

## CHAPTER 3

### *Case Study Two: Vietnam into Cambodia*

#### **Introduction**

On Christmas day 1978 Vietnamese forces launched a major multi-axis offensive against the Pol Pot Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia (then Kampuchea). Following several years of increasingly poor relations, escalating border dispute, and periodic open hostilities, the Christmas offensive came as the culmination of the deterioration of relations between the communist government in Vietnam and their Khmer Rouge neighbours. Within two weeks the Vietnamese had captured the capital Phnom Penh and were moving steadily west toward the Thai border to seize control of the entire country. Eventually while they were successful in driving the Khmer Rouge from power and were able to establish effective control over the majority of Cambodia, remnants of the Khmer Rouge forces with support and advice primarily from China, persevered in the mountainous jungle regions of the south and north west to wage a protracted guerrilla war for at least the next decade.

Although the actual intervention at issue in this case study centres around Vietnam's Christmas day offensive, open hostilities had characterised the state of affairs between Vietnam and Cambodia since 1977, with serious tensions having existed between the two since Pol Pot seized power in 1975. Neither did the interventionary episode conclude immediately following the 1978 offensive. Citing a variety of justifications, but primarily maintaining that a premature withdrawal of Vietnamese troops would almost certainly lead to the Khmer Rouge regaining power in Cambodia, Vietnam maintained up to 100,000 troops in country supporting the Heng Samrin government until 1989, eventually ending what was roundly condemned by Western states as an overly prolonged occupation of Cambodia. The Vietnamese-Cambodian conflict was a significant episode in the development of the Southeast Asian political landscape. Following the tumultuous years of struggle in Indochina since the early 1950's, the intervention into Cambodia with the attendant ousting of Pol Pot and the interplay of Soviet, Chinese, and American interests shaped the contours of Southeast Asia in a dramatic way. The eventual state of relations in Indochina in the late 1980's had significant impact also on the nature of great power relations and although sidelined by the

fall of the Berlin wall, perestroika, and the end of the Cold War – the tensions and manoeuvrings in Indochina were influential in shaping the eventual global political landscape.

The Vietnamese intervention in particular defies simple mono-dimensional explanation, despite the number of texts that attempt to do so. Indeed, viewed usually as the third and possibly final chapter of the protracted Indochina wars, the Vietnam - Cambodia conflict (of which the 1978 intervention is but one – albeit most significant part) has attracted a substantial body of analysis, much of which is prejudiced by anti-Vietnamese sentiment and possibly a good deal of bad conscience over US bombings in Cambodia – most usually expressed in the earlier works by American authors. There are a number of complexly interrelated factors that shaped and gave impetus to the nature of the conflict that developed between Vietnam and the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia from 1975 to 1979 and beyond. Most particularly the overlaying influence of great power interests, rivalry, and contest, in Indochina in conjunction with conflicting political and social ideologies, a history of relations that was characterised by antinomy and conquest, an ongoing border dispute over territorial boundary demarcation, the perpetration of genocide by the Khmer Rouge regime, and the overshadowing history of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Indochina wars and the social, political, and economic turmoil that they created. Together these factors created the conditions in which the state of Vietnam contravened the strong international norms and conventions of territorial sovereignty and militarily intervened in the state of Cambodia ousting the existing, and installing a new and clearly pro-Vietnamese, government. It is through an examination of these factors in an holistic manner that some measure of understanding may be attained and thus some degree of explanation may be proposed as to the reasons for this intervention and how these subsequently accord with current realist theory.

This chapter will examine the Vietnamese intervention into Cambodia highlighting the complexity and interrelatedness of the range of significant influences and forces that shaped this conflict. It will also argue that Vietnam's reasons for intervening in Cambodia were complex and multifaceted, and to some degree opportunistic, however, contrary to current realist theory they do not simply represent an attempt by Vietnam to alter the balance of power, either regionally or globally in their favour. Vietnam's intervention was not the outgrowth of hegemonic pretensions or ambitions, neither was it the inevitable conquest of a less powerful neighbour by Vietnam in its quest for an Indochinese federation, nor was it

simply the result of Vietnam becoming sufficiently powerful enough to enable it to succeed militarily against a weaker state. Rather the reasons for Vietnam's precipitous actions on Christmas day 1978 were the culmination of deteriorating relations with Cambodia over a range of ideological, territorial, and domestic matters and as a result of Vietnamese perceptions concerning its security and future regional prospects with such a bellicose and radical neighbour.

For the purposes of this case study the intervention under consideration will be defined as the 1978 Christmas day offensive and the actions of the Vietnamese forces in 1979 in securing Phnom Penh and the majority of Cambodian territory concluding with the installation of the new government and the signing of the treaty of friendship between Heng Samrin and Vietnam on 16 February 1979. As noted this offensive falls within the context of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Indochina conflict – itself an imprecise label to the hostilities between Vietnam and Cambodia following Pol Pot's rise to power in 1975, but most particularly pertaining to open hostilities from 1977 through the intervention of 1978-79, the guerrilla insurgency from 1978 until the eventual full withdrawal of Vietnamese troops in 1989. During 1977-78, despite periodic open hostilities, both Vietnam and Cambodia were engaged in episodic dialogue and negotiation with fighting erupting periodically but not continuously. The intervention of December 1978 represents a clear shift in the dynamics of the conflict and the relations between the protagonists, and can be viewed as an identifiably distinct episode, albeit still within the context of the ongoing conflict.<sup>224</sup>

## **Global Context**

As described in the previous chapter, the late 1970s was a period usually characterised as bipolar Cold War with both the Soviets and the U.S. asserting their influence in those areas they perceived to be within their spheres of influence or likely to be so. Unlike the situation in southeast Africa however, events in Indochina were of more than just passing interest to the major powers and the regional hegemonic power – China. Whereas the conditions surrounding the Tanzanian intervention were described as being one of a permissive environment with the great powers exhibiting benign neglect toward the region, circumstances in southeast Asia can be described as 'closely contested' and of acute great

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<sup>224</sup> In terms of naming convention Cambodia is generally referred to as such except for the period 1975-78 when it was self-titled Democratic Kampuchea by the Khmer Rouge regime, although this convention is not strictly adhered to and the both terms will be used interchangeably here.

power interest. Caught midst competing interests and global strategic manoeuvring by the great powers, the Indochinese states of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia are often portrayed as pawns variously of the great powers, regional powers, or competing ideologies. Although, as will be demonstrated, great power interests and influence in the region overshadowed virtually all activity in Indochina, and tended to shape and direct the course of local and regional politics and interstate relations as a consequence of the rivalries and interplay of the great powers, it is overly simplistic to suggest that relations between Indochina states were merely the subordinate manifestation great power dynamics. Although powerful, the overarching influence of the great powers and their machinations throughout the region, do not entirely subsume the actions and autonomous lives of the states involved. Independent, self-directed action and decision making was still the prerogative of Vietnam and Cambodia and to characterise the conflict between the two simply as that of client states engaged in a proxy war at the behest or manipulation of their political overlords, (as is suggested by Haas<sup>225</sup> for example) is an unsupportable claim. The actions and decisions of the protagonists in this case were clearly subject to and shaped by the interests and intrigues of the great powers and China, however, the intervention of 1978 was contingent upon a far greater variety of influences and forces than those of the global powers alone. Nonetheless an understanding of events in Indochina in the late 1970s is contingent upon an appreciation of these overarching forces and the state of relations between the major rival powers, and of the significance and influence of the regional hegemon, China, in this framework.

## Overview

Kimmo Kiljunen points out that Indochina, in addition to the Indian subcontinent was one of the few parts of the world in 1978 where the spheres of influence of the great powers and China overlapped and were fundamentally opposed to each other.<sup>226</sup> This in addition to the conditions of steadily deteriorating US-Soviet relations, the increasing importance of China in US foreign policy, an intensified Chinese interest in normalisation of relations with the US as a strategic counterweight to Soviet influence in the region, and continued deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations, added to the complexity and sensitivity of relations and events throughout the region.<sup>227</sup> Indeed Michael Leifer notes that the decision by the US to make the

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<sup>225</sup> Michael Haas, *Genocide by Proxy: Cambodian Pawn on a Superpower Chessboard* (New York: Praeger, 1991).

<sup>226</sup> Kimmo Kiljunen, ed., *Kampuchea: Decade of the Genocide. Report of a Finnish Inquiry Commission* (London: Zed, 1984), p. 59.

<sup>227</sup> David Elliott, ed., *The Third Indochina Conflict* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1982).

management of the central balance with the Soviet Union its main strategic priority, led to commentators referring to this period as the ‘Second Cold War’, inferring the bipolar nature of the systemic relations had taken on a renewed significance with serious implications for interstate relations in areas of contest – such as Indochina.<sup>228</sup>

As the US attempted to disengage itself from Indochina following the eventual fall of Saigon in 1975 and the failure of US military power to decisively alter the course of Vietnamese unification under a communist government, it sought alternate means to forestall or counter any possibility of growing Soviet influence in the region. Given that Viet-Sino relations were under pressure from increased Soviet assistance to Vietnam during and following the 2<sup>nd</sup> Indochina conflict, the US felt that the door might be open to increased Soviet influence and even military presence in the region through its relationship with the Vietnamese government. Thus an opportunity existed through improved relations with China to possibly exploit the ailing Sino-Viet relations with the intent of increasing pressure on Vietnam to reject further friendly overtures by the Soviets thereby reducing the likelihood of increased Soviet penetration into the region.

The Chinese meanwhile, similarly minded were guided primarily by the state of their relations with their paramount rival – the Soviet Union. As Ross cogently argues:

Whereas Washington had previously limited Soviet influence in Indochina through its relations with the governments of South Vietnam Laos and Cambodia, the possibility now existed that Moscow would be the uncontested power in the region. Given the implications of expanded Soviet influence on China’s border for USSR encirclement of the PRC, the most urgent aspect of China’s Vietnam policy was its attempt to persuade Hanoi to maintain some distance from Moscow and to refrain from promoting Soviet policy toward China during this period of adjustment to the new regional distribution of power.<sup>229</sup>

Cambodia meanwhile under the Khmer Rouge regime had broken diplomatic relations with all other states except China and North Korea, and had assumed a position of extreme xenophobic communist nationalism and radical self-reliance. Once on friendly terms with the US under the short lived Lon Nol republic, following his deposition of Sihanouk in 1970 and his election as president in 1972, cordial relations ceased immediately the Khmer Rouge

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<sup>228</sup> Michael Leifer, "Vietnam's Intervention in Kampuchea: The Rights of the State V. The Rights of People," in *Political Theory, International Relations, and the Ethics of Intervention*, ed. Ian and Hoffman Forbes, Mark (Southampton: St Martin's Press, 1993).

<sup>229</sup> Robert Ross, *The Indochina Triangle: China's Vietnam Policy 1975 - 1979* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 3.

seized power in Phnom Penh in 1975. For its part, Cambodia became increasingly receptive to and reliant on Chinese support, eschewing virtually all other interstate relations and withdrawing to a radically self-reliant position.

Within this context of third party interest in the behaviour of Vietnam and its relations with Cambodia, the actions of the major powers in their bi-lateral relations with the Indochinese states takes on more strategic significance. Again as Kiljunen observes:

Not until disputes among the great powers were reflected in the region did relations worsen crucially between Vietnam and Kampuchea. The setting for the basic confrontation of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Indochina war arose primarily from the gradual weakening in relations between China and Vietnam which in turn have been affected by the polarisation in great power relations and the strategic changes which took place in these relations during the latter half of the 1970s.<sup>230</sup>

It is to these relations and their significance to the deepening conflict between Vietnam and the Khmer Rouge that this study will now turn.

## **Major Global Actors**

### **Soviet Union.**

Soviet influence in Indochina has historically been facilitated through its relations with Vietnam, having given extensive military and economic assistance as well as political support to the Vietnamese, particularly since 1964 when Brezhnev succeeded Khrushchev.<sup>231</sup> In more recent times the Soviets embarked upon a regional political/diplomatic offensive independent of Vietnam to expand their presence and influence in Southeast Asia, and although of limited success, it served to arouse US and Chinese suspicion and reaction. As Horn notes, assessing Soviet goals and ambitions in Southeast Asia is a complex and controversial endeavour, however, he points to a number of Soviet objectives that have been in the forefront of Soviet regional policy for a number of years.<sup>232</sup> While Horn agrees that the Soviets probably did not believe the region held any core or vital interests for them, it was nonetheless of considerable interest by virtue of the fact that it was an area in which all the major powers were involved.<sup>233</sup> The Soviet's most fundamental goal in the region therefore was to be recognised

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<sup>230</sup> Kiljunen, ed., *Kampuchea: Decade of the Genocide. Report of a Finnish Inquiry Commission*, p. 6.

<sup>231</sup> Robert Horn, "Soviet - Vietnamese Relations and the Future of Southeast Asia," *Pacific Affairs* 51, no. 4 (1979): p. 586.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*

as a power which must be included in any discussions affecting the region. More specifically the USSR sought to counter its two major rivals, the US and the Peoples' Republic of China (PRC). Horn also notes that Moscow had long sought to limit Washington's role in the region and since the late 1950s had actively sought also to contain Beijing's influence. Finally the Soviets had also sought to limit Japan's role in the region and to expand its trade and development markets for Soviet goods and the procurement of facilities to aid in its naval expansion.<sup>234</sup> The spread of Marxism-Leninism ideology however, seems not to have been a major focus with the Soviets having only limited contact with regional communist branches.<sup>235</sup>

Of particular significance beside the USSR relations with Vietnam are its relations with the PRC. In fact the triangular relations between the Soviets, the Chinese, and the Vietnamese are inextricably linked. The Soviet-Vietnamese relations influence the Sino-Soviet relations and likewise the Sino-Vietnamese, and similarly all three bi-lateral relations are shaped by the other two. Consequently, although it is possible that the three sides to this triangle may balance each of the others to produce an equilibrium, it is also very possible for one slight imbalance, such as a change in the political circumstance of one actor or an increased push by the Soviets for example, to completely upset this equilibrium, magnifying the discordance. If Cambodia and the USA are also added to this network of relations it is possible to get a sense of how unstable such a situation may become, particularly given the volatile nature of the Khmer Rouge regime and its relations with Vietnam.

From around 1972 as relations deteriorated, the Chinese began to define the Soviets as their main opponents and commenced building closer relations with its enemies.<sup>236</sup> The US defeat in South Vietnam in 1975 and its disengagement from the region created, as Ross argues, a power vacuum in Southeast Asia.<sup>237</sup> Chinese fears of Soviet encirclement were consequently heightened, as they perceived the Soviets rushing to fill the void created by the vacating US, especially through its relations with Vietnam. Thus Chinese fears were suddenly apparently given substance thereby galvanising the PRC to action in its attempts to forestall Soviet penetration. The relationship between the Soviets and the PRC continued to decline in the late 1970s as the Soviets cautiously sought to increase their presence in the region and the Chinese sought urgently to counter this, all the while cognisant of their inability to do so on

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid.: p. 592.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

<sup>236</sup> Kiljunen, ed., *Kampuchea: Decade of the Genocide. Report of a Finnish Inquiry Commission*, p. 61.

their own. Yet for their part there is evidence that the Soviets were cautious in their penetration of the region in response to Chinese sensitivities, and that possibly also they were less alarmed by the state of their relations with China than was China of their relationship with the Soviets.<sup>238</sup>

The Soviet relations with Vietnam however, were on a much firmer footing, albeit the Vietnamese were by no means mere pawns in the relationship. Horn again provides valuable insight into the nature of this relationship when he notes, “several factors ... led to close relations and cooperation between the two countries. These include[d] Vietnam’s general dependence on outside economic and military assistance, its need for diplomatic support, and its ideological compatibility with the Soviet Union.”<sup>239</sup>

After 1975, the Vietnamese had virtually nowhere else to turn but to the Soviet communist bloc for the much needed economic assistance to rebuild its devastated economy and infrastructure. In 1975 Le Duan, then first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Working People’s Party of Vietnam, signed a number of highly significant economic agreements in Moscow.<sup>240</sup> From that time the Soviet Union became by far Vietnam’s major aid donor and trading partner. Similarly, given Vietnam’s diplomatic isolation following 1975 it turned increasingly to the Soviet bloc for assistance on the diplomatic front also. Meanwhile, as Vietnamese relations with China became increasingly estranged, as Hanoi grew closer to Moscow, the Vietnamese came to appreciate the value of an ally that was powerful yet distant.<sup>241</sup> Yet despite this close relationship, Soviet influence in Hanoi was not unlimited. Despite strong lobbying by the Soviets for a proposed collective security arrangement in Asia, the Vietnamese resisted endorsing this in recognition of the geographical and political realities of being a neighbour to China.<sup>242</sup> Sheldon Simon also notes that:

prior to the November 1978 friendship treaty, Hanoi tried to avoid becoming dependent on a single external mentor. The SRV refused, for example, to join COMECON despite Soviet pressures in 1976, and enacted a liberal foreign investment code in 1977 in hopes of attracting Western and Japanese capital. Even as late as early 1978, Vietnam refrained from endorsing Moscow’s Asian collective

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<sup>237</sup> Ross, *The Indochina Triangle: China's Vietnam Policy 1975 - 1979*, p. 3.

<sup>238</sup> Horn, "Soviet - Vietnamese Relations and the Future of Southeast Asia."

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*: p. 587.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*: p. 591.



security proposal and continued to support multi-centrism in the international communist community.<sup>243</sup>

Vietnam was initially cautious of its relationship with the USSR attempting, ultimately unsuccessfully, to tread a path between the Soviets and PRC, struggling to maintain Soviet support without completely estranging China, and struggling even more to maintain some relations with China in the face of what it perceived was growing animosity from Beijing.

Perhaps the most significant dynamic in Vietnam's relationship with the USSR was its extreme nationalistic sensitivity to its independence. Geographically placed as it is, Vietnam had long been caught between the imperial designs of China and the competing sovereignty claims of its fellow Indochinese states. Through the process of its historical circumstance, Vietnam had forged a fervent nationalistic independence, which in the 1970s was no less viable than in previous regimes. It was this sense of fierce nationalistic independence that circumscribed Vietnam's relations not only with the Soviets but the Chinese and Cambodians also, and acted to restrain Soviet influence in the region as it simultaneously attempted to restrain Chinese influence. As Marek Thee in 1979 suggests:

In reality, Vietnam is not a country to become a stooge of the Soviet Union. It did not fight France and the United States only to fall under Soviet dominance. It knew many times, both during the First and Second Indochina wars, how to defy pressures coming from Moscow, when Soviet Euro-centred policy clashed with Hanoi's interest and strategy. But neither is Hanoi willing to become a pawn in a Chinese dominated sphere of influence.<sup>244</sup>

With regard to Soviet influence and relations with Cambodia the story appears simpler yet more ambivalent. Michael Leifer notes that: "although critical of the Americans and South Vietnamese military invasion of Cambodia, the Russians did not break diplomatic contact with Phnom Penh when Sihanouk's government – in exile was formed."<sup>245</sup> This move of course angered Sihanouk as the Soviets tried to maintain a presence in Cambodia regardless of who might come to power there. The Soviets consistently tried to "square the circle" to use Leifer's phrase, by refusing to receive an ambassador from Lon Nol's

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<sup>243</sup> Sheldon Simon, "Davids and Goliaths: Small Power-Great Power Security Relations in Southeast Asia," *Asian Survey* 23, no. 3 (1983): p. 311.

<sup>244</sup> Marek Thee, "Red East in Conflict: The China/Indochina Wars," *Journal of Peace Research* 16, no. 2 (1979): p. 97.

<sup>245</sup> Michael Leifer, "The International Dimensions of the Cambodian Conflict," *International Affairs* 51, no. 4 (1975): p. 540.

government whilst allowing a representative from this same government to occupy rooms in Moscow and maintain governmental links. Initially, Lon Nol's attempt to maintain non-aligned status failed as US influence and backing became more overt and necessary, thence the Soviets withdrew diplomatic contact with Cambodia. Leifer suggests that another possible reason that the Soviets did not break diplomatically with Lon Nol at the outset was its concern not to alienate regional non-communist governments with whom it sought conventional relationships in competition with Beijing.<sup>246</sup> Following Lon Nol's fall to the Khmer rouge in 1975, the Soviets remained estranged from Cambodia as the Khmer Rouge came firmly under the influence of China and grew more ideologically antagonistic to Soviet style Marxism-Leninism.

### **The United States**

As Ross notes, the most significant aspect of US influence in the region – with the exception of the bombing campaign in Cambodia - was its dramatic and sudden disengagement from overt participation in the region following the fall of Saigon in 1975.<sup>247</sup> As has been described this power vacuum opened the door to possible further Soviet penetration and necessitated the US seeking alternative modes of maintaining a measure of influence in Southeast Asia. Indeed subsequent US policy on Southeast Asia proved to be far more successful for the US than had its failed military attempts. Writing in 1984, Kiljunen argues that US strategy in Southeast Asia was constructed on four elements: a) the discrediting of the new governments in Indochina, b) the prevention of structural changes in other Southeast Asian countries, c) the isolation and destabilisation of Vietnam, and d) the deepening of contradictions among the socialist countries especially by the one sided development of relations with China.<sup>248</sup> This position is supported by Marek Thee who claims the US took “malicious pleasure in seeing Vietnam punished by China”<sup>249</sup> and Sheldon who adds, “Washington's policy toward Vietnam is one of self-imposed isolation”.<sup>250</sup> Kiljunen continues to assert that the calamitous events of the 1970s offered the Americans an opportunity to re-evaluate and re-present their experiences in Vietnam and the basis of their war in Indochina. By increasing the tensions throughout the region and playing up the Sino-

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<sup>246</sup> Ibid.: p. 541.

<sup>247</sup> Ross, *The Indochina Triangle: China's Vietnam Policy 1975 - 1979*.

<sup>248</sup> Kiljunen, ed., *Kampuchea: Decade of the Genocide. Report of a Finnish Inquiry Commission*, p. 62.

<sup>249</sup> Thee, "Red East in Conflict: The China/Indochina Wars," p. 98.

<sup>250</sup> Simon, "Davids and Goliaths: Small Power-Great Power Security Relations in Southeast Asia," p. 913, Thee, "Red East in Conflict: The China/Indochina Wars," p. 98.

Soviet dispute, the US was able to make its earlier military actions seem justified.<sup>251</sup> While this may be perhaps a little stern a judgment, there appears plenty of evidence that the US acted vindictively against Vietnam not only in reaction to its ignominious defeat in 1975 but also out of its greater interest in seeing self-destructive tensions between China and the Soviets work to its ultimate advantage. Most particularly it was in the interests of the US to drive a wedge between China and Vietnam at the first sign of a crack in their bi-lateral relations and to continue to exploit that rift to the detriment of the Soviets, Vietnam, and Cambodia.

The US administration in 1977-78 was clearly unsympathetic to Vietnam, and for good reason from its perspective. In 1975 when the South Vietnamese government fell the US froze \$150M worth of Vietnamese assets in the US, imposed a trade embargo on the country and vigorously opposed Vietnam's admission to the UN.<sup>252</sup> Vietnam however, with the war behind them, hoped that cordial relations with the US would be possible so as to facilitate the resuscitation of its war-fractured economy and to offset Chinese and Soviet influence. Still holding out hope for, in fact planning on, the promised \$3.2B for post war reconstruction that Nixon had pledged in 1973, Vietnam first made diplomatic moves to Washington in September 1975. In March 1976, US secretary of State Henry Kissinger revised the unconditional nature of Nixon's offer to now include full accounting of US missing in action (MIA) personnel, and assurances from Hanoi of its peaceful intentions.<sup>253</sup> He also signaled that prospects of the US living up to its promised aid were unlikely at best. 1976 was also an election year for the US and the incumbent president Gerald Ford campaigned on a strong anti-communist platform so as to strengthen his credentials against the Reagan challenge. As Rowley and Evans note, the US MIA demands were impossible to meet, and deliberately so it would appear, nonetheless the Vietnamese desperate for economic assistance and a measure of independence from the Soviets and Chinese agreed to cooperate unconditionally with US demands. The right wing of congress however, intended to use the MIA issue to indefinitely delay rapprochement with Vietnam and the US government used the issue also to again veto Vietnams UN application that same year.<sup>254</sup>

Jimmy Carter came to the presidential office in January 1977 and although he moved initially to improve the state of relations with Vietnam, increasing pressure from right wing

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<sup>251</sup> Kiljunen, ed., *Kampuchea: Decade of the Genocide. Report of a Finnish Inquiry Commission.*

<sup>252</sup> Evans and Rowley, *Red Brotherhood at War: Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos since 1975*, p. 42.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

conservative factions in the administration saw his government retreat from its more friendly stance to one more resembling that of his predecessors. Later that year Richard Holbrooke, assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs renounced entirely Washington's promise of aid to Vietnam calling the matter of the US promise "an outmoded historical curiosity that keeps arising and complicating the discussions".<sup>255</sup>

By 1978 US policy toward Southeast Asia and the Soviets had shifted considerably to a more belligerent stance, confronting the USSR and its allies and retreating entirely from rapprochement with Vietnam. Relations with China now took centre stage as the US sought to exploit the growing Sino - Soviet estrangement. By 1978 too the Vietnamese had given up on opening diplomatic and economic ties with the US and accordingly, left with little option, turned to the USSR and that year became a full member of COMECON and signed a friendship treaty with the Soviets – thus setting in place a strategic alignment and chain of events that would prove so significant in the coming months and years.

American involvement in Cambodia meanwhile arose largely, from the 'pressures'<sup>256</sup> of the war in South Vietnam and their involvement there, but was also sustained in its ineffectual form in part as a consequence of its adversarial relationship with the Soviet Union.<sup>257</sup> As noted earlier the Soviet Union although on the outer in Cambodia was trying vainly to maintain a presence in Indochina outside of Vietnam – which in turn led the Chinese to intensify their efforts to support the Sihanouk then Khmer Rouge regimes. As Leifer argues:

In the case of the United States, involvement in Cambodia became an entangling association with an embarrassing outcome. Unlike the Vietnamese communists, who sponsored a reliable and successful client, the United States government assumed an obligation to an administration which within months of seizing power showed itself to be increasingly feckless, incompetent, and corrupt, and incapable of a basic cohesion. Its leader was eventually persuaded to abdicate apparently only after being assured of one million dollars deposited in his name in an American bank.<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid.

<sup>256</sup> The US administration at the time sought to justify its intervention into Cambodia and its massive bombing campaign as 'imperatives' of the war in South Vietnam. Chomsky and Shawcross both give graphic and highly critical accounts of American action in Cambodia, see *Hegemony or Survival* and *Sideshow*.

<sup>257</sup> Leifer, "The International Dimensions of the Cambodian Conflict," p. 539.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid.: p. 537.

By 1970 Vietminh and Vietcong forces were operating from bases within Cambodia against South Vietnamese forces across the border and were resupplying these forces via the Ho Chi Minh trail through the Cambodian jungle. Ostensibly to eradicate these forces and the communist forces that were arraigned against Lon Nol's government in Phnom Penh, President Nixon agreed to the invasion of Cambodia in accordance with what was termed the "Nixon doctrine". The doctrine essentially articulated the principle that any future US military role in the world would serve to supplement efforts of indigenous armies to hold back Communism.<sup>259</sup> By attacking all communist forces in Cambodia, Vietnamese and Cambodian, the US attempted not only to confound Vietnamese operations into South Vietnam but to remove the immanent threat to Lon Nol's tenuous hold on power in Cambodia also.

By supporting the Lon Nol government the US was hoping to use Cambodia as a buffer zone through which to disrupt Vietnamese communist forces logistics and activities in South Vietnam so that it could continue its larger strategy of military disengagement. During the period up to 1973 the US undertook a massive bombing campaign in Cambodia wreaking untold havoc and destruction on rural Cambodia and undeniably driving many Cambodians, especially the rural peasants, into the Khmer Rouge camp, as their land and livelihoods disintegrated around them.<sup>260</sup> In August 1973 the US congress suspended the 'illegal'<sup>261</sup> bombing campaign signaling the end of overt US military involvement in Cambodia and sounding the death knell for the Lon Nol government. Summing up the US involvement in Cambodia under Nixon and Kissinger, an embittered Sihanouk remarked "they demoralized America, they lost all of Indochina to the Communists, and they created the Khmer Rouge."<sup>262</sup>

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<sup>259</sup> Haas, *Genocide by Proxy: Cambodian Pawn on a Superpower Chessboard*, p. 78.

<sup>260</sup> *Inter alia* Shawcross details the extent and effects of the bombing campaign in *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia*. Most accounts claim between 600,000 to 1 million Cambodians lost their lives in the bombing with the CIA estimating around 700,000. Approximately 3630 B-52 raids and an unspecified number of F111 raids delivered over 539,129 tons of ordinances, which is reportedly more than the total dropped on Japan during WWII. The bombing and subsequent flood of refugees led to the collapse of the agricultural system and induced a famine in which hundreds of thousands died from starvation. In fact, many of the deaths after 1975 that are attributed to the Khmer Rouge may have been caused by starvation from the famine induced by U.S. bombing before 1975. As the Khmer Rouge came to power in 1975, a U.S. Agency for International Development report estimated that it would likely take two to three years until Cambodia would regain its rice self-sufficiency.

<sup>261</sup> The Cambodian bombing campaign was considered illegal as President Nixon did not seek Congressional approval for the actions and deliberately initially kept the knowledge of such from Congress.

<sup>262</sup> William Shawcross, *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia* (New York: 1979), p. 391.

## China.

At once a significant global actor and a dominant regional actor, yet not quite a great power, but the regional major power, China in 1978 sat astride the theoretic divide between global actor and regional influence. Without a doubt the most influential regional power in this interventionary episode, China's role in shaping and precipitating the events in 1978 are of significant concern for this study and to large extent have influenced, not only the 3<sup>rd</sup> Indochina war, but the political contours of the entire region since.

It is perhaps possible only theoretically to distinguish and separate the vast history of relations between China and her southern neighbours and the more recent events of the late 1970s leading up to the Vietnamese intervention into Cambodia. While Chinese relations with neighbours, and Vietnam in particular, altered most radically following Mao's communist take over, there are recurring themes of Chinese imperialism, Vietnamese fears of cultural subordination, and Han Chinese chauvinism, that echo still in relations between states in the region. This history of course constituted the background to relations between China and her neighbours in the 1970s and to degree underpinned and created the individual and collective perceptions of the Indochina states to Chinese actions and motives. Thus a complex matrix of perception, misperception, and misunderstanding is a considerable component of the relational dynamics between these states.

Gareth Porter<sup>263</sup> in his work *Vietnamese policy and the Indochina Crisis* traces the history of the deteriorating relationship between China and Vietnam – and it is this relationship and its decline that is central to the development of events between Vietnam and Cambodia. Before discussing this more recent history however, it is germane to first briefly outline the nature of the historical relationship between these two states. Thu-Huong Nguyen-vo's excellent work *Khmer-Viet Relations and the Third Indochina Conflict* succinctly describes Vietnamese perceptions of their northern neighbours thus:

The Vietnamese had always feared that some foreign power would use neighbouring states as platforms from which it could encircle and attack Vietnam. This foreign power for as long as they could remember had been China. Their collective memory of more than one thousand years of Chinese domination forced them to jealously guard their independence at all costs. At times their fear was carried to the point of paranoia... thus through episode after episode of repelling invasions from China, a

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<sup>263</sup> Gareth Porter, "Vietnamese Policy and the Indochina Crisis," in *The Third Indochina Conflict*, ed. David Elliott (Boulder: Westview, 1981).

national experience was forced with all its wounds and exaggerated fears, with all its ferocity and ruthlessness.<sup>264</sup>

The Chinese for their part had always been concerned to secure their southern borders from the same sorts of fears of encirclement and exposure, and had throughout the centuries taken on something of a 'civilising mission' to the 'backward' southern people. For much of their history, Vietnam had acted as tributary state to China, in exchange for their independence, and had adopted much of the Chinese custom and social and civil administrative manner and style. Thus perceptions of each other were thoroughly historically grounded and were never too far below the surface of both the Chinese and Vietnamese behaviour.

When revolutionary fervour reached Vietnam in the 1940s it was to the Chinese ironically that the Vietnamese looked for guidance and example. Ideologically the Vietnamese recognised the appropriateness of Mao's interpretation of Marxism-Leninism for their situation. Tracing the development of the ideological relationship between China and Vietnam, Porter notes that in the early 1960s Vietnam was very close to China's ideological position and its view of the Soviet Union as 'revisionist', however, by the mid 1960s Vietnam was asserting its ideological independence and distancing itself from the Chinese position.<sup>265</sup> As early as 1964 China was attempting to induce Vietnam away from the Soviets by offering to pay all expenses in the war in South Vietnam if it would break relations with Moscow.<sup>266</sup>

These divergent views crystallised during the 2<sup>nd</sup> Indochina war as the Vietnamese subordinated their opposition to revisionism to join with the Soviets to fight the common enemy – the US. China for its part perceived the Soviets as the priority threat and acted to reduce its military confrontation with the US, thus the Vietnamese came to see the Chinese as less reliable allies than hoped, clearly more interested in their relationships with the Soviets and the US than in the fortunes of Vietnamese communism. This was confirmed in their eyes by the Chinese attempts to persuade the Vietnamese to wage a protracted guerrilla war against the US rather more conventional open warfare for purposes that would only serve Chinese interests – not nationalistic communist Vietnam's. Specifically a protracted low level

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<sup>264</sup> Thu-huong Nguyen-vo, *Khmer-Viet Relations and the Third Indochina Conflict* (Jefferson: McFarland and Co., 1992), p. 16.

<sup>265</sup> Porter, "Vietnamese Policy and the Indochina Crisis."

war would serve both sides of Chinese strategic interests – it would keep the US bogged down and not able to contemplate attacking China, and it would prevent the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) from uniting with the South and forming a strong independent state on China's southern border. Furthermore, a continuation of the war would strain even further US-Soviet relations again serving to meet Chinese interests of a restrained Soviet presence in Indochina.<sup>267</sup> As Porter concludes: "the ten years from the beginning of the US direct military intervention in Vietnam to the end of the war thus represented a transition from close Sino-Vietnamese collaboration and a subsequent degree of agreement on international questions, to sharp antagonism in national interests and ideology".<sup>268</sup>

Following the Vietnamese communist victory and the fall of Saigon in 1975, relations deteriorated even further as China attempted to coerce Vietnam away from its relation with the USSR, and as the Vietnamese resisted this coercion and sought to internationalise its support to offset overbearing Sino and Soviet influence. As Vietnam consolidated its position in Southern Vietnam, China's rhetoric over the Soviets grew more strident. In June 1975 Deng Xiaoping, declared that the USSR had replaced the US as the main threat to peace and security in the region.<sup>269</sup> Beijing's objectives were to effect the total exclusion of the Soviet influence from its southern border region and to build a counterweight to the newly enhanced Vietnamese-Soviet influence in Southeast Asia. Unable to compete with Moscow's economic and technical assistance, and unable to induce Vietnam to distance itself from Soviet influence, Beijing resorted to more bellicose rhetoric. The key to securing its southern periphery henceforth therefore laid not with Vietnam but with Cambodia and to lesser degree Thailand and Laos. Cambodia had no ties with the Soviets as discussed previously and their growing animosity towards Hanoi saw them quickly and willingly fall into China's influence and patronage. Beijing demanded that the new Indochinese governments in Cambodia and Vietnam repudiate Soviet aid. The Khmer Rouge in pursuit of their policy of self-reliance gladly obliged, but Hanoi was holding out for a more independent solution in which it would attract international assistance from the US and others.

Chinese diplomacy from 1975 worked assiduously to keep Vietnam and the US estranged, and this coupled with already existing US antipathy, saw Vietnam's hopes of

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<sup>266</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid., p. 75, Sheldon Simon, "China, Vietnam, and Asean: The Politics of Polarization," *Asian Survey* 19, no. 12 (1979): p. 1172.

<sup>268</sup> Porter, "Vietnamese Policy and the Indochina Crisis," p. 74.

<sup>269</sup> Evans and Rowley, *Red Brotherhood at War: Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos since 1975*, p. 45.



normalised relations and reconstruction aid from the US, as promised, evaporate. Obdurate in the face of increased Chinese pressure, the Vietnamese turned increasingly to the Soviets for succour in the form of an aid agreement, and although careful not to concede unilaterally to Soviet demands either, the strains in the relationship with Beijing became serious and consequential.

The deteriorating relations between Hanoi and Beijing were manifest in three particular episodes that bear some discussion; the territorial disputes over Chinese offshore island claims, the Hoa or Vietnamese ethnic Chinese issue<sup>270</sup>, and the growing US – China détente. Following the signing of the Soviet aid and assistance agreement with Vietnam, China began publicizing its territorial claims over two obscure and largely uninhabited island groups; the Paracels and the Spratlys. Both groups were claimed by numerous countries including China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines, although none had expressed too much interest until exploration had determined the viability of the exploitation of the associated oil fields. As Evans and Rowley describe however, the dispute was not merely a nationalistic irredentist claim nor a crude resource grab, “but also a Chinese demand for political submission on the part of the Vietnamese – and it was clearly understood as such in Hanoi.”<sup>271</sup> Within the context of growing Chinese frustration and anger over Vietnam’s apparent intransigence, independence and insensitivity to China’s security concerns, the territorial dispute was orchestrated to elicit a measure of compromise and respect from Vietnam and to act as a caution and chastisement should Vietnam continue to flout Chinese influence.

While relations between Hanoi and Beijing continued to deteriorate from 1975 to 1978, especially in light of developments between Cambodia, Vietnam, and China, relations between Washington and Beijing improved considerably. The two factors were closely related, as it was a common antipathy toward the USSR that induced both China and the US to take a hard stance over Vietnam and to move toward normalisation of their relations. The hard-line elements within the US administration were no friends of the Vietnamese and the Chinese were ever more fearful of Soviet expansion in their sphere of influence, thus the global aspirations of the Americans and the regional ambitions of the Chinese could both be

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<sup>270</sup> For a full discussion of this topic see Charles Benoit, "Vietnam's "Boat People"," in *The Third Indochina Conflict*, ed. David Elliott (Boulder: Westview Press, 1981), Porter, "Vietnamese Policy and the Indochina Crisis."

<sup>271</sup> Evans and Rowley, *Red Brotherhood at War: Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos since 1975*, p. 48.

advanced, at the expense of the mutually disliked Vietnam, through the normalisation of their relations.

The final influence to be considered here is the nature and development of the relationship between China and Cambodia. Simon Sheldon presents the situation facing China in the mid 1970s as a 'Hobsonian choice'. If China antagonised Hanoi then it would turn further to Moscow, but if it left Vietnam to grow stronger and independent then it would decrease its own security to the south.<sup>272</sup> As discussed, until 1978 China tried to avoid alienating Vietnam while at the same time fostering independent ties with Laos and Cambodia. However, as each side struggled to resist the pressure of the other, Vietnam turned to the Soviets and China, with pressure from the US, opted for a strategy of more strident opposition to Vietnamese 'hegemony'.<sup>273</sup> The most significant upshot of this change of strategy was the relationship and patronage that China developed with the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia and its subsequent repercussions.

China had been the primary ally of the Cambodian communists during the war in Vietnam and the struggle against Lon Nol and in the first year after the fall of Lon Nol, China emerged as the only government with significant contact with the Khmer Rouge. The relationship was one of mutual benefit. The Khmer Rouge government in Cambodia would forestall Soviet influence in that country, would act as a barrier to further Vietnamese influence, consequently limiting Vietnam's power in China's southern periphery, and China would act as patron to the Khmer Rouge supplying funds, equipment, advice and some measure of international legitimacy. As the dispute between Hanoi and Phnom Penh intensified however, the Chinese grew uneasy with the Khmer Rouge regime and its policy towards Vietnam in particular. Although China reiterated its full support to Phnom Penh, it was cautious not to alienate Vietnam further for fear of driving it deeper into the Soviet camp, nor did it wish the Khmer Rouge to antagonise the Vietnamese into open conflict, which would provide further opportunity for the Soviets to become involved directly. The Khmer Rouge however, were dismissive of Chinese concerns and were angered that it should try to mediate their dispute with Vietnam. Ultimately, China proved to have little ability to decisively influence either Phnom Penh, because of Pol Pot's radical and extreme policies, and for fear of losing their influence entirely in neither Cambodia, nor Hanoi because of the

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<sup>272</sup> Simon, "Davids and Goliaths: Small Power-Great Power Security Relations in Southeast Asia," p. 312.

parlous state that their relations had descended to. As the conflict deepened China had little option but to provide conditional support to the Khmer Rouge while simultaneously keeping a low profile so as not to antagonise the Vietnamese, and where possible distancing itself internationally from the excesses of the Pol Pot regime. When war eventually erupted in December 1978 it was to the consternation of the Chinese not at their behest.

### **The Proxy War Argument.**

A persistent and superficially appealing argument can be found in a variety of commentaries on the events in 1978-79 and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Indochina conflict, (particularly in Haas)<sup>274</sup> that the conflict was essentially a proxy war fought by Cambodia and Vietnam as client states of the great powers and China. There is clear evidence that during the 1970s Indochina was the site of the peculiar and intense intersection of the spheres of influence and domains of interest of the rival Cold War super-powers and China. It has also been demonstrated that clearly Vietnam and Cambodia were supported financially, militarily, and diplomatically to considerable extent by the USSR and China respectively. So too has the case been made that the US sought to bring pressure to bear against Vietnam and the Soviet Union through its détente with China and its anti-Soviet stance in Southeast Asia. The evidence is also plain that the Soviets sought to increase their influence and penetration of Indochina and Southeast Asia during this period primarily through their patronage of Vietnam. What is not evident however, is any proof of instigation of the conflict by the great powers, and although a strong case could be made that both the US and Russia could have benefited from and even been desirous of conflict, there is no evidence to support a claim that they did directly initiate the conflict. As Horn notes:

the conflict appears to very much a local one based on historical and present Vietnamese-Cambodian enmity. There is no evidence of Soviet or Chinese instigation. The conflict appears to be a 'proxy war' between Moscow and Peking only in the sense that each of these capitals leaned to the side of its ally.<sup>275</sup>

There is, as has been proposed, reasonable evidence to suggest that China was clearly opposed to open conflict between Vietnam and Cambodia – standing to gain nothing but risking further Soviet influence in the region. Similarly, given Vietnam's position of strength

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<sup>273</sup> The Chinese referred to 'Vietnamese hegemony' to suggest either that Vietnam was expansionist, aggressive and determined to become a region major power, or more commonly as 'code' for stooge to Soviet imperialism in Indochina.

<sup>274</sup> Haas, *Genocide by Proxy: Cambodian Pawn on a Superpower Chessboard*.

it would appear unlikely that a reasoned US position would support a decisive conflict in which Vietnam was almost certain to win. Finally, there is the consideration that both Vietnam and Cambodia were staunchly nationalistic and independent and in no way intended being used as pawns of greater powers. To suggest therefore that this conflict was a proxy war to extent denies the actual protagonists a causal role in the affair – this is clearly not consistent with their *modus operandi* or their historical patterns of behaviour. Vietnam in particular as is regularly noted, did not endure nearly thirty years in nationalistic wars of independence and re-unification to become the client of any great power. Their attempted middle ground approach between the Soviets and the Chinese is further evidence of their determination to create their own independent path.

If the proximate causes therefore for this conflict are not be wholly found in the global context and in the actions and decisions of the great powers and China, as it is argued here, then they must be sought elsewhere – notably within the regional context and the unit level factors governing the behaviour of the states.

## **Regional Context**

### **Introduction.**

Having briefly surveyed the contours of the global circumstance and the action and influences of the great powers and China during and surrounding this conflict, which together form the backdrop and context of the dispute, it is now necessary to examine the influences, relations, and events in the regional context. There are a number of significant factors that at a local level are usually considered to be the prime causes and determinants of the conflict between Cambodia and Vietnam in most accounts of the period. These include: a tradition and history of animosity between these states, a history of Vietnamese expansionist ambition and territorial conquest, a more recent attempt by Vietnam to forge an Indochina Federation of communist states with itself as head, a Cambodian political culture of paranoia and mistrust, a simmering border dispute gone to open conflict, an ideological schism that sought to be resolved, and the natural outcome of conflicting nationalist sentiments. Each of these accounts is grounded in supportable fact and singly form part of the complex and dynamic circumstance that forms the regional backdrop to the dispute, but individually they are

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<sup>275</sup> Horn, "Soviet - Vietnamese Relations and the Future of Southeast Asia," p. 602.

insufficient to adequately account for events in 1978-79 and even taken together only make sense when considered within the global context described above.

Unfortunately a simple account of this conflict in parsimonious realist terms of national security, balance of power, and state interests alone is as unsatisfactory as it is misleading. As argued above, Vietnam's intervention into Cambodia was not simply the result of the push and pull of great power interests seeking a realignment of the balance of power following the withdrawal of the US from Indochina – although this dynamic is not denied – so too it is argued here that the dispute cannot be simply characterised as Vietnam seeking to become a regional hegemon by altering the regional balance of power in its favour – nor more simply reacting to threats to its national security posed by Cambodia's aggression. Although Vietnam's national security concerns are an essential element of this episode they alone are an insufficient explanation. The regional hegemon argument meanwhile is although appealing, misleading and does not accord with the available facts.

### **Background.**

The Vietnamese and Khmer peoples have a long history of enmity and conflict stretching back centuries, and in this respect the war between Cambodia and Vietnam in 1978 – 79 can be seen as another chapter in this long story.<sup>276</sup>

Few states in the world have a foreign policy that for decades, even centuries has been simpler or more uniform than that of Cambodia. Its foreign relations have always been typified by its relationship with neighbouring Vietnam...whatever the regime in place in Phnom Penh or across the border in Vietnam...Khmer-Vietnamese relations have always consisted of attempts to settle the problem of Cambodia's territorial integrity, which to degree means survival. It has always gone back to the problems of ancient rivalries and border disputes.<sup>277</sup>

This it would appear is the standard point of departure for most commentaries on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Indochina war, a form of the 'ancient hatreds' discourse in which the historic actions of these two racially distinct peoples is meant to imply some form of crude determinism over events in the 1970s. Such notion is rejected here, although the history of animosity is not denied, nor is the possibility that the living memories of such history can be a powerful tool in the hands of leaders who would inflame and exploit them for political purposes, however, the determinism implied in such accounts is disingenuous and misleading and serves to obscure

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<sup>276</sup> Wheeler, *Saving Strangers: Humanitarian Intervention in International Society*, p. 79.

<sup>277</sup> Joseph Pouvatchy, "Cambodian - Vietnamese Relations," *Asian Survey* 26, no. 4 (1986): p. 440.

more that it reveals. It is pertinent however, to briefly outline this history so that it may inform later discourse on the significance of that history and its manipulation by all parties to the dispute for various purposes.

Vietnamese civilization is believed to have begun around 500AD in what is now the Red River delta of Vietnam. Serious conflict with the Khmer people however, as Nguyen-vo<sup>278</sup> indicates, can be traced back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century during which time the Khmer initiated campaigns by way of the sea, and by land in collusion with Champa and China, Vietnam's most feared enemy. Although this latest type failed, it helped forge Vietnamese fears of Chinese encirclement and conquest, which was to prove significant in later centuries. The Vietnamese dynasties in subsequent years expanded from the Red river through territorial encroachment and through direct intervention in Kampuchean politics. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Vietnamese again through settlement, intervention and military force had incorporated the whole region of fertile land to Ca Mau, the southern most tip of the Indochinese peninsula. Vietnamese and Siamese involvement in Kampuchean domestic affairs continued with the Khmers often calling upon either the Vietnamese or the Siamese to intervene to settle challenges to the throne by providing arms to assist one contender or the other to defeat their rival to power. By the early 18<sup>th</sup> century the Vietnamese and Siamese rivals had become the most powerful factors in Kampuchean internal power struggles. Twice during this century Vietnam occupied Kampuchea, from 1813 – 1833 and 1834 – 1841, both times arousing popular opposition. Kampuchean foreign relations during this period were little better than tributary state, whoever ruled the state did so only with the support of either Siam or Vietnam, both of who usually demanded territorial concessions in return.

Nguyen-vo characterises the Vietnamese conception of its sphere of influence and national security as being best satisfied through a persistent policy of expansion, which some argue became the enduring hallmark of Vietnamese regional policy.<sup>279</sup> This process was exacerbated by the territorial redistributions of the French colonial powers from 1859. After the conquest of what was then termed Cochin China by the French, and the establishment of the French protectorate over Cambodia in 1863, four sizeable areas of Cambodia were transferred to Cochin China or Annam (both Vietnamese territory).

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<sup>278</sup> Nguyen-vo, *Khmer-Viet Relations and the Third Indochina Conflict*.

Ibid.

<sup>279</sup> Nguyen-vo, *Khmer-Viet Relations and the Third Indochina Conflict*, pp. 14 - 16.

## Colonial Rule.

Under the French, Vietnam was divided into the colony of Cochin China and the protectorates of Annam and Tonkin. These were joined with the protectorates of Laos and Cambodia to form the *Union Indochinoise*.<sup>280</sup> This demarcation and rule affected the relations between Vietnam and Cambodia in both positive and negative manner. With unity of rule came an end to territorial conquest and contest, however it brought other sources of conflict that would prove significant in later disputes. First, the boundary demarcation known as the 'Brevie Line' interpretation of which was to form a major part of the basis of the territorial dispute in 1977-79, and second, the unequal treatment of the Cambodians and the Vietnamese by the French. Perceiving the Vietnamese as more industrious and advanced than their Khmer neighbours, the French privileged them with greater educational and vocational opportunities, often utilising Vietnamese as the middle level civil service class. Not only did this engender resentment in the Khmers, as the Vietnamese filled these positions in Cambodia as well as Vietnamese territories, but it also acted to stifle the development of an indigenous urban middle class and intelligentsia in Cambodia.<sup>281</sup> As Marek Thee confirms: "The French relied heavily on the better educated Vietnamese to fill the middle and lower ranks of the colonial administration in the whole of Indochina. Vietnamese functionaries became the real vehicle of French rule and too often they attracted the hatred of the local population more than the French themselves. This was in fact, part of the French policy of '*divide et impera*'".<sup>282</sup>

As in other colonial experiences, the seeds of discontent found fertile ground in both Cambodia and Vietnam and soon nationalist anti-colonial opposition arose and began to organise. In Vietnam pre-Can Vuong and Can Vuong anti-colonial movements were the first to emerge. They sought to oust the colonial French and re-install the emperor and his institutions.<sup>283</sup> These were soon replaced by movements agitating not just for the removal of the French but for new forms of socio-political organisation as well. In Cambodia a similar process took place repudiating not only French rule but any suggestion of the old subordinate relations with Vietnam as well. As Nguyen-vo succinctly notes:

As with nationalist awakenings elsewhere, this one involved redirection of hostilities elsewhere. As the Chinese had always, and the French had on occasions served as the external focus for hostilities in the consolidation of Vietnamese nationalism, so the

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<sup>280</sup> Nguyen-vo, *Khmer-Viet Relations and the Third Indochina Conflict*, p. 17.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18 - 19.

<sup>282</sup> Thee, "Red East in Conflict: The China/Indochina Wars," p. 96.

<sup>283</sup> Nguyen-vo, *Khmer-Viet Relations and the Third Indochina Conflict*, p. 22.

Vietnamese and French would respectively serve this purpose for the Kampucheans. Clashes took place between Khmer and Vietnamese inhabitants during the summer of 1945 under Sihanouk in a sense of officially sponsored antipathy to the Vietnamese.<sup>284</sup>

Through this process of externalisation of hostility, the Vietnamese – Cambodian history of animosity again came to serve the political purposes of the day and to be codified in cultural mythology.

With the end of World War II and the return of the French, the contest for power among the anti-colonial forces intensified. In Vietnam the Vietminh grew in prominence and in Cambodia the Khmer Isarak (free Khmer) likewise. In 1930 the Communist Party of Indochina was founded by Ho Chi Minh and although nominally representing all three countries, was dominated by Vietnamese. A party congress resolution in 1935 envisaged the establishment of an Indochinese Federation, however by 1951 the party was broken into three independent organisations, never to be re-united.<sup>285</sup> The Cambodian party subsequently divided into the pro-Vietnamese Khmer Vietminh, which favoured collaboration with Sihanouk, and their rivals under Saloth Sar who were to become the Khmer Rouge. The Khmer Vietminh in 1954, after the Geneva Agreement, mostly settled in North Vietnam while the Khmer Rouge gained control of the party in Cambodia. Although the Vietnamese communists supported the Khmer Rouge in their subsequent struggle for power in Cambodia, relations between the Vietminh and the Khmer Rouge only proved to grow more antagonistic and hostile.

### **Recent Vietnamese History.**

In June 1954 after defeat at Dien Bien Phu, the French government agreed to negotiations to end the 1<sup>st</sup> Indochina war. The country was subsequently divided at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel with the Vietminh occupying the north and national elections to be held within 2 years to reunify the country. The staunchly anti-communist and US sponsored president Ngo Dinh Diem of South Vietnam subsequently refused to hold elections and attempted to destroy the communist influence in the South. In 1959 the communist north resumed its revolutionary war and in the fall of 1963 Diem was overthrown and killed in a coup that although launched by his own generals was generally acknowledged to have been US sponsored. By 1965 US president

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<sup>284</sup> Ibid.

<sup>285</sup> Robert Fraser, ed., *Keesing's Contemporary Archives*, vol. 24 (London: Longman Group, 1978), p. 29269A.



Johnson approved escalating US involvement in the air and ground war in South Vietnam. After the 1968 Tet Offensive however, the Johnson administration sought to pursue a negotiated settlement. In 1969 Ho Chi Minh died and was succeeded by Le Duan. Johnson's successor Nixon continued to seek US disengagement through the 'Vietnamisation' of the war and a policy of withdrawal through 'peace with honour'. In January 1973 a temporary peace was concluded with the signing of the Paris peace agreement, however the accord soon fell apart and in early 1975 the communists launched a new offensive. In six weeks the resistance of the Thieu government collapsed and the communists seized power in Saigon on April 30<sup>th</sup>.<sup>286</sup>

### **Recent Cambodian History.**

In January 1946 Cambodia was granted self-government within the French Union and in 1953 complete independence. In 1954 communist Viet Minh troops from Vietnam invaded Cambodia but later that same year the Geneva armistice provided for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Cambodia. In 1955 King Norodom Sihanouk abdicated the throne in favour of his father so that he could enter politics, he subsequently formed the Popular Socialist Party and served as Premier. From 1965 onwards Sihanouk permitted the North Vietnamese and Southern Vietnam National Liberation Front (NLF) troops to use the eastern provinces to locate staging bases for activities against the South Vietnamese and US forces in South Vietnam. In 1963 Sihanouk renounced all US aid accusing them of supporting anti-government forces in Cambodia and in 1965 severed diplomatic relations entirely.<sup>287</sup> The Cambodian Communist Party in 1967 launched a guerrilla movement against the Sihanouk government, in opposition to the North Vietnamese communist party policy, which was one of collaboration with Sihanouk. In the spring of 1969 the US launched its covert bombing campaign against the Vietnamese and Cambodian communist strongholds in eastern Cambodia. As Cambodian communist activity and opposition grew, Sihanouk turned increasingly to the West and in July 1969 restored diplomatic relations with the US. August 1969 saw Lt General Lon Nol, the defence minister and supreme commander of the army, appointed Premier of Cambodia. Despite Sihanouk's attempted removal of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese troops from Cambodian soil, growing dissatisfaction with his handling of affairs and US intrigues precipitated his deposition by Lon Nol in March 1970. Michael

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<sup>286</sup> [www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/vm.html](http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/vm.html), *Vietnam* (2005 [cited]), [www.loveofasia.com](http://www.loveofasia.com), *History of Vietnam* (2005 [cited]).

<sup>287</sup> [www.encyclopedia.com/html/section/cambodia\\_history.asp](http://www.encyclopedia.com/html/section/cambodia_history.asp), *Cambodia History* (2005 [cited]).

Leifer in a 1975 *International Affairs* article '*The International Dimensions of the Cambodian Conflict*' quite extraordinarily places the cause of Sihanouk's demise squarely with his performance as leader: "To dwell on the issue of external involvement in the coup of March 1970 is to diminish the all important fact that Sihanouk fell in the final analysis because of the disenchantment and finally the open dissidence of opponents within his state".<sup>288</sup> Despite Leifer's protestation however, US complicity in Lon Nol's rise to power as a staunchly anti-communist and pro-American ally in the region, is generally agreed as certain.

From 1970 until 1975 Cambodia was plunged into civil war. Lon Nol's heavy-handed forces aided by the effects of the US bombing campaign and South Vietnamese troops waged protracted struggle with the Cambodian communists who in turn were supported by the North Vietnamese communists and NLF. The North Vietnamese and NLF forces indeed bore the brunt of the fighting and they continued to cooperate with the Khmer Rouge, though in decreasing numbers, until the war ended. The action of the South Vietnamese troops in Cambodia and the continued heavy US bombing, with the attendant devastation of rural Cambodian villages and lives, not only alienated the Khmer population but drove them deeper into cooperation with and support to the Khmer Rouge, who at the time presented themselves as national liberationists and Khmer nationalists.<sup>289</sup> In August 1973 the US congress ordered a halt to bombing operations while the Lon Nol government grew increasingly oppressive as its military situation rapidly deteriorated. In September 1973 the Khmer Rouge were in a position to launch a major offensive against Kampong Cham, Cambodia's 3<sup>rd</sup> largest city and by 1975 they were shelling and threatening the capital Phnom Penh. Thirteen days before the North Vietnamese and NLF captured Saigon, Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge forces took Phnom Penh and overthrew the government of Lon Nol. After the brutal and hungry years under Lon Nol and US bombardment, the Khmer Rouge were cheered as liberators as they entered Phnom Penh on April 17. The elation however, was short lived as a day after they entered the capital the Khmer Rouge began "emptying the cities, breaking up

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<sup>288</sup> Leifer, "The International Dimensions of the Cambodian Conflict," p. 531. Leifer is Reader in International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science and although his work is usually quite clearly pro-American, his apologetics for US intervention in Cambodia in this instance are a sure example of the assumptions underlying his analysis and typical of much of early American literature on the subject.

<sup>289</sup> Eva Mysliwiec, *Punishing the Poor: The International Isolation of Kampuchea* (Oxford: Oxfam, 1988). Mysliwiec also estimates up to one million Cambodians were killed by US bombs during this period. Many more were made homeless and fled to the cities.

families, clearing hospitals and marching the entire population into the countryside, taking only the food they could carry”.<sup>290</sup>

From 1975 until the Vietnamese intervention in December 1978 the Khmer Rouge transformed Cambodia into a hellish social experiment of unprecedented proportion. As Pol Pot expounded in 1978: “We are building a socialism without a model... there are no schools, faculties or universities in the traditional sense, ... because we wish to do away with all the vestiges of the past.”<sup>291</sup> The Khmer Rouge’s radical egalitarianism Jackson suggests:

was expressed in the complete collectivisation of agricultural and industrial production and the abolition of all private property, most personal possessions, money, bank accounts, loans, and interest rates. According to the official ideology, the root of all pre-1975 domestic problems was the dominance of the feudal landowning and capitalist classes residing mainly in the cities. The regimes first acts utterly destroyed the remaining Vietnamese and Chinese commercial backbone of society by driving them out of the country by forcing them to take up residence in the agricultural cooperatives of the liberated zones.<sup>292</sup>

Similarly the social structure of the country was decapitated by the immediate execution of military officers, government officials, businessmen, and any others suspected of capitalist connection or practices. Between 1975 and 1978 the Pol Pot regime systematically violated the most basic human rights. Retrospectively describing the conditions in Cambodia during this period, Sir Robert Jackson, Under Secretary General and Senior advisor to the UN described:

ceaseless killings...torture, persecution, iron discipline, ruthlessly imposed, hunger, starvation, deprivation of even the most elementary essentials of life. Some of the methods of torture and execution were, if anything, more obscene than those practiced by the Nazis and degraded the human mind and body in ways never before known... 2 million Kampuchean – a quarter of the entire population – perished representing genocide on a scale never before witnessed in terms of a single country (and) rarely in history has the entire population of a nation been subjected to such bestial and inhuman treatment as that endured by the Kampuchean people under Pol Pot.<sup>293</sup>

From the beginning of the Khmer Rouge rule they mounted frequent and vicious military attacks upon their Thai and Vietnamese neighbours inflicting significant civilian casualties. In conjunction with their persecution of all non-Khmers, in particular the

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<sup>290</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid., pp. 6 - 7.

<sup>292</sup> Karl Jackson, "Cambodia 1977: Gone to Pot," *Asian Survey* 18, no. 1 (1978): p. 77.

Vietnamese and Chinese, the Khmer Rouge undertook frequent brutal internal purges of party members, cadres, and ordinary civilians. Although the Thais moved eventually to accommodate the Khmer Rouge diplomatically through negotiation, relations with the Vietnamese continued to grow increasingly antagonistic and openly hostile.<sup>294</sup> The basis of this antipathy is to be found in a number of socio-political and geopolitical factors of which the most significant appear to be, the vilification of the Vietnamese by the Khmer Rouge utilising the perpetuated history of animosity to suit their domestic political agenda, the deep seated ideological differences between the Vietnamese Communist Party and the Khmer Rouge, the peculiar nationalistic significance of the disputed territorial border and the conflict this precipitated, and the xenophobic nationalism of the Khmer Rouge. Each will be discussed in some detail.

### **Border Dispute.**

The history of escalating events in the land border dispute between Vietnam and Cambodia is relatively easy enough to comprehend and trace. What is not so simple to discern however, is how a dispute over essentially insignificant differences in the demarcation of the border and the inconsequential amounts of territory the discrepancies encompass could precipitate open conflict. It is common for commentaries to concentrate on the issue of the border dispute as the focus of the conflict between the Cambodians and Vietnamese – and with good reason, the ongoing often open hostilities on the border provided the proximate spark that ignited the intervention and war, however, the dispute over the border territory is symptomatic of more fundamental and significant differences between the Khmer and Vietnamese people.

In a 1979 *Southeast Asian Affairs* article titled ‘*The Kampuchean-Vietnamese Conflict*’ Stephen Heder<sup>295</sup> details the background to the dispute over the border territories and argues that the significance of the border lay not in the physical territory in question but the peculiar national significance that negotiation of the border had come to assume as a result of the long history of Khmer-Viet territorial relations. In 1954 the French administration published the in-principle land border demarcation between Cambodia and Vietnam. A dispute ensued however, over the precise delineation this border – an area of

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<sup>293</sup> Sir Robert Jackson, preface in Mysliwiec, *Punishing the Poor: The International Isolation of Kampuchea*.

<sup>294</sup> Despite ongoing serious disturbances and clashes between Thai forces and Khmer Rouge elements in the refugee camps and along the Thai – Cambodia border, as a result of continued Khmer Rouge agitation, the Thai government acted to limit any possible escalation of hostilities and pursued a patient and forbearing strategy with the Phnom Penh government.

<sup>295</sup> Stephen Heder, "The Kampuchean - Vietnamese Conflict," *Southeast Asian Affairs* 6 (1979).

probably less than 100 square kilometres. There was also a dispute over the maritime boundaries as depicted by the so-called 'Brevie Line'. Both sides agreed to the French administrative demarcation of 1939, but not as to whether this line also determined the division of territorial waters. As noted earlier, territorial expansion and claim by the Vietnamese had seen lower Kampuchea ceded by the Khmers to the Vietnamese. The coming of the French did not halt this persistent loss of territory and saw further land arbitrarily annexed to the Vietnamese, hence the French demarcation of boundaries was not in itself a resolution to the problem. These historical losses to the Vietnamese and the sentiment they invoked in the Khmer population contributed to the emergence of a particular 'diplomatic strategy' regarding the frontier issue in the Sihanouk era.<sup>296</sup>

Sihanouk eventually renounced Cambodia's claims to the disputed Kampuchea Krom ('lower' Kampuchea) as 'lost' territories and agreed to the arbitrary French demarcation on the conditions that the frontiers henceforth be set and non-negotiable and that Kampuchea and Kampuchea alone had the right to seek minor readjustments or to resolve ambiguities to the border. The rationale of this approach was that by renouncing claims to so much of its territory, Kampuchea had won the right to set the conditions for acceptance of the boundaries, and that by settling the matter thus, Cambodia could hopefully once and for all time prevent Vietnam from repeatedly encroaching upon its territory. Given the military superiority of the Vietnamese and their traditional tactic of incrementally claiming more and more Khmer territory, the Cambodians believed their plan would finalise the matter. As Heder argues this non-negotiable posture came to be assumed in both Cambodia's diplomacy and public conscience as the minimal national position – one that was inextricably tied to Khmer sovereignty.

Although established during the Sihanouk era these constraints became as binding on the Khmer Rouge as they had been on Sihanouk. By presenting themselves as Khmer nationalists and liberators, the Khmer Rouge were bound by this position and the nationalistic legitimacy that it bore. Thus the minimal position regarding border demarcation became a focal point of the more bellicose Khmer Rouge regime and was destined to become a flashpoint in Khmer-Viet relations. The Vietnamese position on the border demarcation however, had never assumed the same level of national salience as it had for the Khmers and

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<sup>296</sup> Ibid.: p. 23.

was always a matter they felt was open to negotiation and mutually agreeable compromise.<sup>297</sup> In 1975 therefore the legacies of these inherited positions and the bellicose and aggressive Khmer Rouge stance combined to produce a series of clashes in the disputed territory. In May that year Vietnamese and Cambodian patrol vessels exchanged gun fire over the disputed island of Phu Quoc and troops clashed on the island of Poulo Panjang, with the Cambodians eventually being repulsed by local Vietnamese forces.

Following a summit in June however, the issue of the border dispute settled down until April the following year. In a further summit in April and May 1976 the two sides again failed to reach agreement with the Cambodians demanding Vietnam withdraw from the border region so that negotiations could proceed, and the Vietnamese arguing that the troops would withdraw or stay depending on the outcome of the negotiations. The Kampucheans of course interpreted this as a further example of the historic Vietnamese tactic of piecemeal encroachment. The talks were suspended and over the coming months the tensions rose as neither side gave way. In early 1977 the Kampucheans increased their pressure on the border zone and by May both sides had escalated their military presence and were engaged in frequent incidents and clashes. The Vietnamese in May responded to Kampuchean artillery shelling by launching counter attacks into Kampuchean territory in an effort ostensibly to bring the Khmer Rouge to the negotiating table. The Khmer Rouge responded in kind to what they perceived as renewed Vietnamese aggression and territorial ambition. In late September 1977 the Vietnamese marshaled around 60,000 troops and in December launched a major offensive pushing deep into Kampuchean territory.

Fighting continued into 1978 with stories of Kampuchean atrocities committed against Vietnamese villagers and Kampuchean counter accusation and claims of decisive victories over the Vietnamese. From the second half of January to June the Vietnamese forces remained largely on the defensive, repelling numerous Kampuchean raids over the border.<sup>298</sup> In February the Vietnamese deputy Foreign Minister Thach released a government proposal for peaceful settlement essentially reiterating Vietnam's wish to negotiate. Pol Pot responded in April reasserting Kampuchea's exclusive right to negotiation on the border issue: "Speaking of the right to demand the revision of border documents and changes in the

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<sup>297</sup> Ibid.: pp. 24 - 25.

<sup>298</sup> Fraser, ed., *Keesing's Contemporary Archives*, p. 29272B.

demarcation of land sea borders, only Democratic Kampuchea has the right and countless justified reasons to do so...”<sup>299</sup>

Fighting continued in the remaining months of 1978 although at a reduced scale most probably due to the unusually heavy wet season. Eventually however, the 1978-79 dry season saw the resumption of major hostilities and the December 25<sup>th</sup> Vietnamese intervention. Throughout this protracted dispute the elements of misperception, miscalculation, and misunderstanding are evident. The diplomatic legacies, as Heder describes them, were manifest in the continued pursuit of the nationalistic minimal position by the Khmer Rouge and were misinterpreted by the Vietnamese who saw their own willingness to negotiate as accommodating and the Khmer unwillingness to deal as intransigence and aggression. The Vietnamese were likewise perceived by the Kampuchean as having further territorial designs and were consequently met with aggressive border defence and an uncompromising diplomatic stance. As the proximate spark that ignited the broader conflict and precipitated the intervention in 1978, the persistent border dispute played a large part in the rationale of the war, but is itself only a part of the more complex whole. Issues of ideology, nationalism, Kampuchean fears of Vietnamese ambitions toward an Indochina federation, and competing interests also played significant part in the regional dynamics that produced this conflict.

### **Ideology.**

Ideologically the Vietnamese and Kampuchean communists were markedly dissimilar – a manifestation not only of their differing historical experiences, but also of their ideological pedigree, the circumstances surrounding their formation, the social and economic conditions into which they were born, and the manifestation of their subsequent world view and communist program. Between Heder and Rowley there is something of a debate as to the primacy and significance of these contributing factors, with Rowley arguing that it was the Kampuchean fear of the ‘myth’ of Vietnamese desire for an Indochina federation, which was a product of Vietnam’s communist worldview, that in large part constituted the divide between the parties and precipitated the conflict. Heder on the other hand sees this fear and misrepresentation as merely a manifestation of the differences between the parties, with the real cause of division being the underlying socio-political differences and histories of communism in the respective countries that produced different and incompatible communist worldviews. The question bears further discussion.

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<sup>299</sup> Ibid., p. 29273.

Heder notes that the formative period of the Vietnamese revolution was classically colonial and focused not on the destruction of 'feudal structures of society' but on the removal of foreign administration and the development of independent nationalism. Class conflict was downplayed to maintain nationalistic unity and 'mild administrative measures' were favoured over violent mass revolution.<sup>300</sup> Kampuchea by contrast, he argues involved "an attenuated neoclassical setting in which the main task of the revolution was the destruction of a colonially ossified and neo-colonially modernised feudal bureaucratic but indigenous and nationalist regime".<sup>301</sup> Formed ostensibly in 1960 during the Sihanouk years and struggling against this, and later the Lon Nol regime, the Kampuchean communists were battling strongly nationalistic and indigenously rooted autocracy.<sup>302</sup> Thus the Khmer Rouge sought to emphasise radical class struggle and extreme nationalism to differentiate their cause.

In addition to these differing socio-political circumstances the two parties also inherited different communist pedigree. The Vietnamese communist party descended from the communist party of the 1930s and 40s, which had only one centre- Moscow. Its leaders also experienced the Comintern era, which gave an "institutionalised legitimacy to worldwide coordination of communist movements".<sup>303</sup> Consequently the Vietnamese communist rationale had always had a strong emphasis on socialist unity and international communist community – necessitating a high degree of coordination and cooperation amongst the socialist bloc to effectively confront the capitalist bloc. In contrast the communist party of Kampuchea was a party of the radically different 1960s and 70s, in which the socialist bloc had already fractured with the Sino-Soviet split creating two antagonistic and competing communist centres. The Kampuchean communists therefore had no faith in a socialist bloc and were disdainful of the international communist community and cooperation. Furthermore they grew fiercely nationalistic and independent and fearful of "revisionism" posing as "internationalism". Thus the different socio-economic and political circumstances, and differing experiences with international communism in different periods, produced different revolutions and communist parties in Kampuchea and Vietnam.

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<sup>300</sup> Heder, "The Kampuchean - Vietnamese Conflict," pp. 35 - 36.

<sup>301</sup> Stephen Heder, "The Kampuchean - Vietnamese Conflict," in *The Third Indochina Conflict*, ed. David Elliott (Boulder: Westview Press, 1981), p. 35.

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.



For Heder these differences lay at the heart of the dispute and conflict between the parties, while for Rowley it was the manifestation of these differences through differing communist worldviews – international communist cooperation through an Indochina federation versus nationalistic independence – that formed the bedrock of antipathy.

### **Indochina Federation.**

As noted earlier, a resolution adopted in the 1935 Indochina Communist Party convention envisaged the formation of an Indochina federation, although the idea was never implemented in any meaningful sense. As an expression of both the tactical expediency of the need to unite in one theatre against a common adversary during the 1<sup>st</sup> Indochina war, and as an outgrowth of Vietnam's international communist community philosophy, the idea grew into something of a convenient myth by which successive Cambodian regimes would repudiate Vietnamese advances. Rowley and Evans argue that the notion in fact had substance, inspiring genuine fear amongst the Khmer Rouge and that it was in fact the underlying cause of the outbreak of hostilities post 1975. They argue that, rather than pursuing hegemony through federation, Vietnam really sought fraternal relations with its neighbours so that it could rebuild its war ravaged economy and society. The Khmer Rouge however, in fact believed that the Vietnamese were literally intent in establishing an Indochina federation as a disguise for further territorial and political ambitions, thus they fought vigorously against it. Although this certainly is the position that the Khmer Rouge promoted, as evidenced by Ieng Sary's June 1978 statement:

In the fact that Vietnam has the intention swallowing Cambodia, subverting and aggressing against it, attempting to engineer a *coup d'etat* to force it to join an Indochina Federation under its domination so that Vietnam can annex Cambodia within a set period of time take a step towards fulfilling its ambitions in Southeast Asia.<sup>304</sup>

It would appear more plausible however, that such Cambodian rhetoric was intended for public consumption so as to perpetuate the 'expansionist Vietnamese' perception thus discrediting Vietnam and serving the political purposes of the Khmer Rouge. It is questionable whether the Khmer Rouge ever really believed the Indochina federation to be any thing other than an historical curiosity, however as a propaganda tool in their conflict with the Vietnamese it proved to be a very useful and convenient one. This would coincide

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<sup>304</sup> Evans and Rowley, *Red Brotherhood at War: Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos since 1975*, p. 36.

with their other successful attempts to arouse and inflame anti-Vietnamese sentiment amongst the Khmer population through their strident propaganda depicting the Vietnamese as an ancient and aggressive enemy with territorial conquest and subjugation of the Khmer race as their goal. Such propaganda is well documented, and as Becker argues helped provide a public enemy and scapegoat for the abject failings of the Khmer Rouge regime.<sup>305</sup> In either case Rowley and Evans' argument against Vietnamese expansionism is convincing even if their case for Kampuchean fears is not.

### **Nationalism.**

Finally, the influential dynamic of Khmer and Vietnamese nationalism should be noted in this complex mix of regional factors. The nature and extent of Vietnamese national independence has been discussed already in the global context of its relations with China and the great powers. This same dynamic was influential in the regional context also in that it shaped the nature of the Vietnamese communist program and coloured its relationship with Cambodia. Accepting Rowley's argument that Vietnam was not expansionist, its strong nationalism can be seen to have supported this proposition, as rather than turning outward to Indochina, Vietnam having achieved its long sought objective of national re-unification in 1975 focused then on national re-building and re-constitution as the natural outgrowth of nationalistic sentiment. Although rampant nationalism can be the cause of external aggression by states, in Vietnam's circumstance it is far more plausible that it should be inwardly focussed, looking externally only to the extent that it could garner alliance and support for its nation building endeavours.

The Khmer Rouge by contrast had distinguished their nationalist credentials in distinction to the staunchly nationalistic Lon Nol and Sihanouk regimes by adopting an even more extreme nationalist position. Their distrust, opposition and hostility to all external influences were a manifestation of this extreme position, as was their radical class distinction and revolution. The conflict with Vietnam had its roots in the violent distinction drawn upon racial and nationalistic cleavages that were exacerbated and exploited by the Khmer Rouge in their search for, and promulgation of, a distinct national identity. The precedents of history were available and easily manipulated by the successive Cambodian regimes to foster greater national identity and unity through the identification and exclusion of 'the other' – in this instance notably the Vietnamese. The Khmer Rouge presented a consistently negative and

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<sup>305</sup> Elizabeth Becker, *When the War Was Over* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1986), pp. 300 - 330.

aggressive image of their Vietnamese neighbours. The 1973 Paris peace accord, the ongoing border dispute, and the US bombing of Cambodia, were portrayed by the Khmer Rouge respectively as instances of Vietnamese perfidy, aggression, and complicity in the external threat to the Khmer nation.

### **Individuals And Organisations.**

No discussion of Cambodia post World War II would be complete without reference to the central roles of two men in the history of that country, Prince Norodom Sihanouk and Saloth Sar, a.k.a Pol Pot. The first because he came to be popularly identified with the state of Cambodia and the hopes of its people, and the other for his savagery and murder of those same people. In terms of a theoretical account of the intervention of 1978 however, their significance may not be as immediately apparent. Thus far this study has focussed on the global and regional level factors that have shaped and directed events in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Indochina war, however, the unit level influence of these two leaders can not be simply overlooked and must be accounted for as part of the holistic explanation of events that this discussions aims for.

As has been noted Sihanouk was influential in Cambodian affairs at least from his campaigning for independence from the French in 1953 until the late 1990s. Usually characterised as charismatic and somewhat enigmatic, it is difficult to make distinction between his personal ambition and his desire to see Cambodia free, independent, and prosperous. Having carefully crafted his image as loyal servant of the state and as senior statesman, Sihanouk was influential in almost every major juncture of recent Cambodian history and it is almost impossible to imagine Cambodia taking the course in history that it did without his presence. Most significantly for this study however, is the manner in which he interpreted, pursued and came to embody the interests of the state and its people. Such personification of national interests is theoretically difficult for realists following Carr, Neibuhr's, and Waltz's logic of the separation of moral man from amoral society.<sup>306</sup> Without the ability to separate the interests of the leader from the interests of the state the argument of rational amoral state action in the international system of states loses its cogency. While the realist response may suggest that Sihanouk really only represented the interests of the state as

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<sup>306</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932). See also Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Relations*, New York: Random House, 1979

opposed to embodying them, and that the state did not therefore lose its rational autonomy as systemic actor, the case is not convincing given the centrality and dominance of his presence and poorly accounts for the role of the 'great man in history'. In Sihanouk's case his famously agile diplomacy with the US, the Chinese, the Thais, the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese at various times and to suit various immediate needs makes it difficult to distinguish whether these were the deft diplomatic manoeuvrings of a state desperately trying to survive or the slick side-stepping of a statesman trying to ensure his personal survival and relevance in a rapidly changing political landscape. In either event the crucial significance of the figure of Sihanouk highlights the need for a more inclusive synthesis to account for the significant influence of unit level factors such as the role of individuals in state foreign policy.

The case of Pol Pot is in some ways similar. As the eventual leading figure in the Khmer Rouge regime his actions became synonymous with the rationale of the state. It is of course arguable whether Cambodia operated as a functioning state during the Khmer Rouge years, however, to the extent that it pursued national objectives and exhibited organisation and structure, even if fractured, Kampuchea can be considered to have constituted a functioning state. Again however, realist theory has difficulty with extreme cases of aberrant state behaviour, as in the case of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge. Leaving aside the argument of rationality for the moment it is difficult to reconcile theoretically the actions of a state such as Kampuchea that strove to remove itself from the international system – cutting all trade and almost all external relations - with a functioning systemic model of state relations and actions. While the realist may argue that this is irrelevant in that ultimately Kampuchea resorted to force in its dealings with Vietnam, thus affirming the centrality of power as the currency of state relations – the explanation is only superficially sufficient. Realist theory could not adequately account for or predict the actions of an aberrant state like Kampuchea without recourse to significant unit level analysis. Systemically Kampuchea was an anomaly. It did not act like a rational state pursuing its own interests. Analytically to make sense of Kampuchea's Pol Pot years the critical importance of the individual and unit level elements must be acknowledged – thus again highlighting the need for a more sufficient realist account to be a more inclusive one.

## The Intervention.

The simmering border dispute that had periodically boiled over into open conflict in the border territories came to sudden and decisive conclusion in December 1978. Observers and commentators had been expecting a 'dry season offensive' since the last major action in December – January 1977-78, and with the coming the 1978-79 dry season speculation was rife as to what form that offensive would take. Nayan Chanda writing for the *Far Eastern Economic Review* at the time reported that opinion appeared unanimous that a massive dry season offensive by Vietnam was immanent but equally divided as to the form that offensive would take.<sup>307</sup> Some suggested a protracted low-level conflict of attrition in which superior Vietnamese military strength would grind down the Khmer Rouge forces while fomenting internal upheaval and possibly political change.<sup>308</sup> Others however, speculated a more conventional full frontal assault across a wide front over the Mekong and into the Cambodian heartland. Observers had also speculated that now that Vietnam had taken out insurance against Chinese retribution via means of its friendship and cooperation treaty with Moscow, that the Vietnamese would take a bold initiative towards Cambodia. The offensive as it eventually occurred however, took even the most astute observer by surprise with its speed, effectiveness, and innovative strategy.

Fully expecting a major offensive, the Khmer Rouge for their part had made what limited preparations they felt warranted. Troop preparations were accelerated and forces concentrated in the 'Parrot's Beak' and 'Fishhook',<sup>309</sup> regions where so much previous cross border confrontation had taken place. So too the leadership had made necessary tactical preparations should the capital Phnom Penh be eventually overrun, and strategic preparations, in terms of making ready for a jungle based guerrilla war campaign. Beijing had several months before, warned and advised the Khmer Rouge of the necessity and wisdom in preparing for a protracted low-level guerrilla style campaign and it appeared the Khmer Rouge had taken this advice seriously.<sup>310</sup>

Chanda describes the force and strategy that was unleashed against the Cambodians as "awe inspiring"<sup>311</sup> and certainly the effectiveness of the Vietnamese forces in seizing the

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<sup>307</sup> Nayan Chanda, "A Dry Season Infiltration," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 3 Nov 1978.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid.

<sup>309</sup> Regions so named because of their resemblance on a map to a parrot's beak and a fishhook.

<sup>310</sup> Nayan Chanda, "Blitzkrieg on Cambodia," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 12 Jan 1979, Nayan Chanda, "Pol Pot Eyes Jungle Again," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 15 Dec 1978.

<sup>311</sup> Chanda, "Blitzkrieg on Cambodia."

capital within fifteen days, and control over the majority of the country some eight days later, with a force of more than 100,000 Vietnamese troops and 15-20,000 Khmer insurgents raised in Vietnam, a huge number of tanks, armoured personnel vehicles, aircraft and artillery, was impressive. On Christmas day 1978 the Vietnamese launched their 'Blooming Lotus' strategy in which their forces moved rapidly to the capital and other regional command and control centres, bypassing outlying forces, captured the centres, then bloomed outwards to engulf the remaining forces. The strategy had been successfully used by General Van Tien Dung in the 1975 spring offensive in South Vietnam, this latest employment however, was used on a national scale.<sup>312</sup> The offensive began with heavy bombing of the Khmer Rouge positions in Andau Pich, Viensai, Stung Treng and Kratie followed by the ground assault forces moving rapidly down Routes 19 and 7. Following four days of fighting Kratie, a key Mekong River port, fell on 30 December after which main force units crossed the Mekong outflanking Kampong Cham, another regional key town, simultaneously cutting off Phnom Penh's principle lines of communication with the eastern front.<sup>313</sup> Meanwhile integrated air bombardment and ground assault east of Kampong Cham was carried out along Route 7 effectively trapping up to 30,000 Cambodian troops (half of their forces) between advancing Vietnamese forces. The Cambodians were apparently deployed in defence of Routes 1 and 7 in the Parrot Beak and Fishhook regions in response to the 1977 Vietnamese offensive, which proceeded along this axis toward Phnom Penh. Once encircled these Cambodian forces were destroyed 'in detail' by Vietnamese aerial and artillery fire.<sup>314</sup>

While the actions in the Svay Rieng, Prey Veng and Kampong Cham provinces were underway, a third front was opened in the south-eastern region of Cambodia.<sup>315</sup> Following aerial attack on Cambodian position along Routes 1 and 2, Vietnamese forces swiftly captured Takeo on Route 2 then advanced rapidly in motorized and armoured units toward Phnom Penh along Routes 1, 3 and 4. The Vietnamese provided air support with MIG 21s, A37s, and F5 aircraft to their advancing columns. Meanwhile some of the units that had crossed the Mekong to assault Kampong Cham moved west to cut Route 6 and cross the Tonle Sap River at Luong before turning south to converge on the capital.<sup>316</sup> Reportedly up to

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<sup>312</sup> Nayan Chanda, "Cambodia: Fifteen Days That Shook Asia," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 19 Jan 1979.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid.

<sup>316</sup> Ibid.

five Vietnamese divisions had surrounded Phnom Penh by January 7 before entering the defenceless city.

With the fall of the capital, the Vietnamese concentrated on rolling up the remaining two-thirds of the country in a manner designed to achieve three objectives; rapidly deny the Khmer Rouge strategic assets around which to regroup and counter-attack, to isolate the rump of the Khmer forces to both buffer the Thai border from fighting (so as to limit the potential for Thai involvement) as well as to sever lines of communication, re-supply, and escape to Thailand, and to isolate and destroy remaining pockets of resistance.<sup>317</sup> The Vietnamese pursued the retreating Khmer forces west after Phnom Penh with two columns of motorized divisions reinforced with armour, artillery and air support, one each via Route 5 and Route 6. The Vietnamese were driving for the vital junction at Sisophon where Routes 5 and 6 converge after travelling down each side of lake Tonle Sap, before continuing west to the Thai border at the town of Poipet.

The force on Route 6, after heavy fighting at Kampong Chhnang, broke through on January 12<sup>th</sup> and continued north toward Battambang. The northern forces on Route 5 meanwhile moved rapidly to Siem Riep and punched through those defences by January 11<sup>th</sup>, with advanced units by that evening having reached Sisophon. At Sisophon these forces wheeled around Cambodian defences to block Route 6 north of Battambang in order to cut off northern escape from that location where the remaining Khmer forces had regrouped. Having thus encircled the remaining Khmer main force and denied its major escape route to the Thai border, the Vietnamese closed in on Battambang. Remnant Khmer forces escaped however, from Battambang, Sisophon and Siem Riep numbering in their hundreds and fled to the Thai border slipping through the dense jungle. This left only the remote northern provinces of Oddar Meanchey and Preah Vichear to which were dispatched two columns of mixed forces. Further operations continued in the southwest to seal off Koh Kong province from possible Chinese resupply via the Gulf of Siam, to the supposed guerrilla bases in the Cardamon Mountains in the southwest.

By the end of February the Vietnamese forces were in effective control of the bulk of the country and although Khmer Rouge forces had slipped away to remoter areas to regroup to platoon and company strength, no further major battles were fought for control of territory. On January 8 the People's Revolutionary Council headed by Heng Samrin was established in

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<sup>317</sup> Nayan Chanda, "Guerillas Fall out as They Take to the Hills," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 26 Jan 1979.

Phnom Penh, and by January 11 they proclaimed a People's Republic of Kampuchea, which was accorded diplomatic recognition by Vietnam, the Soviet Union and its allies only.<sup>318</sup> On February 17 a senior Vietnamese delegation led by Prime Minister Dong and including Army Chief of Staff Dung, met in Phnom Penh and concluded a Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation with the new government the next day.<sup>319</sup>

### **Aftermath and Occupation**

The Khmer Rouge forces as Rowley notes were 'mauled' by the Vietnamese but not entirely destroyed.<sup>320</sup> The remaining forces regrouped in the remote northern provinces, in the Cardamon Mountains, and in the Thai border zones, and over the next 10 years fought a steadily declining protracted guerrilla war with the remaining Vietnamese forces. The Vietnamese for their part had always intended remaining until the Heng Samrin government was sufficiently ensconced and the Khmer Rouge sufficiently weakened so as to no longer pose immediate threat to the fledgling government. Under intense international and regional pressure to end their occupation, the Vietnamese suffered the dual dilemma of having to retain forces in Cambodia at considerable diplomatic and economic expense, or risk all they had ventured to a returning Khmer Rouge, plus see their hoped for swift economic recovery stagnate under the burden of occupation and the economic and diplomatic sanctions of international pariahdom. By 1989, ten years after the intervention, the Vietnamese had withdrawn the remnants of their forces from Cambodian soil, as they claim to have planned all along. Security was restored to their borders with Cambodia, old ideological differences were vanquished and the genocidal Pol Pot regime was destroyed, but the cost to Vietnam had been more that it could easily bear.

### **The Decision**

When presented as they have been here, the aggregating and culminating global, regional, and ideational factors that precipitated this intervention may appear to manifest an inevitability that forgoes the causal role of rational decision-making in this episode. Yet such would be a mistaken impression. The Vietnamese decision to intervene in 1978 was just that, a conscious, rational decision to invade. Despite the opportunism of the events as they actually unfolded, and the '*fortuna*' of the manner in which the Cambodian forces so quickly

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<sup>318</sup> Michael Leifer, "Kampuchea 1979: From Dry Season to Dry Season," *Asian Survey* 20, no. 1 (1979): p. 34.

<sup>319</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>320</sup> Evans and Rowley, *Red Brotherhood at War: Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos since 1975*.



crumbled, the decision to intervene was one that lay fairly and squarely with the Vietnamese political hierarchy. As Chanda notes in January 1979:

According to the Peking People's Daily 'like a gambler maddened by one loss after another, the Vietnamese authorities have decided to throw in all their stakes and overrun Kampuchea, so as to lay the cornerstone for their future great empire.' Independent observers however, tend to see it not as a mad gamble but a calculated one. Despite the stationing of troops and frequent punitive raids the security of the border region could not be assured.<sup>321</sup>

The Vietnamese decision, notwithstanding its considerable risk, was one rationally arrived at by the authorities, and it was influenced by a number of important considerations. In the first instance, Vietnam felt that the opportunity that the 1978 dry season afforded them might be the last one to achieve a favourable outcome. The Vietnamese had observed that after nearly two years of international isolation Kampuchea was slowly opening its doors and taking steps to foster a better international image through a process of diplomatically distancing itself from the "excesses of its past". China had been behind such moves and was cajoling the Khmer Rouge to present themselves internationally as having moved on from their revolutionary past and to present the image of a more acceptable international partner. Although the court of Western opinion was sure to damn Vietnamese action, the Vietnamese may have felt that should the Khmer Rouge's image improve significantly their case against Cambodia as the aggrieved party and moral superior would be that much harder to sustain.<sup>322</sup>

In addition, mounting economic pressures gave impetus to a 1978 solution. The ongoing border dispute was very costly in terms of expensive military commitment, lost lives and disruption to normal economic activity and trade. Chanda reports that one of his sources speculated, "the Vietnamese had weighed their political advantage in continuing a low level war against its military-economic costs and decided to go for strategic gain."<sup>323</sup> Ultimately of course the intervention and occupation proved extraordinarily expensive<sup>324</sup>, but as noted earlier the Vietnamese had hoped that once final settlement was imposed that the promised

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<sup>321</sup> Chanda, "Cambodia: Fifteen Days That Shook Asia."

<sup>322</sup> I owe this point to Chanda who suggests such in his FEER article of 19 January 1979.

<sup>323</sup> Chanda, "Cambodia: Fifteen Days That Shook Asia."

<sup>324</sup> Evans and Rowley, *Red Brotherhood at War: Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos since 1975*. Rowley and Evans noting the disastrous effect on the Vietnamese economy cite To Huu, a Vietnamese deputy premier in 1979, who lamented that "We will be poor and we will be hungry until the end of this century". They also note that Vietnam's post-war economic strategy had been completely wrecked by the conflict and was to remain so for most the next decade.

US aid would be forthcoming and that relations with China would likewise be restored – neither was to eventuate in the short term.<sup>325</sup>

## **The Reaction**

### **Regional.**

In contrast to the muted international and mostly positive regional reaction to Tanzania's intervention into Uganda, Vietnam's intervention provoked widespread condemnation and hostility for a range of principled and pragmatic reasons. As Wheeler contends, this opposition emanated from within three major groupings of states, the US and its allies, ASEAN, and the neutral and non-aligned states.<sup>326</sup> There was however, some support from the eastern bloc countries that sided with the Soviet position, with the exception of Romania, who condemned the action as wrongful and damaging to socialist prestige.<sup>327</sup>

Within the immediate region the reactions of Thailand and China were the most stridently hostile. Caught as they were between the Vietnamese interventionary forces and the Thai border, many Khmer Rouge slipped through the porous borders and began to regroup and organise opposition within the Thai border region. Clearly opposed to further Vietnamese power consolidation in Indochina, and resentful at the loss of Cambodia as a buffer between the two historically antagonistic states, Thailand surreptitiously aided the Khmer Rouge forces and allowed Chinese aid to flow to them through its territories. There were numerous clashes between Thai and Vietnamese border patrols and the situation were extremely tense until gradually diffused by the influx of international aid organisations in the border zone, establishing refugee camps and aid distribution centres. As a member of ASEAN Thailand's response was tempered by the collective concern of the ASEAN states for the cohesion and viability of the association should Thailand react militarily.<sup>328</sup> Anti-communist and pro-American, Thailand was not only fundamentally politically predisposed against Vietnam but it articulated real security concerns over the ongoing Khmer Rouge – Vietnamese clashes in the border region. Its response again however, was tempered by its need to co-habit Indochina and so although it facilitated Chinese aid to the Khmer Rouge and lent covert support itself for the Khmer Rouge forces through its support to the Sihanouk coalition in

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<sup>325</sup> Gary Klintworth, *Vietnam's Intervention in Cambodia in International Law* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1989), p. 9.

<sup>326</sup> Wheeler, *Saving Strangers: Humanitarian Intervention in International Society*, p. 89.

<sup>327</sup> Nguyen-vo, *Khmer-Viet Relations and the Third Indochina Conflict*, p. 131.

exile, it gradually muted its rhetoric while maintaining its stance on the illegality and illegitimacy of the Heng Samrin government.

ASEAN however, presented a united public face in opposition to Vietnam's actions, although not all member states were unanimous in their condemnation of Vietnam. Wheeler suggests that ASEAN was fearful of a Vietnamese drive for regional hegemony, but more accurately it was concerned for the great power imbalance and possible reaction that Vietnam's action may have precipitated. Concerned not only to moderate Soviet influence in the region, member states were also active to limit too great a US or Chinese presence. If the Vietnam victory meant increased Soviet presence then ASEAN was concerned that the US and China would act to offset this with further US presence in the region – an outcome that would not have been favoured by all member states. ASEAN's public face on the matter however, was one of paramount concern for the cardinal rule of the society of states – namely state sovereignty. Condemning Vietnam's actions and calling for the withdrawal of its troops from Cambodia, ASEAN invoked not only a principled stance against intervention but its actions also reflected its sense of betrayal at Vietnam's contravention of the peaceful assurances given by Dong during his regional tour just prior to the intervention.<sup>329</sup>

If ASEAN's reaction was one of continued opposition and condemnation, China's was one of forceful action stemming from its pragmatic opposition to Vietnam's consolidation of power. The deteriorating relations between China and Vietnam have already been noted, as too has China's support the Khmer Rouge regime. As the conflict between Vietnam and Cambodia intensified in 1977 and US-China détente increased, China prepared to flex its muscle against the 'truculent and ungrateful' Vietnamese and to "teach them a lesson".<sup>330</sup> On February 17 1979 some 100,000 Chinese troops embarked upon a punitive attack along the 1300 kilometre Sino-Viet border systematically razing a huge area, devastating four provincial capitals and 320 villages, rendering over 250,000 Vietnamese homeless, at a cost of some 50,000 Vietnamese lives and 20,000 Chinese. This 'pedagogic' invasion aimed not only to punish the Vietnamese for their attitude towards China and their actions in Cambodia but it sought to distract Vietnamese forces from Cambodia to Vietnam's northern borders with China. Having secured what it perceived as assurances of non-intervention and diplomatic support from the US 'covering their political rear' as Brezhnev

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<sup>328</sup> Leifer, "Vietnam's Intervention in Kampuchea: The Rights of the State V. The Rights of People," p. 152.

<sup>329</sup> Porter, "Vietnamese Policy and the Indochina Crisis," p. 111, Wheeler, *Saving Strangers: Humanitarian Intervention in International Society*, p. 95.

said, China felt sufficiently confident of its position to act militarily against Vietnam.<sup>331</sup> Ultimately however, the action failed to meet any of China's goals as the Vietnamese inflicted substantial casualties on the Chinese, highlighting the obsolescence of its field tactics, strategy, and technology, and the Vietnamese were also able to mount their defence using locally raised citizen's forces and regular military units without the need to divert resources from Cambodia.<sup>332</sup> Finally the Vietnamese resolve in its relations with China were if anything only hardened further by China's invasion. In addition to this punitive military action, China also vigorously applied diplomatic pressure on Vietnam through the UN and its support for Sihanouk's coalition government of Democratic Kampuchea. China continued to support Pol Pot and his forces in their guerrilla campaign against the PRK and vociferously condemned Vietnam and the Peoples' Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) as agents of Soviet hegemonism.

### **International Reaction.**

The response of the United States and its allies is again one that is directed by the realities of great power politics, whilst simultaneously presenting a pluralist and principled face. In Wheeler's excellent commentary on the US reaction he notes:

The US ambassador, Andrew Young, argued that international society should have brought the full weight of its moral pressure to bear on a regime that violated its most basic humanitarian principles, stressing the view that the way a government treats its own citizens is a legitimate matter for international censure. However, he was equally adamant that a commitment to defend human rights could not justify breaking the rules of non-intervention, territorial integrity, and non-use of force.<sup>333</sup>

Whilst recognising that Vietnam had legitimate security anxieties relating to Cambodian attacks against its citizens in the border areas, the US argued "border disputes do not grant one nation the right to impose a government on another by military force."<sup>334</sup> By assuming this pluralist line of argument the US was attempting to use the collective legitimacy of the international society and its normative conventions to sanction Vietnam and bring about a reversal of the power shift that had seen them evicted from the region as a result of Vietnam's

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<sup>330</sup> Nguyen-vo, *Khmer-Viet Relations and the Third Indochina Conflict*.

<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>332</sup> The Vietnamese more than bloodied the Chinese assault and inflicted heavy Chinese casualties with only half the number of troops that the Chinese committed to the offensive. Vietnam at one point occupied substantial tracks of Chinese territory and consistently proved to have superior technology, tactics and battlefield skill.

<sup>333</sup> Wheeler, *Saving Strangers: Humanitarian Intervention in International Society*, p. 91.

<sup>334</sup> *Ibid.*

victory in 1975. Having lost its legitimacy to intervene materially in Indochina after its defeat in 1975, the US sought to bring its influence to bear on the region through pressure in the fora of the UN and the international community.

Wheeler also notes the earlier attempts by US Senator McGovern to propose action to end the human rights abuses in Kampuchea under the authority of the UN Charter chapter VII and how this proposal failed to gain momentum in the face of its threat to the non-intervention principle and the political difficulty of getting such a resolution through the UN.<sup>335</sup> The US administration subsequently moved to stymie PRK membership to the UN and to frustrate Vietnam's attempts to seek economic assistance through the international institutions of the IMF and the World Bank.

Wheeler makes the case that Vietnam argued that in fact two wars were taking place in Cambodia, "one a border war started by the Pol Pot – Ieng Sary clique against Vietnam ... the other, a revolutionary war of the Kampuchean people".<sup>336</sup> This 'two wars' claim was rejected by the US and its allies as a sham cover for Vietnam's forcible change of government in Cambodia and they argued that Vietnam should remove its forces from the country.<sup>337</sup> The US administration also sought to raise the issue of human rights and the abuses of the Khmer Rouge regime as a matter of international principle. Its condemnation of the Vietnamese action however, stood in contradiction of this, as did their advocacy of Vietnam's withdrawal.

Behind this public face of pluralist concern for the norms and values of the international community and the tensions between humanitarian action and principles of non-intervention, the US's actions may also be seen to be the product of the great power dynamics at play, in particular its opposition to Soviet penetration into the region, and as a consequence of deep felt antipathy towards Vietnam following the experiences of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Indochina war and possibly its guilt over the Cambodian bombing. The US's reaction therefore, appears a mix of perplexity at the paradoxes of international norms, values, and principles, and an equally real "need" to check Soviet expansion into Indochina.

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<sup>335</sup> Ibid., p. 91. It should also be noted that the UN would have been mindful of recent past US intervention and its dire consequences, decreasing the likelihood of any general agreement in the Security Council or General Assembly to such proposal.

<sup>336</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>337</sup> The consequences of such withdrawal of course, as Vietnam had argued, would have been the immediate return of the Khmer Rouge. This no doubt was exactly what the US and its allies would have hoped for, although it is difficult to reconcile the consequences of such with their stated opposition to the genocidal nature of the Khmer Rouge regime.

Britain and France likewise condemned Vietnam's actions on the basis that it contravened international convention against territorial sovereignty insisting that the Vietnamese should withdraw their forces immediately. Similarly a host of smaller nations such as Norway, Portugal, Australia, and New Zealand argued that despite the internal abuses of the Pol Pot government nothing could justify the invasion of one state by another.<sup>338</sup> As Wheeler notes moral censure and condemnation of corrupt and abusive regimes was as far as the solidarist position extended in the international community in the 1970s, genocide was apparently abhorrent but it did not justify intervention.<sup>339</sup> The norms and conventions that drew their legitimacy from the consensus of international society at this time were still very much preoccupied with upholding the primacy of the principles of territorial sovereignty and non-intervention – and although they could overlook the actions of a strategically marginalised state such as Tanzania they could not do so in Indochina where so much great power interest was at stake. Again it would appear that the interpretation and application the norms and conventions of international society were conditional and not as independent of the influences of great power interests as may have been supposed, rather they were conditioned by the values and ambitions of the most powerful and influential.

#### **UN Reaction.**

“The Security Council, in receipt of a complaint from Democratic Kampuchea that a lawfully constituted member of the United Nations was under unprovoked attack, began a debate on January 11 1979”.<sup>340</sup> Two days before this appeal to the UN, Heng Samrin telegraphed the president of the Security Council and advised him that the People's Revolutionary Council of Kampuchea was in full control of the country so UN action in regard to the DK representatives would be inappropriate. The UN did not accept this position but rather over the coming years continued to recognise the DK as the lawful UN member state and by *de facto* still the lawful government of Cambodia.

In 1979 the UN Security Council twice considered Vietnam's intervention into Kampuchea, first in January then again in February-March. On both occasions the draft resolution failed to be adopted due to veto votes by the USSR. Apart from the USSR however, only Czechoslovakia would argue against the drafts, while the remaining 13 council members voted in favour. The General Assembly however, had each year for the four years

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<sup>338</sup> Wheeler, *Saving Strangers: Humanitarian Intervention in International Society*, p. 94.

<sup>339</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>340</sup> Haas, *Genocide by Proxy: Cambodian Pawn on a Superpower Chessboard*, p. 109.

from 1979 to 1982 considered the question of Kampuchean representation and on each occasion decided to continue to allow the DK to represent the government of Kampuchea. In the September 1979 vote the DK regime was reaffirmed by 71 votes to 35 with 34 abstentions. Not one Western state voted against Pol Pot's regime, although Austria, France, Spain and the Scandinavian countries did abstain.<sup>341</sup> The General Assembly also considered the agenda item entitled 'the Situation in Kampuchea' and resolved to call for the withdrawal of foreign forces, although they did not specify Vietnam by name. Neither was Vietnam condemned as an aggressor state. Over the subsequent years of Vietnamese occupation and despite growing awareness of the horrors of the Pol Pot years the majority vote in the resolutions against Vietnam steadily increased. By 1989 the vote was 122 for, 19 against with 13 abstentions. Of note the 1987 resolution condemned the foreign armed intervention in Kampuchea and demanded: "a respect for the national independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of all states, non-intervention and not-interference in the internal affairs of states, not-recourse to the threat or use of force, and the peaceful settlement of disputes."<sup>342</sup>

By 1990 the UN's interest in the matter, following Vietnam's complete withdrawal in 1989, was rapidly coming to an end. In its 45<sup>th</sup> session in October the General Assembly unanimously adopted a resolution on Kampuchea, which did not include any reference to a continued foreign military intervention (signalling that the Assembly deemed the intervention terminated) and leaving vacant the Kampuchean UN seat. As Klintworth notes these resolutions, although not backed by any UN forces, did adversely affect Vietnam. International economic assistance was effectively embargoed by the EEC, Japan and the US and other states suspended aid and assistance programs adding even greater strain on Vietnam's shattered economy.<sup>343</sup>

In his study of UN reactions to foreign military interventions, Ramses Amer concludes his systematic study of seven interventions with the analysis that "it can be concluded that the United Nations' reactions seem to depend not so much on the degree of violation of the provisions of the Charter governing the relations between the member-states, but more on the degree of global power involvement."<sup>344</sup> This conclusion accords with the proposition of this study that behind the scenes, great power interests shape and influence the

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<sup>341</sup> Evans and Rowley, *Red Brotherhood at War: Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos since 1975*, p. 155.

<sup>342</sup> Klintworth, *Vietnam's Intervention in Cambodia in International Law*, p. 9.

<sup>343</sup> Ibid.

<sup>344</sup> Ramses Amer, "Foreign Military Interventions and the United Nations: Looking Beyond the Charter," in *Australian National University Research School of Pacific Studies* (Canberra: 1994).

legitimation and application of so called international norms, conventions, and shared values. Thus although this study argues that a critical synthesis should acknowledge the role of norms and shared values in the interaction of states, such synthesis must necessarily be informed by how the interests of the great powers not only shape what are seen as legitimate state interests within the society of states, but also how the interpretation of those norms and values are applied to various circumstances.

## **Justification**

Whereas Vietnam's decision to intervene forcefully and decisively into Cambodia says a great deal about its motivations and reasons, its public justification of its actions says something different again about how it perceived itself in the international community, about how it understood the processes, norms and conventions of international behaviour to be constituted, and about the state of humanitarian considerations in foreign policy at the time.

Michael Leifer argues that in Vietnam's case there was a fundamental difference between its public justification of its actions and its private and informal position on the matter. He insists that in private discussions it was evident that the human rights violations of the Pol Pot regime were not a pressing priority to the Vietnamese – until it was politically convenient. What was a pressing concern he maintains was the geopolitical need to replace the Phnom Penh government with one of its own choosing.<sup>345</sup> In arguing that Vietnam perceived Indochina as a single political entity whose fracture would threaten the integrity and political identity of the Vietnamese state, Leifer harks back to the Indochina federation argument, although he does not explicitly use these terms. He also insists that publicly Vietnam justified their intervention in terms of the removal of a genocidal regime. Both of these claims lack evidence. The Indochina federation argument has been repudiated primarily as politically motivated rhetoric by the Kampucheans and Chinese, while the only evidence he offers to support his claim regarding the humanitarian justification is a quote from Phan Van Dong who on February 18 1979 in Phnom Penh stated: "In the atmosphere of this friendly meeting our delegation warmly welcomes the fraternal Kampuchean people's historic victory. A victory which has smashed the tyranny of the Pol Pot clique, eliminating for good the genocide and slavery imposed by this clique..."<sup>346</sup>

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<sup>345</sup> Leifer, "Vietnam's Intervention in Kampuchea: The Rights of the State V. The Rights of People," p. 146.

<sup>346</sup> Ibid.



The quote is unconvincing of a genuine attempt by the Vietnamese to justify their actions in terms of humanitarian concern. It is by all accounts, the only such reference to genocide that they make during the period immediately following the intervention, and it appears more of an opportunistic remark rather than part of a concerted and orchestrated effort to justify their actions on moral grounds. Wheeler argues that in fact: “Vietnam at no point advanced humanitarian claims to justify its use of force”,<sup>347</sup> but repudiated such appeal insisting, “the human rights were the concern of the Cambodian people.”<sup>348</sup> This being the case,<sup>349</sup> Vietnam’s refusal to claim humanitarian grounds for its intervention suggests therefore that either Vietnam did not think to make it a sustained argument or that it considered that such a claim would be futile. In the latter case, Wheeler suggests that three explanations may be adduced from Vietnam’s actions. Firstly, that “Vietnam might simply have accepted the legitimacy of the rules of sovereignty, non-intervention, and non use of force”.<sup>350</sup> Secondly, that a plea of humanitarian intervention would lack credibility, or thirdly, that such an appeal may in future be used by other states to attack Vietnam.<sup>351</sup> While these are all reasonable suppositions it is proposed here that the idea of an appeal to humanitarian concern was never seriously entertained by the Vietnamese as the primary justification for their intervention, not because they feared it may backfire on them in the future or lack credibility, but because there was no established precedent for such appeal and because such notion did not in 1979 enjoy widespread support or legitimacy. Humanitarian intervention in 1979 was not accepted by the international community as a legitimate form of action in any situation. This is born out in the reaction of states and the UN to Vietnam’s actions, in which it was made very clear that no internal state conditions could ever warrant external military intervention. As the Singaporean ambassador addressing the UN General Assembly at the time insisted: “if we were to recognise a doctrine of humanitarian intervention, I submit that the world would be an even more dangerous place than it is now for us small countries.”<sup>352</sup> Clearly fear of intervention and loss of sovereignty trumped humanitarian moral considerations, especially for small states in the late 1970s.

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<sup>347</sup> Wheeler, *Saving Strangers: Humanitarian Intervention in International Society*, p. 88.

<sup>348</sup> Ibid.

<sup>349</sup> This point was acknowledged by Leifer to Wheeler in a letter to Wheeler of 9 Oct 1998 as noted in footnote 46 to page 88, Ibid.

<sup>350</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>351</sup> Ibid.

<sup>352</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

What Vietnam did argue as its justifications, were framed around the faulty ‘two wars argument’ that Wheeler exposes as disingenuous. What is interesting about this two wars argument is what it says about Vietnam’s perceptions of itself as a state within the society of states, and what it says about what Vietnam understood to be the norms and shared values of that society. As a communist country that had finally, after two decades of struggle, won its independence and re-unification, Vietnam saw itself as having attained a measure of autonomy and respect that it justly deserved. While it has been argued elsewhere that Vietnam exhibited unwarranted arrogance – seeing itself as having taken on and beaten two great powers in two wars – it was more the case that Vietnam was quite uncertain as to how to act on the international stage, now that it had finally arrived there. The flimsy two wars argument may have been sufficient for the Vietnamese politburo to convince itself of the rectitude of its actions but was hopelessly amateurish in the international context. What Vietnam did reckon to be a sure case however, was to justify its actions on the basis of manifest self-defence in the face of persistent aggression on the part of Kampuchea. Certainly in hindsight as Klintworth argues Vietnam did have a legitimate case that it acted in self-defence, even to the extent of regime change.<sup>353</sup> This is supported by Rowley and Evans who note that “no government can tolerate such destruction for long without striking back”<sup>354</sup> and given the extent of loss of life and property inflicted by the Kampuchians, the Vietnamese response was reasonable and proportional. Wheeler also notes that the issue of proportionality may be problematic for the Vietnamese case given that the Vietnamese government was not substantially threatened the Kampuchians thus to remove the Khmer Rouge regime was a disproportionate response to a border conflict. He continues however, to acknowledge Klintworth’s argument that the threat to Vietnam was the “Pol Pot regime based in Phnom Penh (and) military and political logic demanded its overthrow and replacement by a government less committed to war with Vietnam.”<sup>355</sup> The threat to Vietnam could only be removed by removing the very government that was instigating the violence against it, and so the removal of the entire regime was a reasonable and proportional action. In either case Vietnam very poorly publicly justified its actions in Kampuchea and left itself open to sustained condemnation and sanction. In the final analysis, Vietnam may be charged with exhibiting ignorance, ineptitude and inexperience in its attempts to justify its actions in intervening in Cambodia in the terms that it did rather than through an appeal to the just war

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<sup>353</sup> Klintworth, *Vietnam's Intervention in Cambodia in International Law*, p. 28.

<sup>354</sup> Evans and Rowley, *Red Brotherhood at War: Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos since 1975*.

self-defence case that Klintworth outlines. Nonetheless as Wheeler points out, they did feel it necessary to offer justification to their peer states, and that as such this action indicates its recognition that norms and conventions do exist and that international legitimacy is extended through adherence to those values.<sup>356</sup>

## **Conclusion.**

On Christmas day 1978 a force of some 100,000 Vietnamese troops launched a coordinated offensive into Kampuchea, rapidly seizing control of all major centres and within two weeks chasing out the Khmer Rouge regime and capturing the capital Phnom Penh. This was the beginning of the end for the Khmer Rouge regime in Kampuchea and the beginning of a decade long occupation of the country by the Vietnamese forces in support of the newly installed Heng Samrin government. The shockwaves of this intervention reverberated around the globe drawing swift and persistent condemnation from the majority of states who saw Vietnam's action as an illegitimate contravention of the international norms of non-intervention and state territorial sovereignty.

At the global level, the influences that shaped this intervention appear to accord well with a realist account of events. As an actively contested zone, the Indochina peninsular was scene to the global great power rivalry. The antipathy between the Chinese and the Soviets flowed over into relations between China and Vietnam with the latter increasingly seeking succour from the Soviets as Chinese attempts to influence Vietnamese policy drove it deeper into the opposition camp. The increased Soviet penetration into Southeast Asia sparked immediate response from the US, which sought to exploit the growing Sino-Soviet and Sino-Viet rifts through increased US-Sino détente. The Kampucheans meanwhile fell under Chinese patronage and acted as bulwark against further Vietnamese and Soviet expansionism. Although largely convincing, the account is insufficient and erroneous in certain matters, and can only be made more accurate and complete through an analysis of significant regional contextual and unit level elements.

Despite assertions to the contrary Kampuchea and Vietnam did not act as client states in a great power proxy war. Although the frustration of Vietnamese and Soviet plans was the US's objective, a war between Vietnam and Kampuchea did not serve their purposes. In any

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<sup>355</sup> Wheeler, *Saving Strangers: Humanitarian Intervention in International Society*, p. 87.

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

conflict with Vietnam, Kampuchea was sure to come off second best, although a low level protracted conflict would have played directly into US and Chinese plans. The Soviet Union too had little to gain from an internationally isolated Vietnam. The Vietnamese and Kampuchians were to be no man's pawns and each pursued courses of action determined as much by regional and unit level influences such as border security, ideology, history of poor relations, and economics, than by the interests of the great powers. At the unit level many significant factors were credited with primary causality, however, none alone are sufficient, rather they must be located within the wider context and the political changes that were sweeping Southeast Asia at the time. The significance of these sub-systemic factors was crucial and highlights the importance of agency in any theoretic account.

The role of extra-systemic factors such as norms, shared values, and international conventions also were prominently displayed in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Indochina conflict. The pluralist condemnation of Vietnam for its contravention of the principles of the society of states was the defining feature of international reaction to Vietnam's intervention, and although much of this may be assumed to have masked more base interests of power and influence, it demonstrated the pervasiveness of such conventions, if not their powers of restraint. More disturbingly however, was the conditioned nature of the legitimising process and principles of the international community. Although it was from within the consensus of the community of states that individual states drew their legitimacy, this consensus and the processes of its formation appear to have been substantially subject to the overbearing influence of the great powers. It seems that a complex relationship existed between the community of states, the great powers within that community, the norms and shared values embodied in this community, and the role of great powers and influential states in shaping and directing those norms. Realist accounts of this intervention fail to acknowledge and incorporate the dynamic relationship between power and interest on the one hand and influence and norms and values on the other and offer consequently a meagre and insufficient explanation.