbor of Cambodia, was afraid that Vietnam would attack it primarily because it was supporting Pol Pot troops. This was

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<sup>40</sup>Fawthrop, Tom, and Helen Jarvis. "Keeping Pol Pot in the UN Cambodia Seat." Essay. In *Getting Away with Genocide?: Elusive Justice and the Khmer Rouge Tribunal*, 36. Sydney: UNSW Press, 2005.

<sup>41</sup>Robinson, Courtland. "Refugee warriors at the Thai-Cambodian border." *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 19, no. 1 (2000): 23.

<sup>42</sup>ibid

understandable.”<sup>43</sup> With the active support of the Thai government and the acquiescence of the international community, these refugee camps in Thailand effectively became military bases for those forces opposing the Vietnamese-backed People Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) regime. Hence, refugee camps became strategic targets in the Cambodia Conflict. As noted in a later report from a UN observer, the camps were both in practice and “in the minds of the [rebel] faction leaders, the main supply source for the [rebels] in terms of money, equipment, food, medicine, personnel. As an indication of this, a Khmer Rouge leader told us that [UN aid officials] and the NGOs could enter his camp provided that they did not prevent their supplies from ‘serving the liberation.’”<sup>44</sup> Thus, even those who truly wanted to help these refugee populations were forced to wrestle with the fact that “the humanitarian action has benefited political objectives” and the price of accessing the refugees was to serve as the logistics arm of the rebel movement.<sup>45</sup>

By the mid-1980s Vietnam had not solved its ‘Cambodia problem’ but rather found itself in an intractable stalemate, not unlike its patron, the Soviet Union, in Afghanistan. Facing a military quagmire, diplomatic isolation and economic stagnation, the Vietnamese were forced into a Faustian bargain between losing legitimacy by letting its people starve or losing legitimacy by abandoning key tenets communist ideology. Only after the fall of its Soviet patron in 1991 would Vietnam begin to embrace a new identity as foremost a Southeast Asian, rather than communist, nation.

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<sup>43</sup>Luu Văn Lợi. “The Cambodia Problem.” Essay. In *Fifty Years of Vietnamese Diplomacy: 1945-1995*, 402. Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 2006.

<sup>44</sup>Jennar, Raoul Marc. “325.804 Hostages: The Cambodians Imprisoned in the Camps in Thailand ” Essay. In *Cambodian Chronicles 1989-1996: Volume 1 Bungling a Peace Plan 1989-1991*, 203. Bangkok: White Lotus Books, 1998.

<sup>45</sup>ibid

Chapter 2: Vietnam's Occupation of Cambodia during the Fall of the USSR (1986)

How was the nation of Vietnam, which had been at war for its entire existence, able to adapt and survive in a changing world which threatened its entire ideological *raison d'être*? Although the Vietnamese economy suffered under its own brand of Soviet-style 'stagnation', its leadership no more felt the need to end its occupation of Cambodia than the Kremlin did of its occupation of Afghanistan. In the words of Bui Tin, the Deputy Editor of the Vietnamese Communist Party newspaper, "one of the consequences of our conflict with China and our move into Cambodia was that we became almost totally dependent on the Soviet Union... The rise to power of Gorbachev in the Soviet Union and the death of Le Duan in Vietnam provided the opportunity for a change in our relationship."<sup>46</sup> By December 1986, the Vietnamese leadership felt compelled to usher in reforms to both its economic and foreign policies after nearly two decades of conservatively following the Soviet approach to developed socialism. While Vietnam may not have experienced seismic political reform, and even after the December 1986 Sixth National Congress at least nominally maintained the stance that "solidarity and multiform cooperation with the Soviet Union is the key-stone of the foreign policy of our party and State", it was regardless abundantly clear to Vietnam's leadership that their nation's stability was becoming less certain.<sup>47</sup> The Vietnamese government was compelled to respond to the demands of its starving people by slowly embracing aspects of capitalist economics and coming to the negotiating table over the issue of Cambodia. As described in a 1986 Vietnamese newspaper article, "we have not yet fulfilled the overall target set by the 5th Congress, namely stabilizing in the main the socio-economic situation and the people's life... The mistakes and shortcomings in

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<sup>46</sup>Tin, Bui. "Renovation." Essay. In *Following Ho Chi Minh: Memoirs of a North Vietnamese Colonel*, translated by Judith A. Stowe and Do Van, 169. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1995.

<sup>47</sup>"Vietnam 1986-1990." *Vietnamese Studies*, 14, no. 84 (1986): 24.

the economic and social fields originated in shortcomings in the ideological, organizational and cadre work of the Party.”<sup>48</sup> The solution was to slowly devolve state economic power to a more local level: “The efficiency of centrally-run, unified and concentrated management should be ensured in spheres of national importance. At the same time, efforts should be made to ensure the initiative of local authorities at various levels in the economic and social management on a territorial basis.”<sup>49</sup> In this chapter, we will address how Vietnam dealt with the first major shocks of the ‘collapse of Communism’ that occurred in the late-1980s.

### **Sino-Soviet Normalization and The Vladivostok Speech**

As described in the memoirs of Qian Qichen, China’s Foreign Minister (1988-1998), when normalization negotiations began in 1982 between the USSR and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) began in 1982, China’s “conditions [for normalization] were that the Soviet Union must take the initiative to remove the ‘three major barriers’: it was to withdraw its troops from the Sino-Soviet border areas and the People’s Republic of Mongolia, withdraw its troops from Afghanistan, and persuade Vietnam to withdraw Vietnamese troops from Cambodia.”<sup>50</sup> Of these three, the issue of convincing Vietnam to pull out of Cambodia was openly considered the most important and the first condition that must be met. In practice, negotiations were glacial until Mikhail Gorbachev became General Secretary in 1985, because the USSR quite simply was unwilling to accede to any of the three demands. The USSR particularly insisted that negotiations between China and the Soviet Union “must not harm the interests of a third

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<sup>48</sup>“Vietnam 1986-1990.” *Vietnamese Studies*, 14, no. 84 (1986): 10-11.

<sup>49</sup>“Vietnam 1986-1990.” *Vietnamese Studies*, 14, no. 84 (1986): 19.

<sup>50</sup>Qichen, Qian. “Normalization of Sino-Soviet Relations.” Essay. In *Ten Episodes in China's Diplomacy*, 4. London: HarperCollins, 2006.

country”, that is to say Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Mongolia.<sup>51</sup> Despite these diplomatic challenges, China and the Soviet Union in 1984 signed (1) the Sino-Soviet Economic and Technological Cooperation Agreement and (2) the Sino-Soviet Economic Agreement on the Establishment of the Economic, Trade, and Science and Technology Cooperation Committee. In combination, these treaties effectively re-established trade relations between the PRC and the USSR. Consequently, “the total volume of trade between China and the Soviet Union increased from 2.65 billion Swiss francs in 1984 to 4.6 billion Swiss francs in 1985.”<sup>52</sup> As described in Kosal Path’s *Vietnam’s Strategic Thinking During The Third Indochina War*, China “was aggressively making inroads into markets in the Soviet bloc and undercutting Vietnam’s exports to those markets. As relations between China and the Soviet bloc improved, China gained access to its markets.”<sup>53</sup> As the Sino-Soviet split began to resolve, the USSR literally became increasingly invested in appeasing China over Vietnam.

Gorbachev’s July 28, 1986, Vladivostok Speech marked a seismic shift in Soviet foreign policy. First, he announced that the Soviet Union was negotiating with Mongolia to pull out an undetermined quantity of troops from the Chinese border. Second, Gorbachev declared that the USSR was pulling out six regiments of troops from Afghanistan and would withdraw if ‘foreign interference’ in the conflict ceased. Third, he stated that the Cambodia Conflict was an issue between Vietnam and China and encouraged both sides to bilaterally negotiate a settlement. In one short speech, Gorbachev gave in to all three Chinese conditions and abandoned both Afghanistan and Vietnam. In the aftermath of the speech, China’s ‘paramount leader’, Deng

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<sup>51</sup>Qichen, Qian. “Normalization of Sino-Soviet Relations.” Essay. In *Ten Episodes in China's Diplomacy*, 7. London: HarperCollins, 2006.

<sup>52</sup>Qichen, Qian. “Normalization of Sino-Soviet Relations.” Essay. In *Ten Episodes in China's Diplomacy*, 17. London: HarperCollins, 2006.

<sup>53</sup> Path, Kosal. “The Road to Doi Moi.” Essay. In *Vietnam's Strategic Thinking During The Third Indochina War*, 189. Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2020.

Xiaoping, told an American reporter on September 2, that Cambodia remained the PRC's top priority and that if Gorbachev made a material action on the topic then he would meet Gorbachev anywhere in the USSR for a formal meeting to discuss further normalizing relations. As put by Qichen, "As a matter of fact, this was an official response to Gorbachev's speech at Vladivostok."<sup>54</sup>

### **The USSR under Gorbachev**

After two Soviet General Secretaries were appointed, and almost immediately died of old age in the early 1980s, the election of the spry Mikhail Gorbachev in March 1985 marked a turning point. His leadership established permanent pressure in both the USSR and its client states to shift away from 'archaic' Marxist orthodoxy to a more 'modern' interpretation of Communism. As the mainstay of this transition, he particularly advocated for the implementation of two new concepts: *perestroika* (economic liberalization) and *glasnost* (political transparency). While Vietnam vigorously took to the former, it was much more coy on the latter. For Vietnam, now losing ties with USSR, new inspiration drew increasingly from the Southeast Asian 'tiger economies' given the distasteful history viscerally remembered and actively experienced in relation to China and the United States. In the late-1980s, few states in Southeast Asia were democracies, yet most of the region had thriving economies which were rapidly outpacing Vietnam. According to World Bank data, in 1986, Vietnam had an annual GDP growth rate of just 2.8 percent.<sup>55</sup> By contrast, GDP growth was 5.5 percent for Thailand, 5.8 percent for

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<sup>54</sup>Qichen, Qian. "Normalization of Sino-Soviet Relations." Essay. In *Ten Episodes in China's Diplomacy*, 20. London: HarperCollins, 2006.

<sup>55</sup>"GDP Growth (Annual %) - Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, China, United States, United Kingdom, Korea, Rep." Data. The World Bank. Accessed October 12, 2022. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?contextual=default&end=1986&locations=VN-TH-ID-CN-US-GB-KR&start=1986&view=bar&year=1986>.

Indonesia, and 11.3 percent for South Korea.<sup>56</sup> Vietnamese leadership sought to partake in the rapid economic growth experienced by its neighbors, rather than dramatically exchange communism for capitalism.

### **Politics on the Thai-Cambodian Frontier**

Relations between Vietnam, however, and its neighbors, especially those in the Association of Southeast Asian States (ASEAN), were frosty over its occupation of Cambodia. Vietnam accused the entire Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) of being an unreformed front for the Khmer Rouge, which had previously held the Cambodian seat at the UN under the moniker of Democratic Kampuchea (DK).<sup>57</sup> The DK name was used until an agreement was reached under the guise of the Association of Southeast Asian States (ASEAN) to reorganize the rebel groups under the wider CGDK umbrella. The rebels could hardly have dreamt of being so cohesive as the Vietnamese implied. The CGDK was in practice little more than a diplomatic framework that provided legitimacy to, and ensured that there was no active belligerency among, the three main rebel groups opposing the Vietnamese-backed People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK).<sup>58</sup> The three rebel groups were: the Khmer Rouge, confusingly still officially calling itself Democratic Kampuchea (DK); the Royalist National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC); and the Right-wing Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF).<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> *ibid*

<sup>57</sup>Luu Văn Lợi. "From Democratic Cambodia to People's Cambodia." Essay. In *Fifty Years of Vietnamese Diplomacy: 1945-1995*, 390. Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 2006.

<sup>58</sup>Nhem, Boraden. "The Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea: the Enemy of My Enemy Is Not Necessarily My Friend." Essay. In *Chronicle of a People's War: The Military and Strategic History of the Cambodian Civil War*, 73. Routledge Studies in Modern History. New York, NY: Routledge, 2018.

<sup>59</sup>Nhem, Boraden. "The Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea: the Enemy of My Enemy Is Not Necessarily My Friend." Essay. In *Chronicle of a People's War: The Military and Strategic History of the Cambodian Civil War*, 49. Routledge Studies in Modern History. New York, NY: Routledge, 2018.

By the mid-1980s, Vietnam's goals were to ensure that China would not threaten its sovereignty and that the Khmer Rouge would not return to power. As put in a 1991 Western study, negotiations were grid-locked for the first half of the Cambodia Conflict in large part because "Hanoi's deployment of substantial troops in Cambodia to sustain the PRK was justified under the terms of a 1979 security treaty signed between the two parties. Thus, Hanoi rejected the view that it was a direct party to the Cambodia situation. In this context, the Vietnamese argued that their troops stationed in Cambodia served as a defensive move to counter the threat of Chinese expansionism into both Cambodia and Vietnam. Thus, a Vietnamese withdrawal could only be possible after the Chinese threat receded."<sup>60</sup> While Vietnam had been drawing down its overall troop strength in Cambodia since 1982, the question of when, if ever, all Vietnamese troops would permanently leave the nation remained open. On August 18th, 1985, Vietnam and the PRK announced that all Vietnamese troops would leave Cambodia by 1990, with the possibility of leaving sooner "if in the forthcoming years a political solution of the so-called Kampuchean problem is reached."<sup>61</sup> Prince Sihanouk, leader of FUNCINPEC, dismissed these claims, stating that "maybe by then there will be so many Vietnamese in [PRK leader] Heng Samrin's army or just living in Kampuchea that Vietnam will be able to withdraw, leaving behind the Vietnamese."<sup>62</sup> In particular, CGDK sources argued that Cambodia's ethnic-Vietnamese population, inflated by new settlers from Vietnam, were partisan occupiers incapable of placing loyalty to the Cambodian nation over their Vietnamese homeland. Therefore, the

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<sup>60</sup>Acharya, Amitav, Lizée Pierre, and Sorpong Peou. "Introduction." Essay. In *Cambodia--the 1989 Paris Peace Conference: Background Analysis and Documents*, xxiii. Millwood, NY: Kraus International Publications, 1991.

<sup>61</sup>"The Enemies' Schemes Are Doomed To Failure." Essay. In *Undeclared War against the People's Republic of Kampuchea*, 70. Phnom Penh: Press Department of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of the PRK, 1985.

<sup>62</sup>"Introduction." Essay. In *Documents on the Kampuchean Problem 1979-1985*, vii. Bangkok: Thai Watana Panich Press, 1985.



withdrawal of Vietnamese regular forces would be a step in the right direction, but, given the ‘infiltration’ of ethnic Vietnamese into Cambodian society, withdrawal itself would not decisively constitute an exit of Vietnam from what the CGDK deemed a war of foreign aggression.<sup>63</sup>

### **The Sixteen Camps Campaign**

Between November 1984 and March 1985, Vietnam’s largest dry-season offensive in the Cambodia Conflict resulted in the destruction of every single camp controlled by the CGDK and consequently gained the appellation of ‘The Sixteen Camps Campaign.’<sup>64</sup> Though the dry-season offensive nominally targeted the entire CGDK, it crippled the KPNLF and FUNCINPEC while leaving the Khmer Rouge mostly unscathed. Whereas the KPNLF and FUNCINPEC strove to establish state structures to reinforce their claims to being the legitimate government of Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge effectively embraced its position as an insurgency after its catastrophic losses in the conventionally-fought Vietnamese Invasion of Cambodia in 1978-79.<sup>65</sup> After The Sixteen Camps Campaign, Thailand leveled accusations that “along the Thai-Kampuchean border, no fewer than ten serious actions of violation of Thailand’s territorial integrity were committed by Vietnamese forces.”<sup>66</sup> Vietnam vehemently rejected these claims.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup>Department of Press and Information of the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea, *Mastermind of the Indochina Federation* § (1986).

<sup>64</sup>Nhem, Boraden. “The Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea: the Enemy of My Enemy Is Not Necessarily My Friend.” Essay. In *Chronicle of a People's War: The Military and Strategic History of the Cambodian Civil War*, 82. Routledge Studies in Modern History. New York, NY: Routledge, 2018.

<sup>65</sup>Nhem, Boraden. “The Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea: the Enemy of My Enemy Is Not Necessarily My Friend.” Essay. In *Chronicle of a People's War: The Military and Strategic History of the Cambodian Civil War*. Routledge Studies in Modern History. New York, NY: Routledge, 2018.

<sup>66</sup>“Introduction.” Essay. In *Documents on the Kampuchean Problem 1979-1985*, iv. Bangkok: Thai Watana Panich Press, 1985.

<sup>67</sup>“Chronology 1985.” *Vietnamese Studies*, 14, no. 84 (1986): 165.

The PRK retorted with its own list of thousands of claimed incursions by Thailand into its own territory between 1979 to 1985.<sup>68</sup>

In practice, throughout the 1980s the Thai-Cambodian border was itself simply one battlefield of many in the Cambodia Conflict. As a result of The Sixteen Camps Campaign, by March 1985, “more than 100,000 [refugees] had fled into Thailand. Counting the 45,000 Cambodians still in evacuation sites from the 1983-84 offensives, the total of displaced Cambodians in Thailand neared 240,000. Unlike previous dry-season offensives, however, the Vietnamese forces did not withdraw in 1985 but dug into the border and began laying mines.”<sup>69</sup> Consequently, “the basic structure of the border camps - that is, closed camps for ‘displaced persons’ controlled by the Thai government, administered by the CGDK factions, and served by [the UN High Commission on Refugees] along with about 14 non-governmental organizations - remained intact from 1986 until voluntary repatriation commenced in March 1992.”<sup>70</sup>

### **Negotiations Begin in the Aftermath of the Sixteen Camps Campaign**

On March 17th 1986, the CGDK put forth an eight-point proposal for the settlement of the Cambodia Conflict. Namely, the proposal called for the staged withdrawal of Vietnamese troops, the formation of a quadripartite government with equal shares for each faction including the PRK, and UN-supervised elections. While the Vietnamese were, in principle, not against a negotiated settlement or withdrawing their troops, they could not tolerate giving the Khmer Rouge power in government. As described in a Singaporean-sponsored history of the Cambodia

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<sup>68</sup>“Where The Enemies Come From.” Essay. In *Undeclared War against the People's Republic of Kampuchea*, 38. Phnom Penh: Press Department of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of the PRK, 1985.

<sup>69</sup>Robinson, Courtland. "Refugee warriors at the Thai-Cambodian border." *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 19, no. 1 (2000): 29.

<sup>70</sup>Robinson, Courtland. "Refugee warriors at the Thai-Cambodian border." *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 19, no. 1 (2000): 31.

Conflict, “while the Vietnamese response was disappointing, it was not unexpected as there was the common perception that the Vietnamese position was unlikely to change and Vietnam was not yet ready for a political solution as it was going through a period of leadership transition” much like its larger Soviet patron.<sup>71</sup>

Despite these impressive tactical victories by Vietnam in The Sixteen Camps Campaign, both sides of the Cambodia Conflict remained unwilling to negotiate, and the conflict fundamentally remained a quagmire that could only end with an agreement between Vietnam and the powers of China, the United States, the Soviet Union, and Thailand. Though Vietnam and PRK consistently outmatched the armies of the CGDK throughout the occupation, Vietnam found that time was on the side of the CGDK as the costs of the war became unsustainable. As described even in a 1985 publication by the zealously pro-CGDK government of Thailand, “no one including the CGDK expects that CGDK forces could militarily drive Vietnamese forces, the fourth largest in the world, back to their own country. But the CGDK believes that military struggle must go on to put pressure on Hanoi to begin the process for a political settlement in Kampuchea.”<sup>72</sup> For the Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach, the issue with a negotiated settlement was that “right now, [the leader of the PRK] has the whole cake in his pocket, but he is being asked to give away three-fourths of it for nothing [in the negotiated settlement proposal of the CGDK]” and even with rising costs they were unwilling to completely abandon the PRK.<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, the Vietnamese felt that “we can control Pol Pot along the

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<sup>71</sup>Guan, Ang Cheng. “The Vietnamese Announce Complete Troop Withdrawal by 1990 and JIM (I).” Essay. In *Singapore, ASEAN and the Cambodian Conflict, 1978-1991*, 97. Singapore: NUS Press, 2013.

<sup>72</sup>“Introduction.” Essay. In *Documents on the Kampuchean Problem 1979-1985*, vi. Bangkok: Thai Watana Panich Press, 1985.

<sup>73</sup>Muskie, Edmund S. “Vietnam.” Essay. In *Exploring Cambodia: Issues and Reality in a Time of Transition: Findings and Recommendations from the Visit to Thailand, Vietnam, and Cambodia Undertaken by Former U.S. Senator and Secretary of State Edmund S. Muskie*, 13. District of Columbia: Center for National Policy, 1990.

border. If we allow a quadripartite army, can we control the Khmer Rouge armed forces?"<sup>74</sup> As it already stood, "only the Khmer Rouge could maintain an expansive network among the population. Without the Khmer Rouge's acquiescence, it would be next to impossible for the non-communist forces to infiltrate into Cambodia" and granting the Khmer Rouge influence within a unified Cambodian military would inevitably end in catastrophe.<sup>75</sup>

### **The Sixth National Congress**

The Vietnamese economy in 1985 was in the midst of a crisis, and the start of the withdrawal of Soviet economic aid further worsened the situation. Quite simply, as described in a 1992 Vietnamese government publication, "in the early 1980s, Vietnam realized that stagnation in this country was caused by the system of centrally-controlled, bureaucratic subsidy-based administrative management, primarily in the area of the economy."<sup>76</sup> As experienced by average Vietnamese citizens, an article in a 1986 Vietnamese newspaper complained that "the quality of products still leaves much to be desired; they lag behind the international average by twenty to thirty years and do not satisfy consumers, worse still the quality of some products has decreased compared to the past."<sup>77</sup> In short, it was abundantly clear to the Vietnamese leadership that the economy was failing, the occupation of Cambodia had been disaster, and if change wasn't implemented soon in both areas then the current regime might collapse. Unfortunately, the

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<sup>74</sup>Muskie, Edmund S. "Cambodia." Essay. In *Exploring Cambodia: Issues and Reality in a Time of Transition: Findings and Recommendations from the Visit to Thailand, Vietnam, and Cambodia Undertaken by Former U.S. Senator and Secretary of State Edmund S. Muskie*, 22. District of Columbia: Center for National Policy, 1990.

<sup>75</sup>Nhem, Boraden. "The Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea: the Enemy of My Enemy Is Not Necessarily My Friend." Essay. In *Chronicle of a People's War: The Military and Strategic History of the Cambodian Civil War*, 89. Routledge Studies in Modern History. New York, NY: Routledge, 2018.

<sup>76</sup>"Publisher's Note." Essay. In *Vietnam: One Year after the 7th National Party Congress*, 5. Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 1992.

<sup>77</sup>"Light Industry" *Vietnamese Studies*, 19, no. 89 (1986): 150.

conservative faction in the Vietnamese government was strong and rebuffed any serious effort at reform in any field.

On July 10th, 1986 the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam, Le Duan, died. Far more conservative than his successors, Le Duan had been in practice the most powerful man in Vietnam from the passing of Ho in 1969 until his own death 17 years later. As shown in the 5th National Congress in 1982, Le Duan stubbornly resisted any advocacy for any real reform, angrily stating that “some party members [had] failed to ‘uphold revolutionary quality’...we must resolutely expel from the party as soon as possible all opportunists, all those whose revolutionary spirit has been paralyzed.”<sup>78</sup> In this kind of environment, any attack on the ossifying party line was stiflingly perceived as an attack upon Le Duan himself. After Duan’s death however, a long-time advocate for economic reform, Truong Chinh, took the mantle of interim General Secretary until the Sixth National Congress in December of that year. As described by Bui Tin, “[Truong Chinh] accepted the trend in the Soviet Union towards *perestroika* and *glasnost* and outlined a similar plan for economic renovation in Vietnam... since Truong Chinh was regarded as the first person to advocate [Doi Moi], his prestige increased considerably.”<sup>79</sup> While Chinh did not maintain anywhere near the grip on authority that was ruthlessly upheld by his predecessor Le Duan, in the first days of Congress there was significant support from southern and Hanoi delegates for a top leadership comprising Truong Chinh, Pham Van Dong and Vo Nguyen Giap.<sup>80</sup> However, “suddenly, when the Congress met to decide on which personalities to appoint, the Party Organizational Committee produced a completely

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<sup>78</sup>Elliot, David W.P. “On the Eve of Doi Moi.” Essay. In *Changing Worlds: Vietnam's Transition from Cold War to Globalization*, 45. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012.

<sup>79</sup>Tin, Bui. “Renovation.” Essay. In *Following Ho Chi Minh: Memoirs of a North Vietnamese Colonel*, translated by Judith A. Stowe and Do Van, 137. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1995.

<sup>80</sup>Tin, Bui. “Renovation.” Essay. In *Following Ho Chi Minh: Memoirs of a North Vietnamese Colonel*, translated by Judith A. Stowe and Do Van, 139. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1995.

different scenario. Nguyen Van Linh was to become Party General Secretary with Vo Chi Cong as Head of State and Pham Hung as Prime Minister” as a result of the machinations of the conservative politician Le Duc Tho.<sup>81</sup>

Despite the fact the leadership which emerged from the Congress was less reform-minded than initially anticipated by many within the politburo, the Sixth National Congress in December nonetheless introduced tangible economic reform and brought about the early beginnings of Vietnam’s entry into the global economy. At the conference, it was officially stated that a “policy of encouraging foreign investments in various forms shall be publicized, especially in those branches and enterprises for which high technology is needed and which produce goods for export. Along with the promulgation of the investment code, we should apply policies and measures to create favorable conditions for foreigners and overseas Vietnamese to come to our country for business cooperation.”<sup>82</sup> Efforts were also taken to reduce the size of the military by making it a more “compact and strong organization” in light of its current headcount being fourth largest in the world.<sup>83</sup> The most important result of the Sixth National Congress was that open discussion of Vietnam’s issues (and *realpolitik* solutions) became acceptable and thus dramatically widened the scope of possible options for Vietnamese leadership in grappling with the crumbling Soviet world order. Critically, Vietnamese officials began to actively work within a mindset that separated economic and ideological spheres; the economy of 1975-85 had been a disaster so the solution was to simply fix the economy, not abandon communism. More specifically, Vietnam’s reforms were put in place in large part in response to the inflation rate,

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<sup>81</sup>ibid

<sup>82</sup>Essay. In *6th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam, 15-18 December 1986*, 100. Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 1987.

<sup>83</sup>Essay. In *6th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam, 15-18 December 1986*, 40. Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 1987.

which in 1986 was a ludicrous 700 percent and would remain in the triple digits until 1989.<sup>84</sup> In the context of an already poor economy whose condition was continuing to destabilize the nation, implementing capitalistic economic policies was no longer seen as a threat to the Communist government whose political and foreign policy goals could be compartmentalized as separate from these reforms.

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<sup>84</sup>Van Arkadie, Brian, and Raymond Mallon. "Economic Growth Performance ." Essay. In *Viet Nam a Transition Tiger?*, 179. Canberra: ANU E Press, 2004.

### Chapter 3: Reforms and Withdrawals (1987-1989)

Up until the Sixth Party Congress in 1986, both the military and political situation in Indochina had remained rather static since the start of the war. However, the two year period from 1987 to 1989 witnessed seismic shifts in Southeast Asian geopolitics which would ultimately allow Cambodia to end its civil war and Vietnam to reenter the international community. December 1987 signaled the beginning of real progress in Cambodian negotiations, while that same month saw Vietnam sign into law the landmark Law on Foreign Investments which began the process of opening its economy. On the request of People's PRK Prime Minister Hun Sen, Prince Sihanouk, as the nominal head of the CGDK, discreetly met with him on December 2-4 in the rural French village of Fère-en-Tardenois, for the first time placing in the same room the two men who would ultimately inherit the post-war Cambodian state. Norodom Sihanouk was the most recent head of the dynasty which had ruled Cambodia as far back as 68 CE and was considered the legitimate monarch of Cambodia by much of the population. Accurately or not, he was the face nostalgically associated with the years 1953-70 when Cambodia had been a country not-at-war. Hun Sen was born into a poor peasant family in 1952, just a year before Cambodia became independent and Sihanouk the new nation's monarch. Hun Sen joined the Khmer Rouge in 1970 in response "to the appeal of Prince Sihanouk to Cambodians to join the war against the imperialists."<sup>85</sup> After defecting to the Vietnamese in 1977, he managed through a combination of luck and charisma to achieve the most powerful position in the Communist PRK government by the time he was just 33 in 1985. Whereas the Khmer Rouge could block a potential peace agreement, one simply could not achieve peace

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<sup>85</sup>"Personal Biography." Cambodia New Vision. The Cabinet Of Samdech Akka Moha Sena Padei Techo Hun Sen, November 16, 2022. [http://en.cnv.org.kh/?page\\_id=38](http://en.cnv.org.kh/?page_id=38).



without active agreement by Hun Sen and Sihanouk. By 1989, the PRK became nominally democratic, Vietnamese troops were permanently leaving Cambodia, and peace seemed in sight.

Meanwhile, domestically Vietnam finally put in place the Law on Foreign Investments in December 1987 which allowed Western investors into the country, albeit the US did not end its own embargo on the country for another seven years. Before its introduction “There was virtually no foreign investment, the technology gap between Vietnam and its neighbors was growing, visits by Vietnamese nationals to market economies were rare and, apart from a limited number of diplomats and aid workers, there were very few foreigners from market economies working in Viet Nam.”<sup>86</sup> Regardless of any newly introduced economic legislation, however, “Vietnam would be forced by its own declining economy to change [its geopolitical posture]. It needed jobs and Western investment that had been blocked by its Cambodian occupation.”<sup>87</sup> By 1989, the Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Van Linh was publicly stating that “there are native capitalists who are patriotic although their country is a socialist one.”<sup>88</sup> Though there were some incipient attempts at political reform in Vietnam in the late-1980s, none of them achieved any lasting impact and were generally snuffed out as weakly as they were propositioned. This chapter will first explore developments in Cambodian diplomacy to end the war and then discuss aspects of Vietnamese reform.

### **The Jakarta Informal Meetings (JIM I & II)**

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<sup>86</sup>Van Arkadie, Brian, and Raymond Mallon. “The Doi Moi Process.” Essay. In *Viet Nam a Transition Tiger?*, 66. Canberra: ANU E Press, 2004.

<sup>87</sup> Elliot, David W.P. “The Year of Living Dangerously.” Essay. In *Changing Worlds: Vietnam's Transition from Cold War to Globalization*, 68. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012.

<sup>88</sup>“Answers to Interviews at the Asian-Pacific Journalists Roundtable.” Essay. In *Answers by General Secretary of the CPVCC Nguyen Van Linh*, 55. The Gioi Publishers, 1989.

After the groundbreaking first meeting between Hun Sen and Sihanouk in December 1987, real movement began towards creating a more-inclusive peace conference which could hopefully get buy-in from every key actor. With that said, there remained a fundamental disagreement as to whether the conflict was ‘the Cambodian-Vietnamese War’ (implying the PRK was illegitimate) or ‘the Cambodian Civil War’ (implying the PRK is sovereign). Consequently, the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) insisted on negotiating solely with Vietnam, while Vietnam insisted it would not even be at the negotiating table and the CGDK was to negotiate solely with PRK representatives. Trying to overcome this paradox, Indonesia in July 1988 organized the First Jakarta Informal Meeting (JIM I). On the basis of it being a non-binding meeting to be held with a ‘cocktail party’ atmosphere, all four Cambodian factions for the first time agreed to at least nominally acknowledge the existence of each other and speak face-to-face. The meeting also revealed the divides beneath the surface of ASEAN. Thailand was adamant ASEAN make no concessions to Vietnam until Vietnamese troops were no longer on their border (an enclave of Vietnamese influence in Eastern Cambodia was not out of the question).<sup>89</sup> Indonesia, for its own part, held few qualms against Vietnam, and was open to appeasing them in order to gain cooperation so they could win prestige as host of a visibly successful conference.<sup>90</sup> The conference itself achieved little, but the very fact that the CGDK recognized the existence of the PRK faction as separate from Vietnam was a critical step forward in the process of finding peace. Vietnam, for its own part, conceded that it would be party to negotiations rather than only having the PRK at the negotiating table with the CGDK.<sup>91</sup> From 1988 onwards, negotiations became openly more focused on matters within Cambodia

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<sup>89</sup>Guan, Ang Cheng. “The Vietnamese Announce Complete Troop Withdrawal by 1990 and JIM (I).” Essay. In *Singapore, ASEAN and the Cambodian Conflict, 1978-1991*, 110. Singapore: NUS Press, 2013.

<sup>90</sup>ibid

<sup>91</sup>ibid

rather than the wider Cold War, and there was a common acknowledgement that it would be critical for the PRK to be party to any peace agreement. Vietnam's announcement in April 1989 that it would pull out Cambodia by 1990 regardless of outside circumstances furthermore pushed the conflict to being more of an 'internal affair' which consequently meant that ASEAN and the West were now forced to seriously grapple with the role of the Khmer Rouge. In an environment wherein even the CIA acknowledged that "[the non-Communist forces] are fragile, in our view, and no match militarily— and probably not politically—for the Communist Khmer Rouge or the incumbent PRK regime", Western powers had to critically evaluate the potential fallout of Khmer Rouge victory in the conflict as the PRK became crippled by the Vietnamese withdrawal.<sup>92</sup> Already in the days before the Communist PRK dramatically began its dramatic transformation into the capitalistic State of Cambodia (SOC) in April 1989, the CIA harbored deep concerns that "If the diplomatic process continues on its present course, even an internationally sanctioned agreement will not guarantee [the non-communists] a continuing role in government". and particularly described the KPNLF as "often self destructive."<sup>93</sup>

Still, there remained four major barriers to peace between the CGDK and PRK. First, there was no agreement on the deadline of complete Vietnamese withdrawal. Second, the CGDK insisted that the PRK (now acknowledged for the first time), must be dismantled before free elections take place. Third, the PRK demanded that the Khmer Rouge not be allowed in any new government. Fourth, significant disagreement remained as to the composition of a potential peacekeeping force especially given that the PRK viewed the UN to be a biased party in the

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<sup>92</sup>Directorate of Intelligence, *The Non-Communist Factions In Cambodia: The Challenges Ahead* [DELETED] § (1989). <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/0000242241>.

<sup>93</sup>ibid

conflict (albeit involvement of outside observers was accepted to be on the table by all negotiation parties).

The Second Jakarta Informal Meeting (JIM II), was, if anything, even less successful than JIM I. As noted by Son Soubert, the KPNLF's Minister of Foreign Affairs, in February 1989 "Indonesia was ready to host a Second Jakarta Meeting or JIM II. But the Khmer Rouge Democratic Kampuchea party was not ready and advocated further military actions; Prince Sihanouk from Beijing had also exchanged acrimonious statements with Mr Hun Sen. Obviously, the hosting of JIM II did not start well."<sup>94</sup> The relatively low hanging fruit of 'recognizing the other side exists' had been picked at JIM I, but the CGDK was unwilling to negotiate with the PRK on anything other than equal terms (relative to each individual rebel faction) and Vietnam refused to make any further concessions on the two overwhelming issues in which they had some control: the nature of a potential interim regime in Cambodia and the nature of international supervision.

### **The Phnom Penh Spring**

In April 1989, Hun Sen made two massive concessions to Prince Sihanouk that were designed to force the CGDK to reach a negotiated settlement with him or lose their legitimacy. First, on April 5th, the PRK and Vietnam announced that all Vietnamese troops would leave Cambodia by September. The next day, Sihanouk requested France organize the Paris Peace Conference which occurred in July 1989. Second, at least in form if not function, over April 29-

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<sup>94</sup>Sothirak, Pou, Geoff Wade, Mark Hong, and Son Soubert. "The 1991 Paris Peace Agreement: A KPNLF Perspective." Essay. In *Cambodia: Progress And Challenges Since 1991*, 170. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), 2012.

30, the PRK transformed from a ‘communist puppet of Vietnam’ into the free-market and ‘neutral’ State of Cambodia (SOC).

Like many so-called ‘one party’ states, the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party (KPRP) was hardly a ‘one faction’ state. In practice, the PRK government was split between Hun Sen’s *realpolitik* pro-reform faction and Heng Samrin’s Vietnamese-inspired conservative faction. In a tour de force aimed at undermining the heavy foreign accusation that the PRK was a Vietnamese puppet state, the chimeric Hun Sen faction dramatically removed this pillar of CGDK legitimacy by quite literally transforming into a different nation, albeit to the alarm of Heng Samrin and the Vietnamese. In a lightning session of the PRK National Assembly over April 29-30 1989, the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) ceased to exist, the State of Cambodia (SOC) was declared, the previously atheistic communist state with much flair now declared Buddhism to be the state religion, and a market economy with private property was established. On May 6th, 1989, the 9PM-5AM curfew which had been in force in Phnom Penh since January 1979 was for the first time lifted. All that remained of the CGDK’s *raison d’être* was their objection to the Vietnamese troops who remained in Cambodia, but they would leave in September 1989.

In terms of domestic political programme, the SOC and CGDK were now eerily similar thus diluting the CGDK’s claim of fighting a communist puppet of Vietnam. While Sihanouk publicly approved of these developments, internally they pushed the CGDK further into the intransigent positions of the Khmer Rouge just as the attention of the Paris Peace Conference brought the Cambodia Conflict into the spotlight of Western audiences. The wider CGDK began to be forced into Khmer Rouge dog whistles such as the figures that there were “30,000 Vietnamese troops in the ranks of the Cambodian army, 100,000 Vietnamese militiamen in SOC

uniforms, and 1,000,000 illegal Vietnamese immigrants.”<sup>95</sup> To the optimists observing the course of the war, and in the eyes of early international news coverage, it appeared that the Paris Peace Conference was about to finally end decades of strife in Cambodia. Unfortunately, Cambodia was about to face its greatest threat since the Khmer Rouge was forced out of Phnom Penh.

### **The Paris Peace Conference**

As noted by a 1991 retrospective study by a Canadian think tank, “A mood of cautious optimism prevailed among the participants at the opening of the conference. Many delegates believed that it provided the best chance thus far for a settlement of one of the bloodiest and intractable regional conflicts in the third world...At the end, the Paris conference was to fall far short of providing a decisive breakthrough toward the resolution of the Cambodian conflict.”<sup>96</sup> As mentioned in the memoirs of the Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen, “The United States had originally wanted to exclude the Khmer Rouge, and had advocated a settlement between only the three factions of Cambodia...[US Secretary of State] Baker said it was worrisome that the political settlement of the issue was turning it into a settlement on the battlefield. He said that he hoped that China would play an active role, and force the Khmer Rouge to accept a political settlement. If the Khmer Rouge wanted to settle the issue on the battlefield, the United States and the countries of ASEAN would not allow them to play any role in Cambodia’s future government.”<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup>Jennar, Raoul Marc. “Toward Negotiations” Essay. In *Cambodian Chronicles 1989-1996: Volume 1 Bungling a Peace Plan 1989-1991*, 5. Bangkok: White Lotus Books, 1998.

<sup>96</sup>Acharya, Amitav, Lizée Pierre, and Sorpong Peou. “Introduction.” Essay. In *Cambodia--the 1989 Paris Peace Conference: Background Analysis and Documents*, xxiii. Millwood, NY: Kraus International Publications, 1991.

<sup>97</sup>Qichen, Qian. “The Paris Conference on Cambodia.” Essay. In *Ten Episodes in China's Diplomacy*, 49. London: HarperCollins, 2006.

## Normalization of Sino-Soviet Relations

As a first step before a formal meeting between the national leaders Mikhail Gorbachev and Deng Xiaoping, the Chinese foreign minister Qian Qichen made an official visit to the USSR to speak with his Soviet counterpart Eduard Shevardnadze. During this meeting, the topic of the Cambodia Conflict was the issue both sides were most invested in resolving before the official meeting between heads of state. As put by Qichen, he told Shevardnadze “China’s view: a four-party coalition government headed by Prince Norodom Sihanouk should be put in place; the military force of all parties to the civil war in Cambodia should be frozen, reduced, and then dissolved; an international peacekeeping force should be stationed in Cambodia; and strict international surveillance and an international guarantee should be instituted.”<sup>98</sup> The Soviets were first and foremost simply concerned with removing the Cambodian issue, and though they disagreed with China on the exact details of a future Cambodian government they both crucially agreed that Vietnam must withdraw all its troops in the latter half of 1989.

In light of the successful December 1988 meeting between Qichen and Shevardnadze in the USSR, between May 15-18, 1989 Mikhail Gorbachev held a formal meeting with Deng Xiaoping in the PRC. As described by Qichen, “Through the summit meeting, China and the Soviet Union at least ended the abnormal situation that had lasted for decades, and once again established normal state to state relations.”<sup>99</sup> Consequently, going into the Paris Peace Conference that July, there was reason to be optimistic that with the end of the Sino-Soviet split a solution to the Cambodia Conflict may finally be reached.

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<sup>98</sup>Qichen, Qian. “Normalization of Sino-Soviet Relations.” Essay. In *Ten Episodes in China's Diplomacy*, 7. London: HarperCollins, 2006.

<sup>99</sup>Qichen, Qian. “Normalization of Sino-Soviet Relations.” Essay. In *Ten Episodes in China's Diplomacy*, 28. London: HarperCollins, 2006.

## Vietnamese Troops Leave Cambodia

Hun Sen's hopes that exposing CGDK's hypocrisy would affect real change in the international arena initially produced few dividends and discredited his otherwise laudable initiatives in the Phnom Penh Spring. Between September 21-26 1989, the last 26,000 Vietnamese troops finally left Cambodia but the international community simply chose not to acknowledge that fact. Hun Sen officially requested the UN to send a mission to confirm the complete withdrawal of Vietnamese forces on September 28, and on October 6 the Pentagon internally acknowledged that "from a strategic point of view, we can state without risk that the Vietnamese army has withdrawn from Cambodia", but by stubbornly claiming in public that Vietnamese troops remained, the legitimacy of the CGDK was able to stay intact for the time being.<sup>100</sup> The CGDK in fact never acknowledged that Vietnamese troops left Vietnam because doing so would have increased the credibility of the SOC as a legitimate natively-Cambodian government. Publications like Khieu Samphan's 1990 New Year's Address continued unabated in referring to there being "100,000 [Vietnamese] troops already in Cambodia and increasing fresh troops sent from Vietnam" even after they completely withdrew.<sup>101</sup> On November 16, the UN adopted its annual motion on Cambodia with a margin of 124 to 17, continuing the embargo despite the clear fact there were no longer any Vietnamese troops in Cambodia largely due to China's lobbying and rapidly-diminishing inertia on the part of the US and ASEAN who still had some remaining suspicions of Vietnam.

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<sup>100</sup> Jennar, Raoul Marc. "The Vietnamese Withdrawal." Essay. In *Cambodian Chronicles 1989-1996: Volume 1 Bungling a Peace Plan 1989-1991*, 22. Bangkok: White Lotus Books, 1998.

<sup>101</sup>"A New Turning Point of the Struggle of the Cambodian people (Excerpts from the 1990 New Year's Message of HE Mr Khieu Samphan Vice President of Democratic Kampuchea in charge of Foreign Affairs broadcast on 1 January 1990)" *National Army of Democratic Kampuchea*, 1986, 8.



The Vietnamese leadership were disappointed that the fact their withdrawal seemed meaningless in terms of ending the embargo despite previous promises from Western nations, and they were exasperated almost to the point of indifference with the military situation in Cambodia. Vietnamese leadership had a mindset of “trying to end the war in Kampuchea to concentrate our efforts on rebuilding the country.”<sup>102</sup> As described by Vietnamese Foreign Minister Thach in a meeting with former US Secretary of State Edmund Muskie, “the Vietnamese are only one pawn on the chessboard between China and the United States. We are no more. We are no less...regarding the United States and Vietnamese relations, we are not beggars; if you beg they don’t give you what you want anyway.”<sup>103</sup>

While ultimately a major strategic victory for the SOC regime, the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops tactically created an existential threat to the country’s ability to survive the subsequent flooding of rebel forces from the Thai borderlands. After the optimism of Spring, on October 30th curfew returned to Phnom Penh. To many Cambodians, the SOC in late-1989 appeared a makeshift facsimile of the Lon Nol regime in the days and months before the Khmer Rouge swept to power in 1975 and rained down genocide upon the land. While some profited from the privatization of the economy, by and large the real impact was that corruption blossomed, the rich became richer, and the poorest in Cambodia became even yet poorer. While in times of crisis, many nations see a ‘rally around the flag effect’, nothing of the sort occurred in Cambodia in September 1989. As described by a Belgian observer of the Vietnamese

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<sup>102</sup>Muskie, Edmund S. “Vietnam.” Essay. In *Exploring Cambodia: Issues and Reality in a Time of Transition: Findings and Recommendations from the Visit to Thailand, Vietnam, and Cambodia Undertaken by Former U.S. Senator and Secretary of State Edmund S. Muskie*, 10. District of Columbia: Center for National Policy, 1990.

<sup>103</sup>Muskie, Edmund S. “Vietnam.” Essay. In *Exploring Cambodia: Issues and Reality in a Time of Transition: Findings and Recommendations from the Visit to Thailand, Vietnam, and Cambodia Undertaken by Former U.S. Senator and Secretary of State Edmund S. Muskie*, 14. District of Columbia: Center for National Policy, 1990.

withdrawal, Raoul Jennar, “The recruiting of new soldiers [in the SOC] — mostly young men — has been taken badly by the people who, despite the peril of a Khmer Rouge victory, are not really willing to fight.”<sup>104</sup> On the day the last Vietnamese soldier left Cambodia, Jennar wrote that “there is already a danger of the Khmer Rouge recovering power, if not over the whole country, at least over part of it.”<sup>105</sup> The situation would only become more grim over time.

As later elucidated with alarm in the August 1989 edition of the Khmer Rouge newspaper *National Army of Democratic Kampuchea*, “There are in Cambodia five categories of Vietnamese forces... 4. The Vietnamese settlers established in Cambodia, in violation of the 12 August 1949 Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (article 49, last paragraph). They are part of a plan conceived and put into practice systematically by the Hanoi leadership designed to Vietnamize Cambodia.”<sup>106</sup> The Khmer Rouge was not alone in its dissatisfaction.

As the CIA complained in a declassified memo from December 1989, “The six ASEAN countries are increasingly divided over how to deal with the regime in Phnom Penh since Vietnam’s troop withdrawal from Cambodia in late September. They no longer speak with one voice on such issues as support for the non-Communist resistance, discouraging trade with the Vietnam-backed regime, and the form for a Cambodian settlement.”<sup>107</sup> It furthermore posited that “each country is now pursuing its own agenda; for all except Singapore this means closer ties to the State of Cambodia (SOC) regime. The pace at which the individual countries improve

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<sup>104</sup>Jennar, Raoul Marc. “The Vietnamese Withdrawal.” Essay. In *Cambodian Chronicles 1989-1996: Volume 1 Bungling a Peace Plan 1989-1991*, 17. Bangkok: White Lotus Books, 1998.

<sup>105</sup>Jennar, Raoul Marc. “The Vietnamese Withdrawal.” Essay. In *Cambodian Chronicles 1989-1996: Volume 1 Bungling a Peace Plan 1989-1991*, 22. Bangkok: White Lotus Books, 1998.

<sup>106</sup>“Vital Importance of the Role of the International Control Mechanism In the Framework of a Comprehensive Political Solution to the ‘Problem of Kampuchea ” *National Army of Democratic Kampuchea*, 1989, 8.

<sup>107</sup>Directorate of Intelligence, In The Wake Of Vietnam's Withdrawal: ASEAN Views On Cambodia [DELETED] § (1989). <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/0000242241>.

their relations with Phnom Penh over the next year will depend on developments on the battlefield, and on economic competition they feel from each other and from Western countries”.<sup>108</sup> More broadly, the CIA assessed that “the ASEAN embargo on trade with Vietnam has been weakening rapidly over the past year and, in our view, is currently more fiction than fact. Each ASEAN country is vying with the others as well as with Japan and South Korea, for a slice of the Indochina market.”<sup>109</sup>

After the Soviets had informed Vietnam in November 1989 that they planned to withdraw from their naval base in Cam Ranh Bay and cease all military aid, it became apparent that Vietnam had to choose between accepting Chinese hegemony or radically changing its alliance structure. At least in the 1990s, it chose the former option while slowly expanding contacts further afield. While Vietnam would find itself entirely beholden to China through most of the decade, by the early 2000s it had begun to successfully transfer into both formal and informal alliances with ASEAN and the United States.

### **The ‘Vietnamese Gorbachev’**

In 1986 and 1987, many both in Vietnam and abroad saw Prime Minister Linh “as a sort of Vietnamese Gorbachev”, but the hopes of political reform never came to pass regardless of the real and permanent changes in economic policy.<sup>110</sup> The state to a large extent emulated the Soviet policy perestroika (“reconstruction”) while quietly ignoring Gorbachev’s glasnost (“openness”) reforms so as to not appear in disagreement with their patron.

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<sup>108</sup>ibid

<sup>109</sup>ibid

<sup>110</sup>Tin, Bui. “Renovation.” Essay. In *Following Ho Chi Minh: Memoirs of a North Vietnamese Colonel*, translated by Judith A. Stowe and Do Van, 152. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1995.

The most notable of these early reforms was the 1987 Law on Foreign Investment. Officially inaugurated in December of that year, the law opened international investment to non-Communist nations for the first time in the history of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Most critically, the 1987 law changed the previously standing regulation that the state must retain 51% of all businesses and now allowed full foreign ownership of businesses in Vietnam and law explicitly stated that foreign businesses would never be nationalized. Despite these improvements easing investment for foreign entities, domestic entrepreneurship still remained comparatively limited. Private enterprise was in practice banned in a number of glaringly important categories such as mining of precious minerals, media, shipping, and tourism. Additionally, the definition of a ‘Vietnamese party’ in the context of being allowed to make contracts with foreign investors exclusively meant a state entity albeit with the stipulation that private Vietnamese parties could invest in the relevant state businesses.

By March 1989, the CPV “ha[d] come to a clear and definite decision: recognizing the existence and development of private enterprise” and moreover the government explicitly sought to stimulate growth in the sector.<sup>111</sup> The CPV henceforth cautioned its cadres against being “prejudiced against the private sector, to insufficiently value its role and potential, and tend towards restricting its development.”<sup>112</sup> Prime Minister Linh justified the shift towards capitalist economic policy by meekly stating that “it is very difficult for such a backward agricultural country as ours to advance to socialism bypassing capitalist development.”<sup>113</sup> In essence, the Vietnamese government publicly argued the logic that capitalism was a necessary sin in the

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<sup>111</sup>“Stimulating Private Enterprise.” Essay. In *To Understand the 7th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam*, 48. Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1991.

<sup>112</sup>“Stimulating Private Enterprise.” Essay. In *To Understand the 7th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam*, 49. Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1991.

<sup>113</sup>“Answers to Interviews at the Asian-Pacific Journalists Roundtable.” Essay. In *Answers by General Secretary of the CPVCC Nguyen Van Linh*, 55. The Gioi Publishers, 1989.

present to achieve socialism in the future. In particular, clearly abandoning at minimum Stalinist principles, Linh pointed toward the USSR's New Economic Policy (NEP) as a source of inspiration. He bluntly stated: "Lenin actually advised the proletariat to pay foreign capitalists a big fee if they would teach it how to do business. In Vietnam, today we must do the same."<sup>114</sup> Regardless of official bluster, there still was discomfort with the contradictions involved, with Linh citing the Leninist rhetoric that capitalists "are exploitative — they hire workers, and hiring workers implies exploitation" but reassuring that "they must act in conformity with our labor law."<sup>115</sup>

### **The 'Vietnamese Yeltsin'**

While Vietnam saw little attempt at political, as opposed to economic, reform there was one individual who tried to bring about a semblance of glasnost. Tran Xuan Bach, who informally received the moniker of the 'the Vietnamese Yeltsin', was a politburo member tasked in charge of a small team which from 1987 on translated, analyzed, and summarized English, French, Russian, and Chinese language media for Vietnamese leadership. Through this role, Bach gained power in being able to present the voice of the outside world to key political figures. Unlike the rest of the politburo, he loudly made clear his belief that increased press freedom was needed and that democratic social reform must be implemented in order to fortify Communism in Vietnam from the turmoil around it. That said, he was not advocating a multiparty system; as described by Bui Tin, "he was always careful to protect himself and explain that what he favored was a diversification of ideas in the field of economics and cultural styles as well as respect for different religions. He also accepted the need for discussing differing ideologies and political

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<sup>114</sup>ibid

<sup>115</sup>ibid

views.”<sup>116</sup> These arguments were little humored in the politburo and he was promptly removed from his position at the 9th Party Plenum in August 1990.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>116</sup>Tin, Bui. “Renovation.” Essay. In *Following Ho Chi Minh: Memoirs of a North Vietnamese Colonel*, translated by Judith A. Stowe and Do Van, 161. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1995.

<sup>117</sup>Tin, Bui. “Renovation.” Essay. In *Following Ho Chi Minh: Memoirs of a North Vietnamese Colonel*, translated by Judith A. Stowe and Do Van, 160. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1995.

#### Chapter 4: Building the Peace (1990-1991)

In the aftermath of the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia in September 1989, the war slowly transitioned from being viewed in the wider international community as a Cold War proxy-conflict to being seen as a humanitarian crisis with the Khmer Rouge as the looming face of the worst-case scenario. More broadly, the world was beginning to transition from the bipolarity of the Cold War to a unipolar world order under United States hegemony. The collapse of the USSR fundamentally changed the balance of power in Southeast Asia. China was no longer encircled by the Soviet Union and Vietnam because, by the end of 1991, the former quite literally ceased to exist. While, for Vietnam, losing its patron was clearly traumatic, the smaller state's weakness made it no longer a threat to ASEAN (which in any case had its origins as an economic, not military, alliance). As seen in the eventual creation of a UN mission to unprecedentedly govern the entire nation of Cambodia, the globalization of the 1990s was heavily felt even in the jungles of Indochina. ASEAN support for the CGDK lessened as Vietnam pulled its troops from the Thai border and more broadly had its power-projection capabilities atrophy in light of the USSR's decline. Rather than seeing Vietnam and the State of Cambodia (SOC) as enemies, they were now labeled economic opportunities. In practice, the CIA noted in December that "ASEAN and Western countries increasingly view the Khmer Rouge and Phnom Penh's armies as the only viable military forces in Cambodia" but ASEAN had few qualms about doing business with either warring party.<sup>118</sup>

#### **Vietnamese Society after the Withdrawal**

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<sup>118</sup>Directorate of Intelligence, In The Wake Of Vietnam's Withdrawal: ASEAN Views On Cambodia [DELETED] § (1989). <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/0000242241>.

The increasing macro-economic prosperity in Vietnam was not felt evenly across all social classes. In the field of healthcare, the average annual number of outpatient consultations per capita fell from over two in the mid-1980s to just one in 1990, and the inpatient rate fell from 105 admissions per 1000 persons per year in 1987 to 68 in 1990.<sup>119</sup> Put harshly even in a state-published retrospective, “the reduction in health care utilization -with predictably negative effects on public health and welfare- was not evenly distributed across the population. Instead, effects varied across population groups and regions with a more severe impact on the poorer segments of society that could not afford the additional costs.”<sup>120</sup> Even worse for Vietnam, both in terms of employment rates and national security, between mid-1987 and late-1990 Vietnam reduced the size of its armed forces by more than 600,000.<sup>121</sup> The economic disruption was so great that in December 1990 the government was forced to halt the demobilization process because unemployment was so remarkably high.<sup>122</sup> Though the USSR, and its successor state of Russia, never cut off their arms markets to Vietnam, still by 1994 “Vietnam possesse[d] a rather primitive national defense industry which is able to manufacture small arms (including machine guns and rocket launchers), ammunition (such as 82mm mortar shells), and a few spare parts but little else.”<sup>123</sup> The army was shrinking, it couldn’t effectively arm itself regardless, and the demobilized veterans were becoming discontented at returning to unemployment after years of war.

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<sup>119</sup> Kokko, Ari, and Patrik Gustavsson Tingvall. “The Welfare State.” Essay. In *Vietnam: 20 Years of Doi Moi*, edited by Ari Kokko, 218. Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 2008.

<sup>120</sup> *ibid*

<sup>121</sup> Thayer, Carlyle A. “The Problem of Strategic Readjustment.” Essay. In *The Vietnam People's Army Under Doi Moi*, 23. Singapore: Regional Strategic Studies Programme, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1994.

<sup>122</sup> Thayer, Carlyle A. “The Problem of Strategic Readjustment.” Essay. In *The Vietnam People's Army Under Doi Moi*, 24. Singapore: Regional Strategic Studies Programme, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1994.

<sup>123</sup> Thayer, Carlyle A. “National Defense in Peacetime.” Essay. In *The Vietnam People's Army Under Doi Moi*, 47. Singapore: Regional Strategic Studies Programme, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1994.



In this dangerous context, even the pretense that capitalism would be an NEP-style genuinely temporary interlude before socialism, quietly began to disappear as leaders considered the survival of the nation relied materially on raising standards of living. As described in *Vietnam's Foreign Policy In The Restoration Period (1986-2010)*, the 1991 State platform “contained less [emphasis on] ideological contradiction. Instead, it focused on the contradiction between the rich North and poorer South and between capitalist countries themselves.”<sup>124</sup> By taking an attitude that “although contradictions existed in this complex world, they were no longer crucial”, the state opened its scope of options to secure both its economy and security in the post-Soviet world.<sup>125</sup> As shown in a 1990 state-published encyclopedia of Vietnam, “the Vietnamese State encourages the development of individual and private economic components whose operations can last for a long period; the State has no intention to nationalize economic units not under its management... In the eye of the law, private establishments enjoy the same rights as State-run establishments.”<sup>126</sup> The government began to cautiously acknowledge that “the appearance of private establishments has given rise to healthy competition among different sectors. To the adjudications in production and services, many private enterprises have shown a dynamism that shakes State-run enterprises allergic to renovation.”<sup>127</sup> With the subsidy chain from the USSR to inefficient state-run Vietnamese businesses breaking down, private enterprise stubbornly asserted itself in the Southeast Asian nation.

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<sup>124</sup>Minh, Pham. “Results of the Implementation of the Foreign Policy of the Renovation Period.” Essay. In *Vietnam's Foreign Policy In The Restoration Period (1986-2010)*, 122. Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 2015.

<sup>125</sup>Minh, Pham. “Results of the Implementation of the Foreign Policy of the Renovation Period.” Essay. In *Vietnam's Foreign Policy In The Restoration Period (1986-2010)*, 123. Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 2015.

<sup>126</sup>“Economic Evolution.” Essay. In *The Socialist Republic of Vietnam*, 91–92. Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 1990.

<sup>127</sup>“Economic Evolution.” Essay. In *The Socialist Republic of Vietnam*, 92. Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 1990.

## Vietnam and the Collapse of the USSR

While enjoying its rapidly growing, but still nascent, economy, Vietnam was nervously beginning to appreciate the reality that with the USSR's disappearance it would be at the mercy of China and the United States. Carefully avoiding any mention of *glasnost*, a state-published encyclopedia described how "on a par with the changes taking place under perestroika in the Soviet Union and advances occurring in socialist countries in Europe, Vietnam is seeking for herself a new path in order to enter the 21st century with complete confidence."<sup>128</sup> As assessed in a more recent Vietnamese history, "[Gorbachev] had realized the state of crisis, but the reorganization was too late and carried out with inappropriate measures while previously latent ethnic problems fared up in many places. As a result, in 1991 the Soviet regime completely collapsed."<sup>129</sup>

In the last two years of its existence, the USSR proved increasingly incapable of sustaining its domestic commitments to its own people, let alone its foreign commitments to its communist allies. As noted by Richard H. Solomon, the US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs (1989-1992), "the Soviets, mirroring [Vietnamese Foreign Minister] Thach's use of the 'genocide' issue, initially pressed for explicit reference to the need for measures to control Pol Pot. By the March [1990 UN Security Council] meeting, however, they dropped their use of the term 'genocide.'"<sup>130</sup> By the time of an August 1991 UN Security Council meeting to discuss aid commitments to reconstruct Cambodia, "the Soviet

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<sup>128</sup>"History." Essay. In *The Socialist Republic of Vietnam*, 50. Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 1990.

<sup>129</sup>Luu Văn Lợi. "Restoration of the Traditional Relations with Russia and Eastern Europe." Essay. In *Fifty Years of Vietnamese Diplomacy: 1945-1995*, 515. Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 2006.

<sup>130</sup>Solomon, Richard H. "Building A Security Council Consensus." Essay. In *Exiting Indochina: U.S. Leadership of the Cambodia Settlement & Normalization of Relations with Vietnam*, 44. Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2000

representative, Igor Rogachev, bemoaned that he could not make an aid commitment on behalf of his government because ‘I’m not sure I have a country to represent.’”<sup>131</sup>

It is telling of Vietnam’s sheer sense of desperation in 1990-91 that the nation which had proudly ended the Cambodian genocide and fought off the French, Americans, and even the Chinese was now meekly asking China to create a Sino-centric regional order which would include the Khmer Rouge. While publicly demanding the exclusion of the Khmer Rouge from any peace deal, privately Vietnamese politicians very seriously considered negotiating a ‘Red solution’ to the Cambodian Civil War in which the now-capitalist SOC and the Khmer Rouge would join together into a unified communist Cambodian government to the exclusion of the monarchist FUNCINPEC and right-wing KPNLF. Throughout the entire war, the rallying cry in both Vietnam and the PRK/SOC had been simple: the genocidal Khmer Rouge shall never return. That slogan was gone now. In light of the 1989 Revolutions in Europe, and, more locally, the ideology shift from the PRK to the SOC in Cambodia, now Vietnam’s fear of a Khmer Rouge return was subsumed by its fear of the collapse of the wider communist ideological framework.

As these discussions were happening in Hanoi, China unexpectedly sent an immediate invitation for Vietnam’s top leaders to attend a secret meeting in Chengdu to discuss the possibility of normalizing bilateral relations. At this meeting, China firmly opposed the Red solution; agreeing to it could have been catastrophic to its own relations to the West. Rather, the PRC saw Vietnam’s advocacy for the plan as a sign of deep weakness and embarrassingly made public the Vietnamese proposal. While unfortunately there are no texts in English that tell the

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<sup>131</sup>Solomon, Richard H. “The Un Settlement Plan.” Essay. In *Exiting Indochina: U.S. Leadership of the Cambodia Settlement & Normalization of Relations with Vietnam*, 77. Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2000.

Khmer Rouge's perspective on the 'Red solution', Hun Sen at least publicly was horrified by the idea and increased his pace of distancing the SOC from Vietnam.<sup>132</sup> More tellingly though, there is conspicuously no mention of the 'Red solution' in any form in the autobiography of the leader of the SOC's pro-Vietnam hardliner faction, Heng Samrin.<sup>133</sup> Best put by Elliot in *Changing Worlds*, "Not only had Vietnam revealed a desire to pursue an anachronistic policy of ideological solidarity with China, but China's sly revelation of Vietnam's failure to achieve a 'Red solution' and its betrayal of an ally undermined Vietnam's attempt to diversify its foreign policy and gain more room for maneuver."<sup>134</sup> As obliquely described in the state-published *Fifty Years of Vietnamese Diplomacy*, "to safeguard independence and sovereignty while maintaining peaceful relations with China, we had to make some concessions."<sup>135</sup> Namely, Vietnam was forced to concede complete regional hegemony to China. More broadly, this was to be a normalization of relations from open war to wary coexistence purely on Chinese terms; not the grand benevolent Communist partnership desperately hoped for by Vietnam. In November 1991, relations between China and Vietnam officially normalized just a month before the collapse of the Soviet Union.

### **The West Reacts to the Resurgence of the Khmer Rouge**

Democratic states in the West suffered growing public-relations costs in continuing their support for the coalition and tacit support of the CGDK in the previously obscure conflict came under increasing scrutiny. As told in the memoirs of Richard H. Solomon, "the 1984 film *The*

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<sup>132</sup>Jennar, Raoul Marc. "The Cambodian Gamble: Three Months of Negotiations towards a Peace Fraught with Dangers" Essay. In *Cambodian Chronicles 1989-1996: Volume 1 Bungling a Peace Plan 1989-1991*, 237. Bangkok: White Lotus Books, 1998.

<sup>133</sup>Samrin, Heng. *The People's Struggle: Cambodia Reborn*. Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2018.

<sup>134</sup>Elliott, David W.P. "The End Of Illusions: Vietnam Settles For Accommodation With China Rather Than Partnership Or Political Solidarity." Essay. In *Changing Worlds: Vietnam's Transition from Cold War to Globalization*, 116. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012.

<sup>135</sup>Lưu Văn Lợi. "Introduction." Essay. In *Fifty Years of Vietnamese Diplomacy: 1945-1995*, xxiv. Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 2006.

*Killing Fields*, which won three Academy Awards the following year, made the Khmer Rouge revolution a matter of wide public awareness in the United States.”<sup>136</sup> Thus, publicly supporting the Khmer Rouge became anathema to Western politicians once the wider Cambodia Conflict reentered the news cycle after the Paris Peace Conference. As noted in an Australian government publication, “There has been a profound and discernible shift in international opinion about Vietnam and Cambodia. Rather than concentrating on condemning Vietnam as an expansionist neo-colonialist communist state etc., the questions being asked today are, what will happen to the Cambodian people if the Khmer Rouge returns after the Vietnamese withdraw?... Only the delay in Vietnam’s withdrawal from Cambodia appear[ed] to present a problem.”<sup>137</sup> Meanwhile, “the US contention over its policy towards Cambodia came to a head with the airing of a special ABC news programme ‘From the Killing Fields’ hosted by Peter Jennings on 26 April 1990.”<sup>138</sup> Cambodia was never a major point of US policy concern, and by 1990 the political costs of supporting the CGDK were peaking as their significance to American interests rapidly withered. In terms of wider geopolitics, the Bush administration saw ever-less need to appease Chinese stances on the Cambodian conflict as they were no longer needed to balance the now-imploding USSR.

### **Beginnings of Normalization between the United States and Vietnam**

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<sup>136</sup>Solomon, Richard H. “From War to Diplomacy.” Essay. In *Exiting Indochina: U.S. Leadership of the Cambodia Settlement & Normalization of Relations with Vietnam*, 15. Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2000.

<sup>137</sup>Klintworth, Gary. “Effectiveness and Recognisability of the PRK Regime.” Essay. In *Vietnam’s Intervention in Cambodia in International Law*, 99. Canberra: AGPS Press, 1989.

<sup>138</sup>Guan, Cheng Ang. “The Cambodian Problem Resolved.” Essay. In *Singapore, ASEAN and the Cambodian Conflict, 1978-1991*, 150. Singapore: NUS Press, 2013.

As noted in the memoirs of Richard H. Solomon, “The sum of these pressures impelled an adjustment in our Cambodia policy... We were in a race between the growth of domestic political forces determined to oppose any deal involving the Khmer Rouge, no matter what the alternative, and the conclusion of a Perm Five-Security Council consensus on a UN-centered process.”<sup>139</sup> On July 18th, Secretary of State James Baker officially announced that the US was pulling its diplomatic support for the CGDK due to the presence of the Khmer Rouge in the coalition though it would continue to aid the non-Communist FUNCINPEC and KNPLF.<sup>140</sup> Baker furthermore stated that the US would begin a dialogue with Vietnam on the Cambodia issue and was considering establishing a direct link with Phnom Penh. In spite of changes to American policy on Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge still held the confidence of China, so no international consensus could be reached to proactively target the faction.

On April 9th 1991, the United States Ambassador to the UN officially presented his Vietnamese counterpart with a ‘roadmap’ for normalizing bilateral relations which in practice restarted negotiations on normalization after having been frozen under the Carter Administration. As described by Solomon, the roadmap “was designed as a four-stage process of mutually reinforcing confidence building steps that would give Hanoi the political and economic benefits it was seeking in return for cooperation on the Cambodia settlement and in POW/MIA accounting. If implemented, we calculated, Vietnam’s cooperation would help dissipate the enduring domestic climate of distrust and hostility and enable the two countries to normalize

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<sup>139</sup>Solomon, Richard H. “Building a Security Council Consensus.” Essay. In *Exiting Indochina: U.S. Leadership of the Cambodia Settlement & Normalization of Relations with Vietnam*, 45. Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2000.

<sup>140</sup>Solomon, Richard H. “Building a Security Council Consensus.” Essay. In *Exiting Indochina: U.S. Leadership of the Cambodia Settlement & Normalization of Relations with Vietnam*, 46. Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2000.

relations over approximately a two-year period.”<sup>141</sup> Unfortunately, the process of became bogged down because “weak domestic support for improving relations with Hanoi, the forceful assertions of veterans groups that the Vietnamese were not doing all they could to repatriate war remains, and the transition from the Bush to the Clinton administrations dragged out further progress specified by the roadmap strategy.”<sup>142</sup>

### **The Khmer Rouge Gains Ground in Cambodia**

The CGDK may not have acknowledged the Vietnamese withdrawal, but the fact that Vietnamese troops were gone meant that the coalition was making its most significant advances into Cambodia since the early 1980s. Making the situation even more uncomfortable for the CGDK’s backers, as observed by a UN observer in April 1990, “ the Khmer Rouge is more than ever the dominant element in the coalition...[while] time is eroding the popularity of Hun Sen.”<sup>143</sup> With Western projections estimating that the SOC government had the “capacity to survive beyond a period of six and 18 months,” it became apparent that the conflict would soon end in one of two ways: a negotiated settlement would be reached or the rebels militarily would win with the Khmer Rouge returning to a dominant role in Cambodian government.<sup>144</sup>

Moreover, the collapse of the USSR and communism in Eastern Europe hurt the SOC and their Vietnamese sympathizers far more than it hurt the CGDK. At least for the time being,

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<sup>141</sup>Solomon, Richard H. “Exiting the Vietnam Quagmire.” Essay. In *Exiting Indochina: U.S. Leadership of the Cambodia Settlement & Normalization of Relations with Vietnam*, 86. Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2000.

<sup>142</sup>Solomon, Richard H. “Exiting the Vietnam Quagmire.” Essay. In *Exiting Indochina: U.S. Leadership of the Cambodia Settlement & Normalization of Relations with Vietnam*, 87. Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2000.

<sup>143</sup>Jennar, Raoul Marc. “Cambodia: A New Analysis” Essay. In *Cambodian Chronicles 1989-1996: Volume 1 Bungling a Peace Plan 1989-1991*, 26-27. Bangkok: White Lotus Books, 1998.

<sup>144</sup>Jennar, Raoul Marc. “The Attitude of the West Contributes to the Return of Pol Pot” Essay. In *Cambodian Chronicles 1989-1996: Volume 1 Bungling a Peace Plan 1989-1991*, 42. Bangkok: White Lotus Books, 1998.

China and the US were still firmly behind the CGDK but the SOC was essentially on its own. Though Vietnamese Foreign Minister Thach had publicly stated in October 1989 that “if we go back [into Cambodia], it would be a great failure for us”, less than six months later Vietnam was embarrassingly compelled to redeploy a small contingent of troops to desperately try to stymie the Khmer Rouge wave or see their former client be overwhelmed.<sup>145</sup> By November 1990, the situation had sufficiently deteriorated to the point the Khmer Rouge could “do without their rear bases in Thailand and would not suffer from a possible closure of the frontier if Bangkok were to decide to do so.”<sup>146</sup> Though Western governments were slow to spurn the Khmer Rouge in the 1980s, growing public pressure in combination with the USSR’s warming of relations with the NATO powers meant that for the non-Asian actors Cambodia transitioned from being a Cold War battleground to an embarrassment. By mid-1991, the conflict was reaching a breaking point and the SOC was rapidly being forced to concede all its remaining major concessions. As reported by a UN observer in June 1991, “the end of assistance from the old Soviet bloc (even if the USSR, less radical than predicted, follows a policy of minimal cooperation) and the continuation of the embargo by the Western countries continue to produce the effects observed through the past year: the only ones to resist the Khmer Rouge are becoming weaker and weaker.”<sup>147</sup>

## **The P5 Framework and the Origins of the SNC and UNTAC**

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<sup>145</sup>Muskie, Edmund S. “Vietnam .” Essay. In *Exploring Cambodia: Issues and Reality in a Time of Transition: Findings and Recommendations from the Visit to Thailand, Vietnam, and Cambodia Undertaken by Former U.S. Senator and Secretary of State Edmund S. Muskie*, 13. District of Columbia: Center for National Policy, 1990.

<sup>146</sup>Jennar, Raoul Marc. “The Hardest Remains to Be Done” Essay. In *Cambodian Chronicles 1989-1996: Volume 1 Bungling a Peace Plan 1989-1991*, 111. Bangkok: White Lotus Books, 1998.

<sup>147</sup>Jennar, Raoul Marc. “Waiting for the West to Understand” Essay. In *Cambodian Chronicles 1989-1996: Volume 1 Bungling a Peace Plan 1989-1991*, 216. Bangkok: White Lotus Books, 1998.



The so-called ‘P5 Framework’ of September 1990, which was in practice designed by Australian Foreign Minister Garth Evans but tacitly accepted by the UN Security Council, ultimately became the blueprint for peace in Cambodia as officially agreed to by all parties in October 1991. The framework included two key concepts which proved critical: the creation in 1990 of a Supreme National Council (SNC) to hold Cambodia’s national sovereignty, and establishment of the United Nations Transitional Authority (UNTAC) in October 1991 to govern Cambodia on the ground until democratic elections could be held. Neither the idea of the SNC or international supervision of a transitional Cambodian state were entirely original to the P5 Framework. Though a tentative agreement to create an SNC was personally reached between Sihanouk and Hun Sen at a meeting in Tokyo in June 1990, the body was only officially established in the context of UN and Khmer Rouge acquiescence after the P5 Framework became the officially agreed blueprint by all four parties to end the Civil War. Ideas of UN supervision for elections had been discussed since the early 1980s but they had never progressed much further. UNTAC was proposed, and ultimately accepted, because it provided a convenient and responsibility-diffusing solution to “the main difficulty which caused the Paris conference to fail to be overcome. That is, how to govern a country during a period of transition. This amounts to asking again the basic question: what place is to be given to the Khmer Rouge until elections are organized?”<sup>148</sup>

In a major victory for the SOC, the new SNC replaced the CGDK at the UN and therefore weakened the rebels’ claim to being the sole legitimate government of Cambodia. Furthermore, the SNC’s 50/50 composition of 6 delegates from the SOC and 6 from the CGDK

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<sup>148</sup>Jennar, Raoul Marc. “The Framework Document of the Five Permanent Members of the UN Security Council: Is that the Way to Peace?” Essay. In *Cambodian Chronicles 1989-1996: Volume 1 Bungling a Peace Plan 1989-1991*, 92. Bangkok: White Lotus Books, 1998.

was a further win for Hun Sen's government as they were now treated with equal weight to the combined three rebel groups. However, the SOC was forced to concede the implicit inclusion of two representatives of the Khmer Rouge as members of the CGDK delegation to the SNC, implicitly treating their greatest opponent as a legitimate actor in negotiations. The establishment of the SNC as the new UN representative of Cambodia meant that the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) adopted the new name of the National Government of Cambodia (NGC). Therefore, by the end of 1990, the CGDK became the NGC while the PRK was now the SOC. The NGC and SOC agreed that the new Supreme National Council would be the official UN presence of Cambodia instead of the CGDK which had occupied the seat for the last decade.

### **The Comprehensive Cambodian Peace Agreements**

Since 1979, both Vietnam and the PRK/SOC had stubbornly held the exclusion of the Khmer Rouge from the government and acknowledgment of genocide as the primary condition which must above all be met in order for a negotiated settlement to be feasible. Yet, by May 1991, Hun Sen was forced to publicly concede that "One cannot exclude the Khmer Rouge from a political solution" albeit with the condition that "to be able to participate in a political solution, the Khmer Rouge must acknowledge the genocide and undertake to renounce such practices."<sup>149</sup> In the final peace agreement not even this condition was met. As signed on October 23rd, 1991, the Agreements on a Comprehensive Political Settlement of the Cambodia Conflict ended the war but just contained a single clause connected to genocide, opaquely calling for "the non-

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<sup>149</sup>Jennar, Raoul Marc. "Waiting for the West to Understand" Essay. In *Cambodian Chronicles 1989-1996: Volume 1 Bungling a Peace Plan 1989-1991*, 224. Bangkok: White Lotus Books, 1998.

return to the policies and practices of the past.”<sup>150</sup> UNTAC would be given stewardship of the country until elections could be held in 1993, albeit the SNC would similarly hold the nation’s sovereignty until the nation. Only after parliamentary elections would the governance and sovereignty of Cambodia be unified for the first time in over a decade under the Kingdom of Cambodia. Despite the diplomats celebrating achieving peace, much of the international community was outraged that the Khmer Rouge were now eligible to, in any capacity, return to a position of authority in the Cambodian government.<sup>151</sup>

### **Immediate Aftermath of the Peace**

Though Hun Sen acquiesced to the Khmer Rouge being a part of the peace, he had no intention of making it easy. In what evidence suggests may have been a staged event orchestrated by the former SOC Prime Minister, the Khmer Rouge were run out of Phnom Penh the day they returned to the city. Dramatically, “wearing a helmet, with blood streaming down his face, [Khmer Rouge leader] Khieu Samphan was later put into an armored personnel carrier and rushed to Phnom Penh's Pochentong airport...after less than eight hours in the capital.”<sup>152</sup> The already-paranoid Khmer Rouge thus decided to boycott the planned election and eventually return to war with the new Cambodian state.

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<sup>150</sup>“Agreement on a Comprehensive Political Settlement of the Cambodia Conflict.” Essay. In *Agreements on a Comprehensive Political Settlement of the Cambodia Conflict*, Paris, 23 October 1991, 9. New York, NY: United Nations Department Of Public Information, 1992.

<sup>151</sup>Fawthrop, Tom, and Helen Jarvis. *Getting away with genocide?: Elusive justice and the Khmer Rouge tribunal*. UNSW Press, 2005.

<sup>152</sup>Brannigin, William. “Mob Attacks Leader Of Khmer Rouge.” *The Washington Post*. November 28, 1991. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1991/11/28/mob-attacks-leader-of-khmer-rouge/8bc91549-288d-46f1-88c4-919fb431de28/>.

Conclusion: Cambodia and Vietnam are dragged into the post-Cold War World

With the signing of the Paris Peace Agreement in 1991, a half century of war came to an end for Vietnam. For Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge had unilaterally decided the war wasn't over yet unlike the peace agreement's 19 other signers. Only after the Khmer Rouge were defeated in detail in 1998, and their remaining leaders had long lost any political value, did the Kingdom of Cambodia begin actively persecuting its geriatric founders in the UN-sponsored Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC). As described by Chandler in *Brother Number One*, "the Red Khmer responses to the Paris agreements and the UNTAC presence were so inconsistent as to suggest that the party's leaders were unable or unwilling to deal with such an open-ended, unprecedented state of affairs. The party's leaders had almost no experience operating in the open."<sup>153</sup> Pol Pot did not mellow as he aged, and would ultimately meet his own demise under house arrest after brutally slaughtering the entire family of his former Commander in Chief. Even after signing the 1991 Peace Accords, it was clear that the Khmer Rouge was still frozen in time. Best described by David Chandler in *Brother Number One*, "Pol Pot said nothing about how a reborn and rededicated Cambodia would fit into Southeast Asia in the 1990s or beyond. The world he described was changeable insofar as friends and enemies changed, but inside his head, it seems, it was not a different world from the world of the 1960s and 1970s. In this sense, Pol Pot's vision of the world in terms of contending good and evil forces resembled the timeless, uncontextualized vision imparted by Indian epic poems like the Mahabharata or by Buddhist teaching."<sup>154</sup> With or without the Khmer Rouge, Cambodia was going to be moving into the 21st century.

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<sup>153</sup>Chandler, David P. "The UNTAC Period." Essay. In *Brother Number One: A Political Biography Of Pol Pot*, 208–9. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2019.

<sup>154</sup> Chandler, David P. "Grandfather 87." Essay. In *Brother Number One: A Political Biography Of Pol Pot*, 210–11. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2019.

Vietnam began to truly emerge out of its previous isolation, and in normalizing relations with the United States in 1995 for the first time in its history concurrently held diplomatic relations with every permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. Unlike the former USSR, Vietnam never rapidly privatized its economy. Instead, Vietnam for the most part chose the approach of ‘equitization’ in which state enterprises were turned into joint stock companies (generally with the government retaining a majority). Private business would continue to grow, but remained tolerated rather than encouraged by the government. Vietnam became a member of ASEAN in 1995.

### **UNTAC Takes Control in Cambodia**

Despite the SNC being given nominal control of Cambodia’s sovereignty until the future elections were held, the Paris Peace Accords granted UNTAC the real authority over the Cambodian state apparatus including “all administrative agencies, bodies and offices acting in the field of foreign affairs, national defense, finance, public security.”<sup>155</sup> With a budget of over \$1.8 billion dollars and personnel consisting of 1,200 international civilian staff, 3,600 civilian police, 15,900 military personnel, and 20,000 local staff, the mission was not tasked just to maintain the peace but to maintain the state itself.<sup>156</sup> As put by the first US ambassador to post-war Cambodia, “[the \$1.8 billion] wasn’t to establish democracy...it was to stop the fighting.”<sup>157</sup> As stated by the head of UNTAC, Yasushi Akashi, “it was beyond the capacity of UNTAC to

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<sup>155</sup>“UNTAC Mandate.” Essay. In *Agreements on a Comprehensive Political Settlement of the Cambodia Conflict, Paris, 23 October 1991*, 18. New York, NY: United Nations Department Of Public Information, 1992.

<sup>156</sup>Sothirak, Pou, Geoff Wade, Mark Hong, and Yasushi Akashi. “An Assessment of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC).” Essay. In *Cambodia: Progress And Challenges Since 1991*, 162. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), 2012.

<sup>157</sup>Strangio, Sebastian. “The Wages Of Peace.” Essay. In *Hun Sen's Cambodia*, 108. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014.

put an end to the bitter political bickering among the factions, nor was it within its reach to lift Cambodia from its endemic poverty or serious urban-rural disparity within a year and a half of its mandate.”<sup>158</sup>

While UNTAC was neutral insofar as a chimeric organization struggles to follow a unified path, the individual national components of the mission were hardly impartial. As put by George Steuber, a member of the UN Advance Mission in Cambodia (UNAMIC): “there are many many hidden agendas... the French ... wanted to reinstitute the French language into Indochina... The Indonesians...were busy looking for land that they could purchase... the Thai were busy looting Cambodia.”<sup>159</sup> Language barriers were also a huge problem, with him describing how “within my team, Team Delta on the Thai border, my team leader was an Argentinian lieutenant colonel. He spoke Spanish, and he spoke a very limited bit of French. He spoke no English at all. So our immediate problem was the team leader couldn't talk to the team” not to mention the broader issue that almost nobody in UNAMIC spoke the local Khmer language.<sup>160</sup>

Compounding the problem of enforcing a contentious peace agreement just after the end of fighting, there was no clear mandate for how the military component of UNTAC was to deal with resistance. Steuber particularly noted that “we had never seen a copy of the Paris agreement that was governing all the things we were supposed to do on our actual mission for UNAMIC-UNTAC. The draft form did not get into country till the 3d of February [1992].”<sup>161</sup> Yasushi

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<sup>158</sup>Sothirak, Pou, Geoff Wade, Mark Hong, and Yasushi Akashi. “An Assessment of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC).” Essay. In *Cambodia: Progress And Challenges Since 1991*, 154. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), 2012.

<sup>159</sup>Brown, Jerold E, and George Steuber. UN Peacekeeper In Cambodia, 1991-1992: An Interview With Major George Steuber. Other. *Combat Studies Institute*, December 1992.

<sup>160</sup>ibid

<sup>161</sup>ibid

Akashi, acknowledged in a 20-year retrospective on the mission that even at the top of his chain of command “communication with UN headquarters in New York left much to be desired. Despite frequent cable traffic, UN headquarters did not always appreciate the precise scope or implications of the challenges faced by UNTAC in the field.”<sup>162</sup>

The Khmer Rouge simply pretended that nothing had changed since the 1970s, and had no qualms about kidnapping or fighting UNTAC personnel. Steuber noted that “the Khmer Rouge, never make any announcement or say anything unless they preface it with the fact that they are fighting against the Vietnamese...the fact that there are no longer any Vietnamese units in Cambodia and that the ethnic Vietnamese in the Cambodian government pose no threat to ethnic Cambodians is irrelevant.”<sup>163</sup> He added that “I don't know how much more explicit you could be when the Khmer Rouge's division commander comes up on the radio and tells you that he will kill you, meaning your UN team, if you come into his area. If that isn't blocking the UN mission, I don't know what is.”<sup>164</sup> Akashi for his own part felt with clear frustration that this incident “was depicted by the media as a spineless humiliation suffered by UNTAC. I am tempted to ask if the media would have preferred dramatic, if bloody, fighting by us rather than patient diplomacy.”<sup>165</sup>

## The Cambodian Elections

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<sup>162</sup>Sothirak, Pou, Geoff Wade, Mark Hong, and Yasushi Akashi. “An Assessment of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC).” Essay. In *Cambodia: Progress And Challenges Since 1991*, 163. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), 2012.

<sup>163</sup>Brown, Jerold E, and George Steuber. UN Peacekeeper In Cambodia, 1991-1992: An Interview With Major George Steuber. Other. *Combat Studies Institute*, December 1992.

<sup>164</sup>ibid

<sup>165</sup>Sothirak, Pou, Geoff Wade, Mark Hong, and Yasushi Akashi. “An Assessment of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC).” Essay. In *Cambodia: Progress And Challenges Since 1991*, 165. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), 2012.

Though UNTAC was supposed to supervise elections, they struggled to fulfill their mandate without having any real ability to use force. The UN consistently had to back down at any confrontation or risk having the supranational organization drawn into a new war. As described by the UNTAC provincial director for Siem Riep, when he first met his preceding SOC counterpart “he stared at me, I stared at him, we stared at each other. Finally I blinked first. That was it.”<sup>166</sup> While the UNTAC may have had a mandate to govern the country, Hun Sen’s State of Cambodia (SOC) refusal to acknowledge its authority produced an ironic refusal of the UN’s earlier insistence that the CGDK was the legitimate government despite having had no control on the ground. Throughout UNTAC’s existence it was forced into an uneasy coexistence with the Cambodia People’s Party (CPP), the successor party to the SOC, which refused to give up authority and the Khmer Rouge which refused to even let the UN into its territory.

The CPP expected to coast to a decisive electoral victory on the back of its impressive network of connections which had been built over its previous decade as the de-facto Cambodian government. Still, Hun Sen held no reservations about intimidating the population into voting for him and unleashed a campaign of electoral violence. Just between November 1992 and the May 1993 elections, there were recorded instances of more than 200 electoral activists from opposing parties being murdered by CPP death squads with UNTAC impotent to do anything.<sup>167</sup>

As turned out in the parliamentary elections, the CPP lost to FUNCINPEC by a not-insignificant margin. FUNCINPEC won 45.5 percent of the vote, the CPP 38.2 percent, and the KPNLF just 3.8 percent. In terms of seats in the 120 person parliament, FUNCINPEC received 58, the CPP 51, and the KPNLF 10. Hun Sen was furious. Soon after results became public, six

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<sup>166</sup>Strangio, Sebastian. “The Wages Of Peace.” Essay. In *Hun Sen's Cambodia*, 89. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014.

<sup>167</sup>Strangio, Sebastian. “The Wages Of Peace.” Essay. In *Hun Sen's Cambodia*, 90. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014.



provinces in Eastern Cambodia controlled by CPP loyalists seceded and declared themselves an 'autonomous zone'. Only after intense negotiations between CPP and FUNCINPEC over the following five days was an agreement reached to halt a return to war. There would be two co-serving prime ministers: Prince Sihanouk's son Ranariddh and Hun Sen. Neither were happy about the arrangement and resented each other deeply. Vietnam for its own part deliberately limited its official state-to-state involvement with Cambodia post 1991 out of fear of derailing its more important (and still fragile) relations with the US, the PRC, and ASEAN.

### **Destroying the Khmer Rouge and the Royalists**

Though the Khmer Rouge had essentially returned to insurgency since 1992, in 1994 the Kingdom of Cambodia officially declared the organization 'outlaw'. The Khmer Rouge managed to hold out for two primary reasons. First, the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF) was a grotesquely corrupt and amalgam of the previous SOC, FUNCINPEC, and KPNLF militaries torn by internecine strife. In particular, the CPP and FUNCINPEC hated each other more than they hated the Khmer Rouge. Second, the Khmer Rouge still controlled the diamond-rich town of Pailin which it had acquired in the 1989 offensive and was carrying on a lucrative trade with Thai businessmen.

Despite the surprisingly secure position of the Khmer Rouge, its greatest weakness was that the entire leadership excluding Pol Pot tired of a rebel existence and saw even greater profits to be had as power brokers in the Cambodian state. One by one, they began negotiating with the CPP and FUNCINPEC to turn their forces and territory over to one of the sides in exchange for amnesty and retaining power until the new administration. Despite the ECC being founded the next year to try the crimes of the Khmer Rouge genocide, in 1996 Ieng Sary defected with the

provinces of Pailin, Mailai and 3000 troops in exchange for full amnesty and being allowed to retain his hidden wealth. Pol Pot's fear of betrayal, not unjustifiably, was now at a peak as all of his top cadres began rapidly abandoning the movement in exchange for power in the new order.

After hearing accusations that his Commander in Chief was planning to defect, on the night of June 9th 1997 Pol Pot ordered the slaughter of his general along with their entire extended family. With the murder of these twelve people, the remaining Khmer Rouge leadership finally decided the killing was too much and it was time to end the war. Pol Pot was put on trial in a kangaroo court by his former compatriots, and would soon after die under house arrest in the jungles of Cambodia. On July 4th 1997, it was announced that a deal had been struck between FUNCINPEC and the remaining Khmer Rouge to defect.

The next day, on July 5th CPP forces launched a coordinated assault on FUNCINPEC targets across the nation. By July 6th, Hun Sen had nearly taken control of the apparatus of state. After some negotiations between the CPP and FUNCINPEC under angry international scrutiny, Hun Sen was forced to allow Ranariddh to run in the next year's parliamentary elections in which FUNCINPEC performed abysmally. Since 1998, Hun Sen has remained the sole prime minister of Cambodia and remains the most powerful person in the nation.

### **The Vietnamese Economy since 1991**

In the years following both the end of the Cambodian conflict and the fall of the USSR, the Vietnamese economy continued to rapidly expand. Economic reform in Vietnam during the 1990s was comparatively glacial compared both with the post-Soviet states and China. Regardless of the official position that "a state of 'healthy competition' among State-owned enterprises themselves and between State-owned and private enterprises has been declared,"

there was little real impetus on the part of the government to proactively encourage private enterprise or privatize state owned enterprises (SOEs).<sup>168</sup> Furthermore, even the state was forced to openly acknowledge that “there is a lack of capital in addition to the US embargo, economic development is still at a low level while world economic competition is fierce...corruption is still like an epidemic.”<sup>169</sup> For example, only in 1992 did the Vietnamese state begin a limited pilot programme to privatize state owned enterprises (SOEs). Quickly seeing the disaster of the post-Soviet privatizations, not to mention the sheer influence of these businesses, in the early 1990s Vietnam took a much cautious approach wherein the tentative plans to privatize state enterprise shifted to emphasizing ‘equitizing’ these businesses into joint stock companies. Equitization was effectively intended to provide the competitive benefits of private business without disrupting patronage relationships or placing the government in the awkward position of being a still-Communist state systematically giving up the means of production.

### **Vietnamese Relations with the US Fully Normalize**

Despite the original US estimate that full normalization with Vietnam would take just two years, in practice, relations only completely normalized in 2001. While the US dropped its embargo of Vietnam in 1994, and diplomatic relations were formally established in 1995, “This was not full normalization, in that a number of significant issues incorporated in the roadmap, especially Most Favored Nation trading status for Vietnam, remained unresolved.”<sup>170</sup> As described in a 2005 Congressional Research Service (CRS) report on US-Vietnam normalization,

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<sup>168</sup>“Introduction.” Essay. In *Vietnam, One Year After The 7th National Party Congress*, 7. Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 1992.

<sup>169</sup>ibid

<sup>170</sup>Solomon, Richard H. “Building a Security Council Consensus.” Essay. In *Exiting Indochina: U.S. Leadership of the Cambodia Settlement & Normalization of Relations with Vietnam*, 46. Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2000.

“The most important step toward normalization since 1995 was the signing of a sweeping bilateral trade agreement (BTA), which was approved by Congress and signed by President Bush in 2001. Under the BTA, the U.S. extended conditional normal trade relations (NTR) to Vietnam. In return, Hanoi agreed to a range of trade liberalization measures and market-oriented reforms. Trade — primarily imports from Vietnam — has surged since the BTA was signed. The United States is now Vietnam’s largest trading partner.”<sup>171</sup>

### **Vietnam Joins ASEAN**

With China rejecting Vietnam as even a junior partner after the smaller country’s previous patron the USSR dramatically disintegrated, Vietnam was forced to find a new identity going into the 21st century. For both economic and ideological reasons, over the 1990s Vietnam replaced ‘Communist’ with ‘Southeast Asian’ as its foremost identifying trait. As described in the book *Flying Blind: Vietnam’s Decision To Join ASEAN*, Vietnam was highly motivated to become part of “ASEAN in order to overcome the identity crisis that followed its Cambodian trauma and the collapse of the Soviet bloc in the early 1990s.”<sup>172</sup> By the time Vietnam officially asked to join ASEAN in 1994 “Regime survival, a peaceful and cooperative environment for economic development, national independence, an equal status with other regional countries, and opposition to pressures by the West on human rights and democracy became the perceived commonalities between Vietnam and ASEAN countries.”<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>171</sup>Manyin, Mark E. "The Vietnam-US Normalization Process." Library of Congress Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2005.

<sup>172</sup>Vu Tung, Nguyen. “The ‘Association Mentality’ and the Question of State Identity in Vietnamese Foreign Policy.” Essay. In *Flying Blind: Vietnam's Decision to Join ASEAN*, 193. Singapore: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, 2021.

<sup>173</sup>Vu Tung, Nguyen. “ASEAN Membership and Vietnam’s Shifting National Identity.” Essay. In *Flying Blind: Vietnam's Decision to Join ASEAN*, 183. Singapore: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, 2021.

## Conclusion

In summary, the Cambodia Conflict created the foundation of contemporary Southeast Asia. It was by no means a foregone conclusion that Vietnam would sustain its current regime past the fall of its Soviet patron, nor that the Khmer Rouge was destined to fail. Vietnam's withdrawal from Cambodia in 1989 removed most foreign interest in regime change in either Vietnam or Cambodia because the Khmer Rouge was widely perceived as a worse alternative to the puppet PRK. The Khmer Rouge was the only militarily viable rebel group and the non-communist opposition was too weak to counter the PRK.<sup>174</sup> Given the persistence of foreign backing for the rebels after the Vietnamese withdrawal, there was a very real chance that the Khmer Rouge could have once again gained control over the Cambodian state.<sup>175</sup> With Vietnamese forces removed from the Thai border, the nation began to be perceived as an economic opportunity rather than a military opponent. As long as Vietnam was in Cambodia, and consequently able to threaten neighboring Thailand, the Thai government spearheaded efforts in both ASEAN and the UN to keep Vietnam isolated.<sup>176</sup> With the removal of Vietnamese troops from the Thai border in 1989, ASEAN became more interested in using Vietnam as a counterbalance to China than destabilizing the Vietnamese government.<sup>177</sup> There is no evidence of significant efforts by any government to effectively overthrow the Vietnamese government. The most progressive parties within the Vietnamese government seemed much more interested in

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<sup>174</sup>Path, Kosal. *Vietnam's Strategic Thinking during the Third Indochina War*. Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2020.

<sup>175</sup>Nhem, Boraden. *Chronicle of a People's War: The Military and Strategic History of the Cambodian Civil War, 1979-1991*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2019.

<sup>176</sup>Vu Tung, Nguyen. *Flying Blind: Vietnam's Decision to Join ASEAN*. Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2021.

<sup>177</sup>Guan, Cheng Ang. *Singapore, ASEAN and the Cambodian Conflict, 1978-1991*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2013.

economic rather than political reform. Though *Doi Moi* ('renovation') ideals became somewhat influential between 1986-88, the Revolutions of 1989 halted most internal efforts at reform until the mid-1990s.<sup>178</sup> The politician Tran Bach advocated moderate social reform, but he was swiftly removed from the Vietnamese Politburo.<sup>179</sup> There was also some mild agitation for reform from Vietnamese veteran associations, but there is no basis to affirm that they had an interest in fundamentally changing the structure of government.<sup>180</sup> Southeast Asia does not have a strong democratic tradition, unlike Western Europe.<sup>181</sup> Thailand and Cambodia have traditionally been monarchies while Singapore and Indonesia were dictatorships at the time. None of them were particularly invested in American ideas of spreading democracy abroad.<sup>182</sup>

While in the West, common knowledge of conflict in Southeast Asia generally ends with the Fall of Saigon 1975, the lived experience for millions of people in the region was that peace never came even as their rulers rotated from being capitalist to communist. Between 1970 and 1998, Cambodia only enjoyed a single year without war, 1976, which was little solace as the nation was facing the height of the Cambodian Genocide. While the word 'genocide' did not make it into the 1991 Paris Peace Agreement, there was ultimately a semblance of justice for the worst offenders. Though Pol Pot was never placed before the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), he was put on trial and humiliated by his own comrades before he could die alone under house-arrest in the jungles of the land he had scarred.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>178</sup>Elliot, David W.P. *Changing Worlds: Vietnam's Transition from Cold War to Globalization*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012.

<sup>179</sup>Tin, Bui. *Following Ho Chi Minh: Memoirs of a North Vietnamese Colonel*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1999.

<sup>180</sup>ibid

<sup>181</sup>Guan, Ang Cheng. *Southeast Asia's Cold War an Interpretive History*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019.

<sup>182</sup>ibid

<sup>183</sup>Mydans, Seth. "Pol Pot, Brutal Dictator Who Forced Cambodians to Killing Fields, Dies at 73." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, April 17, 1998. <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/04/17/world/death-pol-pot-pol-pot-brutal-dictator-who-forced-cambodians-killing-fields-dies.html>.

Also, the geopolitics of Southeast Asia of 1991 was remote from the morass the Americans had abandoned sixteen years prior. Vietnam was no longer a Soviet ally, because the latter no longer existed, and now sought to bring American business into its burgeoning economy. As mentioned in a 1995 state-published business guide, “the [Vietnamese] people prefer to focus on the future rather than the past. They are often baffled by the fixation many Americans still have with the Vietnam War. The American War was very short compared to other struggles, and two wars have been fought since.”<sup>184</sup> Going into the 21st century, Vietnam has transitioned from being an American adversary to a close military and economic partner in the Pacific. Showcasing the dramatic warming of relations between Vietnam and the United States, in 2018 an American aircraft carrier, the USS Carl Vinson, visited a Vietnamese port for the first time since 1975.<sup>185</sup> Vietnam is now a top tourist destination for Americans, and the Biden administration has recently publicly stated that Vietnam should officially be upgraded to a ‘strategic partner’.<sup>186</sup> All of this was predicated on Vietnam stepping back from a determined effort to achieve regional hegemony and, albeit from force of circumstances, withdrawing from its client state, Cambodia.

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<sup>184</sup>“Customs.” Essay. In *Hanoi Business Guide*, 15. Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 1995.

<sup>185</sup>Hoang, Vu. “US Aircraft Carrier to Make Landmark Visit to Vietnam in March.” VnExpress International. Vn Express, February 25, 2018. <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/us-aircraft-carrier-to-make-landmark-visit-to-vietnam-in-march-3715451.html>.

<sup>186</sup>Stromseth, Jonathan. “A Window of Opportunity to Upgrade US-Vietnam Relations.” Brookings. Brookings, December 20, 2022. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/12/20/a-window-of-opportunity-to-upgrade-us-vietnam-relations/amp/>.

### Appendix: Naming Conventions

- (a) The precise name of the 1978-1991 war in Cambodia was an extremely contentious topic as the insurgent factions insisted it was an illegal invasion of Cambodia by Vietnam while the Vietnamese insisted they had simply intervened in an on-going civil war on behalf of loyal Khmer Rouge party members revolting against a rogue Pol Pot. For the purposes of this paper, I will refer to the 1978-1991 war in Cambodia formally as '**The Cambodia Conflict**' because that was the name used in the Cambodian Peace Agreement which officially ended the fighting.
- (b) The name '**Democratic Kampuchea**', rather confusingly, can refer to multiple distinct entities in Cambodia over certain timeframes, the 1970s and 1980s. Those timeframes and associated named entities are as follows, for your reference:
1. 1975-1978: Refers to the Khmer Rouge government of Cambodia. It materially ruled Cambodia and was the UN-recognized government.
  2. 1978-1982: Refers to the Khmer Rouge insurgency after the Vietnamese invasion. The insurgency had little control of Cambodian territory, but retained the UN-seat of Cambodia.
  3. 1981-1998: In 1981 the Khmer Rouge changed its official party name from the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) to the Democratic Kampuchea Party (DKP) in an attempt to rebrand itself as capitalistic in order to get more foreign support. It called its military the National Army of Democratic Kampuchea (NADK) throughout this time period.
  4. 1982-1990: In 1982 the UN-seat of Cambodia was transferred from Democratic Kampuchea (DK) to the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK). Along with the Khmer Rouge, the CGDK incorporated the non-communist National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC) and right-wing Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF) rebel movements. Please note that in practice all three movements remained independent despite nominally being part of the same government.

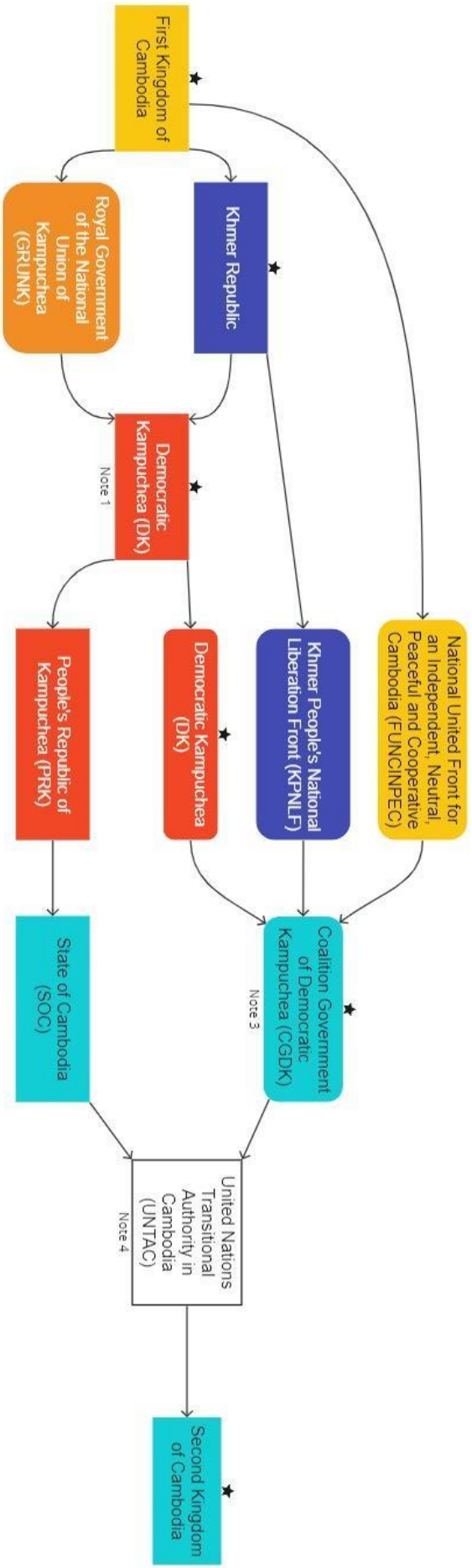


## Cambodian Governments 1970 to 1993

### Cambodian Civil War (1970-1975)

### Cambodia Conflict (1978-1991)

### Transitional Period (1991-1993)



Sharp corners designates the de-facto government of Cambodia. A star above the faction indicates that it holds Cambodia's UN seat.

Note 1: Between 1975 and 1978 Democratic Kampuchea (DK) was the undisputed government of Cambodia.

Note 2: The Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) insisted the conflict was an interstate war between Cambodia and Vietnam. The People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) insisted it was an interstate civil war. This nuance was critical because it reflected which party was legitimate.

Note 3: The CGDK was a purely political entity which retained Cambodia's UN seat and served as the public voice of the rebel factions. FUNCINPEC, the KPNLF, and DK remained separate factions throughout the conflict.

Note 4: The Supreme National Council (SNC) technically held Cambodia's sovereignty concurrently with the existence of United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC). The UN governed Cambodia until the 1993 elections occurred.

Glossary

**ASEAN:** Association of Southeast Asian States  
**BTA:** bilateral trade agreement  
**CGDK:** Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea  
**COMECON:** Council for Mutual Economic Assistance  
**CPK:** Communist Party of Kampuchea  
**CPP:** Cambodian People's Party  
**CRS:** Congressional Research Service  
**DK:** Democratic Kampuchea  
**ECCE:** Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia  
**FUNCINPEC:** National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia  
**JIM I:** The First Jakarta Informal Meeting  
**JIM II:** The Second Jakarta Informal Meeting  
**KPNLF:** Khmer People's National Liberation Front  
**NADK:** National Army of Democratic Kampuchea  
**KPRP:** Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party  
**NEP:** New Economic Policy  
**NGC:** National Government of Cambodia  
**NTR:** normal trade relations  
**NUFSK:** National United Front for Salvation of Kampuchea  
**PRC:** People's Republic of China  
**PRK:** People's Republic of Kampuchea  
**RCAF:** Royal Cambodian Armed Forces  
**SNC:** Supreme National Council  
**SOC:** State of Cambodia  
**SOE:** State owned enterprise  
**SRV:** Socialist Republic of Vietnam  
**UN:** United Nations  
**UNAMIC:** United Nations Advance Mission in Cambodia  
**UNHCR:** United Nations High Commissioner For Refugees  
**UNTAC:** United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia  
**US:** United States  
**USSR:** Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

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