

**The Third Indochina War and the Making of Present-Day Southeast Asia, 1975-
1995**

A Dissertation

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At the end of the Second Indochina War (more popularly known in the United States as the Vietnam War), the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China, and Democratic Kampuchea were among Vietnam's closest allies. At the same time, the new Socialist Republic was hoping to establish diplomatic relations with many countries that had been allies of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) during the war, including the then five-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the United States itself, hoping to capitalize on new trade and investment opportunities to rebuild its tattered economy and avoid overdependence on a single great power benefactor. Yet as early as 1978, this dream had collapsed as Vietnam found itself in the unenviable position of becoming reliant on Soviet economic support to fight the first full-scale conflict between socialist nations – a two-front war against both China and Cambodia. Vietnamese troops would remain bogged down in a bloody guerrilla war in Cambodia until 1989. Not until 1991 would the parties finally agree to a political solution to the conflict, and Vietnam became the first socialist country to become a full member of ASEAN in 1995.

My central argument is that in terms of foreign economic policy, Vietnam consistently sought from 1975 onwards to diversify trade relations and to not become overly dependent on aid from a single power. In the 1970s, Vietnam tried unsuccessfully to avoid the Third Indochina

War, which would jeopardize its quest for independence through multilateralism. When it finally did invade Cambodia primarily as an act of self-defense, Vietnamese leaders found withdrawal politically impossible as they committed to justifying the original invasion *post facto* as a humanitarian intervention. While the Vietnamese domestic economy changed significantly with the *doi moi* reforms in 1986, Vietnam's economic integration in the 1990s was therefore not a revolutionary break from a conservative past but rather a fulfillment of a vision in the 1970s, with the notable difference that Vietnam and other ASEAN countries would through the Third Indochina War elevate absolute state sovereignty and non-interference to be the most important principles guiding regional affairs. In situating my work at the intersection between the International Relations debate on the nature and driving force of regionalism and the historical debates surrounding the Cambodian Genocide and the Third Indochina War, I hope my research will attract a wide audience of scholars, practitioners, and the interested public.

About the author

Hoang Minh Vu (Vũ Minh Hoàng) is a diplomatic historian of 20th century Vietnam and the Asia-Pacific, studying national and regional security, economics, interests and identity formation, and genocide. He is currently Visiting Professor in History at Fulbright University Vietnam. His PhD dissertation at Cornell University argues that the Third Indochina War was the key formative event of the present-day regional order in Southeast Asia, most notably by elevating the principle of non-interference above the protection of human rights. His works have been presented at international conferences like the annual meetings of the Association of Asian Studies, the American Historical Association, and Engaging with Vietnam; and has appeared in the Journal of Vietnamese Studies, various edited volumes, and a documentary. He holds a BSc. in International Relations and History (with First Class Honours) from the London School of Economics and Political Science (2014).

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Chapter I

Introduction

It was April 30, 1976 in Ba Dinh Square, Hanoi. After over thirty years of insurrections and wars that entangled all of the major great powers, the first anniversary of the unification of Vietnam under a Communist government was marked by a triumphant parade in the capital. Even though in far-away New York City Vietnamese diplomats and spies were still lobbying around the clock for admission into the United Nations, the Vietnamese government had invited representatives from all over the world to come join in the celebrations with a clear message: the war is over, and Vietnam is confidently looking to a bright future as a full member of the international community. In true Communist-style hospitality, local youths from the Cultural House who had been particularly well-behaved were hand-picked to greet these leaders. My father, twelve years old at the time, was among them. He excitedly handed a bouquet of flowers to a beaming Khieu Samphan, newly appointed Chairman of the State Presidium of Democratic Kampuchea (more well-known as the Khmer Rouge), who kissed the child on both cheeks in return.¹ The two would not meet again until November 15, 2018 in Phnom Penh. As Vietnam's ambassador to the Kingdom of Cambodia, my father was there to witness the justices of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Court of Cambodia (ECCC) pronounce Khieu Samphan guilty of crimes against humanity against his own Cambodian people and genocide against the ethnic Vietnamese and Cham minorities.²

¹ Craig Etcheson, *The Rise and Demise of Democratic Kampuchea* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1984), 173.

² Quang Minh Vu, "Day of Judgement. Ngày Phán Xử.," accessed October 27, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/minh.q.vu.56/posts/10155782010083053>.

In the intervening years, Vietnam's position had taken what I consider to be a grand detour from its long-term strategic dream: security and prosperity in multilateralism. While there always had been and continues to exist serious disagreements between conservatives and liberals in the Vietnamese leadership on specific policies, I argue that in 1975 as well as in 1995, they agreed that Vietnamese should have an independent foreign policy that facilitates economic growth and that can best be safeguarded by having diversified relationships with as many countries as possible without compromising the security of the Communist Party. At the end of the Second Indochina War (more popularly known in the United States as the Vietnam War), the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China, and Democratic Kampuchea were among Vietnam's closest allies. At the same time, the new Socialist Republic was hoping to establish diplomatic relations with many countries that had been allies of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) during the war, including the then five-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the United States itself, hoping to capitalize on new trade and investment opportunities to rebuild its tattered economy and avoid overdependence on a single great power benefactor. Yet as early as 1978, this dream had collapsed as Vietnam found itself in the unenviable position of becoming reliant on Soviet economic support to fight the first full-scale conflict between socialist nations – a two-front war against both China and Cambodia. Vietnamese troops would remain bogged down in a bloody guerrilla war in Cambodia until 1989. Not until 1991 would the parties finally agree to a political solution to the conflict, and Vietnam became the first socialist country to become a full member of ASEAN in 1995. My central argument is that in terms of foreign economic policy, Vietnam consistently sought from 1975 onwards to diversify trade relations and to not become overly dependent on aid from a single power. In the 1970s, Vietnam tried

unsuccessfully to avoid the Third Indochina War, which would jeopardize its quest for independence through multilateralism. When it finally did invade Cambodia primarily as an act of self-defense, Vietnamese leaders found withdrawal politically impossible as they committed to justifying the original invasion *post facto* as a humanitarian intervention. While the Vietnamese domestic economy changed significantly with the *doi moi* reforms in 1986, Vietnam's economic integration in the 1990s was therefore not a revolutionary break from a conservative past but rather a fulfillment of a vision in the 1970s, with the notable difference that Vietnam and other ASEAN countries would through the Third Indochina War elevate absolute state sovereignty and non-interference to be the most important principles guiding regional affairs.

Literature review

In trying to make sense of the Third Indochina War, most scholars have focused on explaining the outbreak of war between the Communist brothers. In the 1980s and 1990s, a talented generation of journalists and political analysts, with limited access to official documents and no benefit of hindsight, nevertheless brought much critical insight from interviews, news reports, eyewitness accounts, and integrating earlier scholarship. The 1979 Association of Asian Studies Annual Meeting featured one of the first academic panels to discuss the war, producing an important volume edited by David Elliott in 1981. In it, Gareth Porter argued that the war was caused by a combination of “the ideological, geopolitical and historical/cultural predispositions of the Hanoi leadership as well as the immediate context of the events.” That is, Vietnam's ideological drive to spread Communism abroad, historical ambitions to dominate Cambodia, and

opportunism in striking at a moment when it possessed overwhelming military strength were all responsible for the war.³ Writing in the same volume and later in his own monograph, Stephen Heder contended that the roots of the conflict were primarily ideological, with the Cambodians seeking a more radical version of Communism than the Vietnamese.⁴ Against this view was Nayan Chanda, a prolific journalist with the now defunct *Far Eastern Economic Review*, who drew upon his extensive interviews and insider access with local leaders to portray a war that was primarily driven by clashing nationalisms. Chanda's analysis echoes Benedict Anderson's mention of the war in the introduction to his *Imagined Communities* as an example of the continuing relevance of nationalism in the age of ideological struggle between Communism and capitalism.⁵ Grant Evans and Kevin Rowley took a similar position, arguing that the prevailing scholarship of the time that classified the Third Indochina War as part of what Fred Halliday called the "Second Cold War" was missing the point by failing to account for local sources of conflict.⁶ Beyond purely strategic analysis, Gary Klintworth and Wilfred Burchett have argued that Vietnam's intervention in Cambodia was an act of self-defense against Cambodian attacks that was also partly motivated by humanitarian concerns to end the serious human rights violations of the Khmer Rouge regime,

³ Gareth Porter, "Vietnamese Policy and the Indochina Crisis" in David W. P. Elliott and Association for Asian Studies, eds., *The Third Indochina Conflict*, A Westview Replica Edition (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1981), 70.

⁴ Stephen Heder, "The Kampuchean-Vietnamese Conflict" in Elliott and Association for Asian Studies, 21–67; Stephen R Heder, *Cambodian Communism and the Vietnamese Model* (Bangkok, Thailand: White Lotus Press, 2004), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015061552231?urlappend=%3Bsignon=swle:https://shibidp.cit.cornell.edu/idp/shibboleth>.

⁵ Nayan Chanda, *Brother Enemy: The War after the War*, 1st ed (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986); Benedict R. O'G Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed (Pasig City: Anvil, 2003).

⁶ Grant Evans, *Red Brotherhood at War: Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos since 1975*, Rev. ed (London ; New York: Verso, 1990).

which had been responsible for the deaths of between one to two million people out of a population of around six million.⁷

Among the area studies scholars of this earlier generation, there were clear dividing lines between those who study Khmer-Vietnamese relations and those who study Sino-Vietnamese and Soviet-Vietnamese relations. Thu Huong Nguyen Vo provided insight into the deep roots of the war in the historical conflicts between the Khmer and Vietnamese peoples stretching back into the 17th century, with Vietnam's annexation of territories of the declining Khmer Empire during its southward expansion (*Nam Tiến*) and ill treatment of the Khmer inhabitants under Emperor Minh Mạng (r. 1820-1841) the original sin that courted the irredentism of Pol Pot and company.⁸ While acknowledging Cambodia's legitimate historical grievances, other scholars of Cambodia like Elizabeth Becker and Ben Kiernan focus on more recent political frictions arising during the Second Indochina War, including North Vietnam's support for Sihanouk's government during the war, and put the blame for the Third Indochina War on the Khmer Rouge regime's despotism, militarism, and paranoia about foreign intervention, necessitating the invention of the Vietnamese enemy.⁹ Ultimately, all of the above scholars acknowledge that it was the Khmer Rouge that started the war by attacking Vietnam, whose retaliatory intervention prompted

⁷ Gary Klintworth, *Vietnam's Intervention in Cambodia in International Law* (Canberra : Australian Government Publishing Service, 1989); Wilfred G. Burchett, *The China-Cambodia-Vietnam Triangle* (Chicago, Ill.: Vanguard Books, 1981).

⁸ Thu-Huong Nguyen-Vo, *Khmer-Viet Relations and the Third Indochina Conflict* (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland, 1992).

⁹ Elizabeth Becker, *When the War Was over: Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge Revolution* (New York: Public Affairs, 1998); Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

reprisals from China. Only one major Western scholar, Stephen Morris, put the blame for the war primarily on the Vietnam's militaristic political culture and expansionist tendencies.¹⁰

Meanwhile, scholars like Robert Ross, Michael Haas, and Douglas Pike, who were experts in Chinese and Soviet policy, saw Vietnam and Cambodia as merely pawns in the global struggle between the superpowers. According to these scholars, by the late 1970s, the Sino-Soviet split and the United States' rapprochement with China meant that the Chinese and Soviets were vying for supremacy in Southeast Asia after the American withdrawal from Vietnam. Their respective client states, Democratic Kampuchea and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, were pushed into a war they would not otherwise fight by their great power allies.¹¹ Christopher Brady's study of American foreign policy towards Cambodia between 1977 and 1992 also confirms that Cold War considerations were the most important in explaining American opposition to Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia, arguing that American diplomats across three administrations made up "constructed realities" of the situation in Cambodia that were far from the truth, allowing the United States to in effect continue supporting the Khmer Rouge at the UN. Notably, Brady found that the Bush Sr. Administration was actually annoyed by the Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia, as it forced them to face the specter of the Khmer Rouge returning to power.¹² For these scholars, working from the perspective of the Great Powers, the Cold War offered a clear

¹⁰ Stephen J. Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia : Political Culture and the Causes of War* (Stanford, Calif. : Stanford University Press, 1999).

¹¹ Robert S. Ross, *The Indochina Tangle: China's Vietnam Policy, 1975-1979*, Studies of the East Asian Institute (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Michael Haas, *Genocide by Proxy: Cambodian Pawn on a Superpower Chessboard* (New York: Praeger, 1991); Douglas Pike, *Vietnam and the Soviet Union: Anatomy of an Alliance* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987).

¹² Christopher Brady, *United States Foreign Policy towards Cambodia, 1977-92: A Question of Realities*, Contemporary History in Context Series (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).

framework for understanding the origins of the Third Indochina War as a proxy conflict and the diplomatic stalemate lasted until 1989.

From the mid-2000s onward, a new generation of scholars have begun to get some early privileged access into some primary sources and have the benefit of hindsight. Chen Jian's contribution to the edited volume by Odd Arne Westad and Sophie Quinn-Judge and Nicholas Khoo and Xiaoming Zhang's explorations into Chinese archives seemed to confirm that for China, the most important considerations for invading Vietnam in February 1979 were to contain what they believed to be growing Soviet influence in the region and to court American support for Chinese security.¹³ Ang Cheng Guan's key study based on the diplomatic archives of Singapore revealed the heated domestic discussions on the war and the frustrations of the Singaporean government with the Democratic Kampuchea regime, but also tend to confirm the existing belief that most regional countries continued to oppose the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia because of the fear of Vietnamese and Soviet expansion.¹⁴ In each of these works, new archival materials helped provide a more detailed picture but have not fundamentally challenged earlier scholarship.

However, on Vietnamese foreign policy, there has been important new progress. In terms of volume of historiography, the Third Indochina War is dwarfed by the First and Second Indochina Wars largely because of these former wars' much greater significance for the United

¹³ Odd Arne Westad and Sophie Quinn-Judge, eds., *The Third Indochina War: Conflict between China, Vietnam and Cambodia, 1972-79*, Cold War History 11 (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006); Nicholas Khoo, *Collateral Damage: Sino-Soviet Rivalry and the Termination of the Sino-Vietnamese Alliance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Xiaoming Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict between China and Vietnam, 1979-1991* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), <http://newcatalog.library.cornell.edu/catalog/9129058>.

¹⁴ Cheng Guan Ang, *Singapore, ASEAN, and the Cambodian Conflict, 1978-1991* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013).

States. The 2000s has seen a very significant shift in scholarship on Vietnamese foreign policy during the Second Indochina War, which has reshaped how scholars look at Vietnamese foreign policy in the Cold War more generally. In the 1970s and 1980s, when antiwar sentiment in America was high, scholars like Frances Fitzgerald, William Duiker, and Stanley Karnow popularized the notion that the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) was largely monolithic and firmly under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, who alone carried the torch for a free, independent, and united Vietnam.¹⁵ After the Cold War, newly available evidence from French, Russian, Chinese, and even Vietnamese archives have led a new generation of scholars to seriously question this narrative. Christopher Goscha, David Marr, Peter Zinoman, Megan Cook, Hue Tam Ho Tai, Patricia Pelley, and Kim B. Ninh have all given detailed accounts of the many competing visions of Vietnam that vied for power in the late colonial period and in the First Indochina War.¹⁶ Meanwhile, Edward Miller, Keith Taylor, Simon Toner, Sean Fear, and Tuong Vu have begun to rehabilitate the image of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam). Far from being merely a corrupt and dysfunctional puppet state of the United States, their scholarship portray a flawed and fractured state that nonetheless struggled for its own vision of Vietnamese nationhood in a

¹⁵ Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam*, 1st Back Bay pbk. ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 2002); William J. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh*, 1st ed. (New York : Hyperion, c2000.); Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam, a History*, 2nd rev. and updated ed (New York, N.Y: Penguin Books, 1997).

¹⁶ Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History*, 1 edition (New York: Basic Books, 2016); David G. Marr, *Vietnam : State, War, Revolution, 1945-1946 /* (Berkeley : University of California Press, c2013.); Peter Zinoman, *Vietnamese Colonial Republican : The Political Vision of Vũ Trọng Phụng* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 2014); Megan Elisabeth Cook, *The Constitutionalist Party in Cochinchina : The Years of Decline, 1930-1942* (Victoria, Australia : Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1977); Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1992); Patricia M. Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam : New Histories of the National Past /* (Durham : Duke University Press, 2002); Kim Ngoc Bao Ninh, *A World Transformed : The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam, 1945-1965* (Ann Arbor : University of Michigan Press, c2002.).

difficult geopolitical environment.¹⁷ Though there is a disagreement between Lien Hang Nguyen and Pierre Asselin who believe that it was General Secretary Le Duan and his right-hand man Le Duc Tho who were primarily responsible for the war, and Sophie Quinn-Judge who argues that it was in fact Truong Chinh who was the main culprit, they all expose the many internal conflicts between hawks and doves within the VCP itself.¹⁸ This trend in the study of the two earlier Vietnam Wars sets the standard for more general studies of Vietnamese foreign policy, emphasizing multi-archival research with an emphasis on Vietnamese documents and awareness of the interplay between domestic and foreign affairs.

Among newer scholars on Vietnamese foreign policy in the Third Indochina War, there is a brewing debate between Tuong Vu, who believes that Vietnam's conflict with China stems from its "irrational" ideology of "vanguard internationalism"; and Kosal Path, who believes that the Vietnamese decision to go to war was a "rational" response to the domestic economic crisis, military attacks by the Khmer Rouge, and the Chinese threat.¹⁹ Focusing almost entirely on the Sino-Vietnamese conflict and largely ignoring the Cambodian-Vietnamese conflict, Tuong Vu claimed that since the Second Indochina War, the Vietnamese Communist leadership was driven by "rising national pride and revolutionary ambitions" to position themselves at the helm of the

¹⁷ Edward Garvey Miller, *Misalliance : Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 2013); Keith Weller Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Simon Toner, "The Counter-Revolutionary Path: South Vietnam, the United States, and the Global Allure of Development, 1968-1973" (phd, The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), 2015), <http://etheses.lse.ac.uk/3267/>; Tuong Vu and Sean Fear, eds., *The Republic of Vietnam, 1955–1975: Vietnamese Perspectives on Nation Building* (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program Publication, 2020).

¹⁸ Pierre Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 2013); T. Lien-Hang Nguyen, *Hanoi's War : An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press, c2012.); Westad and Quinn-Judge, *The Third Indochina War*, 2006.

¹⁹ Their uses of "rational" and "irrational" are problematic. Here I reconstruct their debate using their own terminology, before disputing this categorization later.

worldwide Communist movement. Their victory in that war further emboldened the VCP and put it on a collision path with the Chinese, who had made rapprochement with the United States in 1971 to bolster their own security in the midst of the Sino-Soviet conflict. The Vietnamese then mistakenly believed the Chinese were acting in concert with Washington, making them unnecessarily see the United States as an enemy during the Third Indochina War.²⁰

By contrast, Kosal Path focused more on the Cambodian-Vietnamese component of the Third Indochina War. In a volume published in 2012, David Elliott had argued that Vietnamese foreign policy from 1975 to 1986 was driven by conservatives, and a vanguard class of reformers were responsible for successfully pressuring for a major change in Vietnamese foreign policy around 1986, but that these reforms “did not fundamentally challenge the worldview of Vietnam’s Communist leaders” that Vietnam should remain a one-party Communist state.²¹ Huy Duc had also published recently a comprehensive account based on interviews with many liberal figures in Vietnamese government at the time, who intimated their many conflicts with the conservative wing over the war. Taking inspiration from their works, and from Lien-Hang Nguyen and Pierre Asselin’s works on the Second Indochina War, Path disputed Tuong Vu’s monolithic characterization of Vietnamese leadership, arguing that at every decision point there were conservatives who were more hawkish and liberals who sought to avoid war and build bridges with the West. Taking a page out of Peter Gourevitch’s Second Image Reversed model, Path argued that the most important factor determining the relative strength of these factions, and

²⁰ Tuong Vu, *Vietnam’s Communist Revolution: The Power and Limits of Ideology* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 210–36.

²¹ David W. P. Elliott, *Changing Worlds: Vietnam’s Transition from the Cold War to Globalization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

consequently the trajectory of Vietnamese foreign policy, was external developments.²² Vietnam, in this model, was responding in a “rational” way to external pressures from the Cambodian attacks and Chinese antagonism that strengthened the conservatives at the beginning of the conflict, but as the economic toll of the war became unbearable and the Soviet Union shifted its position under Gorbachev’s leadership, the liberal reformers were strengthened and able to carry out the *doi moi* reforms and withdraw from Cambodia.²³

Kosal Path’s analysis of the conflict is, in my opinion, much more convincing. In Tuong Vu’s eagerness to make Vietnam’s complex decision-making in the Third Indochina War fit neatly into his macro-analysis of the character of the Vietnamese Communist revolution, Tuong Vu had glossed over some basic facts, the most important of which is that it was Democratic Kampuchea that initiated military conflict with Vietnam, and it was China that invaded Vietnam. Kosal Path’s argument that Vietnam was mainly responding to external pressures is more congruent with my own impression of how Vietnamese leaders operate, and his study of the vying factions within Vietnamese government is far more nuanced and supported by Vietnamese archival documents beyond the edited volumes published by the Party on which Tuong Vu relied. But there are many areas where I disagree with Path as well. His assertion that Vietnam decided to invade Cambodia to secure Soviet economic support and alleviate its existing economic crisis at home is illogical. The Soviets had invited Vietnam to be part of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA or COMECON) for many years, and Vietnam had rejected entering this grouping until the Chinese

²² Peter Gourevitch, “The Second Image Reversed: The International Sources of Domestic Politics,” *International Organization* 32, no. 4 (1978): 881–912.

²³ Kosal Path, *Vietnam’s Strategic Thinking during the Third Indochina War*, 1 edition (University of Wisconsin Press, 2020).

cut off aid and prospects for diversified economic partners in the West became dimmer in 1978.²⁴ Furthermore, the Vietnamese economy was doing fairly well between 1975 and 1978, and it was the war that played a large part in bankrupting the country.

While I broadly agree with his assessment that external factors had a large influence in the domestic balance of power between conservatives and liberals, as a historian I am not so convinced by Path's conclusion that the Vietnamese always acted rationally. The sharp distinction between rational and irrational decision-making in political science has been problematized by the work of Herbert Simon, who argued that leaders are never operating in an ideal world of perfect information where they could make decisions perfectly rationally. The best that they can hope for is a "bounded rationality", which is rational decision-making in conditions of imperfect knowledge.²⁵ In conditions where too much key information is obscured by the fog of war, as was the case for Vietnamese decision-makers in the lead-up to the Third Indochina War, it is meaningless to talk about any kind of rationality, bounded or otherwise. Tuong Vu and Kosal Path's debate on whether the Vietnamese acted rationally or irrationally is thus not analytically useful.

My pointing out mistakes on the part of Vietnamese leaders is not to fault them for having made these decisions with limited knowledge, but rather to illustrate that it was misunderstandings rather than aggressive motive that drove Vietnam to war. What Tuong Vu got

²⁴ Embassy of Vietnam in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, "10565 Tài Liệu Của Đại Sứ Quán Việt Nam Tại Liên Xô Giới Thiệu Hội Đồng Tương Trợ Kinh Tế," July 1978, Phòng Phủ Thủ tướng, Vietnam National Archives Center III.

²⁵ Herbert A Simon, *Models of Bounded Rationality* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1982), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015039079887?urlappend=%3Bsignon=swle:https://shibidp.cit.cornell.edu/idp/shibboleth>.

right was that, given the benefit of hindsight and access to multiple archives, we now know that the Vietnamese had falsely accused the U.S. in backing the Chinese invasion. They also mistook the Chinese for encouraging the Khmer Rouge to attack Vietnam. The latter theory has been largely disproven by Andrew Mertha and J.D. Ciorciari, whose extensive interviews and research in the Chinese and Cambodian archives show that the Chinese were actually trying to dissuade the Khmer Rouge from their aggressive posture towards Vietnam.²⁶ I also believe that Kosal Path had not fully accounted for Vietnamese policy makers' disgust at the Khmer Rouge regime's human rights abuses, which was not the primary reason for the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia but did factor into its mistaken expectation that the invasion would be well-received by the international community, and certainly played a big part in convincing both conservatives and liberals to maintain Vietnam's military presence in the country until they could be sure the Khmer Rouge would not return to power. The Vietnamese decision to stay in Cambodia for a bloody decade was not primarily a strategic calculation as Path suggests, for the costs to Vietnam far outweighed the benefits; but it was also not driven by some fanatical belief in spreading Communism abroad either as Tuong Vu claims.

Beyond engaging with the above scholarship on the causes of the Third Indochina War, my narrative of the war as Vietnam's costly but temporary diversion from its post-1975 quest for integration into the global community also necessitates engaging with the literature of Southeast Asian regionalism. In the 2000s, prominent scholars of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) like Jurgen Haacke, Amitav Acharya, and Ang Cheng Guan have all painted the war as a

²⁶ Andrew Mertha, *Brothers in Arms: Chinese Aid to the Khmer Rouge, 1975-1979* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2014); John D. Ciorciari, "China and the Pol Pot Regime," *Cold War History* 14, no. 2 (April 3, 2014): 215–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2013.808624>.

critical moment for the regional organization. For Haacke, the ASEAN states' coming together to oppose the Vietnamese invasion was a critical step in solidifying the core principle of the so-called "ASEAN Way" – the rejection of the use of force and intervention in another state's affairs for any reason, including the removal of a genocidal regime. For Acharya, the meetings of ASEAN leaders to come together despite the initial doubts of Malaysia and Indonesia became a key moment of elite socialization for the diplomats of ASEAN to always seek total consensus on all decisions. Ang Cheng Guan went even further in emphasizing the importance of the war for the regional organization, stating that "nothing substantial happened in ASEAN in the first ten years" and that the end of the war prompted "much doubt about the future of ASEAN and its *raison d'être*."²⁷ Lee Jones, the sole scholar of ASEAN overtly critical of the conduct of the ASEAN states in supporting the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea which was militarily dominated by the Khmer Rouge, considered the war to be the moment where the ASEAN states elevated the principles of non-interference and absolute sovereignty above considerations of human rights.²⁸

My analysis broadly agrees with Lee Jones's perspective and goes one step further by claiming that the Vietnamese achieved an early victory in the Third Indochina War on the battlefield but ultimately had to accept a political settlement that obviated much of Vietnamese influence in Cambodia. In my analysis, while the path of regional integration Vietnam pursued after the political settlement in 1991 was broadly in line with its aspirations before the war, the

²⁷ Cheng Guan Ang, *Southeast Asia's Cold War: An Interpretive History* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018), 168; Cheng Guan Ang, *Southeast Asia after the Cold War: A Contemporary History* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2019), 14.

²⁸ Lee Jones, *ASEAN, Sovereignty and Intervention in Southeast Asia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

crucial difference was that the ASEAN countries had through the war clarified their attitude towards the principle of absolute non-intervention, and Vietnam's futile efforts to garner international support against the Khmer Rouge during the war convinced its government to capitulate to the ASEAN position, making it possible for Vietnam to become quickly integrated into ASEAN in the postwar years.

Structure

I have broken down the period from 1975 to 1995 into five chronological chapters, each with its own sub-arguments, but together laying out the narrative outlined above. Chapter II details the earnest efforts of Vietnamese and American negotiators between 1975 and 1979 to normalize U.S.-Vietnam relations. I argue that while there were disagreements between liberals and conservatives within Vietnam on whether they could trust the United States to provide the reconstruction aid promised by Richard Nixon back in 1973, the negotiating posture of the Vietnamese side made it clear that should this money be even verbally promised it would likely have been enough for normalization. However, as Vietnam had violated the terms of the 1973 Paris Peace Agreement, this was always unlikely to happen. The process broke down mainly due to the discovery of the Vietnamese spy ring in the U.S. at a critical time, and U.S. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski's personal vendetta against the Soviet Union. Challenging the status quo narrative, it argues that China was a supporter, not saboteur, of the normalization efforts, and that American President Jimmy Carter tried his best to prevent the Third Indochina War, not

encourage it. The failure of the negotiations was an important missed chance to avoid the Third Indochina War.

Chapter III then traces and makes sense of the series of events that led to the breakdown of militant solidarity between China, Vietnam, and Democratic Kampuchea between 1975 and 1979. I argue that China exercised little control of its Cambodian ally and did not encourage the Cambodians to attack Vietnam. Pol Pot, the leader of the Khmer Rouge, made the irrational decision to attack Vietnam based on racist hatred of the Vietnamese and schizophrenic fear of foreign subversion of his revolution. While neither China nor Vietnam wanted war, Vietnam's rapid socialization of the South inadvertently led to a refugee crisis of the ethnic Chinese and ignited dormant fears and mistrust on both sides, leading to the breakdown of bilateral relations and Vietnam's reluctant decision to invade Cambodia.

Chapter IV covers the first half of the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia, from 1979 to 1985. Here I contest the popular narrative that the Vietnamese intentionally stayed in Cambodia for an entire decade in hopes of annexing the country or placing it in a position of permanent subservience. As Vietnam had not wanted the war in the first place, it sought to extricate itself quickly from Cambodia. But China, the U.S., and ASEAN's successful efforts at diplomatically and economically isolating Vietnam and the People's Republic of Kampuchea meant that the Khmer Rouge's return to power remained a real possibility and Vietnamese withdrawal was politically impossible. I argue that for Vietnam, the enormous costs of the war were justified domestically and internationally by the construction of a false narrative at this time and later on that Vietnam's intervention in Cambodia had been primarily a humanitarian intervention from the beginning,

though this narrative did drive the Vietnamese to play a positive role in rebuilding Cambodia *post facto*.

Chapter V maps the parallel development of the arduous Cambodian peace process and the ending of the Cold War from 1986 to 1991. It recounts the many proposals and initiatives from different leaders around the world to arrive at a political solution for the Cambodian problem. I argue that Vietnamese Communist Party leaders' unsuccessful attempt to sideline the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and foil the 1989 Paris Agreement was proof that the *doi moi* reforms of 1986 was not an inflection point in Vietnamese foreign policy that signaled total victory of liberals over conservative. Rather, while Vietnam's Communist leaders have consistently sought to integrate the country economically into the global system, regime security will always remain a key concern.

Chapter VI brings the dissertation together, showing how the Third Indochina War fundamentally reshaped the region. I argue that the war laid the foundations for ASEAN's rapid transformation between 1991 and 1995 from a loose league of anti-Communist countries to become an institutionalized regional organization covering all of Southeast Asia, hosting the most important economic and security fora of the Asia-Pacific, and underpinning a cosmopolitan and non-interventionist regional order. Vietnam's political defeat in the war and its desperate economic situation forced this major regional power to quickly accept the principles of the ASEAN Way and facilitated ASEAN's rapid enlargement.

Finally, in the epilogue, I reflect upon the broader legacy of the Third Indochina War for Vietnam-Cambodian relations and for the region up to the present day. I argue that the principal

players involved in the conflict have not drawn the right lessons from the war. Particularly, putting the principle of absolute sovereignty on a pedestal has been a serious hindrance for ASEAN to deal with a host of present-day issues in the region ranging from transnational pollution to genocide.

Sources

This dissertation is informed by primary source materials in English, Vietnamese, French, Chinese, and Khmer. It all started as an undergraduate dissertation at the London School of Economics and Political Science in 2013, at which time I had easy access to the British National Archives at Kew. Even though the British Archives in 2013 only had limited materials opened for this relatively recent period, I was able to find discussions between the British and Americans and East Europeans in the leadup to hostilities in 1978-79, as well as immediate reactions to the Chinese invasion of Vietnam, which was condemned by a resolution of the UN Security Council with British and American support.

My research in America's vast and decentralized archives took place over many trips: summer 2015 at the National Archives Center II at College Park, Maryland; winter 2015-16 at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, California; and then, with funding from the Cornell American Studies Program, winter 2016-17 at the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library in Atlanta, Georgia and spring 2018 at the Gerald Ford and William Clinton Presidential Libraries at Ann Arbor, Michigan and Little Rock, Arkansas. The majority of useful American materials used in the dissertation came from the National Archives Center II and the Carter Library, including the

Central Intelligence Agency CREST files at both locations, as well as the files published in the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series and Congressional publications held at the Cornell University Library. In time, the declassification and publication of additional materials at the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton Libraries promise to greatly expand our knowledge about the negotiations to end the conflict and normalization of relations with Vietnam.

My work in the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives and the Australian National Archives both came in the summer of 2019, with generous travel and conference funding from the Einaudi International Travel Grant, the Sveriges Riksbank, and Macquarie University, and free lodging at the Vietnam Embassy in Paris, France. The French Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives was very quick to process declassification requests and has opened materials up to 1991, including files on the Paris Conferences and UNSC Permanent 5 discussions that led to the political resolution of the Third Indochina War. The Australian National Archives has more limited declassified content after 1986, but has opened many files pertaining to aid to Vietnam between 1973 and 1979, and fierce internal debates on matters of diplomatic recognition and aid for the Indochinese countries.

At Cornell, I received one semester of formal training in French, six semesters in Mandarin Chinese, and five semesters in Khmer. It was disappointing that my attempt to do research in the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Central Archives came in the winter of 2018-19, when President Xi Jinping had severely restricted archival access to scholars in the wake of the 19th Chinese Communist Party Congress, which removed term limits and emphasized Xi Jinping

thought.²⁹ I was told by officials in email exchanges that I would only be granted access to a limited selection of files reaching no later than the 1960s, which led me to abandon hopes of trying to do research in the Chinese archives. It is my hope that in the future, access to the Chinese archives will once again open up as it did in 2008, and we will get greater clarity on the Chinese point of view of the events covered in this dissertation.

My research in the Cambodian National Archives took place over the winter of 2017-18 and the summer of 2019, with funding from the Cornell History Department, the Einaudi Center for International Studies, and the Hoover Institution at Stanford University. Access to the Cambodian National Archives is perhaps the most open among the Southeast Asian countries – I did not even attempt to access the archives of the five original ASEAN countries as colleagues have informed me that materials on the 1970s and 1980s remain inaccessible to researchers. However, the Cambodian National Archives' holdings of materials from the 1970s and 1980s is limited, as they are still housed in an old building from the French era and suffer severe storage space constraints. Most government files are therefore still held by the government ministries and agencies that produced them and will remain inaccessible to the public until the new archives center is built. The majority of the files that I read were originally produced by the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea, who lack storage facilities of their own.

When writing my undergraduate dissertation in 2013, I took my first trip to do archival research in Vietnam at the National Archives Center III, as well as conducting four interviews with Vietnamese officials who had spent time in various capacities in Cambodia in the 1970s and 1980s.

²⁹ "Press Center for the 19th National Congress of the CPC--People's Daily Online," accessed December 11, 2020, <http://19th.cpcnews.cn/english/index.html>.

Since then, I have taken many trips funded by Cornell's Einaudi Center, the Southeast Asia Program, and the History Department to explore also the Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives and the Vietnamese Communist Party Central Archives, although I was not able to get any documents from the latter. The main national law governing public access to official documents is Law on the Protection of National Secrets No. 29/2018/QH14 the 2018. While it sets out procedures for the declassification of government documents, there is no specific timeline for such declassification to take place, which means that there are fewer resources and less willpower dedicated to this work, and declassification is thus uneven and unpredictable.³⁰

The 2011 Archives Law No. 01/2011/QH13 is the main legislation governing Vietnamese archives. Article 20 outlines a dual system where the documents of the Party and the Government are collected in separate central archives. Article 21 calls for all bodies under either the Party or Government umbrellas to submit their documents to the appropriate central archives within 10 years after the end of their active working periods.³¹ While parallel in function, the orientation of the two are completely opposite. The National Archives system is part of the Ministry of the Interior and is by far the most professional, well-equipped, and welcoming archival institution for researchers. Archives Center III on 34 Phan Kế Bính, Ba Đình, Hà Nội, houses the archives of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and was my main source of Vietnamese archival materials.

³⁰ National Assembly of Vietnam, "Luật Bảo vệ Bí Mật Nhà Nước 2018," accessed December 11, 2020, <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/bo-may-hanh-chinh/Luat-Bao-ve-bi-mat-nha-nuoc-2018-337064.aspx>.

³¹ National Assembly of Vietnam, "Luật Lưu Trữ," accessed December 11, 2020, http://vanban.chinhphu.vn/portal/page/portal/chinhphu/hethongvanban?class_id=1&_page=1&mode=detail&document_id=162373.

Mirroring the archival system of China and several other socialist and formerly socialist countries, Article 21 of the 2011 Archives Law provides specific exceptions for offices in the fields of public security, national security, and foreign affairs – all of which are allowed to maintain their own independent archives, so that their collections may be more quickly accessible to civil servants for continuing official use.³² Thus, the National Archives system that is most open to and best equipped to handle foreign researchers in fact lacks a majority of original documents from Vietnam’s most important foreign policy decision-making bodies: the Politburo, the Party Secretariat, the Party Central Committee’s Foreign Relations Committee, and the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Public Security, and Defense. Access to documents authored by these bodies through the National Archives system is possible, as they submit reports, memos, and other documents to other government bodies such as the Prime Minister’s Office or the Government Central Office, but ultimately this is only an indirect snapshot of their vast and secretive holdings. I was lucky enough to be granted some access to the non-classified files of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives.

Besides these archives, I have also obtained many valuable primary and secondary sources from the vast holdings of the Cornell University Library, and in Vietnam, the National Library of Vietnam (housing a depository for all Masters and Doctoral theses), the Military Library, and the Library of the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam.

³² National Assembly of Vietnam.

Chapter II

The Missed Chance, 1975-1979

Mr. Minister, let's leave aside the issues that divide us. Let us go outside and jointly declare to the press that we have decided to normalize relations.

– U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Richard Holbrooke to Vietnamese Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs Phan Hien, May 1977³³

When the victorious Communist armies broke into Saigon on April 30, 1975, jubilant crowds thronged the streets of northern Vietnamese cities to celebrate the arrival of lasting peace after 34 years of near-continuous warfare. They were mistaken. The late 1970s saw the radical Communists in Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge, attempt to regain by force territories lost to Vietnam in the 16th-19th centuries, eventually prompting a Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia from 1978 to 1989. As the Khmer Rouge's ideological ally and fearing encirclement by a Vietnam-Soviet axis, China undertook a punitive expedition into northern Vietnam from February 17 to March 16, 1979, with sporadic fighting lasting until 1990. While publicly calling for peace, the U.S. funded the Cambodian guerrilla resistance against the Vietnamese occupation and coordinated highly restrictive international sanctions against Vietnam. Coupled with misguided economic policies at home, these external pressures succeeded in keeping Vietnam one of the poorest countries in the world, whose survival was dependent on Soviet bloc aid, stoking fear and apprehension in China and setting the stage for the region to once again descend into conflict. It was not until 1995, well after the end of the Cold War, that the U.S. and Vietnam

³³ Nayan Chanda, *Brother Enemy: The War after the War*, 1st ed (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 152.

exchanged embassies for the first time, an important step in Vietnam's reemergence in the world economy.

But could these lost decades for U.S.-Vietnam relations, and perhaps even the Third Indochina War itself, have been avoided? Edwin Martini and Luu Van Loi both argue that there was still too much distrust between the two sides for rapprochement.³⁴ However, the majority of scholars including Nayan Chanda, Tran Nam Tien, Grant Evans and Kevin Rowley, Steven Hurst, Evelyn Colbert, and Cecile Menetrey-Monchau point out that while relations remained icy between Vietnam and the Ford Administration, both the Vietnamese government and the Carter Administration came tantalizingly close to normalization in 1977-78.³⁵ For these proponents of what I term the "Missed Chance" thesis, the greatest puzzle is actually why Vietnam and the U.S. *did not* establish diplomatic relations in these early postwar years. Why did the Vietnamese side initially insist on making normalization and their provision of data on American soldiers missing-in-action contingent upon American war reparations, which the U.S. side could never accept? By the time the Vietnamese negotiating position softened in mid-1978, the Carter Administration had become determined to delay normalization with Vietnam until after normalization of relations with the People's Republic of China. While the U.S. had obvious strategic reasons to

³⁴ Edwin A. Martini, *Invisible Enemies: The American War on Vietnam, 1975-2000*, Culture, Politics, and the Cold War (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 1-8; Văn Lợi Lưu, *Ngoại Giao Việt Nam, 1945-1995* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Công an nhân dân, 2004), 559-65.

³⁵ Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 1986, 136-60; Nam Tiến Trần, *Quan Hệ Việt Nam - Hoa Kỳ Thực Trạng và Triển Vọng* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Thông tin và truyền thông, 2010), 24-30; Grant Evans, *Red Brotherhood at War: Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos since 1975*, Rev. ed (London ; New York: Verso, 1990), 35-58; Steven Hurst, *The Carter Administration and Vietnam* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire : New York: Macmillan ; St. Martin's Press, 1996); Evelyn Colbert, "U.S. Policy toward Vietnam Since the Fall of Saigon" in Center for the Study of Foreign Affairs (U.S.), *Postwar Indochina: Old Enemies and New Allies*, ed. Joseph Jeremiah Zasloff, Study of Foreign Affairs Series 9657 (Washington, D.C.: Foreign Service Institute, U.S. Dept. of State, 1988), 225-47236; Cécile Menetrey-Monchau, *American-Vietnamese Relations in the Wake of War: Diplomacy After the Capture of Saigon, 1975-1979* (McFarland, 2006), 236-42.

prioritize China over Vietnam, it is less clear why the two processes were incompatible, as China never overtly sought to prevent U.S.-Vietnam rapprochement and China itself maintained diplomatic relations with Vietnam until the Sino-Vietnamese War. Was normalization with Vietnam merely temporarily delayed for decorum's sake, or did the Americans take China's side in the brewing conflict between China and Vietnam?

This chapter explores why and how both the Carter Administration and the Vietnamese government made genuine efforts towards and yet failed to secure normalization of relations in the late 1970s. Drawing on recently released and compiled Vietnamese and American documents, memoirs, and news articles, among others, I hope to refine the "Missed Chance" thesis. I argue that Vietnam's overriding quest to quickly reconstruct its economy and consolidate unified statehood made rapprochement with the U.S. necessary. Yet, it was this very imperative that drove them to insist on American reparations and ultimately miss their best chance for normalization in 1977. By mid-1978, the perceived threat of geostrategic encirclement by China finally prompted Vietnamese leaders to seek unconditional normalization. However, in early 1978, the Ogaden War and the Truong Dinh Hung (David Truong) spying affair greatly augmented Carter's wariness towards Soviet and Vietnamese ambitions. This paved the way for the hawkish National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski to expand his influence over American foreign policy at the expense of the dovish Secretary of State Cyrus Vance. While this meant that normalization of relations with Vietnam was placed on lower priority to normalization with China, it remained on the table until the Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia indefinitely delayed the process. By early 1979, the Vietnamese abandoned hope of normalizing relations

with the U.S. when they realized that they could not abandon the fledgling People's Republic of Kampuchea, setting the stage for Cambodia to become "Vietnam's Vietnam".³⁶

New beginnings

For the Vietnamese government, the two most important postwar objectives were the consolidation of independent statehood and economic reconstruction. Their linkage was made clear by deceased Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh's warning: "As long as we still have to ask for food assistance from outside, we cannot say that we have complete independence and freedom."³⁷ Its victory on the battlefield both elevated the government's self-confidence and lessened its reliance on Soviet and Chinese patronage, giving the attainment of these old aspirations a greater urgency. General Secretary Le Duan, in his euphoric address to the nation on the first Tet festival after reunification, promised that within five years the theretofore nonexistent Vietnamese mechanized industry would churn out radio sets and refrigerators. "Never before has our future looked so bright as now." he declared. "Never before have the Vietnamese people's lives been so happy as now."³⁸ The IV Congress of the rechristened Vietnamese Communist Party (December 14-20, 1976) codified these objectives in an ambitious Second Five Year Plan, calling for sustained GNI growth of 13-14% per annum. This was to be achieved even while shifting the North from a wartime into a peacetime economy, completely

³⁶ Steven Erlanger Times Special To The New York, "Vietnam's Vietnam: Scars of Cambodia," *The New York Times*, April 9, 1989, sec. World, <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/04/09/world/vietnam-s-vietnam-scars-of-cambodia.html>.

³⁷ Men  trety-Monchau, *American-Vietnamese Relations in the Wake of War*, 22.

³⁸ FBIS-APA-76-023 United States, *Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) Daily Reports* (Naples, FL: Readex), ASIA&PACIFIC 1976-02-03, K7, accessed December 3, 2014, <http://resolver.library.cornell.edu/misc/6299594>.

dismantling the capitalist economy and society of the South, and comprehensively integrating these hitherto separate economies under a single command economy.³⁹

While on the surface Vietnam's Second Five-Year Plan appeared to emulate the rapid industrialization of past socialist experiments in China and the Soviet Union, there was one crucial difference. Development in Vietnam would be predicated not solely on the autarkic Stakhanovite spirit of the masses, but also on raising 30 billion *dong* (around U.S. \$12.9 billion) in capital investments and access to foreign technology.⁴⁰ Vietnam had no significant indigenous capital stock, so this money must come from outside, either as investment or aid. Right before the Party Congress, Deputy Prime Minister Do Muoi made a grand tour of Moscow (11/22-12/4) and Beijing (12/5-12/6) to enlist support for the Plan. The Soviets promised him a paltry 3 billion *dong* for the Second Five-Year Plan and 4 billion *dong* for the Third, answering Do Muoi's entreaties with the promise to "do further research on [his] requests."⁴¹ Perhaps precisely because he chose to go to Moscow first, Beijing proved even more of a disappointment. Chinese Vice-Premier Gu Mu complained at length about the disruptions on the Chinese economy wrought by natural disasters, the Cultural Revolution, and being inundated with requests from "other brotherly Third World countries, who are fighting on the front lines against imperialism and hegemonism [Chinese shorthand for the West and Soviet Union, respectively]." Premier Hua Guofeng concluded that

³⁹ Report of the Politburo at the Fourth National Representatives' Party Congress presented by Comrade Pham Van Dong Đảng cộng sản Việt Nam, *Văn Kiện Đảng Toàn Tập* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Chính trị quốc gia, 1998), vols. 37, 610–701, http://dangcongsan.vn/cpv/Modules/News/ListObjectNews.aspx?co_id=30063.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Mười Đỗi, "10001 Hồ Sơ về Chuyến Đi Thăm Liên Xô Của Phó Thủ Tướng Đỗi Mười Từ Ngày 22/11/1976 Đến 04/12/1976," December 22, 1976, Vietnam National Archives Center III.

“because our resources are limited, our ability to provide aid is limited as well.”⁴² In the subsequent formal negotiations in February 1977, China offered just 100 million *renminbi* (~U.S.\$50 million) in zero-interest loans.⁴³ Clearly, with the war over, Vietnam was no longer a priority for Soviet and Chinese funding. This new data on Chinese and Soviet assistance that I have discovered in Vietnamese archives shows Steven Hurst’s widely accepted estimate that Chinese and Soviet aid covered about half of Vietnam’s needs to have grossly understated the shortfall – and consequently, Vietnam’s desperation for new sources of capital.⁴⁴

That the Politburo chose to push ahead with its 30 billion *dong* figure anyways speaks of their postwar aspiration and hallucination in equal measure. Foreign Minister Nguyen Duy Trinh laid out how the Plan would be implemented on the foreign policy front:

The international situation is basically favorable and our international position and reputation has been elevated, opening up promising prospects for developing international cooperation with our socialist brothers and other countries... From now on, economic relations between ourselves and foreign countries must shift fundamentally from those based mainly on non-refundable aid to mutually beneficial bilateral cooperation; and if we want to increase the import of goods that we really need, then we must quickly build up high-value and high-capacity clearing capabilities.⁴⁵

The “other countries” to which Trinh referred included Japan, France, and the U.K., all of which had previously engaged in military action against the Vietnamese Communists, but have normalized relations following the Paris Peace Agreement in 1973. By 1976, when total trade

⁴² Mười Đỗi, “10089 Tập Tài Liệu về Đợt Làm Việc Với Chủ tịch Hoa Quốc Phong, Phó Thủ Tướng Cốc Mục (Trung Quốc) Cùng Phó Thủ Tướng Đỗi Mười Tại Bắc Kinh Ngày 5/12/1976 Đến 6/12/1976,” December 5, 1976, Vietnam National Archives Center III.

⁴³ “10088 Hồ Sơ về Đàm Phán, Ký Kết Hợp Tác Kinh Tế, Viện Trợ Thương Mại Năm 1976, 5 Năm 1976 – 1980 Với Trung Quốc,” August 25, 1975, Vietnam National Archives Center III.

⁴⁴ Hurst, *The Carter Administration and Vietnam*, 38.

⁴⁵ Duy Trinh Nguyễn, *Tất Cả Cho Sản Xuất, Tất Cả Để Xây Dựng Chủ Nghĩa Xã Hội* (Hà-nội: Sự Thật, 1976), 17–19.

with the Soviet Union was \$309.2 million, that with Japan already amounted to \$216.5 million, with British-administered Hong Kong \$59.0 million, and with France \$32.8 million.⁴⁶ Vietnam also moved to assure the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) governments, which had provided extensive support for American forces in Vietnam in fear they would be the next dominoes to fall to Communism, that it only wanted peaceful coexistence. As a result, diplomatic relations were normalized with all five ASEAN countries, and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO, the poor cousin of NATO in Southeast Asia) was finally disbanded in July 1977. Malaysia, in particular, played a crucial role in helping rebuild the rubber and palm oil industries in Vietnam by sending seeds and experts, and setting up a \$2 million rubber laboratory and training facilities.⁴⁷ While repeatedly refusing Soviet invitations to join the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA) for fear of being dragged into the Sino-Soviet dispute, in September 1976 the reunified Socialist Republic of Vietnam became the first openly Communist member of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) when it assumed the former seats and outstanding debts of the Republic of Vietnam in these organizations and the World Bank.⁴⁸ And in April 1977, a liberal Foreign Investment Code was promulgated to attract investors with ownership protections and tax breaks.⁴⁹

Given how quickly Vietnam was moving to integrate itself into the world economy, reducing its dependence on Soviet and Chinese aid, and reconciling with its former adversaries,

⁴⁶ Masaya Shiraishi, *Japanese Relations with Vietnam, 1951-1987* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1990), 63.

⁴⁷ Danny Tze-Ken Wong, *Vietnam-Malaysia: Relations during the Cold War, 1945-1990* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1995), 101–2.

⁴⁸ Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 1986, 157.

⁴⁹ “Điều Lệ Về Đầu Tư Của Nước Ngoài ở Nước Cộng Hòa Xã Hội Chủ Nghĩa Việt Nam” (Hội đồng Chính phủ, April 18, 1977), 115-CP, <http://thuvienphapluat.vn/archive/Nghi-dinh-115-CP-Dieu-le-ve-dau-tu-cua-nuoc-ngoai-o-nuoc-Cong-hoa-xa-hoi-chu-nghia-Viet-Nam-vb17674.aspx>.

normalization with the U.S., too, seemed only a matter of time. Trade and investment from the above countries could only make up for a portion of the shortfall in Soviet and Chinese aid, so access to American capital would have been tremendously helpful to realizing the objectives of the Second Five-Year Plan. As long as the Ford Administration remained in power, however, there was little chance of rapprochement. Despite the fact that the U.S. Congress played its lyre while Saigon burned, at least rhetorically Vietnam still considered the U.S. government, especially one still led by ex-President Richard Nixon's leftovers, its primary threat. In Saigon, former Republic of Vietnam officials were rounded up and interrogated in hope of revealing CIA activity.⁵⁰ In May 1976, a Party directive cited the danger of American subversion as a rationale for increased military support to Laos.⁵¹

Meanwhile, the Party daily *Nhan Dan* continued to condemn American imperialism and predict the imminent collapse of capitalism at every opportunity, even while reminding Americans of their moral and legal obligation to pay war reparations. On April 16, 1976 *Nhan Dan* and Hanoi Radio published snippets from Nixon's 1973 letter during the final stages of the Paris Peace Agreement, which stated "the U.S. Government will contribute to the postwar reconstruction in North Vietnam without any political conditions whatsoever", quoting the figure of "\$3.35 billion in non-refundable aid for a period of five years."⁵² More than just a personal guarantee, the Vietnamese saw this note as a clarification of American obligations pursuant to Article 21 of the 1973 Paris Peace Agreement:

⁵⁰ Đảng cộng sản Việt Nam, *Văn Kiện Đảng Toàn Tập*, vols. 37, 121–5.

⁵¹ "251-NQ/TW Về tăng cường đoàn kết, giúp đỡ và hợp tác với cách mạng Lào trong giai đoạn mới", Đảng cộng sản Việt Nam, vols. 37, 102–9.

⁵² FBIS-APA-76-075, United States, *Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) Daily Reports, Asia&Pacific, NORTH VIETNAM, K1-K2.*

The United States anticipates that this Agreement will usher in an era of reconciliation with the Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam as with all the peoples of Indochina. In pursuance of its traditional policy, the United States will contribute to healing the wounds of war and to postwar reconstruction of the Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam and throughout Indochina.⁵³

If the Vietnamese entertained any hope that the Ford Administration would agree with their interpretation of American obligations, they were sorely disappointed. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger denied the existence of Nixon's letter and declared, not unreasonably, that the Ho Chi Minh Campaign that conquered South Vietnam had made null and void the Paris Peace Agreement – an argument that would be picked up later by the Carter Administration.⁵⁴ Edwin Martini has pointed out the irony that although the U.S. lost the war, it retained a powerful position in the world order, allowing it incredible influence over the fate of the supposed victors. When peace came in 1975, instead of abrogating the Category Z (wartime) embargo against North Vietnam, Kissinger promptly extended it to South Vietnam and Cambodia while freezing all their assets – in effect continuing to treat these nations as enemy belligerents.⁵⁵ Several important chances at reconciliation were lost as a result, when a proposed trip for American oil executives to visit Hanoi in February 1976 was scuppered, and private humanitarian agencies were subjected to a restrictive export licensing regime. Another sticking point was the U.S.'s

⁵³ "Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam, Signed in Paris and Entered into Force January 17, 1973" (Mount Holyoke College), TIAS 7542 (24 UST 4-23), accessed November 22, 2014, <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/vietnam/treaty.htm>.

⁵⁴ United States, *Americans Missing in Southeast Asia: Final Report, Together with Additional and Separate Views of the Select Committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia, United States House of Representatives*, House Report / 94th Congress, 2d Session, no. 94-1764 (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off, 1976), 115–17.

⁵⁵ Martini, *Invisible Enemies*, 15–16.

repeated vetoing of Vietnam's entry into the United Nations, even against overwhelming General Assembly votes to reconsider.⁵⁶

But even the Ford Administration could not wash its hands of Vietnam so easily. It still needed Vietnam's cooperation to find its missing-in-action personnel, amidst claims that there were live American servicemen still being kept captive in Communist Vietnam (popularly termed the POW/MIA issue). The waning days of the War and its immediate aftermath saw a group led by family members of MIA American personnel rise to prominence on this issue, placing great pressure on U.S. officials to demand Hanoi for a full accounting of its lost servicemen. After meeting with Vietnamese officials in Hanoi in December 1975, the House Select Committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia acknowledged in its Final Report that "because of the nature and circumstances in which many Americans were lost in combat in Indochina, a total accounting by the Indochinese Governments is not possible and should not be expected", while recommending "that the Department of State promptly engage the governments of Indochina in direct discussions aimed at gaining the fullest possible accounting for missing Americans."⁵⁷ To Vietnamese officials, the sheer absurdity of the American request led to suspicions that the U.S. only wanted to use the issue to evade their responsibility to provide reparations.⁵⁸ The Vietnamese would throughout this process fail to fully grasp how, though a red-herring, the

⁵⁶ Martini, 25–28.

⁵⁷ United States, *Americans Missing in Southeast Asia*, vii.

⁵⁸ Vietnam (Democratic Republic), *On the Question of Americans Missing in the Vietnam War* (Hanoi? Dept. of Press and Information, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Socialist Republic of Viet Nam, 1980), 3–27.

American domestic lobby for a full MIA accounting was a potent force, capable of keeping the issue a political football that would affect U.S.-Vietnam relations even up to the 1990s.⁵⁹

The American presidential election of November 1976, when Jimmy Carter narrowly defeated Gerald Ford, was to prove a major turning point for the U.S.-Vietnam relationship. As Governor of Georgia, Carter was a Washington outsider untainted by the scandals that had plagued the White House during the Vietnam War era. Although he boasted few foreign policy credentials, Carter's Southern Baptist background drove him from the beginning of his campaign to consistently reject the amoral *realpolitik* of the Nixon and Ford Administrations, outlining instead a new foreign policy based on multilateral solutions and human rights. During his campaign, Carter also made clear that he would seek normalization of relations with Vietnam, North Korea, and Cuba, as part of incoming Secretary of State Vance's belief that engaging with these nations may allow the U.S. to reduce their dependency on the Soviet Union.⁶⁰ Thus, despite the lack of progress towards normalization of U.S.-Vietnam relations since the end of the war in 1975, by the time the Carter Administration took office in January 1977, it seemed all the ingredients were at last in place for normalization.

Back to Paris

⁵⁹ Michael J. Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home: POWs, MIAs, and the Unending Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 1–11.

⁶⁰ United States, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, Departmental ed., Department of State Publication (Washington, DC: Dept. of State : U.S. G.P.O), 1977–80, vol. I, 3–67, accessed December 5, 2014, <http://purl.access.gpo.gov/GPO/LPS121118>; Menétrey-Monchau, *American-Vietnamese Relations in the Wake of War*, 61.

Demonstrating the high priority of Vietnam on his agenda and eager for his first foreign policy victory, Carter wasted little time once in office. While the embargo remained in place, within the first five months the administration signed off on \$5 million of private humanitarian aid.⁶¹ By February 25 Carter had announced plans for a major Presidential delegation to Vietnam to put to bed the MIA/POW claims and put out feelers for normalization. The resultant Woodcock Mission was deliberately composed mainly of politicians who had opposed the Vietnam War, including Senator Mike Mansfield and Congressman G.V. Montgomery. On its trip from March 16 to 20, 1977, Hanoi and Vientiane rolled out the red carpet and Vietnam presented twelve more bodies of American servicemen as a cooperative gesture – a sign of reconciliation quite in contrast to the Khmer Rouge who refused flat out the request for a meeting.⁶² While “express[ing] a strong desire to move toward normal relations with the U.S.”, Phan Hien initially tried to use the provision of Vietnamese information on POW/MIAs as a bargaining chip to gain American reparations. His position was that since the obligation for Vietnam to provide an MIA accounting was provided for in Article 8b of the Paris Peace Agreement, it only made sense that it be implemented alongside Article 21 and the Nixon letter.⁶³

Sensing the promising meeting devolving into deadlock, Woodcock took Hien aside and explained that Americans would view such a request as “sell[ing] us the remains of our MIAs in return for economic aid”, and reminded Hien that he was “hardly likely to see a more sympathetic delegation here in many years.” In suggesting that he drop reparations as a condition, Woodcock

⁶¹ Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 1986, 151.

⁶² United States, *Report on Trip to Vietnam and Laos: March 16-20, 1977*, 1977, 1–6, 23–24.

⁶³ Hurst, *The Carter Administration and Vietnam*, 33–34.

promised that “further efforts will be made to seek aid for Vietnam later, after normalization.”⁶⁴ After that private meeting, Hien adopted a new line, calling the issues of normalization, MIA accounting, and aid “inter-related”, but that “none of these three issues was a precondition to the other two.” Considering its mission a success, the Woodcock Commission’s Final Report repeated the conclusion of the House Committee that “there is no evidence to indicate that any American POW’s from the Indochina conflict remain alive”, that “normalization of relations affords the best prospect for obtaining a fuller accounting for our missing personnel and recommends that the normalization process be pursued vigorously for this as well as other reasons”.⁶⁵ Carter received the report with enthusiasm, accepting the Vietnamese invitation to begin normalization talks and making clear “there are no preconditions requested, and there will certainly be no preconditions on our part for these talks in Paris.”⁶⁶

The first round of the Paris normalization talks took place between Phan Hien and Richard Holbrooke on May 3-4, 1977, to great fanfare. Holbrooke, who would later become one of America’s most distinguished diplomats and peacemaker at the Dayton Accords 1994 that ended the Bosnia War, was at this time a 36-year-old wunderkind only two months into his stint as Assistant Secretary of State. He had been posted to the U.S. Embassy in South Vietnam from 1963-69 and participated in the early rounds of the Paris Peace negotiations, where he and Phan Hien first met. Holbrooke was also one of the most outspoken advocates for normalization of

⁶⁴ Interview with Leonard Woodcock in Elizabeth Becker, *When the War Was over: Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge Revolution* (New York: Public Affairs, 1998), 387.

⁶⁵ United States, *Report on Trip to Vietnam and Laos*, 9, 19–22.

⁶⁶ Jimmy Carter, “Presidential Commission on Americans Missing and Unaccounted for in Southeast Asia Remarks at a News Briefing on the Results of the Commission’s Trip to Vietnam and Laos” (University of California, March 23, 1977), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=7225>.

relations with Vietnam, believing that engagement was the only way to draw Vietnam away from the U.S.S.R. and towards ASEAN, the dynamic regional economic bloc that was rapidly becoming one of America's most important trading partners. And then there was Holbrooke's not-so-secret ambition to dismiss critics of his youthfulness by bagging the first major diplomatic coup of his office: turning the page on the painful and divisive chapter in American history that was the Vietnam War once and for all.⁶⁷

It was during this meeting that Holbrooke made Hien the famous offer, reproduced at the beginning of this paper, for unconditional normalization, effective immediately. The U.S. would furthermore withdraw its veto of Vietnam's U.N. membership and lift the trade embargo as soon as an American embassy was established in Hanoi. To his surprise, Hien replied that normalization can only come with a promise of aid. When Holbrooke reiterated that the American government did not recognize the legality of the Nixon letter and that his maximum offer was for the U.S. government to consider humanitarian aid after normalization had been completed, Hien stood firm. The next day Holbrooke terminated the talks.⁶⁸

Though publicly spun by Holbrooke as "constructive", that meeting had decidedly failed. Hoping to elicit sympathy from the American public by employing Hanoi's standard approach whenever negotiations stalled, Hien talked to the American media. He revealed for the first time that aid was his condition for normalization. This backfired almost immediately as the House of Representatives voted overwhelmingly on May 4 to prohibit U.S. officials even to negotiate

⁶⁷ Derek H. Chollet and Samantha Power, eds., *The Unquiet American: Richard Holbrooke in the World*, 1st ed (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), 76–161.

⁶⁸ Menétrey-Monchau, *American-Vietnamese Relations in the Wake of War*, 113.

“reparation, aid, or any other form of payment” to Vietnam.⁶⁹ On May 6, *Nhan Dan* once again published the Nixon letter, which prompted a furor in the U.S. that eventually forced the State Department to admit to its existence and release its full contents on May 19. But by then, the letter only served to force officials to make profuse assurances that they will not provide aid to Vietnam, quite the opposite of what the Vietnamese had hoped for.⁷⁰ Phan Hien had failed to appreciate how deeply the post-Watergate Congress resented secret deals made by the fallen executive, particularly when it infringed directly on that most sacred power of legislatures – their control over budgets.

The controversy surrounding the publication of the letter clouded over the next round of talks, which were initially scheduled for May 15 but were postponed to June 2. To make things worse, shortly before its commencement, Holbrooke was informed of the discovery of a State Department spy who was passing information to Hanoi via a California-based Vietnamese-American, David Truong. The negotiations went ahead – Holbrooke had nothing to hide, as he had already made his maximum offer – but the atmosphere was poisoned.⁷¹ Hien revealed for the first time the domestic pressures that *he* faced, arguing, “The research department that gave me the list of twenty MIAs [provided in this meeting as a token of goodwill] will ask me what have I come back with.” Holbrooke then suggested that aid could come through different international organizations, but refused to specify the sum.⁷² Soon after the talks concluded without result, Congress caught wind of this conversation, and the Young Amendment to the Foreign Aid Bill was

⁶⁹ Section 505 United States Government Printing Office, “Public Law 95-105” (United States Government Printing Office, August 17, 1977), <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/STATUTE-91/pdf/STATUTE-91-Pg844.pdf>.

⁷⁰ Menétrey-Monchau, *American-Vietnamese Relations in the Wake of War*, 115–35.

⁷¹ Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 1986, 155–56.

⁷² Chanda, 153–54.

passed by the House on June 22 to prohibit such use of international financial institutions (IFIs).⁷³ This amendment was only withdrawn in September when Carter promised to direct American representatives to veto any loans from IFIs to Vietnam and six other countries – which it promptly did at the April 1978 ADB session. Thus the last loophole for the Administration to circumvent Congress and provide aid to Vietnam was closed.⁷⁴

We know the limits that Congress and public opinion placed on the Carter Administration's ability to promise aid to Vietnam. But why did Vietnam, having come so close to normalization, remain so obstinate about its demand for aid in the 1977 talks? Steven Hurst puts it down to Hanoi's Communist worldview, which caused it to believe that since the American capitalists had failed to open up the Vietnamese market by force, they would try to do so by peaceful means. The U.S., therefore, would be willing to grant aid as a fee for accessing the Vietnamese market.⁷⁵ Luu Van Loi alleges that Hanoi did not really take prospects of normalization seriously until 1986, after the *doi moi* reforms.⁷⁶ For Menetrey-Monchau, Vietnam's insistence on a legally-binding guarantee derived from a lingering distrust that the U.S. would carry through an informal promise.⁷⁷

While all of the above certainly played a role in shaping Hanoi's negotiating stance, the root cause for them was domestic pressures exerted on Phan Hien. As I have outlined in detail, the Party's main objectives at this time were consolidation and reconstruction. Vietnam's request for funds was not just a matter of foreign policy, but rather the \$3.35 billion had been a crucial

⁷³ United States Government Printing Office, "Public Law 95-105."

⁷⁴ Martini, *Invisible Enemies*, 33–39.

⁷⁵ Hurst, *The Carter Administration and Vietnam*, 39.

⁷⁶ Luu, *Ngoại Giao Việt Nam, 1945-1995*, 559–65.

⁷⁷ Menetrey-Monchau, *American-Vietnamese Relations in the Wake of War*, 11–20.

part of the \$12.9 billion capital input required for the success of the Five-Year Plan, which in turn embodied all of the Revolution's promises to its people. An important clue for this can be found in the Vietnamese request furnished to the House Committee on Missing Persons in December 1975, which provided detailed tables detailing the exact amounts and values of individual goods to be provided based on the short-lived 1973 Joint Economic Commission study, conducted by the Vietnamese and Americans together to plan for a postwar Vietnam.⁷⁸ Most analysts have concentrated on the legality and politics of the request, overlooking the uncomfortable fact that, given the way command economy accounting works, the Vietnamese had already as good as spent the \$3.35 billion before they received it.

The extent of domestic pressure on Phan Hien to secure aid was not unknown to the Americans. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) caught wind of an October 1977 revelation by Hien's direct superior, Nguyen Duy Trinh, to an undisclosed source that the Politburo was embroiled in "frequent disputes [that] had created a sense of malaise among them." Trinh, Pham Van Dong, and Vice Premier Le Thanh Nghi strongly advocated a softer line on economic transformation in the South and immediate normalization with the U.S. in hope that aid would quickly follow, but they were ultimately overruled by Le Duan and Chairman of the National Assembly Truong Chinh, who demanded that normalization be conditional upon aid.⁷⁹ So while Holbrooke repeatedly urged Hien to consider the limits American democracy placed on his actions, he was at the same time painfully aware that Hien's problems mirrored his own.

⁷⁸ United States, *Americans Missing in Southeast Asia*, 249–53.

⁷⁹ United States Central Intelligence Agency, "Statements of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) Foreign Minister on Differences Within the SRV Political Bureau Regarding Normalization of Relations with the U.S.," November 10, 1977, http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/89801/DOC_0000667506.pdf.

The Paris negotiations were such a tragedy, the “Missed Chance” so lamentable precisely because both negotiators genuinely, even desperately wanted to make normalization a reality, but could not do so. Since the U.S. follows a strongly dualist interpretation of international law, such that treaties signed by the Executive Branch still require legislative ratification in order to become domestic law, there is little else that we could have asked of Richard Holbrooke. But given Vietnam’s more monist interpretation of international law (i.e. that international treaties are almost automatically integrated into domestic law), can we, with hindsight, castigate Phan Hien for not having had the courage to exercise his plenipotentiary prerogative to simply ignore Party leaders’ disapproval and normalize relations – in effect taking the personal fall for the greater good? Had Hien known then that in a little over a year Vietnam would be facing a full-scale regional war against Cambodia and China, his response to Holbrooke’s proposals would perhaps have been different. But at this time, the border conflict with Cambodia was only just heating up again, and the Vietnamese still held out hope for achieving a compromise as they had in 1975. Thus throughout the spring and summer of 1977, with none of the urgency that we would later see in 1978, Phan Hien opted to hold out for a better deal as the Vietnamese had done in 1967, 1968, and 1972.

Too little too late

A series of events starting from summer 1977 gradually shifted Vietnam's negotiating position. On July 17, Vietnam concluded a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with Laos that solidified Vietnamese influence over this country. Their joint communiqué criticized American violation of ASEAN's neutrality, but stated that both sides wanted normalization of relations with the U.S. conditional upon aid being provided.⁸⁰ In May and June 1977, Vietnam and the Soviet Union signed a series of new economic agreements, while China stepped up its aid for the Khmer Rouge. The U.S. did withdraw its veto in the U.N. against Vietnamese membership as a gesture of goodwill, allowing Vietnam to become a full member of the U.N. in September and receiving a loan of \$49 million.⁸¹ During the induction ceremony the African-American Ambassador Andrew Young expressed his personal support, while Carter invited the new Vietnamese U.N. ambassador Dinh Ba Thi to a luncheon.⁸² Meanwhile, in late April 1977, before the start of the first Hien-Holbrooke talks, the Khmer Rouge had resumed the border conflict with Vietnam, dormant for nearly two years, with a major attack on An Giang province. Sporadic fighting would continue despite Vietnam's offer of a peace summit on June 18, culminating in a particularly bloody Khmer Rouge attack on Tay Ninh in September that escalated the conflict beyond the point of no return. In the dry season of 1977-78, Vietnam undertook a punitive expedition into eastern Cambodia that resulted finally in the suspension of their relations on 12/31/1977.⁸³ As

⁸⁰ "10339 Hiệp Ước Hữu Nghị và Hợp Tác Giữa Việt Nam – Lào Ký Tại Viên Chăn Ngày 18/8/1977," August 18, 1977, Vietnam National Archives Center III.

⁸¹ Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 1986, 157.

⁸² Menétrey-Monchau, *American-Vietnamese Relations in the Wake of War*, 139.

⁸³ Robert S. Ross, *The Indochina Tangle: China's Vietnam Policy, 1975-1979*, Studies of the East Asian Institute (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 117–71.

the pressure from the Khmer Rouge built up while the U.S. veto of Vietnamese U.N. membership was no longer an issue, towards the end of 1977 there was an incentive for Phan Hien to move more quickly on normalization with the U.S.

It was against this backdrop that Holbrooke and Hien met for the third round of talks on December 7-10. Perhaps sensing that the impending conflict with China and Cambodia will not bode well for normalization, but also doubtful whether aid would be forthcoming once the fighting begins in earnest, the Vietnamese side for the first time offered to normalize relations without formal conditions. The only thing Phan Hien needed was the most informal of pledges that aid would be provided after normalization, telling Holbrooke, "You just whisper in my ear the amount you'll offer and that is enough." Unfortunately, by this time the legislative walls erected over the summer had severely limited Holbrooke's options, and he could not promise even the removal of the trade embargo, let alone any sort of aid, following normalization. After a further inconclusive meeting on December 19, Holbrooke held out hope for a final convergence of their positions come the next round of talks scheduled in February 1978.⁸⁴

Those talks never took place. On January 31, 1978, David Truong and Robert Humphrey were arrested in connection with the State Department spying affair. A few days later, the role of Dinh Ba Thi in channeling the stolen cables was discovered, and the Americans sought to have him extradited from his post in New York, prompting a controversial debate in the U.N. on American privileges as the host nation. While the information that they passed on was of negligible importance, the sensational story did much to undermine trust from both sides.⁸⁵ Even

⁸⁴ Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 1986, 156.

⁸⁵ Men  trety-Monchau, *American-Vietnamese Relations in the Wake of War*, 144–47.

though at the time the Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia Director at the State Department Frederick Z. Brown assured the First Secretary of the Soviet Embassy in Washington Evgeniy P. Ivanov that “from our point of view the Thi affair need not damage [the normalization] effort,” in a later interview Brown revealed that the lengthy trial of Truong and Humphrey, which lasted until June, was in fact a major reason why the two sides had no contact throughout this critical period.⁸⁶

And a critical period it was. February and March 1978 brought important changes to the Carter Administration’s grand strategy. These months saw Cuban troops play a crucial role in the victory of the Soviet-backed Derg in Ethiopia over the American-backed Somalis. With Cuban expeditionary forces once again involved in a brewing conflict in Angola, the Administration feared that Soviet proxies, possibly including Vietnam, could become new vehicles for Moscow to assert its will. In the wake of these developments, there was political backlash against the Administration as a whole and Vance’s State Department in particular for being “soft on Communism.”⁸⁷ This was a direct factor leading Carter to send Brzezinski to China in May 1978 to negotiate normalization of Sino-American relations as a counter to the Soviets, over Vance and Holbrooke’s reservations. The Chinese proved more cooperative than the Vietnamese, and a timetable was quickly reached for normalization before the end of the year.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Frederick Z. Brown, “Memorandum of Conversation: US-SRV Relations; SALT, Etc.; Cambodia-Vietnam,” March 29, 1978, RG59 General Records of the Department of State, US National Archives, College Park; Charles Stuart Kennedy, “FREDERICK Z. BROWN” (The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, February 2, 1990), 47–52, <http://www.adst.org/OH%20TOCs/Brown,%20Frederick%20Z.toc.pdf>.

⁸⁷ Cyrus R. Vance, *Hard Choices: Critical Years in America’s Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 72–75.

⁸⁸ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Advisor, 1977-1981* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983), 204–33.

During the May 1978 talks, Brzezinski and Chinese premier Huang Hua also discussed a troubling new topic: “assistance to Southeast Asian efforts to check Soviet support of Vietnamese expansionism.”⁸⁹ Already in 1977, periodic clashes had occurred at Vietnam’s disputed border with China, though not on the scale of Vietnam’s clashes with Cambodia. But in March 1978, the Sino-Vietnamese border talks broke down. In a top secret report, Phan Hien resigned himself to the fact that “there is little chance the Chinese side wants to conclude a border agreement in the foreseeable future.”⁹⁰ On March 24, Vietnam nationalized 30,000 businesses in the South, followed by the introduction of a new unified currency on May 3. As these twin decrees virtually wiped out the savings and properties of the wealthy Chinese community (alongside everyone else’s) overnight, they triggered a massive refugee exodus of the ethnic Chinese from Vietnam.⁹¹ Relations with Beijing continued to deteriorate throughout the summer as Vietnam sought to buttress its precarious position by moving towards the Soviet camp, joining the CMEA in June. An internal report stated clearly that China’s “hostile policy” was a main driving force for its change of heart regarding the CMEA.⁹² In response, China suspended all aid to Vietnam on July 3, closed the border on July 11, and increased its aid to the Khmer Rouge.⁹³

The specter of a two-front war with China and Cambodia finally prompted Vietnamese leaders to prioritize security over development. In May 1978 the Vietnamese hinted that they would be willing to normalize relations with the U.S. without any conditions, but by this time

⁸⁹ Brzezinski, 204–33.

⁹⁰ “10776 Tập Tài Liệu Của Bộ Ngoại Giao về Kết Quả Đàm Phán Biên Giới Giữa Việt Nam và Trung Quốc Năm 1977-1978,” 78 1977, Vietnam National Archives Center III.

⁹¹ Ross, *The Indochina Tangle*, 1988, 176–88.

⁹² “10567 Tờ Trình Của Hội Đồng Chính Phủ Lên Ủy Ban Trung Ương Quốc Hội Đề Nghị Phê Chuẩn Việc Gia Nhập Hội Đồng Tương Trợ Kinh Tế Năm 1978,” September 12, 1978, Vietnam National Archives Center III.

⁹³ Pao-min Chang, *Kampuchea between China and Vietnam* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, National University of Singapore, 1985), 62.

Washington had become wary of Vietnam's growing coziness with Moscow. On the same day that China closed its border with Vietnam, Phan Hien made the normalization without conditions position public.⁹⁴ In September, Holbrooke met with another Vietnamese Deputy Foreign Minister, Nguyen Co Thach, to discuss this new position, and promised to relay the request to President Carter. Brzezinski's aide Michel Oksenberg noted with relish to his boss:

The Vietnamese have dropped their demand for reparation or a promise of assistance and are prepared to establish diplomatic relations with us without precondition. In fact, they are panting to lock up the deal... One could sense Vietnam's weakness during the discussions... You asked that I attend the meeting in part to keep an eye on Holbrooke. Holbrooke performed reasonably well, though I think he did more to seek to ingratiate himself with the Vietnamese than I would have done... Their economic difficulties, their conflict with Cambodia and their tensions with China place them in a very disadvantageous position. But we should not be lulled into thinking that the Vietnamese harbor anything but hostile feelings toward us.⁹⁵

The final reply, delivered by Holbrooke's deputy Robert Oakley on October 30, claimed that the border war with Cambodia, the refugee crisis, and Vietnam's relations with the U.S.S.R. – issues that had never before been raised during the negotiations – were now impediments to normalization.⁹⁶

What the Vietnamese probably did not know was that privately, Zbigniew Brzezinski and Michel Oksenberg watched the brewing war between Vietnam and Cambodia with delight. In another memo from Oksenberg to Brzezinski on January 9, 1978, they correctly evaluated that "China is not simply a backer of Cambodia. It aids Vietnam also. Peking's leverage over Phnom

⁹⁴ Evans, *Red Brotherhood at War*, 1990, 56.

⁹⁵ Michel Oksenberg, "Memos from Michel Oksenberg to Zbigniew Brzezinski," 1978, National Security Affairs - Brzezinski Material - Country File, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

⁹⁶ Menétrey-Monchau, *American-Vietnamese Relations in the Wake of War*, 203.

Penh is limited. Moreover... the Sino-Soviet involvement overlays a more fundamental, indigenous conflict.” Yet their plan of action was more sinister. “We want this conflict to fester. We create subtle pressures upon the participants to settle if we prematurely reveal that we consider [the brewing conflict between Vietnam, Cambodia, and China] as favorable to us.”⁹⁷ That is, knowing that American mediation here could help all sides avoid the brewing conflict, Brzezinski’s office actively chose the course of action that would most likely steer the participants toward war, believing that the Third Indochina War would be in the interests of the United States.

Analysts of U.S.-Vietnam relations already unanimously attribute the ascendancy of the hawkish Zbigniew Brzezinski, whose Polish heritage bequeathed him with a fierce anti-Soviet attitude, over the moderate Cyrus Vance as the main factor retarding progress with Vietnam for the remainder of the Administration.⁹⁸ One of the aims of this chapter is to further confirm this thesis with new evidence recently made available in declassified American files, and to elaborate on the extent to which Brzezinski worked to sabotage the normalization process. Although Brzezinski himself tries to play this down in his memoirs, he acknowledges that his disagreements with Vance stem from their “different backgrounds” which produce fundamentally “different estimate[s] of the proper balance between power and principle in our age.”⁹⁹ While the State Department continued to advocate for engagement with the U.S.S.R. through the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT) and normalization with Vietnam, Brzezinski sought instead to play the China card against the Soviet Union and contain Vietnam, whom he considered a budding “Cuba

⁹⁷ Michel Oksenberg, “Memos from Michel Oksenberg to Zbigniew Brzezinski.”

⁹⁸ Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 1986, 264–65; Menétrey-Monchau, *American-Vietnamese Relations in the Wake of War*, 173–75; Martini, *Invisible Enemies*, 86–88.

⁹⁹ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 43.

of the East”.¹⁰⁰ This was the main reason behind America’s failure to take advantage of the mellowing of the Vietnamese position in 1978.

In the same month of May 1978 when Brzezinski made his breakthrough visit to China, his office received a request from Congressman Gillespie “Sonny” Montgomery to send personnel to accompany a prospective Congressional delegation to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City in August 1978. Montgomery had been supportive of efforts to normalize relations with Vietnam and, witnessing the Administration’s stagnation on the issue, had taken upon himself to reach out to Phan Hien and organize what could have been a resumption of normalization talks at a critical moment. Montgomery’s delegation would have included ranking members of Budgetary Committees in both houses of Congress, putting them in a position to seriously consider the question of reconstruction aid to Vietnam. Phan Hien’s response had been most eager. “I welcome the contacts which will contribute to our mutual understanding, believing that they will be beneficial to the process of normalization of the relations between the two countries.” Despite President Carter being explicitly supportive of the visit, Mike Oksenberg privately noted to Brzezinski that “we may not wish to send anybody.” They advised Montgomery that it would be “unwise to raise undue expectations in Hanoi which could unnecessarily damage our fragile relationship.”¹⁰¹ A Vietnamese goodwill mission to Honolulu to study American techniques for identifying recovered bodies, and a glowing report from Sonny Montgomery’s Congressional mission to Hanoi both failed to sway the Administration from its determination to put off

¹⁰⁰ United States, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977–80*, vol. VIII, 465.

¹⁰¹ Gillespie Montgomery, Michel Oksenberg, and Phan Hiên, “Letters between Congressman Gillespie Montgomery and National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski,” n.d., Foreign Affairs Executive FO 8, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

Vietnamese normalization until after that with China.¹⁰² This is damning evidence that Brzezinski was using his office to sabotage the efforts of both the President and Congress to move forward with the normalization process with Vietnam.

One important complication, which existing works have largely ignored, is the Chinese attitude towards the U.S.-Vietnam normalization talks. There is actually no documentary or testimonial record of Chinese leaders ever having explicitly pressured the Americans to halt normalization with Vietnam. Indeed, it would have made little sense for them to put forward such a request, because China had, after all, been the first nation to recognize Communist Vietnam in 1950, and maintained diplomatic relations with Vietnam until February 1979. In fact, as part of his multilateral and open approach to diplomacy, Carter was eager to keep the Chinese in the loop on U.S.-Vietnam relations. Before sending in the Woodcock Commission, President Carter had asked the Chinese Ambassador to the U.S. Huang Chen for his opinion on normalization of U.S.-Vietnam relations. Huang replied, “We think this is good.”¹⁰³ Carter revealed in his memoirs that in “the early part of 1978, the Chinese sent word to me that they would welcome our moving toward Vietnam in order to moderate that country’s policies and keep it out of the Soviet camp...”¹⁰⁴ As late as October 1978, when asked again by Cyrus Vance, Chinese Foreign Minister Huang Hua stated categorically, “[Normalization of U.S.-Vietnam relations] is a matter strictly for your two countries.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 1986, 270–71.

¹⁰³ United States, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1977–80, vol. XIII, 24.

¹⁰⁴ Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (Toronto ; New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 194–95.

¹⁰⁵ United States, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1977–80, vol. XIII, 149–52.

The key problem is that what the Chinese actually said was different from what the Americans heard, as Brzezinski and the CIA both tried to read beyond the text of the Chinese statements. In a critical memo on July 7, 1978, Brzezinski presented Carter with a false dilemma between normalization with Vietnam or China. Brzezinski argued that the State Department's openness to normalization with Vietnam "will reinforce Chinese concerns, and thus needlessly complicate the more important task – normalizing with Peking. You need to choose: Vietnam or China, and China is incomparably more important to us."¹⁰⁶ The CIA was more circumspect on the question of Chinese attitudes:

The Chinese apparently have come to believe that Vietnam would try to use diplomatic ties with the US to mask its close alignment with the USSR and that any US aid to Vietnam that might result from normalization would only relieve the Soviet economic burden. China has not warned, however, that US-Vietnamese normalization would seriously affect its own relations with the US.¹⁰⁷

In the end, Carter listened to Brzezinski. "[Normalization of relations with China] was of paramount importance, so after a few weeks of assessment I decided to postpone the Vietnam effort until after we had concluded our agreement in Peking."¹⁰⁸ That is, while Carter wished to honor Chinese sensibilities by giving precedence to its normalization process – after all, the Chinese had been waiting in line since 1973 – there was nothing to prevent normalization with Vietnam from occurring afterwards, *ceteris paribus*.

But time was running out for Vietnam. Faced with what they considered to be lockout by the U.S. and fearing an imminent two-pronged attack by China and Cambodia, Vietnam threw in

¹⁰⁶ United States, 1977–80, vol. XIII, 507–9.

¹⁰⁷ United States Central Intelligence Agency, "National Intelligence Daily Cable," September 28, 1978, The CIA Records Research Tool (CREST), US National Archives, College Park.

¹⁰⁸ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 194–95.

its lot with the Soviet camp and prepared for war. It signed a Treaty of Peace and Friendship with the Soviet Union on November 2 that contained provisions in the event either side was attacked by a third party for “mutual consultations with the aim of eliminating this threat and of taking corresponding effective measures for the maintenance of the peace and security of their countries.”¹⁰⁹ China and the U.S. finally normalized relations on December 15, technically opening the door at last to resumption of the normalization process with Vietnam. But by this time, the Khmer Rouge had moved 19 divisions to the Vietnamese border and China had also militarized its border with Vietnam. Deciding that it could wait no longer, Vietnam commenced a preemptive invasion of Cambodia on December 25, capturing the capital Phnom Penh on January 7, 1979.¹¹⁰

The U.S. only belatedly attempted to prevent the conflict from blowing up into a full-scale regional war. When informed by Chinese Vice-Premier Deng Xiaoping in January 1979 of his plans to undertake a punitive expedition to force Vietnam to withdraw from Cambodia, Carter took a whole day to draft up for Deng a list of nine reasons against such a move, especially noting how it undermined their newly normalized relationship and that “such action may create an additional excuse for greater Soviet presence in Viet Nam.”¹¹¹ When he realized that his ministrations were to no avail, Carter apparently asked Deng to “do me a favor and make it brief.”¹¹² When the punitive expedition went ahead in February-March 1978, the U.S. publicly called for a joint

¹⁰⁹ “Hiệp Ước Hữu Nghị và Hợp Tác Giữa Nước Cộng Hòa Xã Hội Chủ Nghĩa Việt Nam và Liên Bang Cộng Hòa Xã Hội Chủ Nghĩa Xô-Viết,” *Nhan Dan*, November 4, 1978, Library of the Institute of Strategic Studies, Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam.

¹¹⁰ Ross, *The Indochina Tangle*, 1988, 199–218.

¹¹¹ United States, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1977-1980 vol. XIII, 770–71.

¹¹² Jonathan Alter, *His Very Best: Jimmy Carter, a Life*, Illustrated edition (Simon & Schuster, 2020), chap. 28.

Chinese withdrawal from Vietnam and Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia.¹¹³ Though Carter's efforts were for naught, this episode proved that the U.S. was not deliberately trying to drive Vietnam and China towards war – quite the opposite, in fact.

As it turned out, Vietnam managed to halt the Chinese invasion with their militia and reserves, foiling Deng's plan. While the U.S. publicly chastised both powers, there was a definite lean towards China, with Brzezinski having admitted that he "encouraged the Chinese to support Pol Pot [and] encouraged the Thai to help the D.K. [Democratic Kampuchea, the Khmer Rouge regime's official name]."¹¹⁴ But the biggest difference was that normalization with China had been completed just in time, whereas now normalization with Vietnam was suspended for as long as Vietnamese troops remained in Cambodia. In the aftermath of the Chinese invasion, Cyrus Vance made one last-ditch attempt to engage with the Vietnamese in May 1979, but these talks broke down in July 1979 when it became clear that Vietnam would not be able to make a strategically viable withdrawal from Cambodia.¹¹⁵ The Khmer Rouge leadership had succeeded in evading capture and by mid-year had regrouped and began their decade-long guerrilla resistance. The Vietnamese now found themselves saddled with a new Cambodian government far too weak to defend itself and bereft of means to restore a nation still staggering from the Khmer Rouge genocide.¹¹⁶ Unwilling to abandon their position in Cambodia, Vietnam faced piling international

¹¹³ United States, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977–80*, vol. VIII, 795–99.

¹¹⁴ Becker, *When the War Was Over*, 1998, 435.

¹¹⁵ Vance, *Hard Choices*, 123.

¹¹⁶ Margaret Slocomb, *The People's Republic of Kampuchea, 1979-1989: The Revolution after Pol Pot* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2003), 47–251.

sanctions, total economic dependence on the Soviet bloc, and the dashing of all of their postwar dreams.¹¹⁷ Vietnam's long isolation had begun in earnest.

Conclusion

Washington maintained diplomatic and economic pressure against Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia throughout the 1980s. Military success against the Khmer Rouge insurgency, the end of the Sino-Soviet split and the Cold War, and comprehensive reforms at home all paved the way for Vietnam's withdrawal from Cambodia in 1989. In the early 1990s fresh efforts were made to normalize relations with the U.S., which would only come in 1995, after Vietnam had already been admitted into ASEAN. Today, Vietnam and the United States are closer than ever. The U.S. is currently channeling technology to Vietnam to build several nuclear power plants, and the U.S. Coast Guard is offering patrol boats and training to build up Vietnam's maritime defense capabilities in the face of a rising and increasingly assertive China.

It has been a long and arduous road from war to reconciliation. This chapter details the travails of the negotiations for the normalization of U.S.-Vietnam relations in the 1970s, when a great chance was missed. Many scholars and diplomats have studied the causes of this failure, attributing blame first to the Vietnamese for being inflexible on aid and making a catastrophe of their public relations offensives. Later, the blame was shifted to Zbigniew Brzezinski in particular, who decided to prioritize normalization with China over Vietnam. By being insensitive to the mounting security pressures on Vietnam, these policies helped to create a climate of

¹¹⁷ Douglas Pike, *Vietnam and the Soviet Union: Anatomy of an Alliance* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987), 127–42.

international hostility that drove Vietnam to seek Soviet protection, an important stepping stone towards the outbreak of the Third Indochina War.

But ultimately, I hope to transcend the blame game and help make some sense of the roles idealism, trust, domestic pressures, external pressures, and personalities play in the making or breaking of negotiations. While all of these ingredients need to be favorable for negotiations to succeed, having just one unfavorable ingredient at any one time – a spying affair, a rigid Five-Year Plan, an intransigent Congress, an unfriendly third power, or a Brzezinski – can be enough to delay the process indefinitely. The story of the U.S.-Vietnam normalization negotiations in the 1970s is a story of failure, but it may still prove instructive to aspiring peacemakers today. Those Vietnamese who extoll the benefits of friendship with the United States would do well to remember that, ultimately, even the most liberal U.S. administrations will always conduct their bilateral relationships with Vietnam within the broader context of great power relations, particularly Sino-U.S. relations. On the other hand, those Americans who deal with Vietnam should keep well-informed of developments in Vietnamese domestic politics, which remain the biggest shaper of Vietnamese foreign policy.

While the failure of U.S.-Vietnam rapprochement pushed Vietnam to lean further into the Soviet camp and strike boldly in Cambodia, it was a missed chance to avoid the Third Indochina War rather than a primary reason for the war. Even if Phan Hien and Richard Holbrooke had shaken hands and normalized relations on that fateful day in May 1977, it was possible that Vietnam would still have decided to take out the Khmer Rouge regime, though that conflict may have been resolved much sooner with universal condemnation of the Khmer Rouge. I will attempt

to advance a coherent and balanced account of the complex origins of the Third Indochina War in the next chapter.

Chapter III

The Unraveling of Postwar Dreams, 1975-1979

It is Vietnam's southwestern border province Tay Ninh Province's border with Cambodia at dawn on July 24, 1978. My great-uncle, twenty-two-year-old volunteer private Lam Duc Truong, had died in his sleep of mortar fire. Truong had just returned to the border to serve the final weeks of his tour of duty, ignoring family exhortations to wait it out at home. His company was ambushed by the Khmer Rouge who, like the Communist guerrillas that had fought the Vietnam War, knew the terrain well and moved soundlessly among the leaves. Within seven months, Vietnam would launch a lightning campaign (December 25, 1978 to January 7, 1979) that toppled the Khmer Rouge and installed a pro-Vietnamese government in Phnom Penh. By then, another of my uncles had volunteered for the militia units that bore the brunt of the 200,000-strong Chinese punitive expedition on our northern border.¹¹⁸

What happened in those fateful years between 1975 and 1995 that turned solidarity in triumph into bloody fratricidal conflict, and could it have been avoided? A Vietnamese archivist confided that while the state historians have reached a consensus on what happened during the French and American Resistance Wars, they have been unable or unwilling to do the same for the Vietnam-Cambodia and Sino-Vietnam Wars. That is, 30 years after the event, the Vietnamese government has made no update to its 1979 White Book, which classified the wars with China

¹¹⁸ Evans, *Red Brotherhood at War*, 1990, 108–15.

and Cambodia as originating from China's latest attempt to gain regional hegemony.¹¹⁹ Due to ongoing political considerations, the Vietnam-Cambodia and Sino-Vietnam Wars share a rump page in the official high school history textbook.¹²⁰ Much of what young Vietnamese know about these conflicts are garnered from online forum and blog articles of dubious provenance.

On the Cambodian side, the ongoing trials of former Khmer Rouge leaders and monuments like the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum still remind Cambodians of their bloody past. Yet as recently as in the 2013 General Elections, the Cambodian National Rescue Party, whose leaders are resurrecting the call to expel the *yuons* (Vietnamese, derogatory), have called the Hun Sen government Vietnamese stooges. Their followers claim that the Vietnamese invasion was carried out primarily to subjugate Cambodia.¹²¹ Clearly, the Vietnamese side's reluctance to open its relevant archives to free academic debate risks leaving the field open for opportunistic politicians to manipulate history for their own interests, with incalculable consequences.

In this chapter we will take a modest first step in rectifying this problem. In the first section, I will critically assess two popular proposed causes of the invasion, namely Vietnam's racial/territorial aggrandizement and Soviet masterminding. These theories fundamentally mischaracterize Vietnam's primary objectives, which were in fact regional stability and economic reconstruction. The final resolution of the conflict by force was not inevitable because Vietnamese or Soviet ambitions clashed fundamentally against those of China and Democratic

¹¹⁹ Trường Chinh, *Sự Thật về Quan Hệ Việt Nam, Trung Quốc Trong 30 Năm Qua* (Hà Nội : Sự Thật, 1979), 7–11.

¹²⁰ *Lịch Sử 12* (Hanoi: Ministry of Education and Training, 2013).

¹²¹ Julia Wallace Vannarin Neou, "Cambodia Protests Unmask Anti-Vietnam Views," accessed November 13, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2014/1/24/cambodia-protests-unmask-anti-vietnam-views>.

Kampuchea. It was instead a series of misperceptions from all sides that turned full-scale conflict into a self-fulfilling prophecy. In the second section I will reconstruct the process in 1975-79 by which Vietnam's leaders formulated their decision to invade Cambodia based on an analysis of their perceptions, drawing primarily from Vietnamese archival sources, interviews with ranking members of Vietnam's government and military, personal memoirs, and the official newspaper *Nhan Dan*.

In the critical years between 1977-78, Vietnamese foreign policy underwent three phases: an increasingly desperate search for a negotiated solution to the escalating crisis (April 1977 to February 1978); breakdown of relations with China and facing up to the futility of negotiations (February to June 1978); and maneuvering internationally to optimize conditions for the invasion, but failing (June to December 1978). The invasion was a case of preemptive self-defense, wherein the Vietnamese government responded with overwhelming force to what it misperceived to be a threat to its very survival from a two-front war against an alliance of the People's Republic of China and Democratic Kampuchea. While Vietnamese leaders had prepared for the eventuality of removing the Khmer Rouge as early as September 1977, the final decision progressively crystallized throughout 1978, as the failures of repeated attempts at obtaining Chinese mediation and rapprochement with America turned the specter of a Soviet-Vietnamese alliance into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Vietnam had tried its best to focus on economic development, but was pulled into war by the actions of its neighbors and its own inaccurate assessment of the international situation, specifically its overestimation of Chinese control over the Khmer Rouge and underestimation of the diplomatic and economic costs of invasion. The bonds of ideological kinship and the desire for a peaceful environment for economic reconstruction made Vietnam

initially reluctant to abandon hopes of reconciliation, but the perception that its cause was morally righteous tipped the scale towards invasion. Far from an inevitable clash of wills, the invasion and its consequences were ultimately in none of the participant states' real interests, but resulted from specific and contingent misperceptions by decision-makers in Hanoi, Beijing, and Phnom Penh regarding the intentions of their counterparts.

The myths of Vietnamese hegemonism and Soviet puppet

The Khmer Rouge attacks on Vietnam's border towns in April 1977 following two peaceful years caught Vietnamese leaders by surprise.¹²² Insofar as I argue Vietnam's invasion was in response to the series of events that followed, any analysis of Vietnam's decision to invade Cambodia should rightly focus on the period 1977-78. I will argue that there was no fundamental clash of interests between Vietnam and its neighbors, which turns our attention to Vietnam's decision-making process.

All authors, regardless of their stance, start their assessments with an exploration of the long historical context of the conflict, and with it an examination of the claims advanced in the Khmer Rouge's Black Paper. Published in September 1978 to mobilize international opinion against Vietnam's impending invasion, this document alleged that the conflict was the inevitable culmination of a life-and-death struggle between the Vietnamese and Khmer races. Its roots lie in the medieval Vietnamese state's "Southward March" from their Red River Delta homeland beginning in the 15th century, which destroyed the Indic Kingdom of Champa and annexed Khmer

¹²² Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 1986, 91–92.

Krom (the Mekong Delta) from a declining Khmer Empire. This was followed in the 19th century by imperial Vietnam's interventions in Cambodia's succession crises, facilitated by the "sordid use of Vietnamese girls", ostensibly referring to the political marriages between the two courts during this period. French imperialism came in time to save Cambodia from total dismemberment by Vietnam and Siam, but it also resulted in an influx of ethnic Vietnamese administrators, merchants, fishermen, and farmers. Ho Chi Minh's Indochinese Communist Party (ICP, 1930-45) merely repackaged Vietnam's historical ambitions into their quest for an Indochinese Federation, which entailed subjecting Laos and Cambodia into "special relationships" of subservience. The Khmer Rouge summed up their position thus:

So, whether in the feudalist era, in the French colonialists' period, in the U.S. imperialists' period or in the [sic] Ho Chi Minh's period (that is the present period), the Vietnamese have not changed their true nature, that is the nature of the aggressor, annexationist and swallower of other countries' territories.¹²³

While rejecting the Khmer Rouge's over-simplistic reading of history and noting their border provocations to be the primary trigger for Vietnam's invasion, Norodom Sihanouk nevertheless empathized with this long historical narrative. He opined it was "still true" that "from time immemorial the Vietnamese and the Khmers have been mortal enemies", an opinion he claimed was shared by most Asia experts in the West.¹²⁴ Scholars have also fallen prey to this admittedly tidy narrative. Elizabeth Becker sees the Vietnam-Cambodia border as the meeting point between the industrious and militaristic "Sinitic" and the artistic and peace-loving "Inditic"

¹²³ Cambodia. Krasuañ Kār Parates., *Black Paper : Facts and Evidences of the Acts of Aggression and Annexation of Vietnam against Kampuchea*. (New York : Group of Kampuchean Residents in America, 1978), 3–89.

¹²⁴ Norodom Sihanouk, *War and Hope: The Case for Cambodia* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 3.

civilizations. Comparing this with the Franco-German border, which demarcates the industrious and militaristic Teutons from the artistic Latins, Becker theorizes the hostility between Cambodia and Vietnam to be the latest iteration in a recurring clash of civilizations.¹²⁵ Similarly, Thu Huong Nguyen Vo accuses all sides with betraying their lofty ideologies to “purely national interests and emotions left over from the same feudal, dark ages which their revolutions sought to erase.”¹²⁶ Even scholars like Stephen Morris and William Duiker who do not rely as much on arguments from medieval history believe the historical context produced in Vietnamese leaders a superiority complex in dealing with Cambodia.¹²⁷ These arguments would suggest that sooner or later, conflict between Democratic Kampuchea and Vietnam would prove unavoidable.

This neat historical narrative is useful to help us understand how the lenses of history colored the Khmer Rouge’s perception of Vietnamese intentions, and correctly captures Pol Pot’s motivations for starting the war. But it is of little value in explaining Vietnam’s own perceptions and intentions in the late 1970s. None of the authors above have looked at Vietnamese sources to find concrete evidence of a racial superiority complex having any impact on Vietnamese policy. An exception is the Khmer Rouge’s publication of Vietnamese prisoners’ confessions that supposedly proved the Vietnamese state had ordered them to rape, loot, and kill.¹²⁸ But once

¹²⁵ Becker, *When the War Was Over*, 1998, 337.

¹²⁶ Nguyen-Vo, *Khmer-Viet Relations and the Third Indochina Conflict*, 1992, 144.

¹²⁷ Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia*, 45–46; William J. Duiker, *China and Vietnam, the Roots of Conflict* (Berkeley, Calif.: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1986), 1–7, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/002447782?signon=swle:https://shibidp.cit.cornell.edu/idp/shibboleth>.

¹²⁸ *Evidences on the Vietnamese Aggression against Democratic Kampuchea* ([Cambodia]: Dept. of Press and Information of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Democratic Kampuchea, 1978); *Irrefutable Evidences of the Strategy of Aggression of the Vietnamese Annexationists and Swallowers of Territories* ([S.I.]: The Department, 1978).

one considers the methods of torture the Khmer Rouge were wont to invoke in extracting them, the reliability of these confessions becomes highly questionable.

In my extensive research in the Vietnamese archives and Party documents, and through my interviews of Vietnamese officials, I have yet to encounter any document that alludes to the racial inferiority of the Khmer people, or any designs on the part of the Vietnamese state to annex Laotian and Cambodian territory. Perhaps the most important evidence that calls into question this entire thesis is the fact that despite Vietnam's decade-long occupation of Cambodia, no Indochinese Federation was ever proposed at any level at any time, and today Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia remain sovereign states. Chapter IV, which discusses the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia, will provide further evidence that the Vietnamese never intended to permanently subjugate Cambodia.

“It's the economy, stupid!”

In fact, Vietnamese documents point us in the opposite direction. Grant Evans and Kevin Rowley have rightly argued that after three decades of brutal fighting, the top priority of the government of reunified Vietnam was to avoid further costly conflicts and focus on economic recovery and development.¹²⁹ Contrary to Chang Pao-min's claim that the Vietnamese resorted to aggression in order to avoid having to deal with the difficulties of economic reconstruction, their commitment to development was formalized during the Fourth Party Plenum of the

¹²⁹ Evans, *Red Brotherhood at War*, 1990, 37.

Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV, 14-20/12/1976) in the ambitious Second Five-Year Plan.¹³⁰ Its primary target was sustained GNI growth of 13-14%/annum, nearly doubling the size of the economy in just five years. It was to achieve this while also integrating the hitherto separate economies of North and South, which entailed comprehensively restructuring of the South's capitalist system into a command economy. In order to achieve these targets, the government banked on raising 30 billion VND (~US\$12.9 billion) in capital investment. Furthermore, Section 1 recommended clearing one million hectares for cultivation, primarily in the South; Section 3 provided for military units to engage in new economic ventures; and Sections 5 and 6 called for the expansion of exports and technical cooperation with the global economy, in particular with Laos, Cambodia, and other socialist states.¹³¹

Their ambitious nature did not mean that these goals were merely for show. After all, Communism views economic strength as the foundation of political and military power. In the 1970s Cold War context, a main attraction of central planning for less developed nations was its promise of rapid industrialization, as epitomized in the experiences of the USSR in the 1930s and North Korea in the late 1950s. Both the Vietnamese and Cambodian Communists sought to channel the groundswell of public support following their military victory into proving the economic superiority of socialism as well, albeit in very different ways. That the economy grew 12% in 1976 convinced the Central Committee that, given ideal conditions, these targets were

¹³⁰ Pao-min Chang, *Kampuchea between China and Vietnam* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, National University of Singapore, 1985), 157–78.

¹³¹ “Phương hướng, nhiệm vụ và mục tiêu chủ yếu của Kế hoạch 5 năm 1976-1980” in Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam, “Văn Kiện Đảng Toàn Tập - Tập 37,” 614–704, accessed November 13, 2020, <https://tulieuvankien.dangcongsan.vn/van-kien-tu-lieu-ve-dang/book/van-kien-dang-toan-tap/van-kien-dang-toan-tap-37-116>.

within grasp.¹³² Vietnam was even willing to critically compromise its military readiness in pursuit of this goal: between 1975-76 the bulk of wartime forces were demobilized, with the few divisions remaining in commission each sending all but one regiment to work on economic projects.¹³³ We have therefore very strong evidence that after unification, the Vietnamese government centered its efforts on maximizing trade, growth, and orderly integration of the defeated South into the national economy.

If we accept that Vietnam's core interest between 1976-80 was economic recovery, we can expect that its leaders would prioritize international stability over expansionist conquest. With regards to relations with the Communist giants, Vietnam's dominant strategy was to tread a fine line between the Soviet Union and China in order to maximize aid and trade, and certainly conflict with a China-backed Cambodia would be anathema to this goal. Even if Vietnamese leaders did hold chauvinistic attitudes towards their neighbors, this would not have translated into an aggressive policy so soon after the conclusion of the Second Indochina War, for the core national interests should have restrained them from acting on any such impulse.

While the Vietnamese indeed wanted to build "special relationships" with Laos and Cambodia, Chang Pao-min grossly misstated the term's meaning when he equated it with federation. Sophie Quinn-Judge argued more convincingly that Vietnamese leaders had always seen an Indochinese Federation as antithetical to Vietnamese nationalism.¹³⁴ Following the

¹³² Tetsusaburō Kimura, *The Vietnamese Economy, 1975-86: Reforms and International Relations*, I.D.E. Occasional Papers Series, no. 23 (Tokyo: Institute of Developing Economies : Sole agent Maruzen Co, 1989), 11.

¹³³ Lã Văn Nho, Interview with Major General Lã Văn Nho, September 2, 2013.

¹³⁴ Westad and Quinn-Judge, *The Third Indochina War*, 2006, 214.

critics' lead in tracing the historical context, Ho Chi Minh had initially presided over the formation of a Vietnamese Communist Party in 1930, before the Comintern chastised him for allowing nationalism to color Communism's international spirit and pressured him to re-found it as the ICP. The ICP never garnered significant Laotian or Cambodian membership, and its operations in these countries were very limited up to its self-disbandment in 1945. From the formation of the Vietnam Workers' Party in 1951, its official line advocated aiding Laos and Cambodia with the development of indigenous Communist movements – the Pathet Laos and Khmer Issarak – rather than continue pursuing an Indochina-wide party.¹³⁵ This was consistent, as Evans and Rowley, Nayan Chanda, and William Duiker have noted, with the particularly nationalistic flavor of Asian Communist movements. Thus the proposition that Vietnam sought national aggrandizement *through* federation would have been cognitively jarring to contemporary Vietnamese nationalists.

In the late 1970s, what Vietnam really wanted from Laos and Cambodia were friendly relations and border security. The latter was especially important as Vietnam intended to build the reeducation camps critical to the political and agricultural transformation of the South on the last major tracts of uncultivated land along the Cambodian border. This was made clear by the Secretariat's Directive 22-CT/TW, which, in calling for emergency measures in response to the Khmer Rouge attacks in September 1977, gave lengthy instructions to “firmly foil the enemy's plot to disrupt production, create barriers to our people's cause of building socialism.”¹³⁶ Indeed, what made the repeated Khmer Rouge incursions into Vietnamese territory and the influx of

¹³⁵ Motoo Furuta and Takashi Shiraishi, eds., *Indochina in the 1940s and 1950s* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992).

¹³⁶ Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam, *Văn Kiện Đảng Toàn Tập - Tập 38*, 2018, 335–442, <https://tulieuvankien.dangcongsan.vn/van-kien-tu-lieu-ve-dang/book/van-kien-dang-toan-tap/van-kien-dang-toan-tap-tap-38-117>.

refugees unbearable was their disruption of Vietnam's core aim of economic recovery and nation building.

To maintain regional security, Vietnam was eager to offer what limited material contributions it could to buttress their weaker neighbors' armed forces precisely to avoid in the long run having to interfere directly in their domestic affairs. As late as 30/5/1976, Politburo Resolution 251-NQ/TW still identified the US and its allies' meddling in Laos and Cambodia as the main threat to regional stability, and called for increased military aid to help both the Pathet Laos and Khmer Rouge resist Western imperialist subversion.¹³⁷ In direct contradiction to the "swallower of territory" allegation, Vietnam's border settlement with Laos in February 1976 bought Laotian goodwill by exchanging 24 disputed zones from Vietnam for just 10 from Laos.¹³⁸ In September-October 1977 Vietnam agreed, among other provisions, to train 1,343-1,533 Laotian officers in Vietnamese academies, help construct the military airbases at Ban Ang and Seno, and transport 73,114 tons of military shipments bound for Laos through its ports in 1978.¹³⁹ By 18/7/1977, Vietnam and Laos had signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, whose Article 5 stipulated:

The Contracting Parties... undertake to never cease improving militant solidarity, long-term cooperation and mutual aid with the brother country of Cambodia on the principle of absolute equality, respecting the independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity of one another, respecting one another's legitimate interests, refraining from interfering in the domestic affairs of one another...¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam, "Văn Kiện Đảng Toàn Tập - Tập 37," 104–11.

¹³⁸ Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "9991 Tập Tài Liệu về Đàm Phán Biên Giới Việt – Lào Năm 1976," March 1977, Phòng Phủ Thủ tướng, Vietnam National Archives Center III.

¹³⁹ Vietnam Ministry of Defense, "10684 Công Văn Của Bộ Quốc Phòng v/v Hợp Tác Quân Sự Với Lào Năm 1978," 1978, Phòng Phủ Thủ tướng, Vietnam National Archives Center III.

¹⁴⁰ "10339 Hiệp Ước Hữu Nghị và Hợp Tác Giữa Việt Nam – Lào Ký Tại Viên Chăn Ngày 18/8/1977."

Indeed, Vietnam had been supporting the Khmer Rouge from 1970 onwards, after a coup replaced the pliant Sihanouk with Lon Nol's right-wing government, which collaborated with the Americans in rooting out Vietnamese insurgents from Cambodian territory. Between 1970-76 Vietnam passed on to the Khmer Rouge their share of Chinese and Soviet supplies shipped to Vietnamese ports, including medicine, civil aviation equipment, and radio equipment critical in the final push for Phnom Penh, for which Ieng Sary gave special thanks.¹⁴¹ Thu Huong Nguyen Vo saw the early clashes with the Khmer Rouge during the Vietnam War and in 1975 on the offshore islands as evidence of long-running problems, missing out on the truly remarkable feature of these incidents, namely how quickly and efficiently the two sides settled their differences.¹⁴² In the interests of maintaining stability and solidarity, Vietnamese leaders readily accepted Pol Pot's apology that his troops were "ignorant of local geography" and quickly restored the *status quo ante bellum*.¹⁴³ Even when the December 1978 invasion did take place, Vietnamese troops were carefully drilled beforehand in the "Three Prohibitions and Five No's", which taught absolute respect for Cambodian property and persons, and required the invasion force to be entirely self-sufficient, allowing them only to "breathe [Cambodian] air and drink their water". Vietnamese commanders and diplomats testify that these regulations were followed scrupulously, helping the army earn Cambodian civilians' trust, at least initially.¹⁴⁴ Vietnam's actions certainly did not

¹⁴¹ Vietnam Ministry of Transport, "9960 Hồ Sơ Đàm Phán về Thiết Lập Đường Hàng Không Dân Dụng Việt Nam – Campuchia Năm 1976," July 31, 1976, Phòng Phủ Thủ tướng, Vietnam National Archives Center III; Tiến Bửu Nguyễn, "9961 Báo Cáo Của Bộ Y Tế về Kết Quả Chuyển Đi Công Tác Campuchia Năm 1976," November 18, 1976, Vietnam National Archives Center III.

¹⁴² Nguyen-Vo, *Khmer-Viet Relations and the Third Indochina Conflict*, 1992, 78–79.

¹⁴³ Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 1986, 14–16.

¹⁴⁴ Lã Văn Nho, Interview with Major General Lã Văn Nho; Nguyễn Trắc Toàn, Interview with Minister Nguyễn Trắc Toàn, December 25, 2017.

resemble those of a racist aggressor intent on the destruction of the Cambodian race. If anything, history will castigate Vietnamese leaders for seeking security through blindly supporting the Khmer Rouge, and ultimately losing both.

The allegation that postwar Vietnam wished to assert its racial superiority through an aggressive or expansionist program to subjugate the Khmer race can never be conclusively falsified, for it claims the existence of subconscious biases that are impossible to test. But the authors touting this view have not presented any proof that this attitude, if it existed, shaped the formulation of Vietnamese foreign policy in any concrete way. Their assertion that Vietnam pursued national aggrandizement and yet was wedded to internationalist federation are contradictory, as the Communist Party of Vietnam had already discarded the concept of an Indochinese Federation in favor of Vietnamese nationalism in 1951. Meanwhile, all the available evidence suggests that it would have been strongly in the interests of postwar Vietnamese leaders to suppress any militaristic urging they might have harbored in favor of peace, stability, and foreign direct investment (FDI) to facilitate the reconstruction of their country. The story of the Vietnamese decision to invade Cambodia in 1977-78 should be best told as a tragedy in which Vietnam responded reluctantly to a conflict instigated by the Khmer Rouge, rather than a fable of an inevitable clash of civilizations, or the logical ending to some grand federalist plot by the latter-day emperors in Hanoi.

China and the self-fulfilling prophecy of the Vietnam-Soviet axis

Since the Sino-Soviet split manifested into actual armed conflict in the 1969 border clashes, the Soviet Union gradually surpassed the US as the primary threat to China. This was an important factor leading to the Sino-American rapprochement when President Richard Nixon visited Beijing in 1972.¹⁴⁵ Increasing Sino-Soviet hostility and warming Sino-US relations provide the backdrop to this period, culminating in President Jimmy Carter's announcement on 15/12/1978, ten days before the Vietnamese invasion, that the US would recognize the People's Republic of China from 1/1/1979.¹⁴⁶ For Chinese leaders, the 1950s-60s need for North Vietnam to act as a buffer against American aggression gave way to a nagging fear of united Vietnam becoming a Soviet puppet on its southern border, forming part of an encirclement of China. Alarm bells rang the moment Le Duan secured \$3 billion in Soviet aid in October 1975 for the Second Five-Year Plan, and they rang even louder in 1978 as Vietnam-Soviet relations warmed again.¹⁴⁷ China's suspicion of Vietnam's economic, political, and ideological dependency on the "revisionist-expansionists" contributed to the breakdown of Sino-Vietnamese relations by mid-1978. In this context, the pragmatic Chinese leadership put aside their ideological reservations about the Khmer Rouge regime and extended their support to Pol Pot.

As it turned out, Chinese leaders were lashing out at imaginary demons. Given that its economic plans rested on raising \$12.9 billion of capital investment, with little indigenous capital stocks and no single power willing and able to foot this bill, Vietnam could ill afford to alienate any potential benefactor. Thus it desired to tread the middle path between the USSR and China and distance itself from the Sino-Soviet split, seeking to maximize aid from both sides.

¹⁴⁵ Duiker, *China and Vietnam, the Roots of Conflict*, 35–62.

¹⁴⁶ Haas, *Genocide by Proxy*, 1991, 81–83.

¹⁴⁷ Ross, *The Indochina Tangle*, 1988, 60–61.

Vietnamese leaders, particularly Deputy-Prime Minister Le Thanh Nghi, made repeated trips to Beijing asking for additional aid from an increasingly suspicious and unwilling Chinese donor, who referred to him as “the beggar”, but even in this he was not alone.¹⁴⁸ Even in November 1977, Deputy Prime Minister Pham Van Dong asked Chinese leaders for an outright grant of goods valued at 1.1 million RMB (~US\$585,000) and a zero-interest loan of 800 million RMB in cash over the period 1977-80, on top of completing outstanding joint projects.¹⁴⁹ To reassure China it was no Soviet puppet, Nayan Chanda recounts many episodes in which Vietnamese diplomats openly snubbed their Soviet counterparts, especially when cornered by the latter at public events to criticize China. Even while asking for Soviet aid aggressively, Vietnam’s continued refusal to lease Cam Ranh Bay to the Soviet Navy or join the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA or COMECON) produced further friction.¹⁵⁰ Were Chinese policy-makers able to look at the facts objectively and have some trust in their wartime ally, they would have seen clearly that the Vietnamese were much more interested in getting aid rather than being pulled into their quarrel with the USSR.

Vietnam’s initiatives to establish good relations with the non-Communist powers were further evidence of Vietnam’s search for an independent path. The Second Five-Year Plan had called for increased production of consumer goods. As the Communist world had fallen far behind their Western counterparts in this area, gaining access to Western investment, technology, and markets was imperative. From 1975, the Vietnamese government actively

¹⁴⁸ Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 1986, 27.

¹⁴⁹ Phạm Văn Đồng and Lê Thanh Nghi, “10469 Công Hàm Của Thủ Tướng Phạm Văn Đồng, Phó Thủ Tướng Lê Thanh Nghi Gửi Các Nhà Lãnh Đạo CP Trung Quốc Yêu Cầu Viện Trợ, Hợp Tác Kinh Tế Kỹ Thuật Năm 1977,” 1977, Phòng Phủ Thủ tướng, Vietnam National Archives Center III.

¹⁵⁰ Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 1986, 170–71; 187.

courted French, Japanese, Norwegian, and Indian investment, which started so positively that by 1977 the Soviets had even feared Vietnam would soon be lost to the capitalist camp. While reporters from Western organizations were allowed to set up camp in Ho Chi Minh City, the Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union's application to open a bureau there was rejected, reducing the Soviets to swarming Western journalists returning from the South for the latest updates. Vietnam also broke all the Cold War rules by requesting observer status in ASEAN in January 1976, joining the Non-Aligned Movement in August, and by September becoming the first openly socialist member of the International Monetary Fund, from which it promptly received a loan of \$36 million in January 1977.¹⁵¹ After several rounds of negotiations, the U.S. withdrew its veto of Vietnamese membership in the UN on 20 September 1977. Normalization of relations with the U.S. was never achieved only because the Vietnamese refused to drop their demand for \$3.25 billion in reconstruction aid, which, as discussed in Chapter II, President Nixon had secretly promised in 1973 but Congress was loath to grant. Thus did Vietnam pursue an open-door policy in 1976-77, which saw it shake hands with all of its erstwhile enemies less than a year after its victory, as if to prove just how far it was willing to go to achieve its reconstruction targets.

Those scholars who have gone through the Soviet archives confirm that the Soviets had little influence over the Vietnamese policy towards Cambodia.¹⁵² Admittedly, Vietnamese officials regularly consulted with the Soviets, and KGB personnel stationed in the Soviet embassy in Hanoi were adept at uncovering anything they omitted. Certainly, the Soviets must have tacitly

¹⁵¹ Chanda, 157.

¹⁵² Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia*, 215–18; Dmitry Mosyakov, "The Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese Communists: A History of Their Relations as Told in the Soviet Archives," in Susan E. Cook, ed., *Genocide in Cambodia and Rwanda: New Perspectives* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2006), 54–94.

approved of Vietnam's impending invasion when they signed the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between the USSR and Vietnam on 2/11/1978, whose Article 6 extended to Vietnam a flexible security guarantee.¹⁵³ But this awareness was far from exceptional. Indeed, Western commentators discussed political friction between Vietnam, Cambodia, and China openly throughout 1978 as all sides launched their fierce public rhetoric. A Vietnamese invasion around the start of the dry season in September 1978 was widely predicted, the only surprise being the delay to December.¹⁵⁴ And besides information gathering, no evidence has been found to suggest that the USSR was willing or able to convince Vietnam to undertake aggressive actions against its neighbors to further Soviet interests. As has often been said of the US-Israel relationship and also applicable to the China-Democratic Kampuchea relationship, the Soviet-Vietnam relationship in the late 1970s was a case of the "tail wagging the dog", where Hanoi formulated its initiatives and then convinced Moscow to get on board. Unfortunately, Chinese policy-makers' misreading of these dynamics would contribute to the breakdown in Sino-Vietnamese relations in 1977-78 and inadvertently drive Vietnam into the Soviets' arms, making China's worst fear a reality.

Thus the Chinese belief that Vietnam was invading Cambodia on the orders of an expansionist Soviet Union is entirely false. Even though in relation to the USSR, Vietnam was the smaller nation in need of aid, by virtue of its strategic and ideological importance it held the wheel in the relationship. Vietnam undertook the decision to invade Cambodia not to please the

¹⁵³ "Hiệp Ước Hữu Nghị và Hợp Tác Giữa Nước Cộng Hòa Xã Hội Chủ Nghĩa Việt Nam và Liên Bang Cộng Hòa Xã Hội Chủ Nghĩa Xô-Viết," *Nhan Dan*, November 4, 1978, Library of the Institute of Strategic Studies, Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam.

¹⁵⁴ Ross, *The Indochina Tangle*, 1988, 218.

Soviet Union, but primarily to secure its borders from Khmer Rouge attacks, which the Vietnamese incorrectly assumed were ordered by Beijing.

Mutual misperceptions

Up until the Khmer Rouge began their offensive in April 1977, the Vietnamese leadership consistently failed to recognize the imminent danger. As late as November 16, 1976, Le Duan still confided to the Soviet Ambassador that he expected the situation in Cambodia to shortly improve. With the economic and social failure of the Khmer Rouge methods apparent by this time, the pro-Vietnam faction led by Non Suon had on their own initiative forced the “bad people” to retire their official posts in September 1976 in favor of the “moderate” Nuon Chea.¹⁵⁵ In December 1976 the Fourth Party Plenum still “enthusiastically celebrate[d] the grand historic victories of the fraternal people of Laos and the people of Cambodia”.¹⁵⁶

But the pro-Vietnamese faction had severely miscalculated, as Nuon Chea exposed his true nature as a Pol Pot loyalist. By February 1977 Pol Pot had reassumed power and began a comprehensive purge of pro-Vietnamese and other “reactionary” cadres.¹⁵⁷ Suspicious that the Vietnamese were behind Non Suon’s mini-coup, after he had sufficiently consolidated power Pol Pot set out to pursue his long professed but oft ignored quest to recover Kampuchea Krom in earnest. On April 30, 1977, the two-year anniversary of the Communist takeover of Saigon, Khmer

¹⁵⁵ Dmitry Mosyakov, “The Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese Communists: A History of Their Relations as Told in the Soviet Archives,” November 30, 2015, 84, <http://gsp.yale.edu/node/297>.

¹⁵⁶ Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam, “Văn Kiện Đảng Toàn Tập - Tập 37,” 104–11.

¹⁵⁷ Etcheson, *The Rise and Demise of Democratic Kampuchea*, 177–80.

Rouge troops struck at An Giang province. A Vietnamese proposal for a peace summit was rejected on June 18, and throughout that summer low level fighting spread along the border from the Mekong Delta up to the Central Highlands, prompting General Vo Nguyen Giap to visit the border in July.¹⁵⁸

The memoirs of Heng Samrin, who was then a regional commander with the Khmer Rouge but would later serve as the Chairman of the ruling Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party in the People's Republic of Kampuchea, dates Pol Pot's nationwide directive for all-out war with Vietnam to September 30, 1977.¹⁵⁹ But as early as September 24, the Khmer Rouge launched their most horrendous attack on Tan Lap Commune, leaving 500 civilians dead, with reports of babies ripped out of mothers' wombs and well-endowed women decapitated alive.¹⁶⁰ This incident prompted a major Vietnamese operation into eastern Cambodia directed by Giap himself to signal Vietnamese resolve and test the Khmer Rouge's capabilities, culminating in Khieu Samphan's announcement on December 31, 1977 that Democratic Kampuchea would temporarily suspend relations with Vietnam.¹⁶¹ Around this time Vietnam began remobilizing two Army Corps (III and IV) and preparing them for an all-out offensive to remove the Khmer Rouge if needed.¹⁶² But in early 1978 Vietnam had not abandoned all hopes of a peaceful settlement with Chinese mediation. It withdrew its forces, which were just 38km from Phnom Penh, on January 6, 1978, and issued a February 5 proposal for a comprehensive ceasefire

¹⁵⁸ Evans, *Red Brotherhood at War*, 1990, 104–7.

¹⁵⁹ Heng Samrin, *The People's Struggle: Cambodia Reborn* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2018), 63.

¹⁶⁰ Committee Investigating War Crimes, "567 Ghi Chép Tội Ác Của Bọn Phản Động Pôn-pôt Tại Tỉnh Tây Ninh," April 11, 1978, Phòng Ủy ban Điều tra Tội ác Chiến tranh, Vietnam National Archives Center III.

¹⁶¹ Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia*, 102–7.

¹⁶² Lã Văn Nho, Interview with Major General Lã Văn Nho.

agreement, appealing to the spirit of international socialist solidarity.¹⁶³ This plan backfired, however, as Pol Pot saw only vindication for his beliefs in his army's super-masculine fighting strength. Throughout 1978, the Khmer Rouge progressively ceased their incursions into Thailand and Laos to shift 19 out of their 24 divisions to the Vietnamese border by December 1978. These divisions mined the border areas, conducted ambushes on Vietnamese patrols, and attacked border towns, inflicting severe damage.¹⁶⁴

On paper, Vietnam possessed the world's fourth largest army and air force, but the border conflict caught them unprepared. The PAVN failed to mobilize its fighting and medical corps in time, relying initially on local militia and suffering heavy losses from the Khmer Rouge's hit-and-run tactics. A summative report estimated total material damages at 111,500,600 VND or around US\$51.3 million, of which 86% was to civilian property and 59% was incurred in An Giang Province alone. This estimate did not account for the opportunity costs resulting from the disruption of economic activities along the border and the remobilizing of units that would otherwise be engaged in production.¹⁶⁵ Total military casualties from that undeclared war has never been officially computed, but an official interviewed by Michael Haas gave the figure as being higher than that suffered in the First Indochina War. Total civilian casualties were recorded as 5230 dead, 4710 injured, and 24,300 missing.¹⁶⁶ The refugee situation was dire as well. The Ministry of Labor,

¹⁶³ "Front Page Editorial," *Nhân Dân*, February 5, 1978, Library of the Institute of Strategic Studies, Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam.

¹⁶⁴ Lã Văn Nho, Interview with Major General Lã Văn Nho; Nguyễn Hiệu, Interview with Nguyễn Hiệu, September 3, 2013.

¹⁶⁵ Committee Investigating War Crimes, "566 Tổng Hợp Giá Trị Thiệt Hại Của Các Tỉnh Biên Giới Tây Nam Trong Chiến Tranh Do Pôn-pốt-lêngsary Gây Ra," 1978, Phòng Ủy ban Điều tra Tội ác Chiến tranh, Vietnam National Archives Center III.

¹⁶⁶ Haas, *Genocide by Proxy*, 1991, 58.

Invalids and Social Affairs in its call for emergency international aid reported that, towards the end of 1978 268,380 Vietnamese, 195,620 Khmer, and 25,554 Chinese fled to Vietnam from Cambodia, while 769,500 Vietnamese had to evacuate from the border areas.¹⁶⁷ Clearly, Vietnamese leaders had to address the root of the issue, and fast.

Witnessing the ferocious attack from their supposed Communist brethren with amazed horror, and even more puzzled by their total refusal to negotiate terms, Vietnamese leaders fell prey to the common cognitive trap of ascribing undue rationality to their foes' action, a concept first described by social psychologists Edward Jones and Victor Harris as "actor-observer asymmetry".¹⁶⁸ Major General Lã Văn Nho explained the reasoning of Vietnamese leaders:

Of course [the Khmer Rouge] had their main plan, which was to weaken Vietnam, making it impossible for Vietnam to rebuild our economy... If that was the case, then, we have to look more carefully. Cambodia was a country of only 7 million people, but dared to take on such big ambitions against Vietnam. Cambodia obviously did not have the strength to do this alone... So who was behind them? This is a sensitive issue today, but before, it was very clearly taught to [PAVN officers] that it was China.¹⁶⁹

This argument would have been valid were it true that the Khmer Rouge had acted logically, but there is little evidence in any study of the regime that their decision-making was rational to any consistent degree. Radio Phnom Penh's broadcast in May 1978 claimed that each Khmer would be capable of killing 30 Vietnamese, and was confident that the total destruction of the Vietnamese race and the recovery of Khmer Krom would only cost the lives of 2 million

¹⁶⁷ VNNA/BDTHQCT/33/566.

¹⁶⁸ Edward Ellsworth Jones and Richard E. Nisbett, *The Actor and the Observer: Divergent Perceptions of the Causes of Behavior* (General Learning Press, 1971).

¹⁶⁹ Lã Văn Nho, Interview with Major General Lã Văn Nho.

Cambodians, leaving 6 million to build socialism.¹⁷⁰ For all their professed Marxist purism, the Khmer Rouge dreamed of a rebirth of the mighty Angkor Empire, their territorial claims on Khmer Krom being put forward in defiance of the “imperialist” borders drawn by the French.¹⁷¹ They also saw preemptive war as the only way to contain ongoing Vietnamese subversion, with the increasingly close Vietnam-Laos relationship and Non Suon’s mini-coup evidencing Vietnam’s insidious plots. Whatever the case, insofar as the Khmer Rouge acted irrationally, the Vietnamese reasoning that they had to be acting on Chinese orders proved invalid.

Actually, the Khmer Rouge almost certainly acted *in defiance of* Chinese orders. When asked by Wilfred Burchett about Khmer Rouge intentions in October 1978, Vietnamese Deputy Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach compared the Khmer Rouge’s brazenness in attacking Vietnam to Israel’s boldness in attacking Egypt, arguing they both enjoyed the ultimate insurance of great power protection.¹⁷² But Thach failed to follow this analogy further to distill how the Khmer Rouge might, like Israel or Vietnam itself, have been capable of acting on their own initiative and forcing their more powerful benefactor to follow their lead, as was indeed the case. Post-Mao Chinese leaders, coming out of the horrors of the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution, often privately expressed their displeasure at the radical policies of the Khmer Rouge, and tried repeatedly to convince them of the folly of their ways, to no avail. Sihanouk recounted how, in 1975, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai told Khieu Samphan and Minister of Social Affairs Ieng Thirith to “take things slowly” as he lay on his deathbed, receiving condescending smirks in response.¹⁷³

¹⁷⁰ Etcherson, 192.

¹⁷¹ Haas, 41.

¹⁷² Etcherson, *The Rise and Demise of Democratic Kampuchea*, 187–88.

¹⁷³ Norodom Sihanouk, *War and Hope : The Case for Cambodia*, 1st American ed. (New York : Pantheon Books, c1980.), 54.

Deng Xiaoping's similar admonishment of Minister of National Defense Son Sen in 1978 also fell on deaf ears. It was the Chinese who interceded in the Cambodia-Thailand border conflict in June 1978 and convinced Pol Pot to cease bloody fighting that had been going on there since January 1977.¹⁷⁴

While China continued to provide aid to the Khmer Rouge, a fact that it has attempted to play down in recent years, Andrew Mertha's excellent work with Chinese archives has shown that the Khmer Rouge did not use that aid in the way the Chinese intended. While the Chinese wanted new radar installations to be concentrated in the Southwest, where they would monitor potential infiltration by CIA agents via the coast, the Khmer Rouge insisted that they be placed on the Thai and Vietnamese borders. Similarly, the Chinese wanted to help build Cambodia's major airfield in Stung Vay Chek near the Thai border, but the Khmer Rouge petitioned to build the field in Kampong Chhnang, closer to Phnom Penh and within easy striking distance of Ho Chi Minh City.¹⁷⁵ John Ciociari's extensive interviews with ex-Khmer Rouge leaders also reveal that, though Chinese aid bolstered the confidence of the Khmer Rouge, their motivations for attacking Vietnam were their own.¹⁷⁶ When the Khmer Rouge went public with its conflict with Vietnam, China even sent a high-ranking delegation led by Zhou's widow Deng Yingchao to Phnom Penh in January 1978 to defuse the conflict at Vietnam's request, but the Khmer Rouge leaders refused Chinese mediation. By the end of 1978, Deng had intimated with his Western colleagues his conviction that these policies would lead to a Vietnamese invasion and the removal of China's

¹⁷⁴ Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia*, 75–83.

¹⁷⁵ Mertha, *Brothers in Arms*.

¹⁷⁶ Ciociari, "China and the Pol Pot Regime."

only close ally in Southeast Asia.¹⁷⁷ Beyond merely ideological and strategic concerns, it must have been emotionally difficult for Chinese leaders to turn a blind eye to the genocide of ethnic Chinese in Democratic Kampuchea. The ethnic Chinese there were concentrated in urban areas and thus suffered disproportionately from the Khmer Rouge policy of clearing out the cities. Their population declined from 430,000 in 1975 to just 215,000 by 1979.¹⁷⁸ All evidence and logic seems to suggest that the moderate leaders of post-Mao China were deeply unhappy with the Khmer Rouge's self-destructive domestic and foreign policies, but could not afford to abandon one of their very few close allies.

The Khmer Rouge were themselves aware of this coolness on the part of the moderates in Beijing towards their cause. After Mao's death in 1976, when the radical Gang of Four and the moderates struggled for power, Radio Phnom Penh blasted Deng for being an "anti-socialist and counter-revolutionary".¹⁷⁹ Their broadcast of the arrest of the Gang of Four came in December 1976, a full two months after the event, signaling their severe disappointment and apprehension that the new moderate rulers of China would soon withdraw their support.¹⁸⁰ The Khmer Rouge needed not to worry, however: it was the very pragmatism that they lambasted that drove China's new leaders to commit themselves to continue aiding Cambodia when Democratic Kampuchea rekindled the conflict with Vietnam in April 1977 against Chinese wishes. The Chinese could not risk losing a crucial ally to a Vietnamese regime that they misperceived to be a Soviet pawn. Khmer Rouge leaders soon realized this and milked it for all its diplomatic and material

¹⁷⁷ Ross, *The Indochina Tangle*, 1988, 218–23.

¹⁷⁸ Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime*, 1996, 288–96.

¹⁷⁹ Evans, *Red Brotherhood at War*, 1990, 76–80.

¹⁸⁰ Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 1986, 78.

advantages; Vietnamese leaders did not. While they had legitimate reasons to think China was behind the Khmer Rouge attacks, there was enough countervailing evidence that a more sensitive and less colored Vietnamese reading of events should have seen that the Khmer Rouge was fully capable of making the decision to attack Vietnam without Chinese instigation.

It was actor-observer asymmetry that led Vietnamese leaders to the wrong conclusion. From 1975, Vietnamese leaders were made aware of China's interest in the Cambodian revolution when Mao Zedong congratulated Pol Pot for achieving "at one stroke what we failed with all our masses" and lectured the Vietnamese to "learn from the Khmer Rouge how to carry out a revolution".¹⁸¹ In August 1975, China claimed to be short of funds and had to cut aid for Vietnam in 1976 to just 20% of 1975 levels and refused to discuss aid for the Second Five-Year Plan period. Yet that very same month the Khieu Samphan – Ieng Sary delegation received \$1 billion in aid over five years, out of which \$20 million was an outright grant that the Khmer Rouge would leave largely unused due to their self-sufficiency policy.¹⁸² On 10 February 1976, Deputy Chief of the PLA General Staff Wang Shangrong promised the Khmer Rouge some 500 advisors to train their forces in the use of artillery, naval, and anti-aircraft equipment China would soon deliver.¹⁸³

By 1977, the frequent military encounters in the border war yielded reliable reports that all the weapons and supplies used by the Khmer Rouge proudly carried Chinese markings.¹⁸⁴ A classic example of actor-observer asymmetry ensued: Vietnamese leaders knew their own forces

¹⁸¹ Kenneth Michael Quinn, *The Origins and Development of Radical Cambodian Communism*, 1982, 187.

¹⁸² Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 1986, 79.

¹⁸³ Chanda, 17–18.

¹⁸⁴ Lã Văn Nho, Interview with Major General Lã Văn Nho.

were still enjoying Chinese aid and used some Chinese-made weapons while exercising political autonomy, yet they did not think it was possible for the Khmer Rouge to also use Chinese supplies without being a Chinese puppet. After Deng Yingchao's failure to bring about a ceasefire in her January 1978 mission, Vietnam gave up hope in Chinese mediation of the crisis with Cambodia.¹⁸⁵ The later Chinese success in brokering a cease-fire between Thailand and Cambodia in June 1978 actually made matters worse for Vietnam, as it allowed the Khmer Rouge to pivot their forces from the Thai border to the Vietnamese.¹⁸⁶ Vietnamese leaders thus became increasingly convinced that China was sponsoring the Khmer Rouge against Vietnam.

Contributing to this perception was the fact that Sino-Vietnamese relations themselves were quickly taking a turn for the worse. The first signs of a strain in relations between the American War allies was in January 1974, when China seized the Crescent Group of the Paracel Islands from South Vietnam, prompting newly reunified Vietnam to occupy six of the Spratly Islands and issue a map claiming both island chains in 1975.¹⁸⁷ From 1977 onwards there arose periodic clashes along the still-disputed Sino-Vietnam border. In an effort to resolve their differences Vietnam called for land and sea border negotiations, the first round of which took place between October 1977 and March 1978. In a top-secret report, the head of the Vietnamese delegation Deputy Foreign Minister Phan Hien made this grim assessment:

... there is little chance the Chinese side wants to conclude a border agreement in the foreseeable future... Even so, in their policy towards us, China must... avoid heightening tensions... [and thus] will not abandon the negotiations,

¹⁸⁵ Ross, *The Indochina Tangle*, 1988, 162–63.

¹⁸⁶ Trường Chinh, *On Kampuchea* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Pub. House, 1980), 21–23.

¹⁸⁷ “328 Tài Liệu về Quan Hệ Việt Nam – Trung Quốc Trong Những Năm 1978-1980,” 80 1978, Phòng Sưu tầm, Vietnam National Archives Center III.

hoping to use these negotiations for domestic and international propaganda purposes when needed.

Hien's recommendation that Vietnamese forces do their best to "preserve the status quo" against possible Chinese attempts to forcibly alter it and create a *fait accompli* further revealed Vietnam's dearth of confidence in Chinese good faith. He also asked various government agencies to coordinate their policies with regards to "the ethnic Chinese fleeing across the border".¹⁸⁸ Since January 1976, Vietnam had stepped up efforts to get their ethnic Chinese (the Hoa) to take up Vietnamese citizenship pursuant to a 1955 agreement with China, evoking suspicion among them and the Chinese government of Vietnamese intentions. Many were unwilling to obtain Vietnamese citizenship, which would entail giving up their Chinese citizenship and the promise of Chinese government protection that came with it. Meanwhile, in a quest to quickly set the South on the socialist path, on 24/3/1978 30,000 businesses in the South were nationalized, followed by the introduction of a new unified currency on May 3, 1978, done in a way that it wiped out most South Vietnamese savings. As at the end of 1974 the Hoa controlled around 80% of industries in the South, these policies affected them disproportionately and naturally gave Beijing reason to believe Vietnam was out to persecute them in particular.¹⁸⁹ Hysteria spread among the Hoa community, and 1978-79 would see 450,000 out of a total of over 1 million Hoa leave Vietnam alongside other Vietnamese refugees, prompting an international crisis.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁸ Phan Hiền, "10464 Hồ Sơ Chuẩn Bị Đàm Phán Biên Giới Với Trung Quốc Năm 1977," July 12, 1977, Phòng Phủ Thủ tướng, Vietnam National Archives Center III.

¹⁸⁹ Ross, *The Indochina Tangle*, 1988, 176–88.

¹⁹⁰ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Refworld | World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Vietnam : Chinese (Hoa)," Refworld, accessed November 14, 2020, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/49749c7f8.html>.

Chinese policy-makers, whose patience with Vietnam was already wearing thin, had little trouble believing that Vietnamese socialist reforms were merely to disguise a conspiracy to get rid of the Hoa population. Duiker and Huy Duc agree with this view, arguing that the Hoa was seen to pose an internal threat to Vietnam at a time of tensions with China, but have not provided adequate supporting evidence.¹⁹¹ Neither have I found anything in the Vietnamese records to indicate the existence of any such concerns *prior* to the breakdown of relations that in large part *resulted* from the refugee crisis. According to my grandfather, Vu Loc, who served in the Hanoi People's Committee at the time, before the crisis Hanoi had a flourishing Hoa community and he had many Hoa colleagues. At the beginning of the crisis, he was instructed to go door to door to Hoa households to debunk myths about any government policies unfairly targeting them, and to ensure that people stay put. However, as panic began to spread with the waves of refugee coming from the South en route to China, the city government grew to fear the presence of Chinese saboteurs. What made matters worse is that many of the Hoa lived in Hanoi's Old Town, whose colonial villas had been divided into cramped apartments shared by multiple families. Their Vietnamese neighbors were only too glad to encourage the Hoa to leave so that they could expand their living quarters. By mid-1978, Hoa officials above a certain rank were demoted, and while officially Hanoi still encouraged Hoa people to stay, the city government also facilitated emigration for Hoa families that wanted to leave.¹⁹²

The crisis was most likely an unfortunate consequence of shoddy planning and insensitivity to the already tense international situation in the implementation of socialization

¹⁹¹ Huy Đức, *Bên Thắng Cuộc* (California: OsinBook, 2012), Book I Chapter IV; Duiker, *China and Vietnam, the Roots of Conflict*, 74–77.

¹⁹² Vũ Lộc, Interview with Vũ Lộc, August 5, 2015.

policies in the South. Vietnamese leaders were surprised by the consequences of their socialist reforms in the South, but even more shocked by the strong Chinese reaction. The White Paper wondered, why did China maintain friendly relations with a Khmer Rouge regime that was slaughtering some 200,000 ethnic Chinese, and yet react in such a negative way to Vietnam's redistribution of its ethnic Chinese's wealth?¹⁹³ Instead of admitting that they had implemented socialist reforms poorly, and making concerted efforts to defuse the crisis, the Vietnamese authorities instead doubled down, publicly ascribing the entire fiasco to Chinese manipulations to destabilize Vietnam from within and without.

By June 1978, the Vietnamese leadership had identified China as the number one threat.¹⁹⁴ The border skirmishes against the Khmer Rouge's vastly inferior guerrilla force suddenly became seen as part of an ominous plot by their giant northern neighbor, who incidentally possessed the world's largest army. The threat of a two-front war with China and Cambodia was disconcerting at a time of logistical overstretch, when it took the PAVN up to 29 days to transport personnel between these two fronts.¹⁹⁵ The fear of China finally awakened in Vietnamese leaders the racial/historical outlook on the conflict that had been absent in their attitude towards Cambodia, evidenced by Vietnamese publications' references to two millennia of patriotic struggle against Chinese domination.¹⁹⁶ Concurrently, the costly border clashes coupled with the progressive suspension and withdrawal of Chinese aid were rapidly threatening

¹⁹³ Trường Chinh, *Sự Thật về Quan Hệ Việt Nam, Trung Quốc Trong 30 Năm Qua*.

¹⁹⁴ Elliott and Association for Asian Studies, *The Third Indochina Conflict*, 1981, 105.

¹⁹⁵ Lã Văn Nho, Interview with Major General Lã Văn Nho.

¹⁹⁶ Trường Chinh, *Sự Thật về Quan Hệ Việt Nam, Trung Quốc Trong 30 Năm Qua*, 17.

to make the ambitious Second Five-Year Plan, that cornerstone of Vietnamese postwar policy, simply unattainable.

Hanoi was now forced to seek a powerful ally that could provide both protection against possible Chinese aggression and funding for its Five-Year Plan. The modest inflow of European, Japanese, and Australian investment had not lived up to Vietnamese planners' lofty targets.¹⁹⁷ And as discussed in Chapter II, the negotiations for war reparations from the US were going nowhere. By mid-1978, when Vietnam was finally willing to drop all financial conditions to normalization of relations, the hawkish National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski had ascended the foreign policy driving seat at the expense of the more moderate Secretary of State Cyrus Vance. The Vietnamese had little to entice Brzezinski to sacrifice his "China card" by risking rapprochement with one of its principal enemies.¹⁹⁸ Meanwhile, relations with China was deteriorating at a rapid pace. As Zhang Xiaoming's research in the Chinese archives showed, Deng Xiaoping was finding domestic political motivations for starting a war with Vietnam. The war would eventually allow him to upstage two of his major conservative rivals in the Central Military Commission who opposed the war and favored socialist fraternity with Vietnam, namely Marshal Xu Xiangqian and Marshal Ye Zhangying, who technically still outranked Deng at the beginning of the conflict. His political ascendancy through the war allowed Deng to carry out fully the Four Modernizations that brought China from the chaos of the Cultural Revolution into the beginnings of a true superpower.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁷ Kimura, *The Vietnamese Economy, 1975-86*.

¹⁹⁸ Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 1986, 263–96.

¹⁹⁹ Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War*, 2015, 40–66.

Faced with this dire situation, Vietnam turned back to its old benefactor, the Soviet Union, which was waiting patiently for its prodigal brother's return to Moscow's fold. On October 28, 1977, Vietnam secured from the Soviet Union six small ships, communication equipment, and 45 million rubles' worth of spare parts, unmistakably directed against Chinese ambitions in the South China Sea. Still, the Soviets' refusal to accede to Vietnam's request of 14 MiG-21s made clear their wish to distance themselves from the conflict with Cambodia.²⁰⁰ Although they had confidentially explored the possibility since mid-1977, it was only at the 32nd Session of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA or COMECON) from June 27-29, 1978 that the Vietnamese delegation publicly requested full membership, whereupon they were unanimously welcomed and allowed to bypass all the normal procedures for accession. But privately, some East European countries expressed their discontent at being forced to take on this additional burden, showing how far the USSR was willing to go to bring Vietnam under its sphere of influence.²⁰¹ An internal report from the Vietnamese embassy in Moscow stated clearly the impact of Chinese hostility on the Vietnamese decision:

Since China has publicly pursued a hostile policy against Vietnam, we have joined COMECON as a full member to make clear our viewpoint and where we stand, for it is very necessary now for us to make full use of the support the USSR and other COMECON members could provide.²⁰²

²⁰⁰ Commission for Foreign Relations of the Party Central Committee, "10007 Tập Tài Liệu Của Ban Đối Ngoại Trung Ương Đảng v/v Liên Xô Viện Trợ Quân Sự Cho VN Năm 1976, 1976 – 1980," October 28, 1977, Phòng Phủ Thủ tướng, Vietnam National Archives Center III.

²⁰¹ Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia*, 209–11.

²⁰² Embassy of Vietnam in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, "10565 Tài Liệu Của Đại Sứ Quán Việt Nam Tại Liên Xô Giới Thiệu Hội Đồng Tương Trợ Kinh Tế."

In response, on July 3, China made the final break with Vietnam by announcing the immediate cessation of all aid projects and withdrawal of all experts, and closed the border on July 11.²⁰³ Vietnam had by now decided that if a two-front war was unavoidable, it would be fought on its own terms by means of a decisive preemptive strike to topple the Khmer Rouge. In preparation, on November 2 Vietnam signed the aforementioned Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union, with its Article 6 acting as a flexible security guarantee to deter any full-scale Chinese invasion of northern Vietnam.²⁰⁴ The Vietnam-Soviet alliance and the invasion of Cambodia that China originally feared and Vietnam initially spurned thus became a reality by virtue of the mistrust and inflexibility on both sides.

Underestimating the costs of invasion

According to Kosal Path's new study of Vietnamese strategic thinking during the war, the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia was based on a rational calculation to defend Vietnamese security and interests in the region.²⁰⁵ While I agree broadly with many aspects of his analysis, I do contest his assertion that the Vietnamese leadership made a purely rational decision based on a reliable accounting of the costs and benefits of invasion. Two interconnected misperceptions caused Vietnam to severely underestimate the costs of invasion, which are (1) that their stint in Cambodia would be short and (2) the international community will be supportive of the Vietnamese invasion for removing the Khmer Rouge. Chapter IV will deal in greater detail with

²⁰³ Chang, *Kampuchea between China and Vietnam*, 1985, 62.

²⁰⁴ "Hiệp Ước Hữu Nghị và Hợp Tác Giữa Nước Cộng Hòa Xã Hội Chủ Nghĩa Việt Nam và Liên Bang Cộng Hòa Xã Hội Chủ Nghĩa Xô-Viết," November 4, 1978.

²⁰⁵ Path, *Vietnam's Strategic Thinking during the Third Indochina War*, 2020.

the reasons why Vietnamese troops remained in Cambodia until 1989, but here I should touch on how these expectations influenced the Vietnamese decision to invade Cambodia.

On paper, Vietnamese military planners had every reason to believe that on the Cambodian front, the war would be over quickly. By September 1978, Vietnam had two full army corps totaling 128,000 regular troops, supported by aircraft and artillery inherited from the Second Indochina War, and commanded by generals with decades of battle experience. Facing them were 100,000 Khmers Rouges, consisting mainly of drafted youths so demoralized and exhausted by Pol Pot's bloody reign that many simply deserted on sight of the Vietnamese armies.²⁰⁶ This mismatch in firepower resulted in a Vietnamese invasion that started on December 25, 1978, capturing Phnom Penh just over a week later on January 7, 1979, and secured all the major population centers by the end of January with minimal losses. On the administrative side, on December 2, 1978 the Kampuchean National United Front for National Salvation (KNUFNS), an anti-Pol Pot government led by ex-Khmer Rouge survivors of his purges, was born. It was in fact a loose coalition of four different refugee parties, of whom only the factions that had fled to Laos led by Bou Thang (who would later become Minister of Defense) and Thailand led by Sai Futhoong (whose protégé Tea Banh is currently Minister of Defense) had their own small armed forces and made some significant contribution to the invasion.²⁰⁷ At the time of the invasion the KNUFNS had barely succeeded in building a frame of government, and put together a small army of nearly 30 battalions, capable of stationing just one battalion in each

²⁰⁶ Evans, *Red Brotherhood at War*, 1990, 109.

²⁰⁷ Nguyễn Trắc Toàn, Interview with Minister Nguyễn Trắc Toàn; Ian Baird, *Rise of the Brao: Ethnic Minorities in Northeastern Cambodia during Vietnamese Occupation* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2020).

province.²⁰⁸ Nonetheless, Vietnamese planners believed that the task of rebuilding a viable government would be complete within 1-3 years, and no comprehensive aid program was planned for the fledgling People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK).²⁰⁹

Only after the invasion did the extent of the damage inflicted by the Pol Pot years become apparent. Phnom Penh and other major towns were found devoid of people. Rotting corpses littered the roadsides and filled the wells. A whole generation of intellectuals and skilled personnel had perished in the concentration camps, and the survivors suffered from exhaustion and malnutrition. Transportation networks and industrial infrastructure was non-existent, threatening a famine that would dent the credibility of the newly formed PRK government, which had already proved incapable of independent administration. As it turned out, the PRK would remain dependent on Vietnamese advisors and Soviet aid for the next decade. Memos from the Vietnamese Prime Minister's Office revealed a how far the reality on the ground diverged with their expectations even in 1979:

We must request greater emergency aid from the USSR and the East European countries. If the USSR has difficulties in providing rice we request corn to quickly alleviate the situation... We do not have the ability to provide any more food to Cambodia. If the situation is too urgent we will have to temporarily dip into the national grain reserves to help... As for grain seeds (comrade Con has requested 10,000 tons) we must provide.²¹⁰

²⁰⁸ Heng Samrin, *The People's Struggle*, 105.

²⁰⁹ Nguyễn Trọng, Interview with Principal of the Friendship Highschool of the Revolutionary Workers of Cambodia Nguyễn Trọng, August 30, 2013; Lã Văn Nho, Interview with Major General Lã Văn Nho.

²¹⁰ Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam, "11100 Tập Tài Liệu Của Ban Chấp Hành Trung Ương v/v Viện Trợ Cho Campuchia Năm 1979," 1979, Phòng Phủ Thủ tướng, Vietnam National Archives Center III.

Meanwhile, the Chinese punitive expedition into northern Vietnam (February 17 – March 16, 1979) would cost between 20,000-60,000 military casualties on each side and the destruction of four provincial capitals, leaving 250,000 people homeless.²¹¹ That expedition also necessitated Vietnam's transfer of Army Corps III to Hanoi, allowing the Khmer Rouge remnants the necessary respite to regroup on the Thai border and resume their guerilla operations.²¹² Supported by Chinese and international aid as well as Thailand's provision of a safe haven, these guerrillas managed to bog down Vietnamese troops in Cambodia until 1989, inflicting some 45,000 casualties in the meantime.²¹³ The massive destruction of human and industrial capital in the Third Indochina War and its resultant international isolation made Vietnam miss its ambitious economic targets by a wide margin, with GDP growth falling to zero in 1979 and not picking up significantly until after the 1986 reforms, condemning it to even greater economic and political dependence on the USSR.²¹⁴

Vietnam's second misconception was in believing that the international community would laud its invasion for halting China's imperial designs and the Khmer Rouge genocide. After all, the Carter Administration had condemned the Khmer Rouge as "one of the worst violators of human rights in the world today," and several ASEAN countries were constantly fearful of ethnic Chinese insurgencies.²¹⁵ From 1/1/1978, *Nhan Dan* engaged in a public war of words against

²¹¹ Evans, *Red Brotherhood at War*, 1990, 115–16.

²¹² Lã Văn Nho, Interview with Major General Lã Văn Nho.

²¹³ Margaret Slocomb, *The People's Republic of Kampuchea, 1979-1989: The Revolution after Pol Pot* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2003), 227–51.

²¹⁴ Kimura, *The Vietnamese Economy, 1975-86*, 11.

²¹⁵ Haas, *Genocide by Proxy*, 1991, 75–87; 88–99.

Cambodia and China for propaganda purposes.²¹⁶ In July, Phan Hien toured various ASEAN capitals, and in September-October Pham Van Dong, now Prime Minister, did the same to reassure them that Vietnam held no hegemonic ambitions and to gauge their potential reactions.²¹⁷ Both publicly and privately, Vietnam celebrated this trip as a major diplomatic coup that set regional sympathies firmly in favor of invasion. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs reports on the trip concluded that many of the ASEAN countries shared their concern about Chinese hegemonism and the aggressive behavior and human rights abuses of the Khmer Rouge.²¹⁸ Concurrently in New York, Deputy Prime Minister cum Foreign Minister Nguyen Duy Trinh laid out eloquently before the UN General Assembly the Vietnamese case, especially courting Third World sympathies.²¹⁹ The invasion was delayed to December to allow time for the formation of the KNUFNS, so that they could issue a public request for help to topple Pol Pot, which all the officials interviewed believed legitimized the Vietnamese intervention in international law. *Nhan Dan* portrayed the entire invasion as a KNKKUUFNS-led operation, with Vietnamese support mentioned only in passing.²²⁰ That Vietnam went to such great lengths to court international support only sharpened their indignation when they learned of the international community's refusal to recognize the PRK, the American-led embargo against Vietnam and the PRK, and

²¹⁶ "No. 8779," *Nhan Dan*, June 19, 1978, Library of the Institute of Strategic Studies, Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam.

²¹⁷ Ross, *The Indochina Tangle*, 1988, 197.

²¹⁸ Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "10552 Báo Cáo Của Bộ Ngoại Giao về Cuộc Đi Thăm 5 Nước ĐNA: Thái Lan, Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia và Singapore Của Thủ Tướng Phạm Văn Đồng và Những Vấn Đề Cần Giải Quyết Sau Chuyến Đi Của Thủ Tướng Năm 1978," November 10, 1978, Phòng Phủ Thủ tướng, Vietnam National Archives Center III.

²¹⁹ "No. 8887," *Nhan Dan*, October 7, 1978, Library of the Institute of Strategic Studies, Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam.

²²⁰ "No. 8981," *Nhan Dan*, January 9, 1979, Library of the Institute of Strategic Studies, Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam.

Thailand's willingness to harbor their erstwhile Khmer Rouge enemies. In fact, most countries were still far too wary of Vietnamese military power to welcome their violation of Cambodian sovereignty, even if to remove the Khmer Rouge.²²¹ Only Cuba and the East European countries consistently and publicly lauded the Vietnamese invasion on humanitarian grounds and sent material support, with the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union telling the British that "everyone was united in his loathing of the Pol Pot regime, guilty of so many atrocities against human rights."²²²

Besides the obvious failures of Vietnamese military intelligence and foreign policy analysis, there were also two cognitive factors that negatively affected Vietnamese leaders' ability to accurately gauge the costs of the invasion. In my review of Vietnamese archives and through my interviews, one thing that struck me was the frequency with which Vietnamese decision-makers referenced the genocidal policies of the Khmer Rouge, a factor that a purely *realpolitik* approach to the pursuit of national interests would simply ignore. It is true that the concept of humanitarian intervention was only starting to emerge in international law at the time and is still deeply controversial even today, so Vietnam never tried to formally justify the invasion on those grounds.²²³ Nevertheless, Vietnamese leaders' perception that their cause was morally justified certainly played a role in influencing their decision beyond just cold strategic calculations – after all, leaders are only human.

²²¹ Haas, *Genocide by Proxy*, 1991, 72–115.

²²² Ewen A.J. Fergusson, "Ewen A.J. Fergusson to Mr. Scott," February 22, 1979, PREM 16/2292, British National Archives at Kew.

²²³ Klintworth, *Vietnam's Intervention in Cambodia in International Law*, 59–84.

Evidence of this concern can be found in the report of Group 77, the research group created by the Politburo in 1977 to formulate a new Vietnamese foreign policy towards Cambodia in the wake of the outbreak of conflict. The report concluded that “the Cambodian nation is in the grips of a serious crisis; the people of Cambodia are currently living in a giant concentration camp...” It identified four key political goals for Vietnam’s Cambodian policy – “(1) Protection of our people; (2) Fight hard to punish those invaders who killed our people; (3) Recover lost territory, defend our territorial integrity; and (4) Undermine the plot to divide the people of the two countries, isolate the reactionaries”. However, the report did recommend that Vietnam “actively support, aid, and protect the patriotic Cambodian forces and true revolutionaries”, particularly in helping the refugees who fled to Vietnam. It also called for Vietnam to “pursue an offensive diplomatic push” as “we have the right to punish the invaders and murderers. We are at an advantage diplomatically because we are righteous and humane.”²²⁴ Because of its biased coverage, any regular consumer of *Nhan Dan* and other state news outlets would have believed world opinion to be firmly behind the Vietnamese cause. The evidence suggests, therefore, that while humanitarian intervention was certainly not the first thing on their mind when they decided to invade Cambodia, Vietnamese leaders did allow the propaganda that they put out and considerations of human rights to factor into calculations on the costs and benefits of invading Cambodia. In the end, the material costs of the invasion far outweighed the benefits, and some Vietnamese officials I interviewed have indicated to the

²²⁴ Anh Dũng Huỳnh, “Ghi Chép về Campuchia 1975-1991,” 1995, 12–13, Phòng Vụ Châu Á II - Ban thư ký ASEAN, Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archive, <https://www.diendan.org/tai-lieu/ghi-chep-ve-campuchia-1975-1991>.

effect that had they been aware of the full costs, they would not have supported the invasion of Cambodia.²²⁵

Conclusion

In the first part of this chapter, I critiqued some popularly accepted motivations for Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in order to prove that it was not inevitable. It was not an inevitable clash of civilizations, because there is no evidence that chauvinism was a driving force of Vietnamese foreign policy, or that Vietnam wanted to dominate Laos and Cambodia within an Indochinese Federation. Rather, Vietnam had until April 1977 supported the Khmer Rouge to maintain regional stability and facilitate the reconstruction of its war-ravaged economy. The invasion was also not an inevitable outcome of Soviet manipulation, because Vietnam had sought an independent foreign policy from the USSR to maximize its access to international credit and trade. It was China and Democratic Kampuchea who, by misperceiving Vietnam's motives, drove it into Soviet arms.

I built upon this narrative of overlapping misperceptions to reconstruct the process by which Vietnam arrived at its decision to invade Cambodia. Falling into the trap of actor-observer asymmetry, Vietnam came to believe China was plotting to establish hegemony by using the Khmer Rouge and the refugee crisis to undermine Vietnam. As Sino-Vietnamese relations nosedived, hopes of Chinese mediation of the conflict with Cambodia gave way to full alignment

²²⁵ Nguyễn Trọng, Interview with Principal of the Friendship Highschool of the Revolutionary Workers of Cambodia Nguyễn Trọng; Lã Văn Nho, Interview with Major General Lã Văn Nho; Nguyễn Hiệu, Interview with Nguyễn Hiệu.

with the USSR. It is probable that, had Vietnam correctly identified Pol Pot's mad designs to be the source of Cambodian aggression, and/or correctly gauged the massive costs of its Cambodian adventure, it would not have invaded Cambodia. Without the imminent threat of a two-front war, a partially mobilized PAVN would arguably have been able to protect Vietnam's borders from a strong network of fortifications and wait out the collapse of the suicidal Khmer Rouge regime at a fraction of the human, monetary, and diplomatic cost it was to incur by invading Cambodia.

It is not entirely fair for us, with the benefit of hindsight and abundant resources, to retrospectively chastise contemporary decision-makers for their mistakes. It is enough that we understand that misconceptions on the part of China, Cambodia, and Vietnam were contingent failures of diplomacy that led directly to the Vietnamese decision to invade Cambodia, despite that being a suboptimal outcome for all three governments. The liberal vision of an economically integrated, peaceful, and fraternal Southeast Asia was temporarily buried under the fog of war, but not entirely dead. A decade later, its disciples would get their opportunity to rise once again and bring their ideas to fruition.

Chapter IV

The Lost Years, 1979-1986

Sometime in late 1979, the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) Film Studio, with the help of the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) government, disseminated for overseas viewership a short documentary in French about Cambodia entitled "*Đất nước đã sống lại*" (The country has been resurrected). It outlined in brief the Vietnamese version of Cambodia's recent history, including the triumph of the Khmer Rouge after a long civil war in April 1975; their reign of terror claiming the lives of up to two million people; and the border attacks on and atrocities committed in Vietnam sponsored by the Chinese "hegemonists." Raw images impress upon the audience the horrors of this regime: mountains of human bones; bloody, mangled corpses still strapped to torture implements; deserted cities, factories, railway stations, and shipyards; desecrated pagodas; abandoned schools with Khmer, French, and Russian books strewn across the floor... The film then cut to comically scripted heroics of the Kampuchean National United Front for National Salvation (KNUFNS) as they liberated Phnom Penh on January 7, 1979; throngs of people returning from the countryside to celebrate the foundation of the new Republic; the signing of the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with Vietnam; smiling farmers with full bowls of rice fresh out of the pot; the restarting of an auto factory; panoramas of the mighty temples at Angkor; and a traditional dance at a wedding ceremony. It ends with the titular proclamation that "*La*

nation est resuscitée!”, and would henceforth enjoy independence and liberty, with a triumphant crescendo of a traditional tune at the curtains’ closing.²²⁶

While its depictions of Khmer Rouge atrocities and the state of Cambodia in early 1979 were accurate, “*Đất nước đã sống lại*” and other Vietnamese propaganda at the time told only part of the story. They conveniently neglected to mention that the KNUFNS had been formed only on December 2, 1978, out of a ragtag band of Cambodian refugees, many of whom were purged Khmers Rouges themselves, and their military role in the toppling of the Pol Pot regime was minor. It was a full-scale conventional invasion by around 150,000 PAVN troops from December 25, 1978, that was chiefly responsible for driving the Khmer Rouge out into Cambodia’s western borderlands by January 7, 1979.²²⁷ Heeding China and the Khmer Rouge’s allegations that the Vietnamese were seeking territorial aggrandizement and/or were following Moscow’s bidding, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) voted 71 for – 35 against – 34 neutral in September 1979 to allow Democratic Kampuchea to retain its U.N. seat, in effect recognizing that government’s international legitimacy to represent Cambodia and rejecting the legitimacy of the PRK government.²²⁸ Facing international non-recognition, and lacking both the material means and governing experience to stand on its own economically and militarily, the PRK became wholly dependent on massive military and economic aid from Vietnam and Soviet Bloc countries.

²²⁶ “*Đất Nước Đã Sống Lại*,” 1979.

²²⁷ Slocomb, *The People’s Republic of Kampuchea, 1979-1989*, 2003, 47.

²²⁸ Patrick Raszelenberg, *The Cambodia Conflict: Search for a Settlement, 1979-1991: An Analytical Chronology*, *Mitteilungen Des Instituts Für Asienkunde Hamburg*, no. 241 (Hamburg: Verbund Stiftung Deutsches Übersee-Institut, 1995), 28–29.

What were the Vietnamese trying to achieve in Cambodia that made them willing to pay such a high price to stay? There have been four common explanations in the historiography: (1) Vietnam sought territorial aggrandizement by absorbing Cambodia and Laos into an Indochinese Federation; (2) the Soviets were directing the Vietnamese to expand Soviet Bloc influence by force; (3) the Vietnamese were conducting a humanitarian intervention with altruistic motives; and (4) Vietnam wanted to strategically deny Cambodia to the Khmer Rouge for security. There is a lot of countervailing evidence against the first three explanations, while the last can only explain the Vietnamese decision to stay, but not the direction Vietnam took in rebuilding Cambodia.

The major contribution I hope to make is in pointing out that strategic denial of Cambodia to the Khmer Rouge could have been achieved in two ways: Vietnam could have backed a puppet state, which I define as one that is weak and perpetually dependent on Vietnamese support; or Vietnam could have assisted with the creation of a strong and independent PRK government capable of resisting the Khmer Rouge and that could be seen by the international community as a legitimate representative of the Cambodian people that would be a willing if unequal partner in Vietnam's regional security arrangement. Using Vietnamese sources, I will show that Vietnam chose the latter route, because its leaders understood the limits of its material capacity in the long run to pursue the former option, as well as the need to abide by international norms. Besides trying to secure its southwestern flank, Vietnam also sought to legitimize its narrative of "liberating" Cambodia at home and abroad, which served to justify its occupation of Cambodia between 1979 and 1986.

Of old debates and new puzzles

I will examine in turn the four main existing explanations for why the Vietnamese opted to stay in Cambodia. The first, taken up by the Khmer Rouge, Prince Sihanouk, Stephen Morris, Thu-huong Nguyen-vo, and a number of opposition politicians in Cambodia today, is that the invasion was just the culmination of Vietnam's historic quest to "swallow up" the Cambodian and Laotian nations into a Vietnam-dominated Indochinese Federation. In lieu of any concrete evidence of renewed attempts at creating such a Federation after the formal renunciation of the idea by the Indochinese Communist Party in 1951, the proponents of the "swallowing up" explanation have cited a historical pattern of Vietnamese encroachment on Cambodian land and of the numbers of Vietnamese migrants coming into Cambodia as manifestations of this Vietnamese plot.²²⁹

Although the narrative of an annexation may prove quite useful even today in arousing anti-Vietnamese sentiment among the populace for political gain, seventeenth century conflicts are often a poor guide to understanding late Cold War phenomena, especially in the absence of both evidence and a plausible motive. While the entry of thousands of ethnic Vietnamese into Cambodia in the 1980s was certainly a problem, they had migrated largely on their own accord and not as part of a Vietnamese government program. Many of the migrants were returning from

²²⁹ Cambodia. Krasuañ Kār Parates., *Black Paper : Facts and Evidences of the Acts of Aggression and Annexation of Vietnam against Kampuchea*. (New York : Group of Kampuchean Residents in America, 1978); *Kampuchea under Foreign Occupation : The Struggle Progresses* (Dept. of Press and Information of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Coalition Govt. of Democratic Kampuchea, 1986); Norodom Sihanouk, *War and Hope*; Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia*; Thu-Huong Nguyen-Vo, *Khmer-Viet Relations and the Third Indochina Conflict* (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland, 1992); "Cambodia's Hun Sen Orders Arrest of Map Detractors Amid Vietnam Border Dispute," Radio Free Asia, accessed November 29, 2015, <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/cambodia/arrest-09082015170001.html>.

having been driven out by the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s. In any case they were treated as foreign residents and not enfranchised or given roles in Cambodian government pursuant to Directive 38 of the Cambodian Council of Ministers.²³⁰ Even today, many ethnic Vietnamese, including those born in Cambodia, have no practical path to citizenship and are disenfranchised, have limited access to essential social services, and at risk of political violence.²³¹

The larger allegation of an annexation holds even less truth. While it is true that in previous centuries the Vietnamese Empire had expanded into lands previously held by the Khmer Empire through conquest, settlements, or political marriages, in the aftermath of World War II the strength of the international norm against aggression and the unilateral annexation of other states as codified in the UN Charter Article 2(4) had reached *jus cogens* or peremptory status.²³² Vietnam's outright annexation of Cambodia would have been practically inconceivable from an international legal standpoint, and would certainly have resulted in very severe repercussions from the international community, so there is a strong motive for Vietnam to steer clear of such a course. In fact, Vietnam, like many other formerly colonized nations, had been one of the most outspoken countries in defense of the sanctity of the non-aggression principle.²³³ The Vietnamese Communists saw themselves as having led the charge *against* colonialism and

²³⁰ Ramses Amer, "The Ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia: A Minority at Risk?," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 16, no. 2 (1994): 210–38.

²³¹ "A People in Limbo, Many Living Entirely on the Water," *The New York Times*, March 28, 2018, sec. Magazine, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/03/28/magazine/cambodia-persecuted-minority-water-refuge.html>; Christoph Sperfeldt, "Minorities and Statelessness: Social Exclusion and Citizenship in Cambodia," *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 27, no. 1 (December 16, 2020): 94–120, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718115-02701002>.

²³² "Charter of the United Nations | United Nations," accessed November 29, 2015, <http://www.un.org/en/charter-united-nations/>.

²³³ Klintworth, *Vietnam's Intervention in Cambodia in International Law*, 15–33.

imperialism with their victories in the First and Second Indochina Wars.²³⁴ Any attempt at outright annexation of Cambodia would have been deemed by both the domestic public and the international community as especially hypocritical. In this *causal* process as defined by Nina Tannenwald and Alexander Wendt, while the international norm of the prohibition of aggression does not constitutively make it impossible for Vietnam to *de facto* annex Cambodia, it does make the cost of such an annexation so prohibitively high that the option was not even put on the table by Vietnamese policymakers.²³⁵

The second explanation, that Vietnam was merely a Soviet pawn facilitating the expansion of Soviet power and ideological influence in Southeast Asia, is also problematic. This position was taken most strongly by China, the United States, the ASEAN countries, and scholars like Douglas Pike and Dion Johnson in the context of the late Cold War to justify the isolation of Vietnam and the PRK. They point to the 1978 Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between the USSR and Vietnam, with its Article 6 calling in the case of an attack on either country for “mutual consultations with the aim of eliminating this threat and of taking corresponding effective measures for the maintenance of the peace and security of their countries”; Vietnam’s entry into the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA); as well as the transformation of Cam Ranh Bay into a “technical and military supply point” for almost a third of the Soviet Navy as evidence

²³⁴ *The Vietnamese People’s Struggle in the International Context* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Pub. House, 1986); Dong Giang Vo, *The Non-Aligned Movement : History-Present Problems* (Hanoi: Information and Press Depart., Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 1981).

²³⁵ Nina Tannenwald, “Ideas and Explanation: Advancing the Theoretical Agenda,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 7, no. 2 (2005): 13–42.

that the Vietnamese were merely puppets carrying out the bidding of an expansionist Communist regime in Moscow.²³⁶

While they presented some convincing evidence of Vietnam's reliance on Soviet Bloc aid, these authors have confused such reliance with the capacity and willingness of the USSR to influence the foreign policy of the fiercely independent-minded Vietnamese. Their position has been further weakened by the opening up of the Eastern Bloc archives in the immediate aftermath of the end of the Cold War. Grant Evans and Kevin Rowley, Ramesh Chandra Thakur and Carlyle Thayer, Nayan Chanda, Sergey Radchenko, Bernd Schaefer, and Dmitry Mosyakov have all demonstrated with evidence from the Soviet Bloc archives that it was in fact the Vietnamese who held the reins of control over Cambodian policy in this period, often stringing the Soviets and East Europeans along.²³⁷

Evidence from the Vietnamese archives reveals that while Vietnam became more dependent on Soviet aid because of the breakdown in relations with China and economic embargo by the U.S. and its allies, the Vietnamese tried to make sure that aid from the Soviet Union was not merely a perpetual handout but also helped build up Vietnam's domestic

²³⁶ "Hiệp Ước Hữu Nghị và Hợp Tác Giữa Nước Cộng Hòa Xã Hội Chủ Nghĩa Việt Nam và Liên Bang Cộng Hòa Xã Hội Chủ Nghĩa Xô-Viết," November 4, 1978; Pike, *Vietnam and the Soviet Union*, 1987; Dion W. Johnson, *Bear Tracks in Indochina: An Analysis of Soviet Presence in Vietnam*, Rev. ed (Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala. : Washington, DC: Air University Press ; For sale by the Supt. of Docs., US GPO, 1990).

²³⁷ Evans, *Red Brotherhood at War*, 1990, 35–58; Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 1986, 169–91; 396–401; Sergey Radchenko, *Unwanted Visionaries: The Soviet Failure in Asia at the End of the Cold War*, Oxford Studies in International History (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 124–58; "Why Did Vietnam Overthrow the Khmer Rouge in 1978?," Khmer Times | News Portal Cambodia |, accessed November 29, 2015, <http://www.khmertimeskh.com/news/3467/why-did-vietnam-overthrow-the-khmer-rouge-in-1978-/>; "The Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese Communists: A History of Their Relations as Told in the Soviet Archives," accessed November 30, 2015, <http://gsp.yale.edu/node/297>.

productive capacity. A report of the Soviet Department of the Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs outlined clearly Vietnamese priorities in the Vietnam-Soviet relationship:

The role of the Soviet Union is even more important in the context of China's plot to weaken and economically encircle our country, allying with the imperialists to cause difficulties for our foreign economic relationships... In order to elicit from the Soviet Union more and faster aid, besides political lobbying and maintaining positive relations between the two countries, in economic terms, besides pushing for greater overall exports... we need to focus more on large-scale, stable, mutually beneficial cooperative projects on the basis of our comparative advantages...²³⁸

From early on, the Soviets were not enthusiastic about the prospects of having to support a long Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia. In March 7, 1979, when Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Van Dong came to Moscow asking for more aid, Soviet Chairman of the Council of Ministers Alexei Kosygin suggested to that if Vietnam really wanted to jumpstart its economy, "all you need to do is to withdraw some of your troops [from Cambodia] and assign them economically productive missions." However, this only prompted Dong to enter into a long soliloquy about the importance of rebuilding Cambodia and the spirit of Soviet-Vietnamese friendship, which eventually broke Kosygin down. "All that you have asked we will help at a level appropriate to our abilities, even though this year our harvest is encountering difficulties due to the drought. We will exhaust all means to provide the goods we have already promised," Kosygin relented by the end of that meeting.²³⁹

²³⁸ Soviet Department, Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Số 14/P5-LX Đề Án Của Vụ Liên Xô về Những Chủ Trương và Biện Pháp Trước Mắt Nhằm Tăng Cường Gắn Bó và Phối Hợp Với Liên Xô Trong Tình Hình Mới," February 22, 1979, Phòng Vụ Liên Xô, Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archive.

²³⁹ Soviet Department, Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Biên Bản Hội Đàm Giữa Thủ Tướng Phạm Văn Đồng và Bộ Trưởng NG Liên Xô Coxighin Tại Moskva, 1600-1800 Ngày 3/7/1979," March 7, 1979, Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archive.

That it was the Vietnamese who convinced the reluctant Soviets to stand firm in Cambodia is, after all, not surprising. The Vietnamese had plenty of experience playing off the Sino-Soviet rivalry to enlist both patrons' material support even while maintaining an independent policy during their earlier struggle against the United States. With the issue of Cambodia being so much more directly relevant to Vietnamese security, the Soviets were content with echoing the Vietnamese position on the international stage, providing matériel and intelligence, and serving as a source of advice and moral support in exchange for the use of Cam Ranh Bay and a confirmation of their status as world socialism's elder brother.²⁴⁰

The third explanation, advanced by Irwin Silber and Wilfred Burchett, is that the Vietnamese had stayed because of a genuine desire to prevent the return of the genocidal Khmer Rouge and help reconstruct Cambodia, independent of strategic considerations as to how much influence over the PRK this aid would buy.²⁴¹ Yuichi Kubota's many interviews with combatants on both sides of the war found that throughout the 1980s, the Khmer Rouge continued to militarily dominate the CGDK, due to their superior recruitment techniques, rigid control of the refugee camps, and the poor organization of the other two factions, lending some credence to Vietnamese claims that should the PRK collapse after a Vietnamese withdrawal, the new government would be Khmer Rouge-dominated.²⁴² Yet the humanitarian motive has never been a popular narrative for several good reasons. Even those scholars who do recognize the positive

²⁴⁰ *Kampuchea, from Tragedy to Rebirth* (Moscow : Progress Publishers, c1979.); Soviet Department, Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Biên Bản Hội Đàm Giữa Thủ Tướng Phạm Văn Đồng và Bộ Trưởng NG Liên Xô Coxighin Tại Moskva, 1600-1800 Ngày 3/7/1979."

²⁴¹ Irwin Silber, *Kampuchea : The Revolution Rescued* (Oakland, California: Line of March Publications, 1986); Wilfred G. Burchett, *The China-Cambodia-Vietnam Triangle* (Chicago, Ill.: Vanguard Books, 1981).

²⁴² Yuichi Kubota, *Armed Groups in Cambodian Civil War: Territorial Control, Rivalry, and Recruitment*, First edition. (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 89–113.

impact of Vietnamese aid and criticize the isolation imposed by the West, such as Margaret Slocomb, Elizabeth Becker, Eva Mysliwiec, David Bull, Vivianne Frings, William Shawcross, and Michael Vickery, are more circumspect about the Vietnamese motivations behind this veneer of altruism.²⁴³ In fact, even though the Vietnamese did employ the rhetoric of “performing the international duty” and “militant fraternal solidarity,” both Gary Klintworth and Martha Finnemore point out that they never formally claimed that theirs was a humanitarian intervention, largely because the norms of humanitarian intervention were only emerging at the time and did not then allow for unilateral action resulting in regime change.²⁴⁴ Even today, the legality of such actions is hardly clear, as observed in the lively debate following the NATO bombing of Kosovo in 1999.²⁴⁵ Altruism aside, however, humanitarian concerns were actually an important part of the story from a normative viewpoint. For the Vietnamese, the rebuilding of Cambodia was most significant for allowing the PRK government to stand on its own, which would both allow the Vietnamese to withdraw from the country and justify its invasion of Cambodia as a “liberation”. This was to appease both domestic and international opinion, and ironically became increasingly necessary as international condemnations of the invasion poured in and the costs of the occupation spiraled up.

²⁴³ Slocomb, *The People’s Republic of Kampuchea, 1979-1989*, 2003; Becker, *When the War Was Over*, 1998; Eva Mysliwiec, *Punishing the Poor : The International Isolation of Kampuchea* (Oxford : Oxfam, c1988.); David Bull, *The Poverty of Diplomacy : Kampuchea and the Outside World* (Oxford [Oxfordshire] : Oxfam, 1983); K. Viviane Frings, *The Failure of Agricultural Collectivization in the People’s Republic of Kampuchea, 1979-1980* (Clayton, Vic., Australia : Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1993); William Shawcross, *The Quality of Mercy : Cambodia, Holocaust, and Modern Conscience* (New York : Simon and Schuster, c1984.); Michael Vickery, *Cambodia, 1975-1982* (Boston, MA : South End Press, c1984.).

²⁴⁴ Klintworth, *Vietnam’s Intervention in Cambodia in International Law*; Martha Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention : Changing Beliefs about the Use of Force* / (Ithaca : Cornell University Press, c2003.), 77–78.

²⁴⁵ Christine M. Chinkin, “Kosovo: A ‘Good’ or ‘Bad’ War?,” *The American Journal of International Law* 93, no. 4 (1999): 841–47, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2555349>.

Almost all authors accept that strategic calculations were part of the reason why Vietnam remained in Cambodia. According to this last explanation, Cambodia was too strategically important for Vietnam to risk it returning to the hands of a government friendly to China or the United States. The situation was embedded in the dynamics of the Sino-Soviet split in the late Cold War era. Vietnam's geography, with two populous deltas 1,650 km apart and connected by a long narrow coastal strip, was especially vulnerable to simultaneous attacks on the two deltas from China in the north and Cambodia in the southwest. Indeed, this threat, even more than Pol Pot's incursions themselves, prompted the Vietnamese decision to invade Cambodia and preempt what they saw as an imminent two-front war. Vietnamese President Trường Chinh went so far as to list the breaking of "China's strategic southwestern attack against Vietnam" as one of the five main achievements of the toppling of the Pol Pot regime.²⁴⁶ In this analysis, Vietnam's fundamental failure was in allowing the Khmer Rouge leadership to escape and continue their guerrilla warfare, forcing the Vietnamese to stay as a hedge against their return.²⁴⁷

This is broadly correct, but there are two reasons why these materialist explanations are insufficient to explain Vietnam's decision to stay. First, it is unclear whether the costs of the Vietnamese presence were outweighed in material terms by the security gains, especially after 1982. H.E. Goemans' materialist war termination theory argues that "For a war to end... both sides must have a higher expected utility for the available settlement than for continued

²⁴⁶ Trường Chinh, *On Kampuchea* (Hanoi : Foreign Languages Pub. House, 1980), 20.

²⁴⁷ Michael Haas, *Genocide by Proxy: Cambodian Pawn on a Superpower Chessboard* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 33–120; Gareth Porter, "Vietnamese Policy and the Indochina Crisis" in David W. P. Elliott and Association for Asian Studies, eds., *The Third Indochina Conflict*, A Westview Replica Edition (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1981), 69–137; Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 1986, 313–406; Sophie Quinn-Judge, "Victory on the battlefield; isolation in Asia: Vietnam's Cambodia decade, 1979-1989" Odd Arne Westad and Sophie Quinn-Judge, eds., *The Third Indochina War: Conflict between China, Vietnam and Cambodia, 1972-79*, Cold War History 11 (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 207–30.

fighting.”²⁴⁸ It would seem that by 1982, the utility for a continued Vietnamese resistance to the return of the Khmer Rouge would have decreased remarkably. UNGA Resolution 34/22 of November 14, 1979 had “*call[ed]* for the immediate withdrawal of all foreign forces from Kampuchea...” and “*request[ed]* the Secretary-General to explore the possibility of holding an international conference on Kampuchea...”²⁴⁹ A similar resolution was passed the following year, and the International Conference finally held July 13-17, 1981, at the UN Headquarters in New York City, laying the groundwork for the formation of a Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) in June 1982. Although this organization was still dominated by the Khmer Rouge remnants by virtue of their military strength, its leadership did represent several non-Communist factions, and the CGDK received broad-based support from the West, ASEAN, and China. By this time, the situation in Cambodia had also stabilized, and Vietnamese-PRK allegations of the crimes of the Khmer Rouge were by this time well-corroborated by Western journalists and scholars who were granted privileged access into the country. In the event of Vietnamese compliance with the other parties’ demand for a withdrawal, a deal between the various Cambodian factions that limited the influence of the Khmer Rouge in the new government would not have been inconceivable, and would perhaps have been enforceable by the UN.

Yet, the Vietnamese and PRK governments strongly insisted throughout this period that the Khmer Rouge be given no place in Cambodian government due to their past crimes against humanity, and viewed even humanitarian aid to the CGDK as part of an “undeclared war against

²⁴⁸ H. E. Goemans, *War and Punishment : The Causes of War Termination and the First World War* / (Princeton : Princeton University Press, c2000.), 20.

²⁴⁹ “United Nations General Assembly Resolution 34/22 ‘The Situation in Kampuchea,’” November 14, 1979, http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/34/22.

the People's Republic of Kampuchea."²⁵⁰ It is impossible to totally disaggregate Vietnam's distaste of the humanitarian violations of the Khmer Rouge with its fear that, even if they had genuinely abandoned the old genocidal ways, the Khmer Rouge were too closely allied with China and therefore would have been detrimental to Vietnam's strategic interests. But it would also be too simplistic to quickly dismiss the Vietnamese rhetoric as mere window dressing. In a position where the differences between the material costs and benefits of remaining in Cambodia are not clear-cut, humanitarian and image considerations may well have swayed Vietnamese policy makers towards staying.

Second, the strategic denial argument is indeterminate in its recommendation for *how* Vietnamese leaders would have reconstructed Cambodia. On its own, it cannot account for why Vietnam consciously supported the rise of a strong leader in Hun Sen and laid the foundations for an independent Cambodian economy, instead of trying to keep it as a weak puppet state in perpetual need of Vietnamese guidance and creating a super specialized local economy tied to Vietnam, as the Soviet Union did with its constituent republics. Since the early 1990s, Hun Sen has largely broken free of Vietnamese influence and is now able to achieve a rapprochement with China that currently threatens Vietnamese interests. The clearest indication of such a Cambodian foreign policy in the recent years was the 2012 ASEAN Ministers' Meeting (AMM) in Phnom Penh, where Cambodia's refusal to criticize Chinese activities in the South China Sea led to the very first time the AMM concluded without a joint communiqué and created quite a public embarrassment

²⁵⁰ *Undeclared War against the People's Republic of Kampuchea*. (Phnom Penh : Ministry for Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of Kampuchea, Press Dept., 1985).

for the regional organization.²⁵¹ While Hun Sen's government is by no means strong in its commitment to human rights or dividing up fairly the benefits of economic development, it has certainly proven strong in its ability to maintain a high degree of control over the affairs of its people and advancing its own interests, even when they clash with those of its "friends" in Hanoi.

Were the Vietnamese in the early 1980s simply unaware of the danger of a strong and independent Cambodian government breaking away from their grasp? Until the transcripts of the Vietnamese Politburo discussions are made available, there is little hope of a clear answer. Nevertheless, we must remember that the seasoned leaders of Vietnam were still smarting from the lesson given by their Khmer Rouge brothers, whom they had supported throughout the Indochina Wars up until 1976, but had broken away from the fold in such spectacular fashion.²⁵² It seems most unlikely that they would not at least have had some idea of the risks of losing control inherent in rebuilding a strong Cambodian government under another strongman. And yet, I will demonstrate in the following sections that the Vietnamese set out consciously to do just that. I will conclude with an analysis of how a combination of genuine humanitarian motives and strategic calculations is the best explanation we currently have for Vietnamese policy during the first half of its Cambodian Decade.

The well-intentioned pariah

²⁵¹ "Asia Times Online: ASEAN Stumbles in Phnom Penh," accessed November 30, 2015, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/NG17Ae02.html.

²⁵² Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 1986, 108–35.

The more-than-averagely-informed Vietnamese citizen, who read the Party daily *Nhân Dân* every morning and listened to Hanoi Radio every evening, would have had no idea that on January 7, 1979, their army had just with a lightning military campaign toppled one of the worst human rights violators the world has ever seen within just two weeks. If asked, they would say instead that the brave guerrilla fighters of the KNUFNS had achieved that fantastic victory all by themselves.²⁵³ If you ask them about a month later, on February 18, they would talk about the Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation between the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the People's Republic of Kampuchea, with its Article 2 calling for the two countries "to wholeheartedly support and aid each other in every aspect and with every required means in order to increase each people's ability to defend its independence, sovereignty, national unity, territorial integrity and peaceful labor" and thus legalizing the stationing of Vietnamese troops in Cambodia at the PRK government's request; its Article 5 specifying that "The two Parties completely respect each other's free and independent path" and "pursuing a policy of friendship and good neighborliness with Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries"; and its Article 7 clarifying that "This Treaty is not directed against any third country..."²⁵⁴

The story that Vietnam wanted its people and the international community to hear was a beautiful lie, one which most parties outside the Soviet Bloc quickly saw through and condemned. But while the international castigation of the Vietnamese for lying about their pivotal role in toppling the Khmer Rouge and their meddling in Cambodia's internal affairs was justified, the assumption that the Vietnamese did all of this in order to set up a puppet government perpetually

²⁵³ *Nhan Dan*, January 8, 1979.

²⁵⁴ "2014a Hiệp ước hòa bình hữu nghị và hợp tác giữa Cộng hòa Xã hội chủ nghĩa Việt Nam và Cộng hòa Nhân dân Cam-pu-chia", Phòng Hiệp định, VNMFAA.

dependent on Vietnam was not. The story, it turns out, is much more complicated. Certainly, the Vietnamese did intervene in Cambodia's internal affairs, but this was often to moderate the ideological excesses of the Cambodian revolutionaries in order to create a viable state that could eventually stand on its own two feet.

One of the most important episodes of Vietnamese interference was in the process of creating the new Cambodian Constitution. The task fell to Ros Samay, the Minister of Economy and Livelihood who was among a group of Khmer Communists who spent a large amount of time in Vietnam. In January 1980, Samay assembled a team of eleven elite, French-educated Cambodian jurists, none of whom were Communists and all of whom had lost family members to the Khmer Rouge. Their draft was completed on April 7 and approved by all the major organs of the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party (KPRP) leadership by April 18 without any Vietnamese advisors involved. The Vietnamese intervened, however, when the draft was circulated throughout the country for popular discussion. They quickly curtailed some of Ros Samay's powers by creating the post of Minister of Justice for the much more pliant former Khmer Rouge cadre Uk Bunchheuan. Vietnamese advisors then sat down with Ros Samay to revise the Constitution, and after several more rounds of popular consultations and revisions, the final Constitution was promulgated on June 26, 1981. The final product was castigated by the Cambodian Party Secretariat, with one member commenting derisively of the two versions, "This

one is Cambodian. That one is *yuon* (Vietnamese).” Samay was quietly removed from power in the aftermath and put under ten years of house arrest in Vietnam.²⁵⁵

For Evan Gottesman and Margaret Slocomb, the authors of the only two detailed studies of the domestic politics of the PRK period, this episode demonstrates how the PRK was a mere Vietnamese puppet. But one has first to wonder why, if the Vietnamese were so intent on controlling Cambodian affairs so tightly, did they not seek to supervise the initial creation of the document until promulgation? The Vietnamese were in fact content with giving the Cambodians as much space as possible to determine their own legal system, until they found Ros Samay’s Constitution too problematic to be let alone. And despite the heavy-handed way in which the Vietnamese intervened, a closer look at the actual content differences between the two drafts reveals a more complex story than that told by Gottesman and Slocomb. The aim of the intervening Vietnamese was to create a practical government capable of dealing with the unique challenges of the time rather than a puppet state. Slocomb pointed out that the revised version had added in the preamble “the sincere assistance of the people and army of Vietnam, and the support of the fraternal socialist countries and peace-loving countries in the world” as one of the factors behind the victory of the KNUFNS.²⁵⁶ While this does indicate a Vietnamese wish to solidify cooperation with the PRK, its main function was to clarify the position of the Vietnamese in relation to the KNUFNS – not that of master, but of brothers in the international struggle. In fact, in Article 10, which lays out more fully the PRK’s foreign policy, both versions prescribe that

²⁵⁵ Evan Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge: Inside the Politics of Nation Building* (New Haven, Conn. ; London: Yale University Press, 2004), 106–15; Slocomb, *The People’s Republic of Kampuchea, 1979-1989*, 2003, 67–74.

²⁵⁶ Slocomb, *The People’s Republic of Kampuchea, 1979-1989*, 2003, 71.

“The People’s Republic of Kampuchea develops bonds of solidarity and cooperation with various friendly socialist countries, particularly Vietnam and Laos, on the basis of Marxism-Leninism and proletarian internationalism.” Moreover, the Vietnamese had asked the Cambodians to cut out a much more problematic provision in the April version:

The People’s Republic of Kampuchea resolutely supports revolutionary and progressive forces the world over in the cause of national liberation struggle, for independence, democracy and social progress and against racialism, colonialism, neocolonialism, imperialism and big-nation hegemonism.²⁵⁷

While at first sight this seems a rather heterogeneous list of Marxist-Leninist and Third World nationalist catchphrases rolled into one, in the context of 1980s Communist-speak they were actually universally understood codes for very specific foreign policy lines. “Support[ing] revolutionary and progressive forces the world over” coded for aiding insurrections against non-Communist governments. “Racialism” and “colonialism” were represented by the old European powers, “neocolonialism” and “imperialism” referenced the United States, and “big-nation hegemonism” was reserved mainly for China. Ros Samay’s draft advocated, in effect, a truly revolutionary line of foreign policy. The Vietnamese, on the other hand, were eager to show both the international and domestic publics that the radicalism of the Khmer Rouge era was dead and buried, and that the new regime would be of no threat to the West, ASEAN, or even the Chinese.

Slocomb and Gottesman have also criticized the Vietnamese for rolling back many of the human rights provisions and the division of power in the original constitution.²⁵⁸ While this is

²⁵⁷ Cambodia., *The People’s Republic of Kampuchea Constitution : (Draft) April 17, 1980* ([S.l. : s.n., 1980); Cambodia., *Constitution of the People’s Republic of Kampuchea : (Draft) July 28, 1980*. ([S.l. : s.n., 1980).

²⁵⁸ Slocomb, *The People’s Republic of Kampuchea, 1979-1989*, 2003, 72–73; Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge*, 111–12.

certainly the case, once again we must analytically separate the act of intervention from the motive to perpetuate control. As Uk Bunchheuan reported, the changes were “in accordance with the situation in our country following the war.”²⁵⁹ Other studies of post-genocide rebuilding and reconciliation have shown that the victims of the genocide were not only the dead and the maimed, it was also the living having lost their trust in government and one another.²⁶⁰ From its formation, the PRK government had also been under siege. The edits that aimed to, in effect, vest greater power in a centralized Party leadership and to roll back some private rights were mainly to heighten the PRK government’s capacity to resist Khmer Rouge infiltration; the main checks to both human rights abuses by the government and executive takeover left in place. Seen in this light, another major edit to Articles 15 and 20 to allow for the inheritance of private individuals’ rights to use state lands was not just because Vietnam believed Cambodia was too backward for real socialism as Slocomb claimed, but a testament to Vietnam’s wish for pragmatic, not ideological government in Cambodia.²⁶¹

All in all, the Vietnamese certainly did intervene in even the most important areas of internal Cambodian affairs, but it was not to perpetuate control over Cambodia, but rather to rein in excessive ideological zeal in order to improve the viability of the PRK government, and thereby allow the Vietnamese in the long run to depart with something concrete to show for their vast expenditure of blood and treasure. The PRK government that the Vietnamese helped

²⁵⁹ Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge*, 111.

²⁶⁰ Ben K. Fred-Mensah, “Social Capital Building as Capacity for Postconflict Development: The UNDP in Mozambique and Rwanda,” *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations* 10, no. 4 (October 1, 2004): 437–57, <https://doi.org/10.5555/ggov.2004.10.4.437>; “The International Response to Conflict and Genocide: Lessons from the Rwanda Experience. Humanitarian Aid and Effects. Study 3,” accessed December 1, 2015, <http://www.alnap.org/resource/19256>.

²⁶¹ Slocomb, *The People’s Republic of Kampuchea, 1979-1989*, 2003, 71–72.

set up has proven remarkably resilient, providing much-needed stability for the country through troubled times, drawing strength neither from the rule of law nor the lofty promises of liberal democracy, but from the individual capacity and personal networks of a strongman leader: Hun Sen.

Preparing Cambodia for independence

The Vietnamese never intended to stay in Cambodia for a whole decade. The Vietnamese soldiers and experts I interviewed only expected that their stint in Cambodia would last one or two years at most at the time of entry.²⁶² This generation of Vietnamese who came to Cambodia immortalized their impressions and reflections in diaries, songs, poems, plays, short stories, and even novels to form a popular memory of Vietnam’s long involvement in Cambodia, which I have written about elsewhere. Their stories reflect a tension between the idealism of wanting to help rebuild a tattered society and a profound fear of unexpected death in an alien land.²⁶³ They also complained of low pay and poor living conditions. Most Vietnamese did not want to stay any longer than necessary. The Vietnamese government attempted troop withdrawals starting as early as 1982, but each experimental withdrawal saw the Khmer Rouge immediately take advantage and push back the PRK troops, such that the Vietnamese troops had to quickly return and reestablish control.²⁶⁴

²⁶² Nguyễn Trọng, Interview with Principal of the Friendship Highschool of the Revolutionary Workers of Cambodia Nguyễn Trọng; Lê Văn Nho, Interview with Major General Lê Văn Nho; Nguyễn Trắc Toàn, Interview with Minister Nguyễn Trắc Toàn.

²⁶³ Hoang Minh Vu, “Between Propaganda and Cao-Mienism: The Cambodian Decade in Vietnamese Literature,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 15, no. 1 (February 1, 2020): 49–76, <https://doi.org/10.1525/vs.2020.15.1.49>.

²⁶⁴ Nguyễn Trắc Toàn, Interview with Minister Nguyễn Trắc Toàn.

The Vietnamese understood that what the PRK needed most of all was a strong leader, one who could one day be seen by both domestic and foreign audiences as a viable representative for the Cambodian people. Until December 1981, Pen Sovann, who had spent two decades living in Vietnam, served as General Secretary of the KPRP and Prime Minister. But the Vietnamese interference in the process of drafting the Constitution had turned him, too, against the Vietnamese. Like Ros Samay, Sovann was flown back to Vietnam and interned for a decade.²⁶⁵ If anyone in the Vietnamese leadership had harbored illusions that those Cambodians with the strongest personal ties to Vietnam would be pliant vassals, these developments certainly put those plans to rest. Replacing them was a faction of former Khmer Rouge leaders who had fled to Vietnam from Pol Pot's purges before December 1978. Of the three highest leadership positions, two went to members of this group: Heng Samrin became General Secretary and Chea Sim became President of the National Assembly, with only Prime Minister Chin Si hailing from the old pro-Vietnam faction. Some leaders with strong provincial ties, like Minister of Defense Bou Thang's strong base in northeastern Cambodia, enjoyed the trust of the Vietnamese and maintained a high level of autonomy.²⁶⁶ All of these leaders proved to be steadfastly pliant to the Vietnamese, but none possessed the dynamism and charisma that the PRK government sorely needed.

It was Hun Sen, another Khmer Rouge defector who had risen to be Minister of Foreign Affairs at the tender age of 27, who emerged as the most promising leader. Even Sebastian Strangio, one of his fiercest contemporary critics, had to acknowledge his defining qualities:

²⁶⁵ Luke Young, "Cambodian Political History: The Case of Pen Sovann," *Monthly Review* (blog), accessed December 2, 2015, <http://monthlyreview.org/2013/11/01/cambodian-political-history/>.

²⁶⁶ Baird, *Rise of the Brao*.

“hard work, ingenuity, single-mindedness, and an uncanny ability to bend with the political wind.”²⁶⁷ Despite not having much formal education, Hun Sen knew how to ask the important questions, how to surround himself with the most talented people without regard for their background, and how to impress foreign dignitaries, including the Vietnamese and Prince Sihanouk, the key interlocutor on the Democratic Kampuchea side. His Ministry of Foreign Affairs quickly became one of the most dynamic ministries in the Cambodian government, even as he built up a local political base in his home province of Kampong Cham that could support his rise in the long run.²⁶⁸

Faced with the choice between these options for leadership, the Vietnamese chose Hun Sen. Hun Sen himself admitted publicly and often, even long past when it was politically expedient to do so, that the Vietnamese Ambassador Ngô Điền was his “great teacher.” On his part, Ngô Điền has praised Hun Sen for being a good student who “listens carefully, and when there is something unclear asks questions instead of hiding his ignorance.”²⁶⁹ Even though it was not until the death of Chan Si in December 1984 that Hun Sen ascended to the post of Prime Minister, Ngô Điền and Lê Đức Thọ, Vietnam’s chief strategist in charge of Cambodia, had been grooming him for the post long before that. Hun Sen quickly proved his worth by successfully carrying out the ambitious K5 Plan, a massive network of defensive fortifications and landmines along the Thai-Cambodian border area that was the centerpiece of the Vietnam-PRK strategy to prevent the Khmer Rouge from infiltrating into Cambodia from the border camps on the Thai side. While the project has come under fire from Human Rights Watch for its conscription of

²⁶⁷ Sebastian Strangio, *Hun Sen’s Cambodia* (New Haven [Connecticut] : Yale University Press, 2014), 34.

²⁶⁸ Becker, *When the War Was Over*, 1998, 441–43; Strangio, *Hun Sen’s Cambodia*, 35–39.

²⁶⁹ Huy Đức, *Bên Thắng Cuộc* (California: OsinBook, 2012), 157–58.

laborers and the high human cost, Margaret Slocomb has shown that the project was militarily successful, paving the way for the gradual withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia in 1985.²⁷⁰ Hun Sen would go on to forcefully represent PRK interests at the series of international conferences in the late 1980s that eventually led to the 1991 Paris Peace Agreement. Hun Sen also demonstrated his loyalty and value to the Vietnamese by forcefully debunking any allegations of Vietnamese settler colonialism, not simply with unfounded rhetoric but by providing remarkably detailed research into the history of the Vietnamese community and demonstrating that, in fact, the number of ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia in 1982 was lower than that during pre-Khmer Rouge times.²⁷¹

In their quest for long-term security and escape from pariah state status, the Vietnamese took a deliberate risk in backing a real leader instead of a weak puppet. In Hun Sen, at least in the short run, they had bet on a winning horse. To be clear, Hun Sen's PRK was and is not a model of liberal democratic government that fully reflects the full spectrum of popular demands and protects all human rights, but it is a fully sovereign government willing and capable of protecting its own interests, even when they clash with those of the Vietnamese.

Give a fish, and also teach to fish

²⁷⁰ Brad Adams, *30 Years of Hun Sen : Violence, Repression, and Corruption in Cambodia* ([New York, N.Y.] : Human Rights Watch, 2015), 22–26; Margaret Slocomb, "The K5 Gamble: National Defence and Nation Building under the People's Republic of Kampuchea," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 32, no. 2 (June 1, 2001): 195–210.

²⁷¹ Cambodian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Political Principles of the People's Republic of Cambodia for the Vietnamese Immigrants," 1982, Box 364, Cambodian National Archives.

On December 14, 1979, the Vietnamese Minister of Supplies received an urgent request for assistance from His Excellency Tang Sarum, Minister of Commerce for the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). The first anniversary of the liberation of Phnom Penh from the hands of the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime was fast approaching on January 7, 1980. The PRK government was eager to buttress their legitimacy by receiving a large retinue of representatives from sympathetic nations around the world. They had belatedly realized, however, that the hotels where their guests were to stay were short of 1,000 lightbulbs, which they hoped the Vietnamese could fly over to Phnom Penh in all haste. Sarum's letter made its way up the Vietnamese bureaucracy, until the Vietnamese Vice President Le Thanh Nghi himself signed off on the lightbulbs more than a week later. The lightbulbs arrived just in time for the grand celebration of the newly independent Cambodian republic.²⁷²

Tang Sarum's letter is just one among a veritable treasure trove of documents I gathered this summer from the Vietnamese National Archives Center III on Vietnamese aid to the PRK in the peak period from 1979 to 1985. I picked this story not as a stand-out anecdote, but rather an elegant but typical example to illustrate the nature of Vietnamese aid to the PRK in the early years. It was typical for being an emergency measure dealing with the supply of some of the most basic yet necessary goods, highlighting the PRK's reliance on outside help to rebuild their country after the near total destruction of Cambodia's modern economy under the Khmer Rouge. It was also typical in involving top officials from several ministries in both governments working together on even the most mundane problems, highlighting the weight of the burdensome, top-

²⁷² "11114 Công văn của Bộ Thương nghiệp Campuchia đề nghị giúp về bóng đèn lắp khách sạn đón khách nhân ngày lễ 07/01/1979", Phòng Phủ Thủ tướng, VNNA.

down Communist bureaucracies behind the operation. And finally, it was typical in that, necessary as they were for the normal functioning of Cambodian society, aid supplies often also had political significance beyond their mere basic function. While the Cambodian request was for the new lightbulbs to “replace” [used lightbulbs] at the hotels, the Vietnamese documents approved them for “decoration” during the ceremonies. The Vietnamese would, in the most literal sense, help light the way for the new Cambodian revolution.

The situation was most dire in early 1979. In 1978, one of the worst recorded floods had hit the Mekong delta, inundating 970,000 ha, wiping out 270,000 tons of husked rice, and affecting over 5 million people. This disaster seriously depleted grain reserves in all three Indochinese countries, and meant that not only the Cambodians, but even the Vietnamese experienced rice shortages.²⁷³ Meanwhile, the Khmer Rouge had emptied out the cities, and the Vietnamese troops entering Cambodia quickly found that granaries, transport networks, and institutions critical to supporting the population had completely broken down. The first messages from Vietnamese commanders in Cambodia to Hanoi revealed the extent of the emergency:

We must request greater emergency aid from the USSR and the East European countries. If the USSR has difficulties in providing rice we request corn to quickly alleviate the situation... We do not have the ability to provide any more food to Cambodia. If the situation is too urgent we will have to temporarily dip into the national grain reserves to help... As for grain seeds (comrade Con has requested 10,000 tons) we must provide.²⁷⁴

²⁷³ Ebel Wickramanayake, “Flood Mitigation Problems in Vietnam,” *Disasters* 18, no. 1 (March 1, 1994): 81, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7717.1994.tb00287.x>.

²⁷⁴ “11110 Hiệp định hợp tác kinh tế, kỹ thuật năm 1979 với Campuchia”, Phòng Phủ Thủ tướng, VNNA.

Despite their opposition to the Vietnamese occupation and their aid and trade sanctions against Vietnam, Western governments, ASEAN, and China did recognize the danger and contribute to the alleviation of the imminent famine. In the United States Congress, non-government organizations (NGOs) like the Catholic Relief Services, Church World Service, and the American Jewish Committee testified about the need to provide emergency humanitarian aid, withstanding hours of political questions and concerns as to how aid might strengthen the Vietnamese occupation in the process.²⁷⁵ In the end, alongside aid from some Western governments, about \$100 million was raised by public donations to NGOs, although the process of distribution came under heavy scrutiny and criticism from Western governments. An Oxfam study pointed out that much of the criticisms resulted from misunderstandings about the situation on the ground: the need to rebuild essential services including health and education necessitated the government to use part of the food aid to feed civil servants, and the transportation system was so poor, the governments involved so inefficient as to create the illusion that the Vietnamese and PRK governments were deliberately delaying the shipments.²⁷⁶ In a demonstrative case, on June 25, 1979, the Vietnamese Red Cross sent to the Vietnamese Government a telegram marked TOP PRIORITY, requesting immediate shipment and distribution of 50,000 rupees' worth of medicines for the Cambodian people from the Indian Government. After a long and confused exchange of letters and telegrams, the last letter in the file reveals that

²⁷⁵ United States. Congress., 1979--*Tragedy in Indochina, War, Refugees, and Famine Hearings before the Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, Ninety-Sixth Congress, First Session ...* (Washington : U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1980); United States. Congress., 1980--*the Tragedy in Indochina Continues War, Refugees, and Famine : Hearings before the Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, Ninety-Sixth Congress, Second Session, February 11, May 1, 6, and July 29, 1980.* (Washington : U.S. G.P.O., 1980).

²⁷⁶ Mysliwiec, *Punishing the Poor*, 14–16.

as of September 6, 1979, the medicines were still in India awaiting shipment. Their ultimate fate may be lost to history.²⁷⁷ Further compounding the confusion was the diverting of some of this aid to Cambodian refugees who had come to Vietnam before 1979 and stayed in refugee camps on Vietnamese soil, some of whom were ethnic Vietnamese but technically eligible for the aid.²⁷⁸ Having rejected allegations against Vietnam of diverting or delaying aid, the Oxfam study also noted that while Western aid was still embroiled in political impasse, Vietnamese and the Eastern Bloc aid, provided willingly despite their own economic difficulties at the time, became key to alleviating a massive famine in Cambodia.²⁷⁹

Most scholars agree that the PRK did, for the most part, successfully reconstruct its economy within the first three years. However, as the abovementioned and another Oxfam study both pointed out, the West and international organizations like the UN only provided emergency humanitarian aid but refused to provide development aid, and also denied NGOs based on their territories license to provide such aid to the PRK government.²⁸⁰ In fact, having massive international aid redirected to the refugee camps actually incentivized the population from neighboring provinces to make the dangerous trek into the Khmer Rouge-run refugee camps on the Thai border, thus exacerbating the refugee crisis, strengthened the Khmer Rouge, and presenting a serious security problem for the PRK government.²⁸¹

²⁷⁷ “11127 Công văn của PTT, Hội chữ thập đỏ Việt Nam v/v Ấn Độ giúp Campuchia năm 1979”, Phòng Phủ Thủ tướng, VNNA.

²⁷⁸ “12032 Kế hoạch hợp tác y tế năm 1981 giữa 2 nước Việt Nam – Campuchia”; “12033 Tập văn bản thỏa thuận giữa Bộ Thương binh và Xã hội nước ta và Cao ủy Liên hiệp quốc về người tị nạn (HCR), về viện trợ cho người tị nạn Campuchia năm 1980 – 1981”; “12539 Công văn của HĐBT xét duyệt sử dụng tiền viện trợ của tổ chức Cao ủy Liên hiệp quốc về người tị nạn (HCR) để viện trợ trại tị nạn K năm 1983”, Phòng Phủ Thủ tướng, VNNA.

²⁷⁹ Mysliwicz, *Punishing the Poor*, 14–16.

²⁸⁰ Mysliwicz, 22–50; Bull, *The Poverty of Diplomacy*, 15–17.

²⁸¹ *Undeclared War against the People’s Republic of Kampuchea*.

The burden of providing developmental aid was shared between Vietnam and other CMEA members, primarily the Soviet Union and East Germany. Looking at the Vietnamese data on aid to the PRK reveals a fascinating trend. In 1979, much of the aid was in basic necessities like foodstuff, clothes, toiletries, medicines, etc., with some efforts at restoring agricultural and forestry output, as well as critical energy, transport, and communications infrastructure.²⁸² 1980 saw new efforts made to bring Cambodian students to study in Vietnamese universities and to restore traditional Cambodian culture.²⁸³ These efforts started to bear fruit in 1981, as the agricultural sector in Cambodia had recovered sufficiently to export green beans, soybeans, sesame seeds, and peanuts to Vietnam in exchange for fish and fish products, the first recorded bilateral trade since the establishment of the PRK.²⁸⁴ By 1982, aid and trade flows had developed so much between Vietnamese and Cambodian provinces and cities that the central government felt the need to tabulate and regulate these flows.²⁸⁵ The same year saw Cambodia producing a

²⁸² “11629 Hiệp định, công văn, báo cáo của PTT về kết quả đàm phán và viện trợ không hoàn lại năm 1980 với Campuchia”; “11105 Công văn của PTT v/v giúp Campuchia tổ chức bộ máy làm mọi thủ tục như một cảng Quốc tế ở cảng K năm 1979”; “11106 Công văn của PTT v/v tổ chức bộ máy vận tải và giao thông giúp Campuchia năm 1979”; “11107 Quyết định của PTT về công tác chuyển và đảm bảo giao thông giúp Campuchia năm 1979”; “11108 Hiệp định về hợp tác văn hóa giáo dục, y tế, khoa học, vận chuyển hàng không, XNK năm 1979 với Campuchia”; “11117 Kế hoạch, phương án giúp và viện trợ cho Campuchia năm 1979 của Bộ Giáo dục và Bộ Hải sản”, “11118 Quyết định, phương án, báo cáo của PTT, Bộ GTVT v/v vận chuyển cho Campuchia năm 1979”, “11120 Công văn, kế hoạch giúp đỡ và viện trợ cho Campuchia năm 1979 của các Bộ: Nông nghiệp, Quốc phòng, Thủy lợi, Tài chính”; “11121 Dự toán, đề án, phương án kế hoạch giúp đỡ và viện trợ cho Campuchia năm 1979 của các Bộ: Văn hóa và Thông tin, vật tư, y tế, Hội chữ thập đỏ Việt Nam”; “11122 Phương án, kế hoạch giúp đỡ và viện trợ cho Campuchia năm 1979 của các Tổng cục: Bưu điện, Hậu cần, Hóa chất, Khí tượng thủy văn”; “11123 Công văn, dự toán kế hoạch giúp đỡ viện trợ cho Campuchia năm 1979 của Ngân hàng Nhà nước Việt Nam, Ủy ban Phát thanh và Truyền hình Việt Nam”, Phòng Phủ Thủ tướng, VNNA.

²⁸³ “11129 Công văn của PTT, Bộ ĐH và THCN, Tổng cục Bưu điện về đào tạo cán bộ, học sinh cho Campuchia năm 1979-1982”; “11130 Công văn của PTT giải quyết cho Bộ Giáo dục gửi quà tặng học sinh và giáo viên Campuchia năm 1979”; “11134 Báo cáo của Bộ văn hóa và Thông tin về tình hình thông tin văn hóa giúp Campuchia năm 1979”, Phòng Phủ Thủ tướng, VNNA.

²⁸⁴ “12029 Hợp đồng trao đổi hàng nội thương giữa Việt Nam – Campuchia năm 1981”, Phòng Phủ Thủ tướng, VNNA.

²⁸⁵ “12369 Thư của Chủ tịch HDBT Campuchia và dự thảo thông tư của Chính phủ ta v/v trao đổi kinh tế, văn hóa”; “12705 Hồ sơ v/v hợp tác kinh tế, văn hóa giữa TP Hải Phòng với TP Công Pông Son (Campuchia) các năm 1982 – 1983”, Phòng Phủ Thủ tướng, VNNA.

surplus of 70,000 tons of rice grain which the PRK government requested to sell on the Ho Chi Minh City market, a politically sensitive move that only fueled the DK's propaganda that Vietnam was stealing grain from the Cambodian people.²⁸⁶ The most difficult crisis years were past.

Thereafter, Vietnamese aid was concentrated on building a sustainable foundation for long-term development. Between 1983 and 1985, in addition to continuing the abovementioned forms of aid and cooperation, most Vietnamese aid came in the form of experts who helped train Cambodians in the more technical fields such as accounting and medicine.²⁸⁷ By 1985, propaganda had become reality. The Cambodian nation had indeed been resurrected, and the importance of aid from Vietnam and the Eastern Bloc, both in emergency humanitarian aid and in development aid, were largely responsible for that success. History has shown this foundation to be sustainable and independent.²⁸⁸

I have concentrated more on economic aid than military aid in my analysis. This is in part because of the dearth of publicly accessible Vietnamese archival materials regarding military aid. The only concrete data I have on the scale of Vietnamese military aid is quite staggering: in a document dated February 1979, while Vietnamese and PRK officials were scrambling to address

²⁸⁶ “12372 Công văn của HDBT cho phép TP Hồ Chí Minh tiêu thụ giúp Campuchia 7 vạn tấn gạo năm 1980”, Phòng Phủ Thủ tướng, VNNA.

²⁸⁷ “13088 Báo cáo của Ngân hàng NN Việt Nam tổng kết công tác giúp ngân hàng Quốc gia Campuchia từ 1979 – 1984”; “12986 Hiệp định, báo cáo về hợp tác tương trợ tư pháp với các nước XHCN, Lào và Campuchia trong năm 1984 của Bộ Tư pháp”; “12696 Biên bản làm việc với đoàn ngoại thương Campuchia v/v lưu hành tiền Việt Nam trên đất Campuchia năm 1983”; “12594 Báo cáo công tác năm 1983 của UB Hợp tác kinh tế văn hóa với Lào và Campuchia”; “12697 Công văn của UB Hợp tác kỹ thuật văn hóa với Lào và Campuchia v/v cung cấp thuốc trừ sâu và phương tiện bảo quản lương thực cho Campuchia năm 1983”; “12698 Hồ sơ v/v hợp tác kinh tế trong ngành cao su với Campuchia năm 1983”; “12700 Hồ sơ v/v hợp tác kinh tế trong lĩnh vực công nghiệp và điện lực với Campuchia năm 1983”; “12701 Hồ sơ v/v hợp tác y tế với Campuchia năm 1973”; “12702 Công văn của Tổng cục Bưu điện, Bộ GTVT v/v thực hiện kế hoạch hợp tác bưu điện và GTVT với Campuchia năm 1983”; “12703 Kế hoạch hợp tác về sự nghiệp phát triển nhà trẻ với Campuchia năm 1983 của UBBVBMVTETW”; “12704 Công văn của UBND tỉnh Sông Bé v/v xin kinh phí viện trợ Campuchia năm 1983”, Phòng Phủ Thủ tướng, VNNA.

²⁸⁸ Margaret Slocomb, *An Economic History of Cambodia in the Twentieth Century* (NUS Press, 2010), 175–287.

the unfolding humanitarian crisis, emergency economic aid was projected at 11,000 tons for the next 8 months, while military aid was projected to 131,000 tons.²⁸⁹ But large as this amount may have been, I believe that the existing discourse on Vietnamese and Cambodian security in the 1980s has been overly focused on military hardware in any case. The files that I have been able to uncover show another, important side of the story: in thinking about security in Cambodia from 1979-1985, Vietnamese leaders showed a clear understanding that without a self-sufficient economy and a strong government, it would be impossible for the PRK to sustain on its own a military capable of preventing the return of the Khmer Rouge. Vietnamese troops would be tied down indefinitely, sustaining higher material, human, and, very importantly, diplomatic costs in the long run. The genuine rebuilding of Cambodia eventually into an independent but willing partner in Vietnam's regional security arrangement was a calculation made with both security and international norms in mind.

The diplomatic failure

Despite all of the above propaganda efforts, which I argue the Vietnamese themselves grew to believe, they never quite succeeded in convincing the international community to recognize and support the PRK and withdraw recognition from the Khmer Rouge. As noted in the previous chapter, Vietnamese leaders never expected such international opposition to their invasion. Much of the opposition in the U.N. General Assembly in particular was driven by

²⁸⁹ "11107 Quyết định của PTT về công tác chuyển và đảm bảo giao thông giúp Campuchia năm 1979", Phòng Phủ Thủ tướng, VNNA.

campaigning on the part of the ASEAN countries.²⁹⁰ Vietnam had always put a special emphasis on trying to assure ASEAN that they did not intend to push any further into Southeast Asia, with both Deputy Foreign Minister Phan Hien and Prime Minister Pham Van Dong having made visits to all the ASEAN countries in July and October 1978 respectively to gauge their opinions.²⁹¹ Just two months after Vietnamese troops swept into Phnom Penh, Pham Van Dong came to sign the Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation between the two countries. Dong's speech at the event was sprinkled with keywords and phrases lifted directly from ASEAN's two major statements on regional security, the 1971 Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality Declaration and the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation:²⁹²

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam is resolved to pursue its constant policy toward the other Southeast Asian countries. We will strictly honor our commitments and hope that the other countries will do the same. This is a correct attitude necessary for building good, stable and long-standing neighborly relations, and for furthering economic, cultural, scientific and technical cooperation and exchanges on the basis of mutual respect for each others' independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity and political system, and non-interference, direct or indirect, into each other's internal affairs, in any form whatsoever.²⁹³

²⁹⁰ Ang, *Singapore, ASEAN, and the Cambodian Conflict, 1978-1991*, 2013; Prasad Nāgēndra, *Indonesia's Role in the Resolution of the Cambodian Problem* (Aldershot, Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2001),

<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/004200190?signon=swle:https://shibidp.cit.cornell.edu/idp/shibboleth>.

²⁹¹ Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "10552 Báo Cáo Của Bộ Ngoại Giao về Cuộc Đi Thăm 5 Nước ĐNA: Thái Lan, Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia và Singapore Của Thủ Tướng Phạm Văn Đồng và Những Vấn Đề Cần Giải Quyết Sau Chuyển Đi Của Thủ Tướng Năm 1978."

²⁹² "1971 Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality Declaration Signed on 27 November 1971 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia by the Foreign Ministers | Centre for International Law," April 20, 2015, <http://cil.nus.edu.sg/1971/1971-zone-of-peace-freedom-and-neutrality-declaration-signed-on-27-november-1971-in-kuala-lumpur-malaysia-by-the-foreign-ministers/>; ASEAN, "Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia," ASEAN, February 26, 1976, <https://asean.org/treaty-amity-cooperation-southeast-asia-indonesia-24-february-1976/>.

²⁹³ *Official Friendship Visit of the Government Delegation of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam to the People's Republic of Kampuchea*. ([Hanoi?]: Press and Information Dept., Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 1979).

ASEAN reactions to the Vietnamese invasion were mixed. According to Ang Cheng Guan, even the Thais did not oppose the invasion immediately, as they had themselves been fighting the Khmer Rouge very recently and were not altogether unhappy to see the removal of that regime. It was Singaporean diplomats who convinced them to build the narrative of Thailand as the frontline state that cannot allow the Vietnamese to cement a *fait accompli* in Cambodia. They demanded that all of ASEAN unite behind the call for a complete and immediate Vietnamese military withdrawal from Cambodia, which as we discussed above Vietnam was not in a position to undertake given the threat of the Khmer Rouge returning to power.²⁹⁴ But Thailand and Singapore's hardcore stance was not without dissenters. Concerned about the flow of refugees into neighboring countries and eager to end the conflict as quickly as possible, in March 1980, Indonesian President Suharto and Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Hussein Onn met separately in Kuantan to discuss a feasible solution to the conflict in Cambodia. They recognized that Vietnam was trying to forge its own independent path and that isolating Vietnam will only lead to it becoming even more dependent on the Soviet Union, which would only benefit China at the expense of regional stability. Both Malaysia and Indonesia have sizable and relatively wealthy ethnic Chinese minorities and, more than other ASEAN countries, were concerned about Beijing's growing influence on these communities and sympathetic to Vietnam in its treatment of the Hoa. They also recognized that Vietnam had legitimate security interests in Cambodia. Thus the two leaders at Kuantan called for a political resolution to the conflict that would recognize Vietnamese influence in Cambodia in exchange for the complete withdrawal of Soviet military personnel from Vietnam. However, in the subsequent back and forth between the Vietnamese

²⁹⁴ Ang, *Singapore, ASEAN, and the Cambodian Conflict, 1978-1991*, 2013.

and ASEAN leaders, the two sides could not agree on each other's proposals for a demilitarized border zone, particularly as the Vietnamese feared it would simply be a cover for the Khmer Rouge to operate freely along the Thai border.²⁹⁵ After the foundation of the CGDK in 1982, the two sides' negotiating positions had hardened and would not be malleable again until 1987, when the Cold War tensions between the United States and Soviet Union had thawed considerably. I discuss the renewed efforts leading towards the final political settlement in Chapter V.

Existing studies have overwhelmingly emphasized the Cold War explanation for why many countries fearful of Soviet expansionism voted in international fora against a regime friendly to Vietnam and the Soviet Union, even if they had to continue supporting the Khmer Rouge.²⁹⁶ While these diplomatic concerns were of primary importance, focusing solely on them undervalues the fierce rhetorical debates on this issue at international fora, and underestimates the potential of public communication to influence governments. Specifically, this narrative ignores an important question: Why was there no significant domestic pressure in Western democracies for governments to withdraw recognition from the Khmer Rouge-led Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea even after overwhelming evidence emerged of the brutality of this regime? After all, in the U.S. and Europe there already existed a strong antiwar movement from the Second Indochina War that was sympathetic to the Vietnamese.²⁹⁷ Even if the U.S. was no longer directly involved in the Third Indochina War, Hanoi's propaganda machine,

²⁹⁵ Justus M. van der Kroef, "ASEAN, Hanoi, and the Kampuchean Conflict: Between 'Kuantan' and a 'Third Alternative,'" *Asian Survey* 21, no. 5 (1981): 515–35, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2643831>.

²⁹⁶ Haas, *Genocide by Proxy*, 1991; Ang, *Singapore, ASEAN, and the Cambodian Conflict, 1978-1991*, 2013; Johnson, *Bear Tracks in Indochina*; Pike, *Vietnam and the Soviet Union*, 1987.

²⁹⁷ Melvin Small, *At the Water's Edge : American Politics and the Vietnam War* (Chicago : Ivan R. Dee, c2005.).

which had worked well during the Second Indochina War, should have had more success at garnering public support for its cause in Cambodia.

Hanoi's key diplomatic failure was to produce a truthful and convincing account of the events in Cambodia, stemming from Vietnamese leaders' refusal to acknowledge that Pol Pot's aggression was the manifestation of a deep-rooted anti-Vietnamese sentiment that permeates Cambodian society. Instead, on the floor of the UNGA, Vietnamese diplomats consistently blamed Chinese hegemonism as the root cause of Cambodian aggression, effectively denying the Khmer Rouge any agency, like this speech by Phan Hien on September 28, 1979:

No reason whatever is to be found for talking about solutions. What should be denounced is the Chinese intervention in Kampuchea, the Chinese responsibility for the genocide committed by the Pol Pot-Ieng Sary clique against 3 million inhabitants of Kampuchea. Any maneuver aimed at reviving the Pol Pot-Ieng Sary clique, any maneuver aimed at creating two Kampucheas, constitutes an intolerable interference in the internal affairs of Kampuchea and a gross violation of the Kampuchean people's right to self-determination and it only prolongs the sufferings of a nation which has already suffered too much.²⁹⁸

To broadcast the Khmer Rouge's crimes to the world, the Vietnamese helped organize a People's Revolutionary Tribunal that tried the Khmer Rouge leaders for the crime of genocide *in absentia* over just four days, from August 15 to 19, 1979. The prosecution quickly dropped the charges of "betraying the revolution and the fatherland" and "creating war by invading Vietnam", focusing solely on the charge of genocide. Only Pol Pot and Ieng Sary were cited as defendants, a decision calculated to encourage Khmer Rouge cadres to defect and to shield PRK leaders, many of whom were former Khmer Rouge, from prosecution. The defense lawyers (Hope Stevens, Yuos

²⁹⁸ Phan Hiền, "Record of UNGA Meeting Held on 28 Sept. 1979.," *UN Digital Library*, September 28, 1979, <http://digitallibrary.un.org/record/5256>.

Por, and Dith Munty) offered the sole defense that these leaders were manipulated by the Chinese. In all, the trial, which had a lot of propaganda potential, had many shortcomings leading to a devaluation of its credibility, and documentation of the trial was never widely distributed in the West until the 2000s.²⁹⁹ In their propaganda, the Vietnamese also grossly downplayed Vietnam's high degree of influence in Cambodia, and denied the existence of Soviet bases in Vietnam, despite the major Soviet naval presence at Cam Ranh Bay.³⁰⁰ The obvious holes in the Vietnamese narrative proved detrimental to their efforts to exert public pressure on Western governments to recognize the PRK over the CGDK.

By contrast, the Khmer Rouge, Sihanouk, and their backers were highly successful at producing and disseminating propaganda that turned the charge of genocide and aggression onto the Vietnamese and made other governments' support for the Khmer Rouge more publicly tenable. Taking advantage of the fact that the PRK administration was dealing with the mess they created, the Khmer Rouge took a creative approach by going on the offensive, accusing the Vietnamese and the PRK of genocide. In a speech on October 9, 1979 in front of the UNGA, Ieng Sary accused the Vietnamese of having already killed one million Cambodians – a lower bound estimate of the number of civilian casualties from the Democratic Kampuchea regime – and brought in 250,000 settlers to replace them!³⁰¹ On September 30, 1982, even Sihanouk put his credibility on the line by blatantly lying before the UNGA that “chemical weapons, especially toxic

²⁹⁹ Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge*, 60–66; Tom Fawthrop and Helen Jarvis, *Getting Away With Genocide: Cambodia's Long Struggle Against the Khmer Rouge* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), 40–51.

³⁰⁰ Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Hồ Sơ v/v Thực Hiện Nghị Định Thư, Hiệp Định Liên Xô Giúp Đỡ Kỹ Thuật Xây Dựng, Bổ Sung Thiết Bị Cho Các Công Trình Đặc Biệt và Ký Nghị Định Thư Với Liên Xô về Kéo Dài Thời Gian Hiệp Định về Cam Ranh Năm 1984,” November 4, 1978, Phòng Phủ Thủ tướng, Vietnam National Archives Center III.

³⁰¹ Ieng Sary, “Record of UNGA Meeting Held on 9 Oct. 1979,” *UN Digital Library*, October 11, 1979, <http://digitallibrary.un.org/record/5269>.

gas, are frequently used against the resistance fighters and the inhabitants of villages which have escaped Vietnamese control.”³⁰² It was only in 1987 that a group of Harvard scientists conclusively debunked allegations that the so-called “yellow rain” witnessed in the battlefields of western Cambodia were residue from chemical weapons, concluding that it was actually pollen collected by honeybees.³⁰³ But by then, the damage to the public image of Vietnam and the PRK had already been done. While neither side told the whole truth, by taking a no-holds-barred approach, the Khmer Rouge were able to formulate a much more effective public relations offensive than the Vietnamese and PRK, which did much to cement the latter’s international pariah status.

Of course, not all were fooled by the Khmer Rouge’s propaganda. Australia offers an important case study into the intense domestic debates some countries faced over the Cambodian question. In 1972, the Labour Party’s Gough Whitlam became Prime Minister and immediately withdrew Australian troops from the Second Indochina War, cut relations with the Republic of Vietnam, and established relations with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. In 1975, when Australia fell into a serious constitutional crisis as Governor-General Sir John Kerr removed Whitlam from office to be replaced by the Liberal Party’s Malcolm Fraser, *Nhan Dan* accused Fraser of having been a tool of “international monopolistic capitalism.” Despite this hiccup in relations, between 1975 and 1978, Vietnam grew to become the largest recipient of Australian

³⁰² Norodom Sihanouk, “General Assembly, 37th Session,” *UN Digital Library*, 1982, <http://digitallibrary.un.org/record/754754>.

³⁰³ Julian Robinson, Jeanne Guillemin, and Matthew Meselson, “Yellow Rain: The Story Collapses,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 68 (1987): 100–117, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1148733>.

development aid outside of Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and the ASEAN countries.³⁰⁴ Australia also helped convince the United States to withdraw its veto in 1977, allowing Vietnam to become a full member of the United Nations.³⁰⁵

Yet in January 1979, Australia also became one of the first governments to cut aid to Vietnam over its invasion of Cambodia. Knowing that his Foreign Minister Andrew Peacock would not agree with this decision, Fraser blindsided him by announcing the decision while Peacock was on an official trip abroad. Still, Peacock found several loopholes to allow some aid to get through to Vietnam anyways.³⁰⁶ In an email exchange with me, John McCarthy, Peacock's former secretary who later became Australian Ambassador to Vietnam, confirmed that the tensions from this episode was a contributing factor to Peacock's open challenge for Fraser's leadership of the Liberal Party in 1981, which Peacock narrowly lost. McCarthy also confirmed my reading of the Australian archives that in 1983, when the new Foreign Minister Bill Hayden made a landmark visit to Hanoi to try to break the ice, the two tried to convince then Labour Prime Minister Bob Hawke to resume aid to Vietnam, but the Australians had to abandon the idea under American and ASEAN pressure.³⁰⁷ But even though the mending of Australian-Vietnamese relations would have to wait until the end of the Cold War, in 1981 Fraser was able to announce Australia's derecognition of the Democratic Kampuchea government.³⁰⁸ This case study of

³⁰⁴ Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "North Vietnam - Relations with Australia - Australian Aid," 1983 1975, A1838, Australian National Archives.

³⁰⁵ Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "North Vietnam - Relations with International Organisations, Including the United Nations," 1977, A1838, Australian National Archives.

³⁰⁶ Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "North Vietnam - Relations with Australia - Australian Aid."

³⁰⁷ Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "Vietnam - Relations with Australia - Visit by Mr. Hayden, Minister of Foreign Affairs to ASEAN Countries - Consultations on Aid to Vietnam," 1983, Series A1838, Australian National Archives.

³⁰⁸ Jefferson Lee, *Reporting Cambodia in the Australian Media: "Heroic" Journalism or "Neo-Colonial" Distortions?* (Mount Lawley, W.A.: Centre for Asian Communication, Media and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Arts, Edith Cowan

Australia's soul searching on the issue of the Cambodian conflict shows that while the Cold War played an important role in influencing many countries' decision to politically and economically isolate Vietnam and the PRK in the 1980s, such a policy was not a foregone conclusion. It begs the question whether, had the Vietnamese abandoned their unconvincing positioning as a bulwark protecting Southeast Asia from the Chinese threat, and treated the Khmer Rouge agency seriously, if they could have put together a more truthful narrative that could have convinced some countries to be more sympathetic to their efforts at reconstruction and preventing the return of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that in Cambodia the Vietnamese were driven not only by a desire to prevent the development of an unfriendly regime in Cambodia that might present a military threat to Vietnam's southwest in conjunction with China or the United States, but also a wish to not be seen as having transgressed international norms against aggression. These dual desires best explain why Vietnam pursued the policy goal of creating a strong, independent, and friendly Cambodia in the 1980s, even at great diplomatic and material cost in the short run. In the end, the Vietnamese-PRK relationship could perhaps be best defined as between unequal allies, but certainly not that between a marionette and his helpless puppet.

University, 1995), 20–24,
<https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015040646666?urlappend=%3Bsignon=swle:https://shibidp.cit.cornell.edu/idp/shibboleth>.

Many have tried to grade Vietnam on its involvement in Cambodia, but this task has often been hampered by a poor understanding of Vietnam's objectives in Cambodia. Vivian Frings has argued, for example, that while the agricultural revival was very successful, attempts at collectivization of agriculture were a failure.³⁰⁹ This misses the point: neither the Vietnamese nor the PRK were very interested in agricultural collectivization, fearing that it would resemble to the populace the horrors of the Khmer Rouge years. By contrast, in her assessment of the K5 Plan, Margaret Slocomb rated it as a military success for curtailing Khmer Rouge infiltrations past the blockades, but a diplomatic failure as the human cost of building these blockades and the civilian casualties from landmines contributed greatly to anti-Vietnamese sentiment in Cambodia.³¹⁰ Slocomb's assessment is better than Frings for having considered both the question of whether the Vietnamese policies improved conditions on the ground, as well as whether they produced positive diplomatic results.

The Vietnamese track record in Cambodia is not one that most people today would regard as being particularly successful. Many Vietnamese would rather their government had not intervened in Cambodia in the first place, given the enormous cost Vietnam suffered. However, standing in the shoes of Lê Đức Thọ and other Vietnamese leaders in 1978, with the limited information that they possessed, it would seem that Vietnam had little other choice. Furthermore, knowing the full extent of the Khmer Rouge atrocities as we do now, it may behoove us to consider more clearly the need that existed for a genuine humanitarian intervention. In any case, once we accept the invasion as having been difficult to avoid, it becomes difficult to think as well

³⁰⁹ Frings, *The Failure of Agricultural Collectivization in the People's Republic of Kampuchea, 1979-1980*.

³¹⁰ Slocomb, "The K5 Gamble," 5.

of a better outcome than what the Vietnamese did achieve. They did not entirely shake off international pariah status, they did suffer from economic isolation and stagnation in those years, and today there are many elements in Cambodia who view the occupation as a dark period of Vietnamese aggression. The more unsavory aspects of the way the Vietnamese conducted the war and intervened in Cambodian politics, while arguably necessary, certainly did not help their image. But in the end, the Vietnamese did contribute to rebuilding a stable Cambodia that may yet prove to be a valuable friend, and histories like this one will hopefully redeem their efforts in these lost years.

Chapter V

Out of the Quagmire, 1986-1991

The Sixth Vietnamese Communist Party Congress met in December 1986 in a somber and tense atmosphere. Its long-serving and conservative General-Secretary, Le Duan, had passed away in July, heightening the possibility of major revisions in domestic and international policy. Pressure for change had reached a breaking point even within the Party leadership. A decade after the People's Army of Vietnam had triumphantly marched into Saigon and reunified the country under Communist rule, the Revolution's promises of prosperity and independence proved as elusive as ever. The Vietnam of 1986 was an impoverished nation, bogged down in a seemingly interminable conflict in Cambodia's western borderlands versus the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK), which was supported by the United States and its allies, China, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Excluded by these powers from the global economic network and possessing a very weak industrial base, Vietnam was forced into a position of dependency on Soviet aid in order to sustain its military and economic patronage of the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK).³¹¹

Developments abroad were also forcing Vietnamese leaders to reevaluate their grand strategy. In the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev had consolidated sufficient power to begin a process of radical reforms that would soon end both the Cold War and aid to its Third World allies, before leading eventually to the collapse of the Soviet Union itself in December 1991. A seismic

³¹¹ Melanie Beresford, *Economic Transition in Vietnam: Trade and Aid in the Demise of a Centrally Planned Economy* (Cheltenham, UK ; Northampton, MA, USA: Edward Elgar, 2001); Adam Fforde, *From Plan to Market: The Economic Transition in Vietnam*, Transitions--Asia and Asian America (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1996).

shift in the international balance of power was under way, as the stable Cold War order that saw the world divided into two opposing camps disappeared almost overnight. Like other nations around the globe, Vietnam would need to carefully reassess its strategic position to adapt to a new and unfamiliar environment.

The dominant narrative in the historiography of this period has portrayed the Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia as a linear process originating from the *doi moi* (Renovation) policies it adopted at the Sixth Party Congress, which prioritized economic development and international integration over military and political objectives in Cambodia. Vietnam's decisions to complete its military withdrawal from Cambodia in September 1989, to engage with ASEAN and the West to sideline the Khmer Rouge, and ultimately to sign the 1991 Paris Peace Agreement are part of this evolution from doctrinaire backwardness to liberal enlightenment.³¹² The problem with this dominant narrative is that it was constructed without access to critical internal policy documents, which form the backbone of most major studies of Australian, American, and even Singaporean grand strategy.³¹³ Existing studies of Vietnamese grand strategy have been forced to rely on official pronouncements, interviews, and observations of behavior. These are

³¹² Carlyle A. Thayer and Ramses Amer, eds., *Vietnamese Foreign Policy in Transition*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999); Becker, *When the War Was Over*, 1998; Ramses Amer, *The Cambodian Conflict, 1979-1991: From Intervention to Resolution* (Penang, Malaysia : Uppsala, Sweden: Research and Education for Peace, School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia ; Dept. of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University, 1996); Gary Klintworth, ed., *Vietnam's Withdrawal from Cambodia: Regional Issues and Realignment*, Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence, no. 64 (Canberra, Australia: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, 1990).

³¹³ Ken Berry, *Cambodia From Red to Blue: Australia's Initiative for Peace*, Studies in World Affairs 15 (St. Leonards, N.S.W., Australia: Allen & Unwin in association with the Department of International Relations, RSPAS, ANU, 1997); Robert G. Sutter, *Cambodian Crisis: Problems of a Settlement and Policy Dilemmas for the United States*, CRS Issue Brief IB89020 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, 1989); Richard H. Solomon, *Exiting Indochina: U.S. Leadership of the Cambodia Settlement & Normalization of Relations with Vietnam* (Washington, D.C: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2000); Cheng Guan Ang, *Singapore, ASEAN, and the Cambodian Conflict, 1978-1991* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013).

valuable sources, but, as I will demonstrate, they do not tell the whole story and sometimes obscure the underlying dynamics of Vietnamese decision-making.

Drawing upon classified Vietnamese sources, this chapter highlights a subplot that has received only scant and speculative mention in Western historiography, and has only been addressed very briefly in a recent work by Vietnamese journalist Huy Duc.³¹⁴ Referred to in some Vietnamese documents as the “Red Solution,” it was an attempt from June to September 1990 by the Vietnamese Communist Party leadership to reconcile with the Chinese Communist Party and defend Communism against what they feared to be a Western imperialist conspiracy to rollback Communism around the world. The Red Solution proposed to force the PRK government to form a secret coalition with the Khmer Rouge and exclude the non-Communist factions from real power in the new Cambodian government. This initiative only failed because the Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the PRK government, and eventually China itself refused to go along with the plan. Despite its failure, the Red Solution demonstrates clearly that the path from the Sixth Party Congress to Vietnam’s acceptance of the Paris Peace Agreement was far more contested than scholars previously thought.

While the dominant narrative has covered the internal economic pressures quite well, it presents an incomplete picture of how external changes affected Vietnam’s foreign policy. It is true that the decline in Soviet support made Vietnam’s position in Cambodia more tenuous. But this factor alone was not decisive, seeing as Vietnam unilaterally withdrew all of its troops from

³¹⁴ David W. P. Elliott, *Changing Worlds: Vietnam’s Transition from the Cold War to Globalization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 112–13; “The Red Solution; Cambodia,” *The Economist*, August 17, 1991, Academic OneFile; Huy Đức, *Bên Thắng Cuộc*, 2012, Chương 11; Path, *Vietnam’s Strategic Thinking during the Third Indochina War*, 2020, 200.

Cambodia by September 1989 before the major cuts in Soviet aid, without a political solution being reached until October 23, 1991. Much more important was how the end of the Cold War removed other powers' threat perception of Vietnam as a conduit for Soviet expansion, thus breaking the diplomatic stalemate that had persisted since 1979 and allowing for a multilateral solution that would preserve the PRK and limit the Khmer Rouge. The Soviet retreat from leadership of the world Communist movement and the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe also compelled Communist Party leaders in Vietnam and China to draw closer together for political support and protection. The result was a Sino-Vietnamese rapprochement, notwithstanding the failure of the Red Solution. As the Vietnam-backed PRK and China-backed Khmer Rouge held the bulk of military power in Cambodia after 1989, their sponsors' mutual decision to come to the negotiating table proved to be the elusive keystone in moving negotiations forward. Meanwhile, even though the end of the Cold War did not lead to major political changes within Vietnam, the path that the new leaders of Vietnam chose was fundamentally informed by a certain reading of Vietnam's priorities in the changing international order. Had Vietnamese leaders arrived at a different assessment, it might well have led to a very different outcome, as the enduring stalemate on the Korean peninsula demonstrates. In providing this more complete account of Vietnamese grand strategy, I hope that this chapter will prove useful to those who wish to understand the genesis of the present-day regional order in Southeast Asia, or to draw lessons from the arduous peace process that nevertheless led to a multilateral and lasting political solution for the Cambodian conflict.

Ruler of the East no more

It is only in recognizing the role of threat perceptions as the main stumbling block preventing a political solution to the Cambodian conflict that we can fully appreciate the importance of developments in Soviet grand strategy that radically changed these perceptions in the mid-late 1980s. As early as March 24, 1982, the seeds for a Sino-Soviet rapprochement were planted during a speech delivered by Soviet General-Secretary Leonid Brezhnev in Tashkent. Seeking to break the Sino-American entente in the midst of escalating tensions with the U.S., Brezhnev declared that the Soviets “have never considered normal the state of hostility and estrangement between [China and the U.S.S.R.],” adding that his government respected China’s sovereignty over Taiwan.³¹⁵ Though Chinese Paramount Leader Deng Xiaoping responded positively, the first Sino-Soviet dialogue on October 5-9 ended in failure, with the Cambodian conflict and Soviet presence in Vietnam acting as the greatest barriers to Sino-Soviet rapprochement.³¹⁶

Brezhnev’s passing on November 10, 1982, sparked off over two years of unstable leadership in the Soviet Union, as his successors Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko quickly followed him to the grave. At Chernenko’s funeral on March 13, 1985, the new Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev made a symbolic decision to move Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Chinese Premier Li Peng to the front of the procession, at the expense of a visibly perturbed Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher of Great Britain. Though often forgotten today in light of his

³¹⁵ Frederic A. Moritz, “Brezhnev Plays His ‘China Card,’” *Christian Science Monitor*, March 25, 1982, <http://www.csmonitor.com/1982/0325/032540.html>.

³¹⁶ Radchenko, *Unwanted Visionaries*, 34–50.

much more prominent legacy in shaping modern Europe, Gorbachev was in fact an early believer that the history of the 21st century would be written in Asia. Accordingly, his earliest speeches as General Secretary actually placed Asia as his foreign policy priority.³¹⁷

The most important of these by far was delivered at Vladivostok on July 29, 1986.³¹⁸ Interspersing his speech with periodic assurances that his audacious pronouncements had won broad backing at the 27th Communist Party of the Soviet Union Congress, Gorbachev called for an Asian version of the 1975 Helsinki Agreement to form the basis for a new cooperative regional order.³¹⁹ While asserting that it was “impermissible to... decide the future of [Cambodia] in the distant capitals or even the United Nations,” Gorbachev acknowledged that “much depends on the normalization of Sino-Vietnamese relations” and expressed “interest in seeing friendly dialogue resumed and the unnecessary suspicion and distrust removed” between these two powers. He also claimed that there were “no insurmountable obstacles in the way of establishing mutually acceptable relations between the countries of Indochina and ASEAN.”³²⁰ Other bold policies outlined in this speech included blocking nuclear proliferation in the Asia-Pacific; initiating talks with the aim of a commensurate “radical reduction of armed forces and conventional armaments in Asia to limits of reasonable sufficiency”; discussions on confidence-building measures and non-use of force; and an invitation to Chinese leaders to enter into discussions “at any time and at any level” aimed at “establishing an atmosphere of good-

³¹⁷ Radchenko, 2.

³¹⁸ The city’s name in Russian means “Ruler of the East”.

³¹⁹ Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev, *Speech by Mikhail Gorbachev in Vladivostok, July 28, 1986* (Moscow: Novosti Press Agency, 1986), 34.

³²⁰ Gorbachev, 35.

neighborliness.” Saving the best for last, Gorbachev closed by announcing the beginning of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan.³²¹

Gorbachev’s Vladivostok speech was meant to signal a renewed Soviet interest in tapping the vast population and resources of its Asian holdings in tandem with better relations with its Asian neighbors in order to reinvigorate the Soviet economy. But like Gorbachev’s other grand programs, it had precisely the opposite effect, marking the beginning of the end of Soviet power in Asia. The late 1980s saw his attempts at political (*glasnost*) and economic (*perestroika*) reforms at home throw the burdensome Soviet bureaucracy into a tailspin. Increasingly, the Soviet Union found itself unwilling to maintain expensive commitments abroad, including in Indochina, especially as its relationship with the West and China continued to warm. By mid-1989, right after Gorbachev’s landmark visit to Beijing during the Tiananmen Crisis on May 15-18 to finalize the normalization of Sino-Soviet relations, Communist governments in Eastern Europe began breaking away from the Soviet fold.³²² After months of coups and counter-coups, the Soviet Union itself formally dissolved on December 26, 1991.³²³ The Soviet bear would threaten Asia no more.

Peacemakers, peacemakers everywhere

³²¹ Gorbachev, 29, 36–37.

³²² Bill Keller Times Special To The New York, “GORBACHEV VISITS BEIJING FOR START OF SUMMIT TALKS,” *The New York Times*, May 15, 1989, sec. World, <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/05/15/world/gorbachev-visits-beijing-for-start-of-summit-talks.html>.

³²³ David R. Marples, *The Collapse of the Soviet Union: 1985-1991*, 1st ed, Seminar Studies in History (Harlow, England ; New York: Pearson : Longman, 2004).

On the eve of Gorbachev's landmark speech at Vladivostok, the Vietnamese-PRK position and the CGDK position were very far apart. The latest CGDK proposal of March 17, 1986 called for a two-phase withdrawal of Vietnamese forces, interspersed by negotiations between the PRK and CGDK to "establish a quadripartite coalition government of Kampuchea [consisting of the PRK and the three members of the CGDK]," with elections held under the supervision of a U.N. observer group. Cambodia would be a neutral country and sign "a non-aggression and peaceful coexistence treaty and... establish economic and trade relations" with Vietnam.³²⁴ At that time, the Vietnam-PRK position rejected any coalition government to include the Khmer Rouge. Drawing from the legacy of the 1973 Paris Peace Agreements, Vietnam was highly skeptical of the longevity of any coalition of such bitter enemies, and worried that if given the opportunity to break out of the K5 perimeter, the Khmer Rouge might win the ensuing civil war.³²⁵ While their suspicion on the first score was correct – the civil war did break out again after the 1993 elections, dragging on until Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot's death in 1998 – their assessment of the Khmer Rouge's military strength ultimately proved to be exaggerated. But Vietnam was hardly alone in its strategic appraisal: U.S. Senator Bob Kerrey once testified that "every time [the Khmer Rouge] come down the Cardamon Mountains a few miles, everybody thinks they are about ready to take over Phnom Penh."³²⁶ From October 1987 onwards, however, the PRK's growing strength

³²⁴ Cambodia, ed., *The Eight-Point Peace Proposal of the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea and the International Support* (Democratic Kampuchea: Dept. of Press and Information of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea, 1987), 1–2.

³²⁵ "Báo Cáo Tuần Của Bộ Ngoại Giao về Tình Hình Thế Giới và Công Tác Đối Ngoại Của Việt Nam Năm [Weekly Reports of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the International Situation and the External Activities of Vietnam in the year] 1985-1986; 1992-1993," 8.

³²⁶ United Nations, ed., *Proposed Structure for the Agreements on a Comprehensive Political Settlement of the Cambodia Conflict: (final Draft Texts)* ([New York: United Nations], 1990), Annex, 35; Raoul Marc Jennar, *A Dangerous Gamble: An Analysis of the "Comprehensive Political Settlement" Worked out by the Five Permanent Members of the UN Security Council to End the Conflict in Cambodia* (Jodoigne-Souveraine, Belgium: [s.n], 1990).

emboldened Vietnam and PRK to call for a bipartite coalition of the PRK and CGDK.³²⁷ The two positions had thus converged somewhat, but deep distrust and a proliferation of preconditions to talks from both sides stalled progress.

Throughout this time, the Vietnamese tried without success to entice Prince Sihanouk to leave the CGDK, knowing that he was the main reason for that government's international legitimacy, and that the Khmer Rouge's position would be significantly weakened without him. On Director-General for Asia and Oceania at the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs Claude Martin's visit to Hanoi in 1986, Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach told him that "if Sihanouk should like to return to his country, the President Heng Samrin would love to greet him."³²⁸ They did come close to success on one occasion. On 29 May 1987, Vietnamese Ambassador to North Korea Nguyen Giap relayed to Hanoi an urgent top-secret message from his Palestinian Liberation Organization counterpart Mustafa al-Safarini in Pyongyang. Prince Norodom Sihanouk had for the first time intimated to his good friend al-Safarini his disillusionment with the Khmer Rouge, who routinely turned their guns on his forces, and expressed willingness to meet with Prime Minister Hun Sen to begin peace talks that would bring about a political solution to the Cambodian conflict and politically isolate the Khmer Rouge. Unfortunately, at the last moment, Sihanouk got cold feet and the breakthrough meeting never took place.³²⁹

³²⁷ Berry, *Cambodia From Red to Blue*, 13.

³²⁸ Claude Martin, *La diplomatie n'est pas un dîner de gala* (La Tour d'Aigues: Éditions de l'Aube, 2018), 509.

³²⁹ Nguyễn Giáp, "Đề Án, Báo Cáo Của Bộ Ngoại Giao về Việc Chủ Tịch Chính Phủ LH Campuchia Dân Chủ Sihanouk Đề Nghị Gặp Gỡ Chủ Tịch CHND Campuchia Hunxén Tháng 7 Năm 1987 và Chủ Trương Của Việt Nam," May 1987, Phòng Văn phòng Bộ Ngoại giao, Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archive.

The Soviet Union's gradual retreat from Asia from 1986 onwards triggered an outpouring of creative proposals from the Western powers and ASEAN countries to make the long-awaited negotiations a reality. The first major initiative to break the deadlock came from Indonesia, the *primus inter pares* of ASEAN. On his visit to Ho Chi Minh City on July 27-29, 1987, Indonesian Foreign Minister Mochtar Kusumaatmadja and Nguyen Co Thach laid the groundwork for what became known as the Jakarta Informal Meetings (JIM), where the four Cambodian factions could sit together for the first time "without preconditions or labels" and hash out their differences. Kusumaatmadja's enthusiasm for the project was critical in pushing through this proposal over resistance from Thailand and Singapore at the August 16th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Bangkok.³³⁰

JIM I finally took place successfully on July 24-28, 1988, with the four Cambodian parties' discussions in the morning and joined by Vietnam, Laos, and the ASEAN countries in the afternoon.³³¹ Sensing the other two CGDK factions' desire to break away from their leadership, the Khmer Rouge tried to scupper the working group that was set up to plan the next round of negotiations. Once again an Indonesian Foreign Minister, this time the newly appointed Ali Alatas, was the hero of the hour when he also made a trip to Vietnam to revive the talks over Khmer Rouge protestations. Not to be outdone by the Indonesians, other nations also sought to imprint their influence on the negotiations. Throughout the Indochina Wars, Thailand had been the ASEAN country at the front line. Its forces clashed intermittently with Vietnamese forces along the Cambodian border, and its acquiescence to the existence of CGDK sanctuaries on its territory

³³⁰ Amitav Acharya, Pierre Lizée, and Sorpong Peou, eds., *Cambodia - The 1989 Paris Peace Conference: Background Analysis and Documents* (Millwood, N.Y: Kraus International Publications, 1991), xxxvii.

³³¹ Haas, *Genocide by Proxy*, 1991, 131-32.

was the lifeline for the CGDK. The significance of Thai Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhaven's announcement in late 1988 that he wished to turn Indochina "from a battlefield to a trading market," his Foreign Minister Siddhi Savetsila's visit to Hanoi in January 1989, and most importantly his invitation later that month to the PRK leader Hun Sen to come to Bangkok for a summit cannot be overemphasized. When chastised by Deng Xiaoping for his overtures, Chatichai responded pointedly that while China could afford to wait ten years for a solution in Cambodia, Thailand could not.³³² To be sure, this did not mean that Thai leaders were ready simply to accede to the Vietnamese and PRK position in exchange for peace. When former U.S. Secretary of State Edmund Muskie visited Bangkok as part of his fact-finding tour in summer 1989, Foreign Minister Siddhi Savestila requested that the Americans not move forward with normalization with Vietnam or recognize its withdrawal from Cambodia so that the Vietnamese "will tell Hun Sen to be more flexible and they will call for a comprehensive political solution."³³³ But Thailand's sudden willingness to negotiate with the PRK in early 1989 was very important in convincing the more belligerent ASEAN countries to come to the negotiation table, and cannot be explained without referring to its diminishing threat perception of Vietnam in the context of the Soviets' global retreat.

JIM II, held on February 16-21, 1989, was seen by the Vietnamese as another major turning point in their quest to isolate the Khmer Rouge. From the first day, Vietnam and Laos focused on removing any lingering threat perception other leaders might still hold by expressing

³³² Becker, *When the War Was Over*, 1998, 480–83.

³³³ Edmund S. Muskie and Center for National Policy (U.S.), eds., *Exploring Cambodia: Issues and Reality in a Time of Transition: Findings and Recommendations from the Visit to Thailand, Vietnam, and Cambodia Undertaken by Former U.S. Senator and Secretary of State Edmund S. Muskie* (Washington, D.C. : Lanham, MD: Center for National Policy ; Distributed by arrangement with UPA, 1990), 1.

their willingness to accede to the 1976 Bali Declaration, unambiguously recognizing the validity of the ASEAN regional order. In contrast, the Khmer Rouge's attempt to derail the multilateral talks on February 20 served only to further entrench their isolation when the other leaders responded by simply holding private one-on-one meetings on the side. The final communiqué reflected the great progress toward a political compromise: other than the Khmer Rouge who expressed their reservations, all other parties expressed their support.³³⁴

Building on this momentum, France joined Indonesia in co-hosting the First Paris International Conference on Cambodia (PICC) on July 30 – August 30, 1989, which brought all the Cambodian parties, regional countries, and the P5 to the negotiating table for the first time. Claude Martin was particularly conscious of France's colonial legacy in Indochina, and ambitious to restore French influence in the region by engineering the return of Prince Sihanouk, whom he had met in Beijing during the latter's exile and developed a personal friendship.³³⁵ Thus with the ink hardly dry on the U.S.-Soviet Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty and Solidarność celebrating their triumph in Poland's first free elections, many hoped that the last major Cold War conflict in Southeast Asia would soon reach a conclusion via the negotiating table and the ballot box as well.

One government, two voices

³³⁴ "Báo Cáo về Hội Nghị Không Chính Thức Giacacta Lần Thứ 2 (Jim 2) Từ 19 Đến 21/2/1989 [Report on the Jakarta Informal Meetings II (JIM II) from 19 to 21 February 1989]," February 24, 1989, Phòng Văn phòng Bộ Ngoại giao, Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archive.

³³⁵ Becker, *When the War Was Over*, 1998, 450–52.

On the surface, it seemed that Vietnam had every reason to cooperate at the PICC, given its newfound commitment to economic liberalization and a new cooperative regional order. As Le Duan lay on his deathbed in July 1986, four Departments of the Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) – China, North America, Economic, and Foreign Policy – began a two-month long study on the achievements and shortcomings of Vietnam’s foreign policy in the previous decade at the request of the upcoming Sixth Party Congress. The resulting “Report on the International Situation and Our People’s Struggle in the Field of Foreign Policy” noted that the period since 1975 had been characterized by “a new scientific and industrial revolution, while the globalization of international economic life has attained a high level, the degree of interdependence has elevated, the global economy has truly become a unified whole of which our own economy is an inseparable part.” It was one of the first official documents to identify Vietnam’s failure to “attach our own economic development to these new trends” as the root cause of the country’s backwardness.³³⁶

The resultant discussions at the Party Congress led to a sweeping series of domestic and foreign policy reforms called *Doi Moi* (Renewal). At home, the Party sought far-reaching liberalization and decentralization of the economy, while maintaining its iron grip on power.³³⁷ Abroad, the Party Congress reemphasized Resolution 32-NQ/TW, which made the modernization and globalization of Vietnam’s economy a priority, even while noting somberly that “peaceful

³³⁶ “Tài Liệu Nghiên Cứu Của Vụ: Trung Quốc, Bắc Mỹ, Tổng Hợp Kinh Tế, Tổng Hợp Đối Ngoại về Tình Hình Kinh Tế và Chính Trị Thế Giới Phục vụ Cho Đợt Thảo Luận Nghị Quyết 32 Của Bộ Chính Trị Tại Bộ Ngoại Giao [Research Papers of the Departments: China, North America, Economic Affairs, External Affairs on the International Economic and Political Situation to facilitate the Discussion Session for Resolution 32 of the Politburo at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs],” 9 1986, 37–8, Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archive.

³³⁷ Adam Fforde, *Vietnamese State Industry and the Political Economy of Commercial Renaissance: Dragon’s Tooth or Curate’s Egg?*, Asian Studies Series (Oxford: Chandos, 2007), 193–211.

coexistence is only a change in the method of struggle and does not change the fierceness of the class struggle.”³³⁸ The primacy of economic over political objectives was further emphasized in Resolution 13-NQ/TW of the Politburo in 1988, which stated that “the greatest interest of our Party and people lies in strengthening and protecting the peace in order to focus on economic development.”³³⁹

Vietnam’s military posture also hinted at a genuine willingness to work toward a solution. As the occupation dragged on, Vietnamese leaders became increasingly concerned that the presence of Vietnamese troops on Cambodian soil not only made it difficult for the PRK government to gain popular support in parts of the countryside, but also fostered a mindset of dependency on Vietnam. Wishing to send an urgent message to Hun Sen’s government as well as its critics, as early as 1985 Vietnam had announced that it would withdraw all of its forces from Cambodia by 1990.³⁴⁰ By 1988, three quarters of Vietnamese forces had left Cambodia. On January 6, 1989, in a show of goodwill ahead of JIM II, Vietnam and the PRK jointly moved up the date of departure for the final 50,000 Vietnamese combat troops in Cambodia to September 30

³³⁸ “Nghị Quyết Của Bộ Chính Trị, Ban Bí Thư [Resolutions of the Politburo and Secretariat from... to...] Từ 1984 Đến 1990, 1993,” 90, 1993 1984, 28–52, Phòng Văn phòng Bộ Ngoại giao, Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archive.

³³⁹ Nguyen An Le, “Đường Lối Đối Ngoại Của Đảng Cộng Sản Việt Nam Thời Kỳ Đổi Mới [The Foreign Policy Pathway of the Vietnamese Communist Party in the Renovation Era]” (Ministry of Defense, January 25, 2015), http://www.mod.gov.vn/wps/portal!/ut/p/b1/vZPLbqNAEEW_JR-AaMAYvGzejaGB5mFgYwHBGNsYgm0wfH2YjDTSLJjsZIK1aulWnXtbKjqlyzq9ZkNdZfe6vWaXX-90vdcgJqLEQCAyGgCIY4OVpSAWOBy9o-NT8rSUm10pMHLHDZp4zR3tWwmNlnr4xwiZpjTtI0KujYJ1kamNKrHfDtlp2Kh9HGdUJ_Zp64QPvy9QbFBwqC_3uHYx8M4o8x7BgcieCQ8itgl71cNR6qmBMJPWITuG65Kp3VO9Va7nWI9SvSpeFtPJYhp8UhB8I-n3vKxDYyVYAliWzgmEjZBsPI4DkPv-T9IPyVcbPgRfWfwb4giGuEBkmecijgFEoJNFHHzqYsvSAR2D1d4_TR2azzM5zcS2hQQEOUFMyDJYUWlCqNxt4zOByrJAZUy7XzRBwQZBOGECuK8RCSUIE4tfUn0N9H8aKIP_DdQdQwPIDEzedzx2Qf9wwwu2_B5p0WI3afDnsyEo6SWnRqELIMDa66wtFfRmQv9HyLAovbVaOzfOVsp63wTbUfK-HNpx82wu3LBOXeULVQBZiDUt-vb9XMLwqRz4d82n3NJ22We9ZNcKeqwuGeixkPtVOB2CIOOfhIkWIm4f8sdKJRc5is7prEydAW7_IAT7M_u7BuF3fwPmofbz3QmOjbUq6a4attSbGHP_p8h1_EgzN/dl4/d5/L2dBISevZ0FBIS9nQSEh/

³⁴⁰ Haas, *Genocide by Proxy*, 1991, 148.

that year.³⁴¹ With the tide of the negotiations turning against the Khmer Rouge, there seemed every reason for Vietnam to pressure its PRK ally to make significant concessions in order to turn the page on its Cambodian involvement.

To everyone's surprise, the Vietnamese-Laos-PRK negotiating position at the PICC was inflexible and even introduced new complications. Hun Sen suddenly insisted that "the signatory parties and the States condemn and reject the genocidal policy and practices which the Cambodian people endured in a recent past," to permanently disarm the Khmer Rouge, and to punish its leaders.³⁴² With China and the Khmer Rouge refusing to sign any document containing the word "genocide," Vietnam and the PRK rejected the Thais' proposed compromise wording of "policies and practices of a recent past."³⁴³ Vietnam and the PRK also refused to have the International Control Mechanism replace the PRK as an interim government before elections. These were the principal areas of disagreement leading to the PICC's ending on August 30 without an agreement.³⁴⁴ Despite this, Vietnam kept its promise of a unilateral troop withdrawal the following month.³⁴⁵ While some European countries like France and Germany were willing to consider resuming aid to Vietnam in 1989 through the IMF when the Cold War was ending and Vietnamese troops had already withdrawn from Cambodia, the U.S. pressured its European allies to drop these proposals. When they refused, the Americans vetoed the IMF loans outright.³⁴⁶

³⁴¹ Nguyễn and Vú, *Nhà Ngoại Giao Nguyễn Cơ Thạch [The Diplomat Nguyen Co Thach]*, 282.

³⁴² Acharya, Lizée, and Peou, *Cambodia - The 1989 Paris Peace Conference*, 170.

³⁴³ Haas, *Genocide by Proxy*, 1991, 199.

³⁴⁴ Acharya, Lizée, and Peou, *Cambodia - The 1989 Paris Peace Conference*, 484.

³⁴⁵ "Chương Trình và Báo Cáo Công Tác Tháng, Quý, Năm Của Vụ Châu Á 3 Năm [Program and Reports on Monthly, Quarterly, and Yearly Activities of the three years] 1986; 1990," 1990 1986, 25–41, Phòng Văn phòng Bộ Ngoại giao, Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archive.

³⁴⁶ James Baker III, "Letter to Roland Dumas," September 22, 1989, *Asie-Océanie 1987-91*, French Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives; Acharya, Lizée, and Peou, *Cambodia - The 1989 Paris Peace*

So why were Vietnam and the PRK not as cooperative as they could have been at the PICC?

There are several theories. For Michael Leifer, their insistence on the genocide clause shows how desperately Vietnam wished to legitimize its decade in Cambodia and Hun Sen wished to legitimize his government.³⁴⁷ Michael Haas, on the other hand, opines that while the West had hoped for a Vietnamese-PRK capitulation at Paris, Hanoi was still committed to a postwar environment where the PRK would remain a dominant force in Cambodian politics.³⁴⁸ Taking a more cynical view, Acharya, Lizée, and Peou dismiss any pre-Conference hopes of a diplomatic solution as misguided given the Cambodian factions' mutual distrust and unwillingness to share power.³⁴⁹

While these assessments all have their merits, they are concerned mainly with the specifics of the negotiations, and miss out on the bigger picture. By not having access to internal Vietnamese documents, they fail to appreciate the sheer shock and fear Communist Party leaders in Vietnam felt as they watched the crisis of Eastern European Communism unfold. A rift was forming between the more conservative Communist Party and the more liberal Ministry of Foreign Affairs. An examination of the Politburo's revisions of the March 1989 Ministry of Foreign Affairs proposal for Vietnam's strategy at the PICC yields some valuable insights. The MoFA and Politburo agreed on most points, including that the best-case scenario was for Hun Sen and Sihanouk to come to a mutual accommodation at the expense of the KPNLF and Khmer Rouge.

Conference; United Nations and Paris Conference on Cambodia, eds., *Agreements on a Comprehensive Political Settlement of the Cambodia Conflict, Paris, 23 October 1991* (New York: United Nations Department of Public Information, 1992).

³⁴⁷ Michael Leifer, "Cambodia in Regional and Global Politics" in Klintworth, *Vietnam's Withdrawal from Cambodia*, 13–14.

³⁴⁸ Haas, *Genocide by Proxy*, 1991, 206–8.

³⁴⁹ Acharya, Lizée, and Peou, *Cambodia - The 1989 Paris Peace Conference*, xlviii.

Crucially, however, the Politburo added that “we will maintain firmly the principle that the PRK government not be disbanded [in the interim period]” and “resolutely refuse to accept any international peacekeeping force”. It was precisely these two points, along with the issue of genocide recognition, which made it impossible for Vietnam to come to terms with its counterparts at the PICC.³⁵⁰

What had caused such a divergence between the Politburo and the MoFA over the role of the U.N. and the need to preserve a friendly Communist government in Cambodia? As Jonathan Haslam has observed in his famous study of Soviet foreign policy, in a Communist bureaucracy the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is often the most liberal branch of government.³⁵¹ The nature of its work means that the MoFA’s officer corps tends to be the most cosmopolitan, most receptive to cooperative solutions involving international organizations such as the U.N., and most disposed to see change as opportunity rather than challenge. The Politburo, on the other hand, is the executive office of the Vietnam Communist Party. Like all ruling parties, it is primarily concerned with questions of power and political survival. Party leaders were understandably the ones who felt most acutely the threat to their way of life at the twilight of Communism in Eastern Europe. As Graham Allison has theorized, in every nation’s bureaucracy there are differing policy preferences among a state’s foreign policy decision-making bodies, requiring a degree of bureaucratic bargaining to push through policies.³⁵² But this political reality

³⁵⁰ “Đề Án và Kế Hoạch Đấu Tranh Ngoại Giao về Vấn Đề CPC và ĐNA Gửi Bộ Chính Trị Tháng 2 và 3/1989 [Proposal and Plan for the Diplomatic Struggle on the Cambodian Issue and Southeast Asia to the Politburo in February and March 1989],” Autumn 1989, Phòng Văn phòng Bộ Ngoại giao, Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archive.

³⁵¹ Jonathan Haslam, *The Soviet Union and the Struggle for Collective Security in Europe, 1933-39* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1984), 27–51.

³⁵² Graham T. Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2nd ed (New York: Longman, 1999).

is anathema to the Communist conception of the monolithic state, forcing official historians to paper over all such internal disagreements, to the detriment of a proper understanding of the dynamics of Vietnamese policy-making.³⁵³ One of the aims of this chapter is to rectify this shortcoming and recognize the profound bureaucratic disagreements that are at work even today in the making of Vietnamese foreign policy.

The rise and fall of the Red Solution

The Vietnamese Communist Party's increasing apprehensions led to the adoption of Resolution 08A-NQ/HNTW on "The state of the socialist countries, the sabotage of the imperialists and the urgent duty of our Party" at the Eighth Conference of the Central Executive Committee on March 27, 1990. Resolution 08A acknowledged that the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe was in part self-inflicted by misguided economic policies and reform efforts that were too radical and destabilizing.³⁵⁴ However, it also alleged that the opportunistic "imperialists"³⁵⁵ had come up with a concerted plan to "promote the economic and social crisis, pushing us towards a political crisis, step by step turning our society to the capitalist system, making us dependent on capitalism."³⁵⁶ Predicting that the "imperialist and reactionary elements"

³⁵³ Lưu, *Ngoại Giao Việt Nam [Vietnamese Diplomacy], 1945-1995*; Nguyễn, *Ngoại Giao Việt Nam [Vietnamese Diplomacy], 1945-2000*.

³⁵⁴ 08A-NQ/HNTW "Tình hình các nước xã hội chủ nghĩa, sự phá hoại của chủ nghĩa đế quốc và nhiệm vụ cấp bách của Đảng ta [The state of the socialist countries, the sabotage of the imperialists and the urgent duty of our Party]", Đảng cộng sản Việt Nam, *Văn Kiện Đảng Toàn Tập* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Chính trị quốc gia, 1998), vols. 50, 63–7, http://dangcongsan.vn/cpv/Modules/News/ListObjectNews.aspx?co_id=30063.

³⁵⁵ Referring to the Western governments.

³⁵⁶ 08A-NQ/HNTW "Tình hình các nước xã hội chủ nghĩa, sự phá hoại của chủ nghĩa đế quốc và nhiệm vụ cấp bách của Đảng ta [The state of the socialist countries, the sabotage of the imperialists and the urgent duty of our Party]", Đảng cộng sản Việt Nam, *Văn Kiện Đảng Toàn Tập*, vols. 50, 75–6.

will “make use of this situation to create divisions between the three Indochinese countries, putting greater pressure on our country and the other Indochinese countries to resolve the Cambodian problem in a manner advantageous to them,” Resolution 08A recommended “strengthen[ing] the special relationship between the [Communist] Parties and peoples of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia on the basis of mutual respect and assistance.” Finally, it called for concerted efforts to normalize relations with China for, after all, “China is a socialist country.”³⁵⁷

Vietnam and China had made contact at various levels throughout the 1980s, but by early 1990 little had been achieved. After the 1979 war, their border remained highly militarized and sporadic fighting continued. While Vietnam’s 1986 Sixth Party Congress emphasized the need for “negotiations to solve both immediate and long-term problems in the relationship between the two countries,” by 1987 a Chinese commentator observed that “Vietnam has taken no practical steps towards resuming normal relations with China.”³⁵⁸ In 1988, a major engagement at the Johnson South Reef of the disputed Spratly Islands resulted in the death of 77 Vietnamese sailors and China’s takeover of six additional reefs and atolls, leading Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach to conclude that “the Chinese action is not only aimed at conquering a part of our territory, but also is part of a broad and long-term strategic plan to become the hegemon of Southeast Asia and to control the international shipping route connecting the Pacific and Indian Oceans.”³⁵⁹ What talks that did take place were ineffectual. On May 8-10, 1989, at the second round of the normalization talks at the Deputy-Ministerial level, the Chinese avoided discussing any issue

³⁵⁷ Đảng cộng sản Việt Nam, vols. 50, 73-84.

³⁵⁸ Evans, *Red Brotherhood at War*, 1990, 257–58.

³⁵⁹ Nguyễn Cơ Thạch, “Báo Cáo Tháng, Quý Của Bộ Ngoại Giao về Tình Hình Thế Giới và Công Tác Đối Ngoại Của Việt Nam Năm 1977 – 1978; 1983; 1986; 1991 – 1992; 1996, [Monthly, Quarterly Reports of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the International Situation and the External Activities of Vietnam in the year]” 139–40.

other than Cambodia, insisting on a role for the Khmer Rouge in the settlement, whereas the Vietnamese side maintained their stance that “the internal affairs of Cambodia should be resolved by Cambodians.” The Chinese declined to meet for a third round.³⁶⁰ But the normalization of Sino-Soviet relations in May 1989 was seen by the MoFA as “having a basically positive impact” on Vietnam’s position, giving hope that normalization of Sino-Vietnamese relations could be finalized after Vietnam’s withdrawal from Cambodia that September.³⁶¹

Until mid-1990, while the Communist Party set the principles and directions for Vietnamese foreign policy, the MoFA still maintained a virtual monopoly over policy implementation. But by mid-1990, the urgency of the global crisis of Communism and disappointment with the MoFA’s slow progress in the normalization talks with China led General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh and Minister of Defense Le Duc Anh to take matters into their own hands. The sluggish negotiations were given new life at a meeting on June 5, 1990, between Linh and Chinese Ambassador to Vietnam Zhang Dewei at the ornate Party Central Committee Guesthouse, a mere stone’s throw from Ba Dinh Square, exactly one year after the famous photograph of a man halting a column of tanks on a similar boulevard in Beijing was taken. Among those in attendance was Nguyen Co Thach. Even though the minutes of the meeting do not recount the expressions worn by participants, it is safe to assume that even Thach’s famously cheerful demeanor would have betrayed profound concern as the meeting wore on.³⁶²

³⁶⁰ “67-VP/NG Báo Cáo về Vòng 2 Đàm Phán Việt-Trung Cấp Thứ Trưởng Họp Ở Bắc Kinh Từ 8-10/5/1989 [Report on the Second Round of Sino-Vietnamese Negotiations at the Vice Ministerial Level in Beijing from 8-10 May 1989],” May 12, 1989, Phòng Văn phòng Bộ Ngoại giao, Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archive.

³⁶¹ “Báo Cáo về Cuộc Gặp Cấp Cao Xô-Trung Tại TQ Từ 15-18/5/1989 [Report on the Sino-Soviet Summit in China from 15-18 May 1989],” May 21, 1989, Phòng Văn phòng Bộ Ngoại giao, Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archive.

³⁶² Nguyễn and Vú, *Nhà Ngoại Giao Nguyễn Cơ Thạch [The Diplomat Nguyen Co Thach]*, 47.

After exchanging fond reminiscences on the golden days of Sino-Vietnamese solidarity against the U.S. in the 1960s, Linh expressed concern that “the imperialists are dipping their hairy hands into the Socialist countries.” He cited the fall of Communist rule in Poland and former U.S. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski’s prediction that “by the end of this century, or the beginning of the next, Socialism will have vanished.” “We need to help each other,” concurred Zhang. He revealed that at 86, Deng Xiaoping “is now unable to maintain any post in the Party or government.” This was an important development, as Deng’s personal disdain for what he called the “ungrateful and arrogant” Vietnamese had been a major stumbling block to normalization of relations.³⁶³ “The Soviet Union may be the fortress of Socialism, but it is now facing many problems,” Linh intimated. “We want to discuss with real Communists the defense of Socialism. During the Tiananmen Incident, you comrades have dealt with the problem with determination and resolution.³⁶⁴ I am ready to make a trip to China to visit China’s top leaders to restore our amicable relations. The Imperialists’ plot is against the international Socialist movement, therefore true Communists of our two countries need to exchange our experiences.”³⁶⁵

The conversation shifted to Cambodia. It quickly became clear that despite the foregoing pleasantries, a decade of animosity and distrust still made it difficult for either leader to state

³⁶³ Xiaoming Zhang, “China’s 1979 War with Vietnam: A Reassessment,” *The China Quarterly* 184 (December 2005): 851–874, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741005000536>.

³⁶⁴ On June 4, 1989, Chinese troops forcibly cleared the pro-democracy protests at Tiananmen Square in Beijing, leading to the arrests, injury, and deaths of thousands of activists. See: Kelly Barth, ed., *The Tiananmen Square Massacre, At Issue in History* (San Diego: Greenhaven Press/Thomson Gale, 2003).

³⁶⁵ “Biên bản tiếp xúc giữa đ/c TBT Nguyễn Văn Linh với đại sứ TQ tại HN Trương Đức Duy ngày 5/6/90 và một số cuộc tiếp xúc giữa Trợ lý BT NG TQ Từ Đôn Tín với các đ/c lãnh đạo Đảng và Nhà nước VN 6/1990 [Minutes of the meeting between Comrade General-Secretary Nguyen Van Linh receiving the Chinese Ambassador to Vietnam Zhang Dejie on June 5, 1990 at the Party Central Committee Guesthouse, No. 1 Hoang Van Thu Avenue]” in Nguyễn Đình Bảng, “Biên Bản Tiếp Xúc Giữa Đ/c TBT Nguyễn Văn Linh Với Đại Sứ TQ Tại HN Trương Đức Duy Ngày 5/6/90 và Một Số Cuộc Tiếp Xúc Giữa Trợ Lý BT NG TQ Từ Đôn Tín Với Các Đ/c Lãnh Đạo Đảng và Nhà Nước VN 6/1990,” 1990, 1–7, Phòng Văn phòng Bộ Ngoại giao, Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archive.

their intentions plainly. Instead, Linh began by warning Zhang that U.N.-sponsored elections would “only be to the advantage of the Western states.” Linh hoped that China would replace the Soviet Union as Vietnam’s reliable ally in the P5 deliberations over Cambodia, as he was convinced that the Americans planned to turn Cambodia into a liberal capitalist democracy, with Vietnam their next target. “If [the government of] Vietnam is toppled, there will be very big and complex repercussions.” Knowing that his proposal contrasted sharply with Vietnam’s official negotiating position, Linh admitted that “Vietnam and China need to discuss with one another because this matter cannot be mentioned publicly or via [multilateral] diplomatic channels.” Sensing a trap, Zhang quickly made clear that “a Cambodia that is independent, at peace, neutral, and enjoys friendly relations with other countries, on this matter we and Comrade Thach are in agreement.” He reiterated the Chinese principle that “no party should be eliminated, no party should gain a monopoly on power in Cambodia” and proposed that Sihanouk “exercise real power” in leading a transitional Supreme National Council (SNC). Zhang’s coyness forced Linh to finally state his position unambiguously: “There is no reason why the Khmer Communists [referring to the PRK government and the Khmer Rouge] cannot shake hands with one another. They can even shake hands with Sihanouk, much more so can they with one another.” Wholly unprepared for such a radical proposal for a secret alliance between those two sworn enemies, Zhang could only promise to relay Linh’s request directly to top Chinese leaders back home. Linh concluded by acknowledging that “from the perspective of the Foreign Ministry it is inconvenient

to speak about such matters. If we continue to fight one another it will only benefit the imperialists, and we will not be able to focus on economic development.” Thach kept silent.³⁶⁶

Zhang kept his promise. Just four days later, he was joined by Chinese Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs Xu Dunxin in Hanoi for another meeting with Linh and the Director-General of the China Department of the Vietnamese MoFA, Tran Huu Nghia. A note from the China Department described Xu as someone who despite his rank possessed even more real power over Chinese strategy in Asia than the Vice Ministers, and that his visit “has been sanctioned by the highest level of Chinese government, not the [Chinese] Ministry of Foreign Affairs,” suggesting that efforts to bypass normal diplomatic channels were mutual.³⁶⁷ Linh opened by reiterating the need for united action against the imperialists, and reminded Xu of the fact that Hun Sen himself was once a Khmer Rouge fighter. As General-Secretary, however, even Linh felt it too sensitive for him to broach the Red Solution in full, leaving the task to Le Duc Anh in a follow-up meeting. Le Duc Anh proposed that publicly both China and Vietnam should endorse the formation of an SNC comprising all four parties with Sihanouk at the head, but privately they should compel the Khmer Rouge and PRK to cooperate and undermine the other two parties’ and Sihanouk’s authority. Finally, the Vietnamese Politburo had laid down all their cards.

Scarcely had it seen the light of day than the Red Solution encountered resistance from all quarters. Unlike Thach who had kept silent on June 5, Nghia expressed his reservations about Vietnam’s ability to influence Hun Sen, prompting Xu to reply with similar doubts on China’s

³⁶⁶ Nguyễn Đình Bảng, 1–7.

³⁶⁷ “Vụ Trung Quốc Vũ Thuần gửi Lãnh đạo Bộ, 21h ngày 10 tháng 6 năm 1990 [From the China Department to the Ministry Leadership, 2100 hours on 10 June 1990]” in Nguyễn Đình Bảng, “Biên Bản Tiếp Xúc Giữa Đ/c TBT Nguyễn Văn Linh Với Đại Sứ TQ Tại HN Trương Đức Duy Ngày 5/6/90 và Một Số Cuộc Tiếp Xúc Giữa Trợ Lý BT NG TQ Từ Đôn Tín Với Các Đ/c Lãnh Đạo Đảng và Nhà Nước VN 6/1990.”

influence over the Khmer Rouge.³⁶⁸ In a private exchange at the dinner reception following that meeting, a Chinese diplomat told a Vietnamese counterpart that the Chinese MoFA just wished for a quick solution to “move on to more useful matters,” and that if at the upcoming P5 meetings on Cambodia in Paris the other powers were unanimous on having a strong U.N. role in the country, China would not veto their proposal.³⁶⁹ That very evening, just a few streets over from where Xu and Nghia were meeting, Nguyen Co Thach was hosting his own discussions with Hun Sen to formulate their own plans to undermine the Red Solution. While Linh and Zhang were discussing the Red Solution on June 5, Hun Sen and Sihanouk were meeting in Tokyo to draft a new agreement – the Tokyo Joint Communiqué – which stipulated that the SNC would feature only two parties: the PRK and CGDK. This solution would increase the PRK’s share of government to one-half and reduce the other three parties’ share to one-sixth each. Thach and Hun Sen plotted to get Thailand and Japan to pressure both the Khmer Rouge and China to accept the Tokyo Joint Communiqué.³⁷⁰ At the end of that long summer day in Hanoi, it was unclear exactly who had outmaneuvered whom.

Only when Vietnamese Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Tran Quang Co met with Xu Dunxin again on June 11-13 to discuss the specifics of Sino-Vietnam normalization did it become apparent that the Chinese had outfoxed both Nguyen Van Linh and Nguyen Co Thach. Xu endorsed neither Linh and Le Duc Anh’s Red Solution nor Hun Sen and Sihanouk’s proposal.

³⁶⁸ “Báo cáo cuộc tiếp xúc với Đại sứ Trung Quốc Trương Đức Duy và Từ Đôn Tín trưa 9/6/1990 [Report of the meeting with the Chinese Ambassador Zhang Dejie and Xu Dunxin at noon on 9 June 1990]” in *ibid.*

³⁶⁹ “Biên bản tiếp xúc, chiều tối 9/6, Trương Thanh nói với đồng chí Lê Công Phụng [Minutes of the contact during the reception on the night of 9 June, Zhang Qing speaking to comrade Le Cong Phung]” in *ibid.*

³⁷⁰ “Nội dung buổi gặp làm việc giữa đ/c Hun Sen và đ/c Nguyễn Cơ Thạch (từ 17h00 đến 18h30 ngày 09/6/1990), HN ngày 9/6/1990 [Contents of the working meeting between comrade Hun Sen and comrade Nguyen Co Thach (from 1700 hours to 1830 hours on 9 June 1990 in Hanoi)]” in *ibid.*

Instead, he stuck to the P5 solution calling for a four-party SNC and a U.N. peacekeeping force to carry out elections. Xu also refused to discuss normalization of Sino-Vietnamese relations until the Cambodian problem had been resolved. At 1600 hours on June 13, Thach and Xu finally met for the first time. The temperature in the room rose as Xu expressed his doubt over whether Tran Quang Co had relayed his messages to the Politburo, suggesting that there were in fact two voices in Vietnamese foreign policy. Thach denied this charge vehemently, retorting that “if you comrades cooperate energetically we will have one option, whereas if you do not cooperate energetically we will have to prepare for other options.” Unconvinced, Xu pointed out correctly that if Thach indeed wished to go along with the Politburo’s proposal, he should gladly accept the “four Cambodian parties” formulation and recognize the legitimacy of Khmer Rouge participation. After a sharp exchange, Thach abruptly stood up, shook hands with his guests, and stormed out of the room.³⁷¹ Xu had grasped and exploited perfectly the internal division in the Vietnamese government over Cambodia; and Thach, despite his good intentions, was left with very little room to maneuver. When both the Vietnamese Chinese sides presented their own versions of an “internal agreement” after the talks, it became apparent that their positions remained too far apart to be reconciled.³⁷² Fundamentally, Thach’s MoFA refused to yield to the Chinese side the key concession that Linh had promised and the Chinese demanded: Vietnamese acceptance, and indeed backing, of the Khmer Rouge to return to power in Cambodia.

³⁷¹ “Biên bản Bộ trưởng Nguyễn Cơ Thạch tiếp Trợ lý Ngoại trưởng Trung Quốc Từ Đôn Tín Chiều 13-6-1990 [Minutes of Minister Nguyen Co Thach receiving Assistant Minister for Foreign Affairs Xu Dunxin on the Afternoon of 13 June 1990]” in *ibid.*

³⁷² Nguyễn Đình Bảng.

After that acrimonious encounter, both the Vietnamese and Chinese Politburos became even more determined to exclude the MoFA from the normalization process. The Chinese milked the June 1990 talks with Vietnam for all they were worth, selectively leaking juicy details of the proceedings to European Economic Community leaders to humiliate the Vietnamese.³⁷³ Showing how little he thought of this so-called secret plan, in his discussions with the French, Xu Dunxin was quick to reveal all the details of the Red Solution.³⁷⁴ As Tran Quang Co's memoirs recall,

After the disagreement between Minister Nguyen Co Thach and the head of the Chinese delegation Xu Dunxin, the pressure on our Ministry increased even more: for the last half of 1990 until 1991, China ignored the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, working exclusively with the Central Commission for External Relations [of the Vietnam Communist Party]; [Chinese] Foreign Minister Qian Qichen refused to meet with Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach at the U.N. General Assembly session in New York in September 1990. Before that, the Chinese plan to internally divide us has been exposed clearly: they want us to replace our Foreign Minister.³⁷⁵

For the Chinese, neither Thach's solution, as presented by Sihanouk and Hun Sen in the Tokyo Joint Communique, nor the Red Solution was acceptable. After supporting and supplying the Khmer Rouge for over a decade, China was loath to assent to the demise of its ally and best channel of Chinese influence in the country. But they were also far more realistic than the Vietnamese Politburo in understanding that the Red Solution would have been unworkable. The collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe heralded a unipolar moment for the United States, in which it could exercise nearly preponderant power largely unchallenged. Less encumbered by

³⁷³ "Thông Báo Nội Dung TQ Nói Với Phương Tây về Cuộc Gặp Trung-Việt Ở HN [Notification of the Contents of China's Revelations to the West on the Sino-Vietnamese Meetings in Hanoi] ," June 28, 1990, Phòng Văn phòng Bộ Ngoại giao, Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archive.

³⁷⁴ "Conseil National Suprême - Négociations," 1990, Direction d'Asie et d'Océanie 1987-91, French Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives.

³⁷⁵ Trần Quang Cơ, *Hồi Ưc và Suy Nghĩ* (Hanoi: Self-published, 1993), 73, <https://anhbasam.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/hoi-ky-tran-quang-co.pdf>.

strategic considerations, American leaders increasingly realized and made known their moral desire to prevent the return of the Khmer Rouge.³⁷⁶ China at that time was still in the intermediate stage of its “Four Modernizations” program and highly vulnerable, certainly in no position to maintain a Communist Cambodia against international pressure with only the Vietnamese to help. The best that China could hope for was a U.N.-mediated settlement that would nullify Hun Sen, give some limited credence to the Khmer Rouge, and give primacy to Sihanouk, with whom the Chinese had also cultivated a symbiotic relationship for decades.³⁷⁷

After one more round of inconclusive discussions between Zhang Dewei and Tran Quang Co in August, it was apparent to Chinese leaders that no further concessions on Cambodia could be extracted.³⁷⁸ On August 29, after Chinese Prime Minister Li Peng’s tour of ASEAN to court their support for the P5 proposal and the P5 meeting at New York had both confirmed the final agenda for a comprehensive agreement on Cambodia, the long-awaited invitation finally came for Nguyen Van Linh to meet with Li and Chinese Paramount Leader Jiang Zemin.³⁷⁹ The resultant Chengdu Summit of September 3-4 was the first time the top leaderships of China and Vietnam had met in a bilateral setting since the late 1970s. It was a star-studded yet highly secretive affair, tucked away in a mountainous region far from the prying lens of the international media, which had converged on Beijing for the XI Asiad. Though the detailed contents of the discussions are still a closely guarded secret, the broad strokes are public knowledge. It was here that Vietnam

³⁷⁶ Becker, *When the War Was Over*, 1998, 504; Solomon, *Exiting Indochina*, 60–63; Sutter, *Cambodian Crisis*, 39–61.

³⁷⁷ Becker, *When the War Was Over*, 1998, 338–39.

³⁷⁸ “Báo Cáo Hai Cuộc Hội Đàm Với ĐS TQ Trương Đức Duy Tại HN về Vấn Đề CPC và Quan Hệ Hai Nước 5/8 và 13/8/1990 [Report on Two Talks with Chinese Ambassador Zhang Dejie in Hanoi on the Cambodian Issue and Bilateral Relations on 5 August and 13 August 1990],” August 1990, Phòng Văn phòng Bộ Ngoại giao, Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archive.

³⁷⁹ Trần Quang Cơ, *Hồi Ưc và Suy Nghĩ*, 73.

and China agreed on the roadmap to normalize relations.³⁸⁰ Linh had hoped that, by leaving Thach out of the proceedings, his Red Solution would stand a better chance. But he was sorely disappointed when first Li Peng, and then Jiang Zemin himself definitively rejected the Red Solution, explaining to Linh that “in the current international situation it is not beneficial for us to have the two [Khmer] Communist parties shake hands.”³⁸¹ It would be more than a year later before normal relations were finally restored between the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the People’s Republic of China on November 11, 1991, a month after the conclusion of the 1991 Paris Peace Agreement and Thach’s forcible retirement as Foreign Minister. Territorial disputes between the two countries remain heated to this day.³⁸² With the Chengdu Summit, the Vietnamese Politburo’s detour from the Paris peace process came to an ignominious end. The Vietnamese had come to Chengdu to capitulate to their erstwhile enemies, only to have the instrument of surrender rejected. They were left to pick up the pieces in Paris.

Back to Paris

As we have seen, by 1989 the receding of Soviet power had removed the *raison d’être* for the continuation of the Cambodian conflict in the eyes of all interested external powers. The Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia in September 1989 left a power vacuum in the western borderlands, inviting the Khmer Rouge to launch a new offensive. While the human effects of the renewed fighting was significant – nearly 200,000 people were displaced between 1989 and 1991

³⁸⁰ Lưu, *Ngoại Giao Việt Nam [Vietnamese Diplomacy], 1945-1995*, 514–5.

³⁸¹ Trần Quang Cơ, *Hồi ức và Suy Nghĩ*, 87.

³⁸² Lưu, *Ngoại Giao Việt Nam [Vietnamese Diplomacy], 1945-1995*, 516–9.

– the PRK army proved resilient enough to stem the Khmer Rouge advance.³⁸³ By mid-1991 it had become apparent to all that even in the absence of Vietnamese troops the Cambodian problem could not be resolved on the battlefield. The failure of the Red Solution meant that it would not be solved by a secret alliance of the two Khmer Communist parties either.

The only remaining option was a multilateral compromise. The negotiations' momentum found a necessary outlet in the November 24, 1989, proposal by the Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans for a U.N. interim administration for Cambodia, which eventually became the framework for the 1991 Paris Peace Agreement. The Australian proposal was actually the brainchild of the American Chairman of the House Sub-Committee on Asia and the Pacific Stephen Solarz, who looked to the international agreement that facilitated the South African withdrawal from South-West Africa (Namibia) as a model.³⁸⁴ But the U.S. was far too invested in the conflict to serve as an impartial broker. That is where Australia came in. Since 1981, even while participating in the isolation of Vietnam and the PRK, Australia had distinguished its position from that of ASEAN and the U.S. by derecognizing the Khmer Rouge and abstaining on the issue of Cambodia's U.N. seat. In 1984, Australian Foreign Minister Bill Hayden had broached the idea of elections as the ultimate political solution, and in 1986 he had called for the Khmer Rouge leadership to face an international tribunal for war crimes.³⁸⁵ This relatively neutral position made the Australians the more suitable party to propose the "Namibia Solution," and to act as courier for sensitive messages between the adversaries. For example, when the American

³⁸³ Ben Kiernan, *The Making of the Paris Agreement on Cambodia, 1990-91: Paper Presented at the Indochina Project Conference, Hyatt Regency, Kauai, 18-20 December 1991* ([S.l.: s.n.], 1991), 1–7.

³⁸⁴ Stephen J. Solarz, *Journeys to War & Peace: A Congressional Memoir* (UPNE, 2011), 108–11.

³⁸⁵ Berry, *Cambodia From Red to Blue*, 5–7.

Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Richard Solomon offered Vietnam the carrot of normalizing relations in exchange for Vietnam's support for the Australian proposal without having to wait for its implementation, this message had to be conveyed through the Australian Assistant Foreign Minister Michael Costello.³⁸⁶ The complementary roles the Australians and Americans played in these negotiations is an important lesson for diplomats today, showing how every interested state should find a niche where they could maximize their contributions and leverage during multilateral negotiations.

The sixth meeting of the P5 on August 27-28, 1991 embraced this solution fully by calling for the parallel operation of the PRK government and a strong U.N. Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), the maintenance of the factional armies at their relative strengths, and a host of auxiliary agreements on free elections, the repatriation of refugees, and the neutrality and independence of Cambodia added as a result of Vietnam's reservations. In a major diplomatic victory for the Khmer Rouge and China and political humiliation for Vietnam and the PRK, the word "genocide" was replaced by "human rights abuses" committed by an unspecified agent at an unspecified time in the past. A third informal meeting of the Cambodian parties in Jakarta yielded their assent to the compromise solution on September 10.³⁸⁷ The finish line was in sight at last.

³⁸⁶ "Báo Cáo về Kết Quả Làm Việc Với Trợ Lý Ngoại Trưởng Úc Ông Costello về Vấn Đề Campuchia 11/12/1989 [Report on the Results of the Working Session with Australian Assistant Minister for Foreign Affairs Mr. Costello on the Cambodian Problem 11 December 1989]," December 15, 1989, Phòng Văn phòng Bộ Ngoại giao, Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archive.

³⁸⁷ United Nations and Paris Conference on Cambodia, *Agreements on a Comprehensive Political Settlement of the Cambodia Conflict*, Paris, 23 October 1991.

The twin shocks of the August coup in the Soviet Union that nearly toppled Gorbachev and the Chinese rejection of the Red Solution left Vietnamese leaders in a state of bewilderment, blinding them to the necessity of accepting the P5 solution in order to focus on economic reconstruction. They made a last-ditch effort to alert Hun Sen to the compromise's threat to Communism in Cambodia. The reply from Phnom Penh was polite but firm: in light of the new international developments, Cambodia "cannot hold on to the old ideals, [but] will choose a middle road between socialism and liberalism, following the path of multi-party democracy, abandoning Marxist-Leninist and revolutionary doctrine."³⁸⁸ As we have often seen throughout this story, it was once again the supposedly junior partner in the alliance who made the real decisions when push came to shove.

It is a remarkable irony of history that nearly four decades after the spectacular collapse of French power in Indochina at the famous Battle of Dien Bien Phu, the great affairs of that ex-colony were still decided in the old metropolitan capital. So it was that the representatives of all four Cambodian factions and 17 other interested states descended upon Paris for the last time on October 21-23, 1991. Unlike the 1989 Conference, this time the deal had been made, the reservations submitted, the revisions done, and the assents secured beforehand. All that was left was for the delegates to put their signatures onto the paper. The comprehensive political settlement of the Cambodia conflict had become a reality nearly thirteen years from the day the first Vietnamese divisions crossed the border into Cambodia.

³⁸⁸ "Tờ trình về phương án đấu tranh cụ thể để ký kết hiệp định về Campuchia tại Hội nghị quốc tế Pari [Report on the specific plan for the struggle towards signing the treaty on Cambodia at the Paris International Conference] (10/1991)" in "Hội Nghị Quốc Tế Pa-Ri về Cam-Pu-Chia Tháng 10/1991," 1991, 5–12, Phòng Văn phòng Bộ Ngoại giao, Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archive.

Conclusion

On the same day the final agreements were signed in Paris, the new Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Manh Cam met with his American counterpart James Baker at the Hotel Intercontinental. Both Tran Quang Co and Richard Solomon, old adversaries on either side of the fence during the Cambodian negotiations, were in attendance. At this historic meeting, the two sides agreed to revive the process of normalizing U.S.-Vietnam relations, which had started in 1977 but been suspended since 1979.³⁸⁹ The process's final success in 1995, in the wake of Vietnam's accession into ASEAN, would confirm Vietnam's integration into the American-led world order and reshape the strategic environment of Southeast Asia into its present-day configuration. The Cold War line dividing the Indochinese states and Myanmar from the rest of Southeast Asia disappeared, replaced by a new wave of economic integration and political camaraderie among the ten ASEAN members as they face together the challenges of the 21st century, chief among which is an increasingly powerful and assertive China. For Cambodia, the elections in 1993 would lead to a coalition government of Hun Sen's rebranded Cambodian People's Party and the royalist party FUNCINPEC. The disaffected Khmer Rouge began a new civil war, which would end only in 1998 with Pol Pot's death. It was not until 2007 that the first of the Khmer Rouge leaders responsible for the genocide, Comrade Duch, was sentenced for his crimes by the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia. Cambodia today is outwardly a

³⁸⁹ "Những nội dung chính trong cuộc tiếp xúc giữa Bộ trưởng Nguyễn Mạnh Cầm và Ngoại trưởng Baker ngày 23/10/1991 [Main contents from the contact between Minister Nguyen Manh Cam and Secretary of State Baker on 23 October 1991]" in *ibid.*, 192–8.

peaceful and fast-developing country with Hun Sen still at the helm, but the ghosts of its turbulent past still haunt the country, and the renewed contest over its history has the potential to resurrect old tensions and destabilize the region once again.

This chapter's aim is to bring in Vietnamese documents to shed new light on the processes that brought Vietnam out of the quagmire of Cambodia to the present day. From 1986 onward, Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms at home and abroad created a new international environment where the Soviet camp was no longer seen as a serious threat by the West, China, and ASEAN, opening the door to substantive negotiations on Cambodia. While the decline in Soviet aid did make it more difficult for Vietnam to maintain its occupation of Cambodia, and Gorbachev's reforms did encourage the *doi moi* reforms in Vietnam, this did not lead necessarily to a more accommodating Vietnamese stance in Cambodia. In fact, the rapid collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe from mid-1989 onwards led to divisions in the Vietnamese government and a detour from cooperating in the peace process. It was only the rejection of the Red Solution by Hun Sen, Nguyen Co Thach, and the Chinese leadership that finally brought Vietnam to accede to the 1991 Paris Agreements.

Perhaps the moral of this story is that history is rarely simple, and the great processes that shape our world are seldom unidirectional. Great events, like the end of the Cold War, can lead to several very different, contingent outcomes. For regional powers, it removed the faulty Cold War glasses that had distorted their view of Vietnamese intentions for so long, even though there was nothing necessary or rational about wearing those glasses in the first place. For Vietnam, there was no straight path from the death of Le Duan to the embrace of peace and globalization that characterizes its international position today. It was a long and deeply

contested process that could very conceivably have resulted in the creation of a very different political environment in Cambodia and a much less cooperative regional order. For too long, experts have presented an over-simplistic narrative of this process; and the Vietnamese government, in the interest of maintaining the veneer of the monolithic state, has gladly played along. But we cannot learn from the lessons of our past and understand the processes driving our foreign policy today without acknowledging that human beings often see things differently, even when they call each other “comrade”. And with the defeat of the Red Solution and the resolution of the Cambodian conflict, regional leaders who had faced one another across the negotiating table could once again dream of making new comrades out of old enemies. Finally, Vietnam had escaped its long detour into war and economic isolation and found its way back to the path of multilateralism and economic integration.

Chapter VI

The Making of Present-Day Southeast Asia, 1991-1995

By 1991 the Soviets had more or less cut off all aid. I remember a meeting in which Mr. Đỗ Mười gathered us all into his office. He was the Chairman of the Council of Ministers at the time. It was quite late in the afternoon, around 5pm. It was very dark, even we had no electricity by that time. Mr. Đỗ Mười told us, "Now, I don't know what to do, but our reserves are completely depleted, Soviet aid is finished, there is nothing left in the safes and storage units. Not iron nor steel nor fuel nor fertilizer, none is left. So, I want to hear your ideas. What should we do?"³⁹⁰

Fondly remembered today as a time of hope and change, the late 1980s and early 1990s were in fact some of Vietnam's darkest days. The first years of the celebrated *doi moi* reforms saw GDP per capita plummet from a 1987 high of \$574 to just \$94 by 1989 (current U.S. dollars), not recovering 1987 levels until 2005.³⁹¹ This was broadly consistent with patterns seen elsewhere throughout the former socialist bloc, as these countries' quest for post-Cold War liberalization necessitated the rapid and chaotic dismantlement of the old socialist economic structure and loss of thousands of government jobs before the new private sector could sufficiently develop to replace them. At the same time, the massive Soviet aid on which Vietnam had been so reliant dried up almost overnight, which the international development aid that flowed in could not so quickly replace. On the political front, though the war in Cambodia was over, Vietnam remained more isolated diplomatically than ever, its former Eastern Bloc allies turning inward as they wrestled with domestic problems, while the U.S. embargo remained as

³⁹⁰ Khoan Vũ, Interview with former Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister Vũ Khoan, January 17, 2018.

³⁹¹ These figures are still the subject of debate, but there is insufficient space here to discuss it in detail. "Vietnam GDP per Capita (Current U.S.\$)," World Bank, accessed October 17, 2018, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=VN>.

absolute as it had been since 1975, limiting Vietnamese efforts to integrate its economy into the American-led global trade and financial markets.

Yet, as we have seen in the previous chapter, the seeds of Vietnam's rehabilitation and inclusion into a new liberal Southeast Asian order were already planted during the negotiations that ended the Cambodian conflict. The negotiations themselves allowed leaders on both sides to really get to know their counterparts and develop a grudging respect for the other side. The need for compromise also led both sides to moderate their worldview. At the Jakarta Informal Meetings II on February 16-21, 1989, Vietnam had indicated its willingness to accede to the Bali Declaration of 1976. While at the time it was intended as a gesture of goodwill to facilitate the peace process, it was also the first time that Vietnam publicly accepted the ASEAN countries' core vision for the region's political order, and would in the early 1990s be cited by supportive ASEAN politicians as evidence of Vietnam's readiness to join the organization. The restart of the U.S.-Vietnam normalization process was also birthed during the Cambodia peace process, as the Clinton Administration used normalization as a carrot for Hanoi to accept a strong U.N. presence in Cambodia. Finally, the resolution of the Cambodian conflict was a key condition for the normalization of Sino-Vietnamese relations, even if the two sides never settled their territorial disputes nor regained their prewar trust and fraternal solidarity. Internally, while there was a brief period of political and social liberalization after the 1986 reforms, by the early 1990s the Communist Party had headed off any prospects of revolution by introducing a series of laws restricting political deviance and outlawing all opposition parties.

So while Vietnam entered the 1990s in a very difficult political and economic position, the conditions were favorable for them to improve. But few could have predicted at the beginning

of that decade the massive and virtually unopposed transformation of the region from the antagonistic blocs system of the late Cold War into the cosmopolitan, economically integrated, peaceful, and politically independent Southeast Asia we know today. By the summer of 1995, Vietnam was the first formerly socialist full member of ASEAN, and had normalized relations with the U.S. By 1999, ASEAN counted all ten major Southeast Asian countries among its members. Two major questions arise from this period that current scholarship has yet to satisfactorily answer. First, how did this transformation come about, and who was responsible? Second, the enlargement of the EU and NATO upset Russia immensely and remains a major source of East-West friction in Eastern Europe. Why was the enlargement of ASEAN from 1995-1999 not met with the same opposition from China?

This chapter attempts to answer the first question in two parts. First, I explore how critical members of a liberal epistemic community comprised of Southeast Asian scholars, diplomats, and military leaders redefined the role of ASEAN from a very informal dialogue into a full-fledged regional organization with developed security and economic institutions. In the second part, I look at some of the personalities responsible for reinventing the image of Vietnam within a few short years from a military threat and economic liability into an integral and active member of ASEAN. An “epistemic community” is defined by Peter Haas as “a network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area.”³⁹² This network is implicit in nature, does not function as an organized group, and whose members – sometimes termed “idea

³⁹² Peter M. Haas, “Introduction: Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination,” *International Organization* 46, no. 1 (1992): 3.

entrepreneurs” – need not know of one another personally. What makes them a coherent community is their shared beliefs and norms, in this case liberal regional institutionalism and the dissemination of knowledge through reports and publications, and their ability to share and draw upon the ideas and works of one another to influence public knowledge, discourse, and policy. In the period of extreme flux and power vacuum at the end of the Cold War, epistemic communities had unusually great latitude to radically reimagine and redefine regions. Using archival and primary sources from Vietnam, the U.S., and ASEAN, I will identify these critical leaders and show how they transformed how Southeast Asians thought about regional security, economics, and identity in just a few short years.

The third part of the chapter deals with the puzzle of why the superpowers not only allowed, but even lent grudging support for ASEAN’s new expanded role in the region. I argue that insofar as the creation of the ASEAN Regional Forum was in part oriented toward containing new Chinese ambitions in the South China Sea and giving ASEAN businesses an advantage over Chinese firms in Southeast Asian markets, China rightly watched ASEAN’s expansion warily. However, China neither complained nor actively sought to undermine this process, and in fact participated as an ARF dialogue partner, as it also understood that ASEAN’s expansion would dilute American influence in closely allied states such as Thailand, the Philippines, and Singapore. Meanwhile, the U.S. largely dismissed the challenge an expanded ASEAN could pose to its regional dominance, believing that its military dominance and treaty allies would allow it to remain the indispensable power in the Asia-Pacific. While the U.S. did not encourage ASEAN’s expansion, Clinton Administration’s politically courageous move of removing the U.S. embargo

on Vietnam in 1994 did make Vietnam's integration into ASEAN, whose members are major trading partners of the U.S, go smoother.

One of my goals is to begin a historical analysis of a phenomenon that has until now been largely studied as contemporary affairs by political scientists. Existing studies of this period of ASEAN history can be divided between those who are generally supportive of the ASEAN Way of informal dialogues, unity in diversity, and emphasis on non-intervention (Jurgen Haacke, Amitav Acharya, Blake Berger) and those who are more critical of ASEAN's slow work rate, lack of tangible achievements, and hypocrisy in claiming to be transcending balance of power politics (Christopher Roberts, Lee Jones, and Ralf Emmers).³⁹³ I am trying to chart a middle ground between these two positions. While I agree with the supporters of ASEAN that the creation of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) was basically an expansion of ASEAN Way norms to the broader Asia-Pacific region, and that the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) was a fulfillment of ASEAN's original mission of economic cooperation, I also agree with the critics that the formation of these permanent, formal, and, in the case of the AFTA, binding institutions, and the inclusion of Vietnam represented a major departure from ASEAN's traditional aversion to formal institutions and Communism. The epistemic community of those who dreamed up and made this new Southeast Asian order a reality are the main characters of my story.

³⁹³ Jurgen Haacke, *ASEAN's Diplomatic and Security Culture: Origins, Development and Prospects* (Routledge, 2013); Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order* (Routledge, 2014); Blake Berger, *The ASEAN Regional Forum: A Qualified Success* ([Bangkok]: American Studies Program (ASP), Institute of Security and International Studies (ISIS), Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University, 2012); Christopher B Roberts, *ASEAN Regionalism: Cooperation, Values and Institutionalisation* (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2012); Lee Jones, *ASEAN, Sovereignty and Intervention in Southeast Asia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Ralf Emmers, *Cooperative Security and the Balance of Power in ASEAN and ARF* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003).

Dare to dream³⁹⁴

The end of the Cold War in the late 1980s meant the collapse of the bipolar system that had shaped to various extents all aspects of international diplomacy since the 1940s. For an event so momentous, few experts predicted the end of the Cold War, a failure so great that it led to a major crisis in the field of International Relations and heralded the rise of a new school of thought, Constructivism, to challenge the dominance Realism and Liberalism had shared since the 1930s.³⁹⁵ While many observers rejoiced at the triumph of liberalism, others lamented the end of the bloody but stable Cold War order and expressed anxiety about what might arise in its place. On one extreme, Francis Fukuyama wrote of the “end of history,” arguing that the defeat of Communism will lead to a unipolar, liberal world order under American leadership.³⁹⁶ But other scholars put forward their own formulations on how the international order might be reorganized along regional lines. For Samuel Huntington, the rise of ethnic nationalism in Eastern Europe and Islamic fundamentalism in Iran point to the increasing salience of cultural values, prompting a “clash of civilizations” between regions defined by cultural affinity.³⁹⁷ Peter Katzenstein imagined a “world of regions” organized around regional powers that are ultimately connected back to the “American imperium,” arguing that the willingness and ability of regional powers to lead would

³⁹⁴ Drawn from the lyrics of the ASEAN Anthem, ASEAN | ONE VISION ONE IDENTITY ONE COMMUNITY, accessed November 26, 2018, <https://asean.org/asean/about-asean/asean-anthem/>.

³⁹⁵ Emanuel Adler, “Seizing the Middle Ground:: Constructivism in World Politics,” *European Journal of International Relations* 3, no. 3 (September 1997): 319–63, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066197003003003>.

³⁹⁶ Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?,” *The National Interest*, no. 16 (1989): 3–18; Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Reissue edition (New York: Free Press, 2006).

³⁹⁷ Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?,” *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993): 22–49, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20045621>.

be the prime determinant of the success and failure of regional projects.³⁹⁸ And Barry Buzan and Ole Weaver posited that shared norms and institutions would be the hallmarks of the new regional orders.³⁹⁹ Developments in Southeast Asia in the post-Cold War era contained elements from all of the above theoretical approaches, but would unfold closest to Buzan and Weaver's prediction.

International Relations theory was playing catch-up to a rapidly developing situation. The winter of 1991-1992 alone fundamentally redefined the global economy. In North America, Canada joined the U.S.-Mexico trade negotiations for what would eventually become the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the key institution underpinning North American regional cooperation until the 2018 U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement.⁴⁰⁰ On November 14, 1991, the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China put aside their differences to join the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, greatly strengthening its claim to being the region's most important economic organization.⁴⁰¹ In December, negotiators of the Uruguay Round finished the first draft of the Final Act of the agreements that would create the World Trade Organization.⁴⁰² After the Ukraine voted overwhelmingly for independence on December 1, the Presidents of Russia, Belarus, and the Ukraine met a week later in the stately Belovezhskaya

³⁹⁸ Peter J Katzenstein, *A World of Regions : Asia and Europe in the American Imperium* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), <http://newcatalog.library.cornell.edu/catalog/5654561>; Peter J Katzenstein, *Asian Regionalism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: East Asia Program, Cornell University, 2000).

³⁹⁹ Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁴⁰⁰ "Opposed from the Start, the Rocky History of NAFTA," *Reuters*, August 16, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-trade-nafta-timeline-idU.S.KCN1AW09M>.

⁴⁰¹ "1991 APEC Ministerial Meeting," accessed November 26, 2018, https://www.apec.org/Meeting-Papers/Annual-Ministerial-Meetings/1991/1991_amm.

⁴⁰² "WTO | Understanding the WTO - The Uruguay Round," accessed November 26, 2018, https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/whatis_e/tif_e/fact5_e.htm.

Pushcha National Park to replace the once-proud Soviet Union with a loose Commonwealth of Independent States.⁴⁰³ The next day, December 9, West European leaders convened in Maastricht, the Netherlands, to do the opposite, drafting the treaty that would amalgamate the European Economic Community and many other functional regional organizations into arguably the greatest experiment in supranational government of the modern age – the European Union. By the time ASEAN leaders gathered in Singapore on January 27, 1992, Singaporean Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong intimated in his opening address that “since the last Summit in Manila four years ago, the international landscape has changed beyond recognition. It will be some time before the dramatic events in the former Soviet Union reach a new equilibrium. I do not know what the future will be like and what it means for us in South East Asia.” He ended with a warning that “we cannot stand still in our old positions, or we will be left stranded in the sands of time.”⁴⁰⁴

Bringing up the 1987 Manila Summit was a calculated risk on Goh’s part. There, President Corazon Aquino had pushed boldly for economic integration, noting that “after 19 years of existence, ASEAN should already be evaluating the impact of regional economic cooperation instead of endlessly discussing how to get it off the ground.”⁴⁰⁵ Indeed, the most significant document governing economic relations between ASEAN states at the time was the 1977 Agreement on ASEAN Preferential Trading Arrangements, adopted also in Manila, which was limited to setting out some basic definitions and frameworks for ASEAN states to conduct

⁴⁰³ John B. Dunlop, “The August 1991 Coup and Its Impact on Soviet Politics,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 5, no. 1 (January 1, 2003): 94–127, <https://doi.org/10.1162/152039703320996731>.

⁴⁰⁴ ASEAN, *Meeting of ASEAN Heads of Government* ([Jakarta]: ASEAN Secretariat, 1992), 7.

⁴⁰⁵ *Meeting of the ASEAN Heads of Government: [Proceedings]* (Jakarta, Indonesia: ASEAN Secretariat, n.d.), No. 3, 25.

bilateral trade agreements.⁴⁰⁶ In the lead up to the 1987 conference, the ASEAN Chambers of Commerce and Industry formed their own research group and published a report that called for an ASEAN Common Market.⁴⁰⁷ Similar findings calling for at least a Free Trade Area (FTA) were published by the Indonesian Center for Strategic and International Studies and the ASEAN Research Unit of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore.⁴⁰⁸

But in Manila, Indonesian Foreign Minister Mochtar Kusumaatmadja repeatedly rejected initiatives from the Filipino hosts, Thai Commerce Minister Montri Pongpanich, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad, and his own scholars. The Singaporeans' more modest proposal for an "ASEAN Trade Area" were also eventually watered down to a series of vague cooperative arrangements.⁴⁰⁹ Proud of their status as first among equals in Southeast Asia, the Indonesians were careful never to clearly state their reasons for opposing the plan, but most likely it was because Indonesia's larger but weaker economy was not ready to compete with those of its smaller but more developed and dynamic neighbors on an equal footing. It did not help that Singapore was and remains an economic nationalist's biggest nightmare. Its extremely open economy and entrepot trading practices (importing many times its GDP's worth of goods and services, adding value, and then re-exporting them to regional economies) means that, absent

⁴⁰⁶ ASEAN, "Agreement on ASEAN Preferential Trading Arrangements," February 24, 1977, <https://cil.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/1977-Agreement-on-ASEAN-Preferential-Trading-Arrangements.pdf>.

⁴⁰⁷ ASEAN, *the Way Forward: The Report of the Group of Fourteen on Asean Economic Co-Operation and Integration* (Malaysia: Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS), 1987).

⁴⁰⁸ ASEAN : *The Tasks Ahead* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, ASEAN Economic Research Unit, 1987).

⁴⁰⁹ Donald Crone, "THE ASEAN SUMMIT OF 1987: Searching for New Dynamism," *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 1988, 43–45; "Manila Declaration Philippines, 15 December 1987," ASEAN | ONE VISION ONE IDENTITY ONE COMMUNITY, accessed November 26, 2018, https://asean.org/?static_post=manila-declaration-philippines-15-december-1987.

extremely stringent country-of-origin regulations, any regional partner lowering tariffs on Singapore effectively lowers its tariffs to the rest of the world. The Indonesians had reason to fear that their sovereignty and regional leadership would be compromised by such a scheme.

In January 1992, the memory of Manila was still very raw. While the Singaporeans did not want to push too hard and alienate Indonesia further, neither did they want to waste their agenda-setting advantage as the host nation. But Goh Chok Tong had a trump card up his sleeve. In February 1991, a military coup toppled the elected civilian government of Thailand led by Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan, who had been most active in initiating reconciliation with the Indochinese countries. When the new Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun visited Singapore in May 1991, former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew paid a call to his hotel suite and, over the course of 90 minutes, convinced Anand to present the Singaporean initiative of a Free Trade Area as his own, as Lee knew that the Indonesians would be more receptive if it came from the more neutral Thais. Anand kept his promise at the 24th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in July 1991, which was quickly seconded by the Malaysian hosts.⁴¹⁰ But perhaps more importantly, he made two separate trips to Indonesia that year to personally convince Indonesian President Suharto himself. While Suharto was "not too happy" at their first meeting, by the second, Anand had successfully assured him that in the long run, the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) will help all regional firms stave off competition from outsiders, particularly a resurgent Chinese economy,

⁴¹⁰ "Joint Communique of The Twenty-Fourth ASEAN Ministerial Meeting Kuala Lumpur, 19-20 July 1991," ASEAN | ONE VISION ONE IDENTITY ONE COMMUNITY, accessed November 26, 2018, https://asean.org/?static_post=joint-communique-of-the-twenty-fourth-asean-ministerial-meeting-kuala-lumpur-19-20-july-1991.

while proffering a 20-year transition period to allow Indonesia more time to prepare its economy.⁴¹¹ In his speech at the Singapore Summit, Suharto noted that Indonesia had

observed with caution the recent trends towards interdependency, integration and globalization in the world economy accompanied by the formation of powerful economic groupings among developed countries, as well as protectionistic measures, which will adversely affect the developing countries... However, in order to be able to pull our strengths together, ASEAN must have a clearer economic objective as to enable ASEAN to cope with the economic challenges... In this context, I welcome the establishment of the ASEAN Free Trade Area...⁴¹²

Suharto's concerns were echoed by Corazon Aquino, who painted a bleak picture of a world of "economic blocs" that "while renouncing war... adopts economic exclusion and attrition as a new strategy of national defence."⁴¹³ AFTA, to these leaders, was not an ideological challenge to this new world order, but rather a capitulation to it. Powerless to disrupt the emerging customs unions of Europe and North America, and fearful lest the economic fate of the region is taken out of their hands altogether at the multilateral negotiations under way in the Uruguay Round, the ASEAN countries would create, in effect, their own customs union. In AFTA, these leaders accepted a vision of regional solidarity and cooperation to advance their collective interests in an increasingly cabalistic world.

Articles 2 and 4 of the original Agreement on the Common Effective Preferential Tariff (CEPT) Scheme for the ASEAN Free Trade Area committed its members to reducing tariffs on all goods to 20% within five to eight years, with a further seven years to reduce their tariffs to the

⁴¹¹ Dominic Faulder, *Anand Panyarachun and the Making of Modern Thailand* (Editions Didier Millet, 2018), 264–73.

⁴¹² ASEAN, *Meeting of ASEAN Heads of Government*, 16.

⁴¹³ ASEAN, 23.

0-5% threshold. Article 9 made exceptions for “the protection of its national security, the protection of public morals, the protection of human, animal or plant life and health, and the protection of articles of artistic, historic and archaeological value,” echoing the wording of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade’s Article XX. Article 4 also initially made all agricultural products exempt, though this exception was removed in by an amendment in 1995 that also required any new ASEAN members to accede to the AFTA, making it an integral and inalienable part of membership.⁴¹⁴ Though the CEPT schedule would be renegotiated and amended, and though countries would generally comply with the tariff reduction schedules while maintaining non-tariff barriers to flout the spirit of the agreement, the conclusion of the AFTA marked a major turning point for ASEAN. As an organization set up during the Cold War partly in response to the failure of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, ASEAN leaders had generally eschewed formal institutions and tangling commitments in favor of informal dialogue. They had successfully refined and applied this “ASEAN Way” to bring the Cambodian conflict to a negotiated solution. Yet, in the moment of their greatest triumph, these leaders were also taking the first steps in abandoning their traditional aversion to entangling commitments. To be sure, rapid changes in the broader international system provided an impetus for this change, but these developments were interpreted by an epistemic community of scholars, businessmen, and eventually, national

⁴¹⁴ ASEAN, “Agreement on the Common Effective Preferential Tariff Scheme for the ASEAN Free Trade Area,” January 28, 1992, https://www.asean.org/storage/images/2012/Economic/AFTA/Common_Effective_Preferential_Tariff/Agreement%20on%20the%20Common%20Effective%20Preferential%20Tariff%20Scheme%20for%20the%20ASEAN%20Free%20Trade%20Area.pdf; World Trade Organization, “General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade Article XX Text and Interpretive Note,” 1994, https://www.wto.org/english/res_e/booksp_e/gatt_ai_e/art20_e.pdf; ASEAN, “Protocol To Amend The Agreement On The Common Effective Preferential Tariff Scheme For The ASEAN Free Trade Area,” December 15, 1995, https://asean.org/?static_post=protocol-to-amend-the-agreement-on-the-common-effective-preferential-tariff-scheme-for-the-asean-free-trade-area.

leaders who, through publications, speeches, private entreaties, threats and promises, drew up and made the vision of an AFTA a reality.

Given its role in pushing for security integration, it is perhaps fitting that in the realm of regional security, it was again Singapore that played host to the creation of the other key institution that defines present-day Southeast Asia – the ASEAN Regional Forum. The modern concept of a security community was first defined by Karl Deutsch in 1955 as “a group of people... that... have come to agreement on at least this one point: that common social problems must and can be resolved by processes of 'peaceful change.'”⁴¹⁵ The role of epistemic communities is inherent in the very definition of security communities; one could say that security communities are a specific kind of epistemic community. Its most famous manifestation was in the 1975 Helsinki Conference that, among many other achievements, created the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), the forerunner of today’s Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). In direct contrast to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Warsaw Pact, exclusionary alliances that advocated the concept of collective security through military force, the CSCE provided an inclusive forum for dialogue for any and every country concerned with all aspects of security in the greater Eurasian region.

Outside of Europe, even during the Cold War, American attempts at creating NATO-like alliances like SEATO and the Baghdad Pact had faltered for various and complex reasons, with the U.S. eventually opting to rely on bilateral defense treaties with some specific regional partners – in the case of the Asia-Pacific, Japan, the Republic of Korea, the Republic of China, the

⁴¹⁵ Karl W. Deutsch et al., *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area: International Organization in the Light of Historical Experience*, First edition (Princeton University Press, 1968).

Philippines, and Thailand remain key U.S. allies. Regional organizations like ASEAN had performed some of the functions of a security community, albeit with an appreciable degree of bias, as we have seen in previous chapters. In the realm of regional security, ASEAN could count the 1967 Bangkok Declaration, the 1971 Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) Declaration, the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), and the 1991 Paris Peace Agreements as major texts that enunciate a coherent and distinctive pattern of norms and practices that govern and promote regional security.⁴¹⁶ Their annual Foreign Ministers' Meetings (AMM), which by the early 1990s had become annual, were relatively open fora in which relevant countries could take part in informal dialogue on regional security. However, with the end of the Cambodian conflict, the withdrawal of American and Soviet forces, a resurgent China on the horizon, and the low likelihood that the bigger regional powers of India and Pakistan or China and Japan would be able to set aside their differences long enough to create and maintain effective regional security institutions, ASEAN countries increasingly felt the pressure to seize the opportunity of the power vacuum and radically redesign the security fabric of not just Southeast Asia, but the Asia-Pacific itself with them at the center, before that moment passes and the great powers once again impose their wills on the region.

In his famous 1986 speech at Vladivostok discussed in the last chapter, Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev proposed a version of the CSCE for the Asia-Pacific.⁴¹⁷ Despite the speech

⁴¹⁶ ASEAN, "The Asean Declaration (Bangkok Declaration)," ASEAN | ONE VISION ONE IDENTITY ONE COMMUNITY, August 8, 1967, <https://asean.org/the-asean-declaration-bangkok-declaration-bangkok-8-august-1967/>; "1971 Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality Declaration Signed on 27 November 1971 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia by the Foreign Ministers | Centre for International Law"; ASEAN, "Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia," ASEAN, February 26, 1976, <https://asean.org/treaty-amity-cooperation-southeast-asia-indonesia-24-february-1976/>; *Agreement on a Comprehensive Political Settlement of the Cambodia Conflict: Text Adopted by the Coordination Committee* (Paris? Paris Conference on Cambodia, 1991).

⁴¹⁷ Gorbachev, *Speech by Mikhail Gorbachev in Vladivostok, July 28, 1986*, 34.

being widely lauded, no such initiative ever materialized, and Gorbachev's crumbling Soviet Union proved unable to back up his vision with concrete action. Another famous diplomat, Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans, who was a key mediator in the negotiations over the Cambodian conflict and would later be the author of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) theory, also proposed in July 1990 a Conference on Security and Cooperation in Asia (CSCA), arguing that "it is not unreasonable to hope and expect that new Europe-style patterns of cooperation between old adversaries will find their echo in this part of the world, and that imaginative new approaches to confidence-building and problem-solving can be found."⁴¹⁸ Like with Gorbachev, while the content of the proposal was one that ASEAN countries could potentially get behind, its language, particularly emphasizing that Asians have something to learn from Europeans when it comes to peacemaking, never gained traction in a region so fiercely proud of its localized diplomatic norms and practices.

At the 1990 AMM, Philippines Foreign Minister Raul Manglapus noted the imminent withdrawal of American troops from the Philippines and pushed for the establishment of a "security dialogue" to discuss the full implementation of ZOPFAN in the post-Cold War world. Based on his proposals, the ASEAN foreign ministers decided to expand the format of the Post-Ministerial Conference (PMC), at tradition dating back to 1978, into a forum where ASEAN states could lead regular discussions on regional security with important regional powers that had often been excluded from such dialogues in the past.⁴¹⁹ Two years later, at the same 1992 Singapore Summit where the AFTA was signed, ASEAN leaders issued an extraordinary declaration that

⁴¹⁸ Gareth Evans, "Australia's Asian Future," Gareth Evans, July 19, 1990, <http://www.gevans.org/speeches2.html#1990>.

⁴¹⁹ *ASEAN Ministerial Meeting* (Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat, n.d.), No. 23, 14-6, 34.

pledged to “intensify its external dialogues in political and security matters by using the ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conferences”, issued an open invitation of membership for Indochinese states as long as they accede to the TAC, and greatly expanded ASEAN’s role and ambitions as the indispensable regional organization:

1. ASEAN shall move towards a higher plane of political and economic cooperation to secure regional peace and prosperity;
2. ASEAN shall constantly seek to safeguard its collective interests in response to the formation of large and powerful economic groupings among the developed countries, in particular through the promotion of an open international economic regime and by stimulating economic cooperation in the region;
3. ASEAN shall seek avenues to engaged member states in new areas of cooperation in security matters;
4. ASEAN shall forge a closer relationship based on friendship and cooperation with the Indochinese countries, following the settlement on Cambodia.⁴²⁰

That summer, ASEAN made another series of bold moves at the 25th AMM in Manila, adding Vietnam and Laos as observers and promulgating a Declaration on the South China Sea that emphasized “the necessity to resolve all sovereignty and jurisdictional issues pertaining to the South China Sea by peaceful means, without resort to force.”⁴²¹ The success of the new PMC framework in the following years and ASEAN’s increasing assertiveness led to its rebranding in July 1994 as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), with 18 founding members including all six ASEAN member states, Vietnam, Papua New Guinea, Laos, China, Japan, Republic of Korea, Russia, United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the European Union. It has since grown to 27 members, and with time has shed some of its early informality to host substantive and sometimes

⁴²⁰ ASEAN, “Singapore Declaration Of 1992,” ASEAN, January 28, 1992, https://asean.org/?static_post=singapore-declaration-of-1992-singapore-28-january-1992.

⁴²¹ ASEAN, “ASEAN Declaration on the South China Sea,” July 22, 1992, <https://cil.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/1992-ASEAN-Declaration-on-the-South-China-Sea.pdf>.

heated debates.⁴²² The ARF's ability from the very beginning to bring together all of the major powers of the Asia-Pacific to the same table every year is both a testament to its unique position of being neutral ground, and a demonstration that it satisfies a very real demand for regular dialogue. Certainly, most of these dialogues have been oriented more towards confidence building and information-sharing than direct problem-solving, but, as proponents of security communities would argue, there is real value just in dialogue alone. As the preamble to the UNESCO Constitution, penned by British Prime Minister Clement Attlee, reminds us, "since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed."⁴²³ I would venture also that the creation of regional institutions like the ARF and AFTA, too, are not solely or even mainly the product of objective need, but the result of debates and determined design by key people in key places at key times.

The creation of the AFTA and the ARF in the space of just two years fundamentally transformed the economic and political landscape of Southeast Asia. The epistemic communities that pushed for these institutions, as described above, were overwhelmingly scholars, diplomats, and politicians from the existing ASEAN members and from the West. Together, they built on the confidence gained from the successful resolution of the Cambodian conflict and seized the opportunity of the post-Cold War power vacuum to remake ASEAN, from a very loose and informal entity concerned mainly with its own internal affairs and suspicious of formal

⁴²² "ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)," Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of Norway, accessed November 26, 2018, <http://www.chinese-embassy.no/eng/wjzc/gjzzhy/others/t110924.htm>; Matthew Lee, "US, North Korean Top Diplomats Exchange Pleasantries, Barbs," AP NEWS, August 4, 2018, <https://apnews.com/b050c0f9cb974319921f46636048e496>.

⁴²³ UNESCO, "UNESCO Constitution," UNESCO, November 16, 1945, http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=15244&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html.

institutions gradually becoming an ambitious supranational organization. But this transformation also increased greatly the amount of effort prospective members must take to adapt, both technically and culturally, as well as the risk that they would fail and dilute the organization's mission in the process. And the ASEAN countries' invitation, extended, still needed to be accepted. How and why did the ASEAN states come to embrace rapid expansion? How and why did Vietnam become the first formerly socialist state to accept ASEAN's invitation? And how was Vietnam's integration into ASEAN managed successfully?

Care to share

A fundamental problem one encounters when building up an organization and erecting barriers (comparative tariff barriers, in this case) around it is deciding who should be in and who to leave out. The fourth point of the 1967 Bangkok Declaration sets out the conditions for membership, stating that "the Association is open for participation to all States in the South-East Asian Region subscribing to the aforementioned aims, principles and purposes." This definition, while on its surface straightforward, turned out to be quite contentious and malleable. A study of ASEAN's rapid expansion after the end of the Cold War into countries that are politically, economically, and socially very different from its old core members was thus largely the work of the epistemic communities that helped redefine both key conditions of membership: geography and "principles and purposes."

During a press conference in May 2017, Filipino President Rodrigo Duterte, who was chairing ASEAN at the time and has a penchant for shocking statements, announced that he was

supportive of Mongolia and Turkey's ASEAN membership bids. When questioned by a shocked Myanmar State Councillor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi whether he had considered geography in his pronouncement, Duterte responded that Turkey itself had often been ambivalent about its regional allegiance, alternating its foreign policy orientation between its European ambitions and Middle Eastern and Central Asian connections.

While most commentators dismissed Duterte's comments as just another wild outburst indicative of either his low intellect and unfamiliarity with foreign policy or conscious positioning as an anti-elite populist leader, his fluid definition of regional boundaries was actually quite nuanced.⁴²⁴ Indeed, the geographical boundaries of most regions, including Southeast Asia, are by no means objective and unchanging, but a product of historical and political processes, mediated by an epistemic community of scholars and politicians. Southeast Asia first appeared regularly in official documents during World War II, when the U.S. and Britain agreed at the First Quebec Conference (QUADRANT) in August 1943 to divide areas of primary military responsibility against Japan. Southeast Asia Command was first headquartered in Delhi, India before being moved to Kandy, Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka), with boundaries that excluded all of the maritime islands east of Sumatra – hardly concurrent with the boundaries of Southeast Asia we have come to generally accept today.⁴²⁵ Indochina was particularly hotly contested. The U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, wary of British plans to orchestrate a return of the French imperialism that Franklin Roosevelt passionately detested, made clear to the British at the Second Quebec

⁴²⁴ "Duterte Says He'd Sponsor Turkey & Mongolia for ASEAN, Defying Geography," RT International, accessed December 12, 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/388524-duterte-mongolia-turkey-asean/>.

⁴²⁵ Foreign Relations of the United States, Conferences at Washington and Quebec, 1943, "Memorandum by the British Chiefs of Staff" (Office of the Historian, August 15, 1943), <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1943/d427>.

Conference (OCTAGON) in August 1944 that “Indo-China is in the China theater of war, and therefore is an area of United States strategic responsibility.”⁴²⁶

Early regional theorists of Southeast Asia also found it difficult to justify including Vietnam into their historical and cultural analyses of the region. In George Coèdes’s *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*, the first major academic work to advance a conceptually coherent vision of the region, Vietnam (and the Indies east of Borneo) were conspicuously absent because these areas were not chiefly influenced by Hindu culture.⁴²⁷ Coèdes’s later attempt at integrating Vietnam into the regional history was also more of an addendum, and D.G.E. Hall’s four-edition classic textbook, which Victor Lieberman still considered a standard textbook in the field as late as the 1990s, had only very brief chapters on Vietnam, largely disconnected from the other countries.⁴²⁸ While South Vietnam did participate in the South East Asian Peninsular Games, it was never a member of major regional organizations such as SEATO, the Association of Southeast Asia, or ASEAN. Certainly, Vietnam’s case for being included in Southeast Asia was always much stronger than Mongolia’s or Turkey’s, but the other major borderline case, Papua New Guinea, had been an active observer since 1976, and yet even today it has not attained ASEAN membership. Thus, the geographic boundaries of Southeast Asia were constantly shifting, subject to the interpretation and interests of the epistemic community of scholars and politicians, and Vietnam’s place in Southeast Asia was far from assured.

⁴²⁶ Foreign Relations of the United States, Conference at Quebec, 1944, “The Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Secretary of State” (Office of the Historian, August 29, 1944), <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1944Quebec/d158>.

⁴²⁷ George Coèdes, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*, (Honolulu,: East-West Center Press, 1968).

⁴²⁸ George Coèdes, *The Making of South East Asia* (Berkeley,: University of California Press, 1966); D. G. E. Hall, *A History of South-East Asia*, 4th ed. (New York : St. Martin’s Press, 1981).

The “principles and purposes” of ASEAN, too, changed greatly over time. Written as the Second Indochina War was escalating rapidly, after the successful and bloody military coup in Indonesia that ended *Konfrontasi* and dashed any realistic hopes of a Communist takeover of Southeast Asia, and after three of the five original members had refused to take part in SEATO, the Bangkok Declaration took pains to emphasize its economic, cultural, and technical missions and largely suppressed the political.⁴²⁹ The 1971 ZOPFAN Declaration, on the eve of the American withdrawal from Vietnam, focused instead on non-alignment and non-interference in the affairs of other states, seeking to assure the Communist world that ASEAN was not an instrument of imperialism, and thus not a threat, while at the same time wanting the same assurances from the Indochinese states to refrain from aiding domestic Communist movements in the ASEAN countries.⁴³⁰ The 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, written at the end of the Second Indochina War when both sides were seeking a rapprochement, was much more sanguine, with no mention of external powers and plenty on increasing trade, improving standards of living, and social justice, of course still only achievable with a healthy respect for state sovereignty.⁴³¹ Despite this vision never having been fulfilled in the 1980s, by the 1990s, prominent scholar Amitav Acharya was arguing that the ZOPFAN thesis of excluding external powers was no longer a good model for regional security. Engagement and balancing, as described by the TAC, was a more appropriate strategy for a regional organization in a multipolar age.⁴³²

⁴²⁹ ASEAN, “The Asean Declaration (Bangkok Declaration).”

⁴³⁰ L. Jones, *ASEAN, Sovereignty and Intervention in Southeast Asia*, 2012 edition (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 37–92; “1971 Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality Declaration Signed on 27 November 1971 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia by the Foreign Ministers | Centre for International Law.”

⁴³¹ ASEAN, “Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia,” February 26, 1976.

⁴³² Amitav Acharya, *A New Regional Order in South-East Asia: ASEAN in the Post-Cold War Era* (London: Brassey’s for the International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1993), 53–59.

But as we have seen in the previous chapters, Vietnamese had initially countered the ASEAN pronouncements with its own vision for Southeast Asia during the Cold War. Then, on the eve of the resolution of the Cambodian conflict, General Secretary Nguyễn Văn Linh had a last-minute change of heart that very nearly resulted in the re-erection of the walls between Communist Indochina and the rest of Southeast Asia. While the Chinese ultimately turned down the proposal of a Red Solution for Cambodia, and Nguyễn Văn Linh was replaced in 1991 as General Secretary, his successor, Đỗ Mười, had perhaps even more of a track record as an old conservative, with the dubious honor of having orchestrated land reforms in both North and South Vietnam.⁴³³ Furthermore, the two sides had only very recently come to an understanding after over a decade of tense diplomatic and military standoff. It was difficult to rebuild that trust in a short amount of time. It was therefore far from clear in 1991 whether Vietnam would accept the ASEAN vision of a cosmopolitan and integrated Southeast Asia.

The key role in redefining Vietnam as an integral part of this new Southeast Asia was played on the Vietnamese side by the scholarly community. In the 1980s, there was little Vietnamese scholarship on ASEAN countries, and the few Vietnamese scholars who studied ASEAN toed the party line in being generally critical. The Vietnam Council on Social Sciences (the forerunner of today's Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences) Council on Global Economics' 1983 study of ASEAN economies alleged that "the ASEAN countries today are more and more dependent on the U.S. militarily, politically, economically, and increasingly becoming monopolist capitalist Japan's lifeline base for maritime economic expansionism." It also blames the Chinese

⁴³³ Huy Đức, *Bên Thắng Cuộc*, 2012, Chapters VII-VII.

mercantile community for acting as “intermediaries and sell-outs in the service of imperialism, and traditional and contemporary agents of Great Han ethnic hegemonism.”⁴³⁴ The economic analysis in the rest of the study gave very pessimistic outlooks despite being conducted at the height of the ASEAN countries’ breakout growth.

But by the early 1990s, the Vietnamese government was facing great pressure to adopt a conciliatory approach toward ASEAN. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, Vietnam’s *đổi mới* economic reforms did not produce an immediate positive impact. And Vũ Khoan, who in the early 1990s was Vietnam’s Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and chief economic strategist and negotiator, revealed in the interview quoted at the beginning of this chapter, Vietnam was finding itself in such dire straits when the Soviet Union cut off aid in 1990-1991 that the Prime Minister’s office experienced electricity blackout.⁴³⁵ Khoan’s solution for the problem posed by Đỗ Mười was to redouble Vietnam’s efforts at “maximizing friends and minimizing enemies,” as had been the mantra of the Politburo’s Resolution 13-NQ/TW of May 1988. The same resolution had stressed the need to foster relations with regional powers, including ASEAN.⁴³⁶ The Seventh Party Congress of June 1991 repeated the call to “develop friendly relations with Southeast Asian countries” and “strive for a peaceful, friendly, and cooperative Southeast Asia.”⁴³⁷

But Vietnam would have found it difficult to engage and compete with its neighbors economically without reforms to bring its economy more in line with international practices and norms. As Vietnamese leaders urged intellectuals to explore ways to transition from a command

⁴³⁴ *Kinh tế các nước trong tổ chức ASEAN* (Hà Nội: Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1983), 7.

⁴³⁵ Vũ, Interview with former Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister Vũ Khoan.

⁴³⁶ Le, “Đường Lối Đối Ngoại Của Đảng Cộng Sản Việt Nam Thời Kỳ Đổi Mới.”

⁴³⁷ Đảng cộng sản Việt Nam, *Văn Kiện Đảng Toàn Tập*, vol. 1991, pp. 51–133.

to a market economy, Vietnamese scholars seized the opportunity to produce works that turned this narrative on its head. In 1991, Hanoi Comprehensive University (now part of the Vietnam National University, Hanoi)'s Asia-Pacific Center published a book titled simply *The ASEAN Countries (Các nước ASEAN)*. It argues that “Vietnam’s revolutionary path is certainly toward building socialism and must follow the laws of socialist economics. That fact does not prevent researching and learning positive lessons and things to avoid from other countries’ experiences in nation-building, especially from our neighbors in ASEAN.”⁴³⁸ Notably absent from *The ASEAN Countries* were the vitriolic criticisms of the 1980s; in fact, the authors expressed admiration and posted very favorable outlooks for the economies of Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Thailand.

In December 1991, the same month that definitively changed the global economic landscape, the same Council on Global Economics that commissioned the 1983 study that had so maligned the ASEAN economies co-hosted with the Japanese Center for Economic Research a conference on “The role of the government in economic development: Experiences from Japan, ASEAN, and Vietnam” in Hanoi. One presentation at the conference identified five factors that accounted for ASEAN economies’ rapid growth: political stability, pragmatic macroeconomic policies (particularly tight control of the money supply), openness in foreign economic engagement, tight management of foreign debt, and investment in basic infrastructure and education.⁴³⁹ Two other studies of ASEAN economic development by the Vietnam Asia Pacific Economic Center and the National Political Press (Sự Thật, the official publishing arm of the

⁴³⁸ Dương Ninh Vũ, *Các nước ASEAN* ([TP. Hồ Chí Minh]: Thông tin lý luận, 1991), 5.

⁴³⁹ Đại Lực Võ and Văn Thọ Trần, *Vai trò của nhà nước trong phát triển kinh tế, kinh nghiệm Nhật Bản, Asean và Việt nam* (Hà Nội: Khoa học xã hội, 1992), 67–68.

Vietnam Communist Party) were also predicated on learning from ASEAN's success and came to similar conclusions.⁴⁴⁰ So influential were these findings that other than tight control of the money supply, which one might argue was due more to inability than unwillingness, and the imposition of controls on capital outflows to prevent a repeat of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, Vietnamese development since the 1990s up until today has followed these five principles to the letter.

Certainly, these Vietnamese scholars were aware of the influence conservatives still held in Vietnamese government, and the reverse course on political openness the Party had taken between 1988 and 1990 in the face of the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe, as discussed in the last chapter. Director of the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam Nguyễn Vũ Tùng has shown that instead of trying to push back against the language of Party security, liberal scholars leaned into it. They argued convincingly that, far from being pawns of Western imperialism, Southeast Asian countries were nationalist in character, not unlike Vietnam. They pointed to the large role the state played in Southeast Asian economies as evidence that they had more in common with socialist Vietnam than capitalist America. Finally, they argued that following the ASEAN countries' state-led development model would lead to prosperity that would strengthen Communist Party rule.⁴⁴¹ This formulation was acceptable to a beleaguered Vietnamese Politburo, which itself understood that its long-term legitimacy rested on its ability to deliver economically, and

⁴⁴⁰ Trí Đĩnh Nguyễn, *Vai trò nhà nước trong phát triển kinh tế các nước ASEAN* (Hà Nội: Thống kê, 1993); Dương Ninh Vũ, *Một số vấn đề về sự phát triển của các nước ASEAN* (Hà Nội: Chính trị quốc gia, 1993).

⁴⁴¹ Nguyễn Tùng Vũ, "Vietnam's Membership of ASEAN: A Constructivist Interpretation," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 29, no. 3 (2007): 483–505.

integration with the dynamic, if capitalist, Southeast Asian economies was the most likely pathway to success.

Vietnamese scholars were not alone in their quest to change minds and win hearts. Some of the above publications were based on conference presentations of invited foreign scholars. But perhaps the most striking feature of Vietnam's engagement with the region in these years was the willingness of Vietnam's top leaders to join its scholars in academic engagement with foreign scholars in a number of conferences, of which the Interaction for Progress Conference Series was most significant. First organized in 1991 in Hanoi, Vietnam, and thereafter sponsored by Malaysian Minister of Finance Anwar Ibrahim, the Conference brought together a diverse research group of Vietnamese and ASEAN scholars to advocate for regional integration, led by M. R. Sukhumbhand Paribatra of Chulalongkorn University, Thailand. They met again annually in Kuala Lumpur in May 1992 and Manila in December 1993, with another major conference titled "Towards One Southeast Asia in the 21st Century" in Bangkok in February 1993. On the Vietnamese side, Deputy Prime Minister Nguyễn Khánh and Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Nguyễn Dỵ Niєn were some of the most prominent backers of the Conference and research group, while the Philippines Speaker of the House of Representatives Ramon Mitra and President of the National Security Council Jose Almonte, Thai Prime Ministers Chatichai Choonhavan and Chuan Leekpai and Deputy Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan were supporters among the ASEAN countries.⁴⁴²

⁴⁴² "HỒ Sơ về Hội Thảo "Tương Tác vì Sự Tiến Bộ Việt Nam – ASEAN" Năm 1993," 1993, 228–29, Phòng Văn phòng Chính phủ 1975-1995, Vietnam National Archives Center III.

These conferences illustrated the power of idea entrepreneurs to fundamentally change the language of discourse, and thereby influence policy makers and the interested public. Initially, Vietnam and the ASEAN countries' visions for mutual engagement were strategic and intergovernmental, with the goal of specific gains, and they were embedded in the particular temporal context of the end of the Cold War. But the research group's report for the third Interaction for Progress Conference told a wholly different narrative:

Geography has determined that all of the nations and people of Southeast Asia – large and small, strong and weak – have to live side by side. Geography has required that those who reside here must learn to meet, live, work, and progress together as neighbors. And history has shown the price we must pay if we are unable to do this. *For the nations and peoples of Southeast Asia, living together is a reality of life, not a vision conjured up in the minds of constructivists. And with those who share a fate, close cooperation is neither a one-off decision nor an arbitrary impulse, but a permanent, enduring, and extensive obligation. [Italics in original]*⁴⁴³

Unsurprisingly, the report concluded that ASEAN's expansion of membership to Vietnam was "necessary for the maintenance of peace and prosperity in Southeast Asia's future."⁴⁴⁴ The language is very reminiscent of that used by advocates of European integration after World War II, and indeed, there was a conscious attempt to turn regional integration from strategy into ideology.⁴⁴⁵ And to a large extent, these authors were successful in changing the narrative of ASEAN expansion. At the 25th AMM in Manila, Vietnam and Laos presented their instruments of accession to the TAC and were formally inducted as ASEAN observers, to the acclaim of all parties

⁴⁴³ "Hồ Sơ về Hội Thảo "Tương Tác vì Sự Tiến Bộ Việt Nam – ASEAN" Năm 1993," 238.

⁴⁴⁴ "Hồ Sơ về Hội Thảo "Tương Tác vì Sự Tiến Bộ Việt Nam – ASEAN" Năm 1993," 268.

⁴⁴⁵ This debate is reminiscent of that between Neo-Functionalists and Intergovernmentalists in Europe. See: Ernst B. Haas, *The Uniting of Europe: Political, Social, and Economic Forces, 1950-1957*, Contemporary European Politics and Society (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004); Andrew Moravcsik, *The Choice for Europe: Social Purpose and State Power from Messina to Maastricht*, Cornell Studies in Political Economy (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1998).

present. Many representatives also made clear the distinction between these new observer states and Papua New Guinea. Malaysian Foreign Minister Abdullah Badawi noted that the presence of the Papua New Guinean delegation “attests to the close relations between ASEAN and Papua New Guinea and the countries in the South Pacific,” while commenting that Vietnam and Laos’ accessions to the TAC “marks the beginning of a new chapter in the relations among countries in Southeast Asia.”⁴⁴⁶ The Papua New Guinean Foreign Minister, while expressing desire to “participate and play a more active role in the inner-workings of ASEAN,” also mentioned “the South Pacific Region to which Papua New Guinea belongs.”⁴⁴⁷ The present-day boundaries of Southeast Asia were crystallizing at last.

It would be wrong to say that there was no significant pushback to the idea of Vietnamese membership. The Thais and Singaporeans, who were the most hardline members of ASEAN opposing the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia, were initially more reserved about the prospects of Vietnam becoming a full ASEAN member. Thai Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun, Narongchai Akrasanee, who would later become Thai Minister of Commerce, and Singaporean Trade Minister Lee Hsien Loong all felt that Vietnam was far too underdeveloped to join the AFTA.⁴⁴⁸ In 1994, on the eve of accession, Vietnam’s GNP per capita was the lowest in Southeast Asia at just US\$190, lower than Cambodia’s US\$240 and Laos’s US\$320, and far behind Singapore’s US\$23,360. It also suffered from the second-highest inflation rate of 31.3% and the highest debt to GNP ratio of 161.3%. But there were some encouraging indicators of the strong fundamentals that have allowed Vietnam to grow so rapidly since: it had the second highest

⁴⁴⁶ *ASEAN Ministerial Meeting*, vol. 25, p. 22.

⁴⁴⁷ *ASEAN Ministerial Meeting*, vol. 25, p. 27.

⁴⁴⁸ Acharya, *A New Regional Order in South-East Asia*, 49.

literacy rate (92.5%), a middle-of-the-table average GDP growth rate of 7.7%/annum, and, amazingly, the third most open economy in Southeast Asia, with an openness quotient [(exports + imports)/GDP] of 0.87.⁴⁴⁹ Still, Thai and Singaporean leaders had a point in arguing that grouping such different economies and societies together might not be good for either side, and might eventually lead to ASEAN disunity.

Ultimately, these hard-nosed calculations and reservations were no match for the idealism of the epistemic community. When Vietnam and Laos submitted their requests to accede to the TAC at the landmark Singapore Summit, both Singapore and Thailand quickly offered their support and congratulations.⁴⁵⁰ Singaporean Foreign Minister Wong Kang Seng later explained his empathy towards the Vietnamese was in fact borne of their many heated exchanges over Cambodia:

Indeed, I would venture to suggest that the strong and friendly partnership we today enjoy with Vietnam was forged during those years. We did not agree with their actions in Cambodia, but learnt to respect each other as serious countries. We admired the resolve of their diplomats even though it was deployed for a purpose we rejected. Let me give you one small example. Those of you who have attended UN meetings know that they are notoriously unpunctual. If a meeting is scheduled to start at 10 am it was usual for it to start at 10.30 or even 11. But invariably two delegations would be there early at 9.30 -- Singapore and Vietnam -- both anxious lest the other steal a march. My officers were impressed. Here at last was someone as *kiasu*⁴⁵¹ as we were. They told me that these were serious people and we could work with them once the Cambodian issue was settled.⁴⁵²

⁴⁴⁹ Mya Than. and Carolyn. Gates, eds., *ASEAN Enlargement: Impacts and Implications* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2001), 3.

⁴⁵⁰ *Meeting of the ASEAN Heads of Government*, 26–32.

⁴⁵¹ Hokkien slang for “afraid to lose,” a common self-deprecating self description among Singaporeans.

⁴⁵² Wong Kan Seng, “Speech by Former Deputy Prime Minister & Former Coordinating Minister for National Security Wong Kan Seng at the S. Rajaratnam Lecture at Shangri-La Hotel on Wednesday, 23 November 2011,” Republic of Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs, accessed November 1, 2016,

While Vietnam was ostensibly joining ASEAN for primarily economic reasons, Vietnamese leaders, too, made their final decisions to join primarily on ideational and political grounds, as demonstrated by this extraordinary exchange during my interview with Vũ Khoan:

VK: Actually when we entered ASEAN, we didn't know what an FTA was. I was the officer in charge, and I didn't know! I didn't know what CEPT was! That's the truth!

H: But you were our top economic expert...

VK: Yes, I was, but only on political policy, I had not studied the details at all.

H: So the decision was made without any economic calculations? There must have been some...

VK: We joined first, then we would calculate.

H: At least you must have been aware of the direction...

VK: Only that we wanted to push for economic cooperation, it was a priority once we joined ASEAN. But we had no knowledge of the free market, CEPT, AFTA, we didn't have any time to learn!... It was the same when we entered ASEM and APEC... We had no learning materials and no one to teach us... Only when we got to the WTO, TPP did we start to understand what we were reading. All of our experts had been trained in the collectivized economic system, how could we know the rules by which the rest of the world played?⁴⁵³

Khoan's account is corroborated by the official report on Vietnam's CEPT package, which noted that "our readiness to fulfill the AFTA schedule is not high from a management point of view," while acknowledging that most ministries and firms had not factored the AFTA effect into their calculations for post-2000 development. The report also expressed concern that Vietnam was too far behind the more developed ASEAN countries in almost every category. "As the competitiveness of almost all of our manufactured products is not high, even our domestic

https://www.mfa.gov.sg/content/mfa/overseasmission/phnom_penh/press_statements_speeches/embassy_new_s_press_releases/2011/201112/press_201112_06.html.

⁴⁵³ Vũ, Interview with former Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister Vũ Khoan.

market has the potential to become flooded by ASEAN goods..."⁴⁵⁴ In effect, Vietnamese leaders joined ASEAN and the AFTA by signing on the dotted line, with little understanding of the terms of the contract, largely because they were simply convinced that Southeast Asia was where Vietnam's future belonged.

In retrospect, it was extremely fortunate for Vietnam that the ASEAN countries did not take full advantage of Vietnamese officials' ignorance to extract the greatest amount of concessions, allowing for 53.6% of all categories of Vietnamese goods to enjoy temporary exclusion from tariff reductions until 2008-2010, while a further 7.8% of goods were categorized as "sensitive" and under "general exception" and immune to tariff reductions. By comparison, Singapore enjoyed no temporary exclusion or sensitive categorization, and the least developed among the existing ASEAN members, the Philippines, got only 11.6% of the categories of goods to be temporarily excluded.⁴⁵⁵ Vietnamese firms also proved adaptable and resilient enough to withstand the competition once the tariff barriers fully came down, heading off some of the more alarmist projections in the 1998 report.

Why did the ASEAN countries offer Vietnam more generous terms than they needed to, when just a few years earlier they had been picking at the punctuation in each other's counteroffers at the tense negotiating table over Cambodia? The most plausible explanation, in my view, centers once again on the role of the epistemic community of regional scholars and officials who succeeded in just a few short years in rehabilitating the image of the opposing side

⁴⁵⁴ *Lịch trình giảm thuế của Việt Nam để thực hiện khu vực mậu dịch tự do ASEAN, AFTA* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Tài chính, 1998), 20–21.

⁴⁵⁵ Mya Than. and Gates, *ASEAN Enlargement*, 12–13.

in the minds of the leaders and public of Southeast Asia. Once ASEAN leaders stopped seeing Vietnam as an adversary and became convinced that regional stability and prosperity is tied to Vietnam's economic success, the incentive became to help Vietnam achieve that success, rather than to maximize trade concessions and bleed the country dry. The story of ASEAN's expansion is a testament to the importance of epistemic communities in states' interest formation and policy outcomes.

The spectating giants

Great Powers are not accustomed to simply watch events unfold from a distance, even if these events fall wholly outside of their interests. They are even more rarely found immobile in the face of significant changes that affect their core interests. In Europe, the ongoing crisis over the Crimea and the wars over South Ossetia and Transnistria originated from NATO and the EU's rapid expansion into Russia's traditional sphere of influence after the end of the Cold War, while excluding Russia itself from these organizations.⁴⁵⁶ Yet, as ASEAN underwent its historic post-Cold War transformation and enlargement, there was nary a whimper from China. The Chinese were not invited to attend or comment upon the formation of the AFTA, despite the fact that that organization would severely curtail Chinese firms' competitiveness in Southeast Asian markets vis-à-vis regional companies. Furthermore, the Chinese participated in the ARF from its inception. Chinese Vice Premier and Minister of Foreign Affairs Qian Qichen was present in Bangkok for the AMM prior to the first ARF meeting, and was listed as a member. In his speech

⁴⁵⁶ Gerard Toal, *Near Abroad: Putin, the West, and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017).

at the ASEAN-China Consultative Meeting on July 23, 1994, Qian expressed the belief that “ASEAN’s efforts in maintaining and improving its relations with the three Indochina countries and Myanmar... is beneficial to peace and stability in the region.” While he wished the ARF success on its first meeting, Qian contended that China was “not in favor of copying the experience and measures of other regions of the world such as the CSCE,” saying in effect that China was not a continuing threat to Southeast Asia the way that Russia was to Europe. “At the present stage,” he continued, “the multilateral security dialogue should aim at increasing understanding and confidence through exchange of views.”⁴⁵⁷ China was clearly wary of creating a self-fulfilling prophecy by opposing the creation of the ARF. By going along with it, Qian hoped to affirm that China was a more trustworthy partner to Southeast Asia than Russia was to Europe.

Perhaps Qian Qichen also calculated that ASEAN’s expanding role would disrupt the United States’ existing alliance system in the region. The U.S. was not initially supportive of ASEAN’s new regional ambitions, conscious of its potential to undermine American leadership in the region in an age when America was the sole remaining superpower. Three months after Gareth Evans’s speech calling for the formation of a CSCA, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Richard Solomon, who was also deeply involved in the Cambodian negotiations, argued in a speech at the University of California, San Diego that Asia is vastly different from Europe, particularly in that it “lacks any single threat” and that security concerns are too varied between countries and regions. Expressing his doubt regarding any proposals for an all-Pacific security grouping, Solomon believed that “it is preferable to adapt existing, proven

⁴⁵⁷ *ASEAN Ministerial Meeting*, vols. 27, 39–41.

mechanisms to meet the challenges before creating new ones.” While finding Philippines Foreign Minister Raul Malangpus’s 1990 proposal for an ASEAN debate on regional security issues to be “constructive” and that “integrating Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia into the region will be a top priority item”, Solomon affirmed that “for the United States, the core of Asian security has been – and will continue to be – the U.S.-Japan security relationship,” while giving nods to the importance of other U.S. treaty allies in the region. Clearly, the U.S. preferred Asian security to remain bilateral and U.S.-centric, not multilateral and Asian-centric, a vision that more closely resembled that described by Katzenstein than by Buzan and Weaver.⁴⁵⁸

In the end, the U.S., too, pledged its support for the 1994 ARF Meeting, though also with some caveats. U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott believed the ARF “can play an historic role in conveying intentions, easing suspicious, building confidence, and, ultimately, averting conflicts.” While circumscribing the role of the ARF primarily to preventive diplomacy, he reaffirmed U.S. leadership on the major substantive regional security issue of the day, the question of nuclear weapons on the Korean peninsula. “Today, our five treaty alliances... are the linchpins of [America’s] commitment. Our forward-deployed military presence provides a strong framework for addressing the region’s most pressing security concern.” Clearly, the U.S. intended to treat the ARF much like the CSCE, a feel-good regional organization it could always get behind, but not playing any truly significant role in upholding or challenging the U.S.-led global order.

The U.S. was perhaps more alarmed by the formation of AFTA, fearing that it might become a closed trading bloc. In the ASEAN-US dialogue session in July 1992 following the

⁴⁵⁸ Richard H. Solomon, “Asian Security in the 1990s: Integration in Economics, Diversity in Defense Address,” *US Department of State Dispatch* 1 (1990): 243–48.

creation of AFTA, Undersecretary of State Robert Zoellick argued that “the old North-South logic is now as out-of-date as the Cold War division between East and West... We need to give the ASEAN nations and others an opportunity to benefit from their comparative advantages. At the same time, the international framework must support the outward-looking engagement of the U.S., EC, and Japan, both by assuring them open access for their competitive products, services, and ideas and enabling them to make competitive transitions.” He also assured Southeast Asian countries that the ongoing negotiations for the formation of NAFTA would not lock Asians out of the North American market either. “We have no intention of being a big island; that wouldn’t be in our self-interest.” Secretary of State James Baker III, for his closing statement, expressed his wish that AFTA “will further promote high growth and increased economic integration... by complementing, not undermining, the global free market. Toward this end, we consider APEC a key vehicle for sustaining market-oriented development, advancing regional and global trade liberalization, and fostering a more prosperous economic future for the entire Asia-Pacific region.”⁴⁵⁹ Neither the American rejection of the salience of underdevelopment politics nor the lecturing about the need to keep Southeast Asian markets open to outsiders likely sat well with Southeast Asian leaders, whose policies were not swayed.

While it was initially dismissive of ASEAN’s new ventures, the Clinton Administration did, through its politically courageous move to finally normalize relations with Vietnam in 1995, enable ASEAN’s expansion to proceed smoothly and for Vietnam to be truly rehabilitated in the global community of nations. Until the lifting of the embargo, the U.S.’s dominance in the global

⁴⁵⁹ *ASEAN Ministerial Meeting*, vols. 25, 59, 90–1.

trading system was such that it was difficult for Vietnam to fully integrate with ASEAN, a region where many economies were so dependent on trade with the U.S. Bill Clinton's lifting of the embargo against Vietnam in 1994 was decidedly understated. At the AMM and ARF, China was the only country that mentioned the move, and Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyễn Mạnh Cầm ignored it altogether.⁴⁶⁰ Still, it was not an easy decision, as in the U.S., despite Vietnam's cooperation with the search operations for American missing-in-action (MIA), rumors continued to circulate that Vietnam was hiding live American prisoners of war (POW) from the Second Indochina War. In a 1991 Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll, 69% of Americans believed these rumors.⁴⁶¹ When Clinton eased restrictions for U.S.-funded international organizations such as the World Bank and IMF to be able to provide development aid for Vietnam in 1993, he was bombarded with angry letters from both houses of Congress demanding that no part of the sanctions be lifted until every single discrepancy was straightened out in the POW/MIA records.⁴⁶² Despite knowing the degree of opposition, Clinton lifted the embargo entirely in February 1994, before normalizing relations between the two countries on July 11, 1995, two weeks before Vietnam's final accession into ASEAN on July 28. This action, while again understated in Southeast Asian fora, was critical in enabling Vietnam to participate more fully in the emerging regional order.

Conclusion

⁴⁶⁰ *ASEAN Ministerial Meeting*, vols. 27, 39–41.

⁴⁶¹ Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home*, 2.

⁴⁶² "Letters from Congress to President Bill Clinton Regarding Vietnam," 1993, William J. Clinton Presidential Library.

Looking back, the rapid expansion of ASEAN's membership and institutions in the 1990s was a truly monumental undertaking. In terms of security, a group of small and medium powers, geographically situated in the shatterbelt between competing spheres of Great Power influence, needed to guarantee regional peace and security on its own terms in the post-Cold War world. In terms of economics, a group of states with a very high variance in levels of economic development and socioeconomic systems had to integrate their economies efficiently and equitably. And in terms of identity, a diverse group of nations sought to build a viable and lasting regional identity, foster a sense of belonging, define common aims, and manage intra-group conflicts.

That they to a large extent managed to achieve many of these objectives is very much down to the work of a large epistemic community comprised of scholars and politicians from every Southeast Asian country who, together but not necessarily working in perfect concert, transformed the way that Southeast Asians thought about their region and their place in it. While that vision of a hastily integrated Southeast Asia, papering over differences in political orientation or economic development, was very much a child of those heady post-Cold War times, it was one with real and far-reaching consequences for the people of Southeast Asia. Vietnam's entry into ASEAN in 1995 would pave the way for ASEAN to expand to its present size to encompass all major Southeast Asian countries by 1999. While no one fully understood the significance of the developments of the early 1990s, they all understood that what was happening was momentous. Both China and the United States expressed reservations about the aims and usefulness of the new ASEAN, but both quickly decided it was easier to support rather than oppose the region's invigorated idea entrepreneurs. Perhaps, had China known then how much Vietnam's accession

into ASEAN would strengthen that organization and hedge against Chinese ambitions in the South China Sea, it would have reacted differently, but one struggles to imagine what other response would have greatly altered the tide of change sweeping the region.

Chapter VII

Epilogue

In the foregoing chapters, I have shown that after the Second Indochina War and reunification in 1975, Vietnam consistently sought to integrate into the global economy and build diversified relationships and avoid being put in a state of dependency. In Chapter II, I documented how Vietnamese negotiators made earnest efforts to normalize relations with the United States, only for their hopes to be dashed in 1978 by the fiercely anti-Soviet U.S. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski and a brewing conflict with their two neighbors. In Chapter III, I provided evidence showing that Vietnam wanted to focus on economic reconstruction and tried to avoid war with Cambodia and China, but in the end, they misperceived the Khmer Rouge attacks as having been instigated by China and undertook an invasion of Cambodia in late 1978 that became a deadly quagmire for the next ten years. In Chapter IV, I recounted how the Vietnamese refusal to withdraw and risk allowing the Khmer Rouge to return to power prompted many countries to suspend aid and trade with Vietnam, making it dependent economically on the Soviet Union. In Chapter V, with the Vietnamese economy in ruins from years of warfare and economic mismanagement, Vietnam finally found itself on a circuitous path back to economic integration with domestic reforms in 1986 and the political resolution of the Cambodian conflict in 1991. In Chapter VI, I argued that wartime experiences, particularly disillusionment with interventions and a desire to rebuild after yet another long war made possible Vietnam's rapid postwar transformation into a core member of ASEAN, putting Vietnam back on its original path to multilateralism and economic integration.

In this final chapter, I want to go beyond the central argument of this dissertation and reflect upon the enduring legacies of the Third Indochina War. Historians, genocide scholars, and politicians alike are fond of quoting George Santayana's famous warning, "Those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat it."⁴⁶³ But learning from history is not so easy. As Yuen Foong Khong demonstrated in his study of Lyndon B. Johnson's decision to escalate the war in Vietnam in 1964, in any given situation there are often multiple and contrary historical lessons from which to choose. Johnson had to decide whether to apply the lessons learned from the Korean War and the First Indochina War, where the U.S. and France respectively became embroiled in costly land wars in Asia for minimal security gains; or those from France and Britain's failed appeasement policy toward Nazi Germany in the 1930s.⁴⁶⁴ The first two lessons called for Johnson to avoid another war in Asia, but the latter lesson encouraged him to stand up to authoritarianism before it was too late. In choosing what Khong believed to be the wrong lesson and embroiling the United States in a long and costly war that derailed his domestic reforms and political fortunes, Johnson's case demonstrates how difficult it sometimes is for decision-makers to learn the right lessons from history, even when they consciously try to do so.⁴⁶⁵

These difficulties partly explain why the major actors involved in the Third Indochina War, namely Vietnam, China, Cambodia, ASEAN, and the Western democracies, have come away with all the wrong lessons from history, leading to norms and conduct that serve to lessen the chances

⁴⁶³ "Santayana, George | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy," accessed October 5, 2019, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/santayan/>.

⁴⁶⁴ Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam*, 1st ed. (New York: Random House, c2012.).

⁴⁶⁵ Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* by Yuen Foong Khong (Princeton University Press, 1984).

of an effective international response to the recurrence of mass violence, including crimes against humanity and genocide, to Southeast Asia, as we are witnessing today in the case of the Rohingya in Myanmar. Vietnam's military quagmire in Cambodia between 1979 and 1989 has convinced many of its leaders that it should never again intervene in the internal affairs of a neighboring state, no matter the degree of atrocities. Similarly, most historians of ASEAN and contemporary leaders of the five original ASEAN member states still portray the Cambodian crisis as an exemplary display of ASEAN states' maturity and unity in defending the principle of absolute non-intervention. China, for its part, has never publicly admitted to or apologized for materially and diplomatically aiding the Khmer Rouge regime, nor has it unequivocally condemned this regime. Meanwhile, the Western democracies still largely credits Cambodia's rejuvenation to the influx of capital from the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) and subsequent economic liberalization, ignoring the role of the Vietnamese intervention in ending the genocide and the massive socialist bloc aid that helped rebuilt the country. In Cambodia itself, the last decade has seen a revival of anti-Vietnamese sentiments in the opposition movement, partially directed at the resident ethnic Vietnamese community, one of the targets of the Cambodian Genocide.⁴⁶⁶

⁴⁶⁶ The term "Cambodian Genocide" has is contentious. In 2018, the Extraordinary Chambers in the Court of Cambodia found that the Khmer Rouge leaders were guilty of crimes against humanity against the Cambodian people and genocide against the Vietnamese and Cham ethnic minorities. Due in great part to the lack of an elegant alternative term to describe the mass violence that occurred in Cambodia between 1975-1979, many scholars have used the term "Cambodian Genocide" as a convenient shorthand, even though it obscures the fact that vast majority of the victims of the Khmer Rouge were ethnic Khmer and therefore not victims of genocide. Like many other scholars, I sometimes use the term "Cambodian Genocide" in this chapter for ease of expression, while I am conscious of the important distinctions and debates surrounding this problematic term.

I argue that a first step to drawing the kind of historical lessons that would actually prevent a recurrence of mass political violence is for scholars and policymakers to be bold in expressing their opinions, to dare to question established tenets like the ASEAN Way, and, to discuss in practical and specific terms the real lessons of the Cambodian Genocide when dealing with ongoing and potentially future genocides in the region.

Vietnam: A reluctant and tardy intervention

William Shawcross, Kenton Clymer, Ben Kiernan, and Taylor Owen have written extensively about how the U.S. bombing had been culpable in radicalizing the Khmer Rouge and contributing to the radicalization of Khmer Rouge cadres. But few have chastised the Vietnamese (and other international actors as well) for waiting over three years before acting to stop the mass killings occurring in their neighbor country.⁴⁶⁷ In fact, Vietnam's decision to help topple the Khmer Rouge has been widely criticized for violating the prohibition against the use of force in international relations as expressed in the UN Charter Article 2(1), as well as the emerging regional norm against intervention in other states' affairs as expressed in the 1967 Bangkok Declaration, the 1971 Declaration on the Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality (ZOPFAN), and the 1976 Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC).⁴⁶⁸ Though Vietnamese troops had entered and

⁴⁶⁷ William Shawcross, *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon, and the Destruction of Cambodia*, New ed (London: Hogarth Press, 1986); Kenton J Clymer, *The United States and Cambodia, 1969-2000: A Troubled Relationship* (London: Routledge, 2004); Ben Kiernan and Taylor Owen, "Making More Enemies than We Kill? Calculating U.S. Bomb Tonnages Dropped on Laos and Cambodia, and Weighing Their Implications," *Global Research*, April 28, 2015, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/making-more-enemies-than-we-kill-calculating-u-s-bomb-tonnages-dropped-on-laos-and-cambodia-and-weighing-their-implications/5446040>.

⁴⁶⁸ Haacke, *ASEAN's Diplomatic and Security Culture*, 81–101.

held Cambodian territory on the border by the end of 1977, the Vietnamese only began their campaign to drive the Khmer Rouge from Phnom Penh after an intense border conflict, a genocide of the Vietnamese community in Cambodia, and multiple unsuccessful efforts at courting Chinese mediation.⁴⁶⁹ When Vietnam finally launched a full-scale invasion in December 1978, it was primarily for national security and strategic objectives.⁴⁷⁰ Its inability to destroy the Khmer Rouge forces, aided in great part by Thailand's decision to allow the Khmer Rouge and other opposition groups haven on its side of the border, bogged Vietnamese troops down in the country until 1989, at great human and material cost to both Vietnam and Cambodia. Even after the discovery and publicization of the mass graves of the Khmer Rouge regime, the international community continued to support the seating of the Khmer-Rouge led Coalition Government for Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) at international fora and called for the Vietnamese withdrawal throughout the 1980s.⁴⁷¹ It was only with significant Soviet Bloc support that Vietnam was able to sustain its military efforts to prevent the return of the Khmer Rouge until the Soviet Union crumble in the late 1980s.⁴⁷²

The uncomfortable truth is that Vietnam knew far more than it admitted about the ongoing genocide in Cambodia between 1975 and 1978 but did nothing until forced to defend

⁴⁶⁹ Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79*, 3rd ed. (New Haven [Conn.]: Yale University Press, 2008); Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 1986.

⁴⁷⁰ Kosal Path, *Vietnam's Strategic Thinking during the Third Indochina War*, 1 edition (University of Wisconsin Press, 2020).

⁴⁷¹ Burchett, *The China-Cambodia-Vietnam Triangle*, 1981; Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 1986; Evans, *Red Brotherhood at War*, 1990; Mysliwiec, *Punishing the Poor*; Tom Fawthrop and Helen Jarvis, *Getting Away With Genocide: Cambodia's Long Struggle Against the Khmer Rouge* (London: Pluto Press, 2004); Benny Widyono, *Dancing in Shadows: Sihanouk, the Khmer Rouge, and the United Nations in Cambodia* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008).

⁴⁷² Pike, *Vietnam and the Soviet Union*, 1987.

itself from Pol Pot's aggression. My 2013 interview with Nguyễn Hiệu, who served as a spy and advisor to Lê Đức Thọ and later replaced him as chief advisor to the Kampuchean National United Front for National Salvation (KNUFNS) and People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), served as Deputy Head of the military attaché delegation in Cambodia before becoming a member of the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Communist Party, was particularly illuminating. Hiệu was among the staff who remained in the Vietnamese embassy in Phnom Penh from the Khmer Rouge takeover in April 1975 through the severance of relations in January 1978. Hiệu also participated in the unsuccessful negotiations on the Vietnam-Cambodia border, following the Khmer Rouge attacks on Phú Quốc (Koh Tral) and Thổ Chu islands between 3-5 May 1975. In that time, Hiệu and his colleagues witnessed firsthand many atrocities, including "executions of monks, officers, authorities under Lon Nol's regime, even Lon Nol's family" accompanying the forced evacuation of the city's population.⁴⁷³ In his memoirs, General Lê Đức Anh, who led Vietnamese forces in Cambodia before becoming Defense Minister and President of Vietnam, described the situation when many Cambodian refugees first fled to Vietnam in 1975: "according to international law, our Ministry of Foreign Affairs gave the order to turn them over [to the Cambodian authorities]. All refugees we repatriated were executed, some of whom right on Vietnamese territory, before our very eyes. Later, we made the decision to not repatriate anymore but instead give them food and look after them."⁴⁷⁴ Accounts such as these indicate that Vietnam had good knowledge of the genocide that was taking place in Cambodia, but never seriously considered humanitarian intervention until attacked. Even more troubling, according to Nguyễn Quốc Khánh, who later

⁴⁷³ Interview with Nguyen Hieu, 2013

⁴⁷⁴ Đức Anh Lê, *Cuộc Đời và Sự Nghiệp Cách Mạng* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Chính Trị Quốc Gia, 2015), 260, <https://newcatalog.library.cornell.edu/catalog/9897067>.

became Vietnamese Ambassador to Thailand, there were whispers in the halls of Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the late 1970s that Vietnam needed to emulate the Khmer Rouge's resolve in its ongoing land reform efforts in the South.⁴⁷⁵

It was only in 1977, after the Khmer Rouge had launched costly attacks on Vietnam beginning on Vietnamese Unification Day (April 30), that the Secretariat of the Vietnamese Communist Party hastily formed a Provisional Subcommittee Researching the Cambodian Problem (colloquially known as Group 77). Between 5 December 1977 and 5 January 1978, Vietnamese forces advancing as far as 30km deep into Cambodian territory to destroy Khmer Rouge supply lines "captured a number of secret documents of the leaders of Democratic Kampuchea, which became the basis for the correct identification and evaluation of the nature and plot of the Pol Pot – Ieng Sary clique."⁴⁷⁶ After months of internal debates, much of which was spent arguing over the precise political character of the Khmer Rouge regime by Marxist theoreticians, Group 77 finally came out with their report in January 1978, which concluded that "the Cambodian nation is in the grips of a serious crisis; the people of Cambodia are currently living in a giant concentration camp..." Yet, all four key political goals it identified for Vietnam's Cambodian policy – "(1) Protection of our people; (2) Fight hard to punish those invaders who killed our people; (3) Recover lost territory, defend our territorial integrity; and (4) Undermine the plot to divide the people of the two countries, isolate the reactionaries" – were all defensive in nature and did not explicitly advocate for a military intervention to bring about regime change.

⁴⁷⁵ Interview with Nguyen Quoc Khanh, 2019.

⁴⁷⁶ Joint project of the Communist Party of Vietnam and the Cambodian People's Party, "Lịch Sử Quan Hệ Việt Nam - Campuchia, Campuchia - Việt Nam 1930-2010, Bản Thảo Lần Thứ Ba [History of Vietnam-Cambodia, Cambodia-Vietnam Relations 1930-2010, Third Draft]," 2015, 180.

However, the report did recommend that Vietnam “actively support, aid, and protect the patriotic Cambodian forces and true revolutionaries”, particularly in helping the refugees who fled to Vietnam. It also called for Vietnam to “pursue an offensive diplomatic push” as “we have the right to punish the invaders and murderers. We are at an advantage diplomatically because we are righteous and humane.”⁴⁷⁷

The inclusion of this moralistic language suggests that the final report was a compromise between Politburo members who favored a more activist foreign policy and those who were more wary of the significant costs of expanding a defensive war into an offensive one with a humanitarian dimension. But in practice, even after privately and publicly recognizing the genocidal nature of the Khmer Rouge regime, the Vietnamese opted to withdraw from Cambodia in January 1978 “respecting the independence and sovereignty of our neighbor” and pinned their hopes on Chinese mediation, until relations with China broke down definitively by mid-1978.⁴⁷⁸ In the end, it was not until December 25, 1978, after more than a million Cambodians had already perished under Democratic Kampuchea, and only when Vietnam faced an imminent two-front war with China and Cambodia if it did not quickly eliminate the Khmer Rouge as a security threat, that Vietnam finally launched the invasion that liberated Phnom Penh. Lê Đức Anh perhaps summarizes best Vietnam’s inaction in these years: “We need to seriously self-critique our response to the Cambodian issue. In every stage we made mistakes.”⁴⁷⁹

⁴⁷⁷ Huỳnh, “Ghi Chép về Campuchia 1975-1991,” 12–13.

⁴⁷⁸ Joint project of the Communist Party of Vietnam and the Cambodian People’s Party, “Lịch Sử Quan Hệ Việt Nam - Campuchia, Campuchia - Việt Nam 1930-2010, Bản Thảo Lần Thứ Ba [History of Vietnam-Cambodia, Cambodia-Vietnam Relations 1930-2010, Third Draft],” 181.

⁴⁷⁹ Lê, *Cuộc Đời và Sự Nghiệp Cách Mạng*, 260.

In the recent celebrations of the 40th anniversary of the liberation of Phnom Penh, Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyễn Xuân Phúc spoke at length about the critical role of Vietnam in ending the genocide and historic friendship between the two countries, but offered no reflection on Vietnam's complex relationship with its erstwhile Khmer Communist allies, its role in helping these allies topple the Lon Nol regime and seize power in 1975, and, perhaps most importantly, its inaction in the face of genocide between 1975 and 1978.⁴⁸⁰ From Santayana's instrumentalist perspective, the most important lesson Vietnam should have learned from the Cambodian Genocide is that it should evaluate its allies with objectivity and clarity, and undertake to prevent any recurrence of genocide in the region even if it is perpetrated by an ostensibly friendly regime. Vietnam should also have learned that its widespread use of landmines in Cambodia injured many innocent civilians and turned public opinion against the Vietnamese military presence, playing into the hands of the Khmer Rouge.⁴⁸¹ Yet today, Vietnam has learned the complete opposite lesson. Since acceding to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and joining ASEAN in 1995, Vietnam has internalized the ASEAN Way's core tenet that international humanitarian interventions are too costly and national self-interest should be the only guide for foreign policy, which explains its silence over gross human rights abuses perpetrated by fellow ASEAN members in both East Timor in 1999 and Rakhine State in Myanmar especially since 2012. Vietnam's experiences with asymmetric warfare against the Khmer Rouge insurgency has also played a part in convincing its military leaders that landmines are a cost-efficient, effective, and

⁴⁸⁰ "Phát Biểu Của Thủ Tướng Tại Lễ Kỷ Niệm 40 Năm Chiến Thắng Biên Giới Tây Nam," baodientu.chinhphu.vn, accessed October 3, 2019, <http://baochinhphu.vn/Cac-bai-phat-bieu-cua-Thu-tuong/Phat-bieu-cua-Thu-tuong-tai-Le-ky-niem-40-nam-Chien-thang-bien-gioi-Tay-Nam/356209.vgp>; "The Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese Communists."

⁴⁸¹ Slocumb, "The K5 Gamble."

legitimate means of self-defense, as evidenced by its continuing refusal to sign on to the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction (Ottawa Treaty).⁴⁸²

ASEAN and China: The triumph of amorality

On May 31, 2019, Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong posted on his Facebook page a tribute to the recently deceased Thai Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda that waxed lyrical about his leadership of ASEAN in the face of Vietnam's intervention in Cambodia. "General Prem was resolute in not accepting this *fait accompli*, and worked with ASEAN partners to oppose the Vietnamese occupation in international forums. This prevented the military invasion and regime change from being legitimised. It protected the security of other Southeast Asia countries, and decisively shaped the course of the region."⁴⁸³ The post ignited strong reactions from Vietnam and Cambodia, with Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen lamenting on his own Facebook page that Lee Hsien Loong's statement "reflects Singapore's position then in support of the genocidal regime and the wish for its return to Cambodia. Singapore was the host of the tripartite meeting that led to the formation of the coalition government of the Democratic Kampuchea, which had

⁴⁸² "Mine Ban Policy | Reports | Monitor," accessed October 3, 2019, http://www.the-monitor.org/en-gb/reports/2015/vietnam/mine-ban-policy.aspx#_ftn12.

⁴⁸³ "Lee Hsien Loong - Posts," accessed October 3, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/leehsienloong/photos/a.344710778924968/2475833219146036>; "PM Lee's Facebook Post on Vietnam's Invasion of Cambodia Draws Ire," Text, The Straits Times, June 7, 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/pm-lees-facebook-post-on-vietnams-invasion-of-cambodia-draws-ire>.

prolonged the war and the suffering of Cambodian people for another 10 years. It's an act against the survival of the Cambodian people."⁴⁸⁴

Lee's valorization of ASEAN opposition to Vietnam and the PRK may have been tone-deaf and insensitive, but it was also well within the mainstream of ASEAN historiography. For most experts on ASEAN, the Third Indochina War was the regional organization's defining moment. By 1979, ASEAN was over a decade old. Despite the high hopes of economic and political cooperation that were enunciated in the Bangkok Declaration in 1967, it had little to show in terms of concrete accomplishments. When Vietnam invaded Cambodia, Singapore's Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam initiated a special ASEAN Foreign Ministers' closed meeting in Bangkok, where he encouraged the other ASEAN countries to take a strong stance against what he saw as a challenge to the core ASEAN principle of non-intervention.⁴⁸⁵ ASEAN then played a crucial role in lobbying for continued recognition of Democratic Kampuchea in important international fora like the UN and Non-Aligned Movement, and in the formation of the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea. Most experts consider the Third Indochina War a major turning point for ASEAN as its first major foreign policy victory that launched the organization into international prominence and brought about the conditions favorable for its institutionalization in the 1990s.⁴⁸⁶

⁴⁸⁴ "Samdech Hun Sen, Cambodian Prime Minister - Posts," accessed October 4, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/hunsencambodia/photos/a.887656284616203/2260019794046505/?type=3&theater>.

⁴⁸⁵ Ang, *Singapore, ASEAN, and the Cambodian Conflict, 1978-1991*, 2013, 20–41.

⁴⁸⁶ Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia*, 99–118; Haacke, *ASEAN's Diplomatic and Security Culture*, 81–101; Jones, *ASEAN, Sovereignty and Intervention in Southeast Asia*, 2011, 75–91.

In a key 2011 address, former Singaporean Foreign Minister Wong Kan Seng identified five lessons Singapore learned from the Third Indochina War, all of which were actionable tips for a small nation to punch above its weight and lead the world on an important foreign policy issue. According to Wong, the war's most important legacy was that it made ASEAN "a more cohesive and coordinated grouping. It was through the careful handling of the Cambodia issue that ASEAN proved its mettle and showed the international community that it had the ability to solve problems, and was a 'serious' and 'credible' organisation."⁴⁸⁷ There was no room in Wong's fond reminiscences for critical reflection on the impact of ASEAN actions in prolonging a bloody civil war and buttressing a genocidal regime for over a decade.

Today, the principle of absolute non-intervention regardless of a regime's human rights record that was reaffirmed at the 1991 Paris Peace Conference continues to shape ASEAN's lackluster approach to human rights. Various scholars and organizations have cited concerns that the 2014 ASEAN Human Rights Declaration outlines such a cultural relativist definition of human rights that it could potentially justify any governmental infringement of these rights.⁴⁸⁸ Article 6 stipulates that "the enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms must be balanced with the performance of corresponding duties as every person has responsibilities to all other individuals, the community and the society where one lives." Article 7 further conditions that

⁴⁸⁷ Wong Kan Seng, "Speech by Former Deputy Prime Minister & Former Coordinating Minister for National Security Wong Kan Seng at the S. Rajaratnam Lecture at Shangri-La Hotel on Wednesday, 23 November 2011."

⁴⁸⁸ Nicholas Doyle, "THE ASEAN HUMAN RIGHTS DECLARATION AND THE IMPLICATIONS OF RECENT SOUTHEAST ASIAN INITIATIVES IN HUMAN RIGHTS INSTITUTION-BUILDING AND STANDARD-SETTING," *International & Comparative Law Quarterly* 63, no. 1 (January 2014): 67–101, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020589313000390>; International Commission of Jurists, "The ASEAN Human Rights Declaration: Questions and Answers," 2013, <https://www.icj.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/ASEAN-leaflet-240713.pdf>.

“the realisation of human rights must be considered in the regional and national context bearing in mind different political, economic, legal, social, cultural, historical and religious backgrounds,” and Article 8 subjects the exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms “to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition for the human rights and fundamental freedoms of others, and to meet the just requirements of national security, public order, public health, public safety, public morality, as well as the general welfare of the peoples in a democratic society.” If all that was not enough, Article 9 gives governments the ultimate get-out-of-jail-free card by stipulating that “the principles of impartiality, objectivity, non-selectivity, non-discrimination, non-confrontation and avoidance of double standards and politicisation, should always be upheld.”⁴⁸⁹ Given these caveats, ASEAN will never have grounds to censure any member state for human rights violations. This heavy privileging of stability over justice explains ASEAN’s silence over the Indonesian military crackdown in East Timor in 1999 and Myanmar’s ongoing genocide of its Rohingya population, severely circumscribing its regional leadership role.⁴⁹⁰ Until there are more concerted efforts at critically reexamining ASEAN’s role in supporting the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime and, with it, the entire ASEAN Way of absolute sovereignty and non-intervention, Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia will, for all of its faults, remain the closest thing to a humanitarian intervention in Southeast Asia for the foreseeable future.

⁴⁸⁹ ASEAN, “ASEAN Human Rights Declaration,” 2014, <https://asean.org/asean-human-rights-declaration/>.

⁴⁹⁰ Alan Dupont, “ASEAN’s Response to the East Timor Crisis,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs; Canberra* 54, no. 2 (July 2000): 163–70; “Outcry as Asean Report Predicts ‘smooth’ Return of Rohingya to Myanmar,” Text, *The Straits Times*, June 8, 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/outcry-as-an-asean-report-predicts-smooth-return-of-rohingya-to-myanmar>.

At least, the recent spat between Cambodia and Singapore illustrates how even this fundamental and longstanding principle is increasingly being questioned within ASEAN by its newer members. Attitudes towards absolute sovereignty are trending the opposite way in China, the country that had once been the Khmer Rouge's main ally. Like ASEAN, China also considers the Third Indochina War a major success. Deng Xiaoping supported the Khmer Rouge despite the ideological incompatibility between his moderate, pragmatic philosophy and their radical revolutionary zeal to show the U.S. that China could be a valuable partner in containing Soviet clients and to create the stable conditions necessary for his Reform and Opening Up (改革开放) policy, focusing on economic growth after decades of internal revolutionary upheavals.⁴⁹¹ At the July 1981 International Conference on Kampuchea, Chinese Foreign Minister Han Nianlong roped in the Americans to veto the ASEAN proposal of disarming the Khmer Rouge, leading even the relatively anti-Soviet Singaporeans to conclude that Beijing was not interested in a workable solution to the Cambodian problem, but was hoping either for the return of the Khmer Rouge to power, or the prolongation of the war to bleed Vietnam dry.⁴⁹² In the Chinese government's view, it achieved all its foreign policy objectives in diplomatically isolating Vietnam, garnering ASEAN and Western support for their Khmer Rouge allies, and ultimately forcing a Vietnamese withdrawal and a chance for the return of the Khmer Rouge and renewal of their partnership with China.⁴⁹³

⁴⁹¹ Xiaoming Zhang, "Deng Xiaoping and China's Decision to Go to War with Vietnam," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 12, no. 3 (2010): 3–29; Xiaoming Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict between China and Vietnam, 1979-1991* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), <http://newcatalog.library.cornell.edu/catalog/9129058>.

⁴⁹² Ang, *Singapore, ASEAN, and the Cambodian Conflict, 1978-1991*, 2013, 38–41.

⁴⁹³ Zhang, "Deng Xiaoping and China's Decision to Go to War with Vietnam"; Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War*, 2015.

More than just rallying domestic support to secure Deng Xiaoping's hitherto insecure position in Chinese domestic politics, for the Chinese leadership, the Third Indochina War also vindicated Deng's emphasis of *Realpolitik* over morality and ideology in foreign policy. Today, we see China's disdain for international law and treaties in its actions in Hong Kong and the South China Sea, its willingness to support regimes with especially poor track records in human rights like North Korea and Syria, its penchant for employing the practice of debt-trap diplomacy toward countries like Sri Lanka and Djibouti to secure its national interests, and its domestic suppression of minorities like the Uighurs and Tibetans.⁴⁹⁴

Today, the Chinese government has taken steps to limit public debate of the Third Indochina War, making it difficult for the official narrative of total victory to ever be questioned. While the 40th anniversary of the outbreak of the Third Indochina War was allowed to be publicly commemorated in Vietnam with some censorship, in China veteran groups who served in this war are unable to publicly voice their demands for government recognition and medical support and still gather only in private.⁴⁹⁵ Claiming that this was to avoid antagonizing Vietnam, the

⁴⁹⁴ "China Says Sino-British Joint Declaration on Hong Kong No Longer Has Meaning - Reuters," accessed October 5, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hongkong-anniversary-china/china-says-sino-british-joint-declaration-on-hong-kong-no-longer-has-meaning-idUSKBN19L1J1>; Isaac Kardon, "China Can Say 'No': Analyzing China's Rejection of the South China Sea Arbitration," *University of Pennsylvania Asian Law Review* 13, no. 2 (January 1, 2018), <https://scholarship.law.upenn.edu/alr/vol13/iss2/1>; Christian von Soest, "Democracy Prevention: The International Collaboration of Authoritarian Regimes," *European Journal of Political Research* 54, no. 4 (2015): 623–38, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12100>; Mark Green, "China's Debt Diplomacy," *Foreign Policy* (blog), accessed October 5, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/25/chinas-debt-diplomacy/>.

⁴⁹⁵ Keegan Elmer and Minnie Chan, "Chinese Veterans Defy Official Silence to Mark Vietnam Border War," *South China Morning Post*, February 18, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/2186692/40-years-chinese-veterans-defy-official-silence-remember-vietnam>.

Chinese government is mainly looking after its own reputation by trying to erase the history of the Chinese Communist Party's cozy relationship with the Khmer Rouge.

The West and Cambodia: Selective forgetfulness

In the wake of Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia, the Western democracies quickly moved to suspend development aid to both countries, and supported ASEAN and China's efforts to secure votes for continued recognition of the Khmer Rouge in international fora. International humanitarian aid to the refugee camps on the Thai border that were controlled by the Khmer Rouge also unintentionally gave the Khmer Rouge a safe haven from whence they could harass Vietnamese and PRK troops, and thereby indirectly undermined the nation-building efforts of the PRK.⁴⁹⁶ While some European countries like France and Germany were willing to consider resuming aid to Vietnam in 1989 when the Cold War was ending and Vietnamese troops had already withdrawn from Cambodia, the U.S. pressured its European allies to drop these proposals. When they refused, the Americans vetoed the European loans outright, thereby pressuring Vietnam and the PRK to accept a final peace agreement that gave no mention of the genocide and allowing the Khmer Rouge to participate in the 1993 UN-sponsored election (which they eventually decided to boycott).⁴⁹⁷ It would not be until 2003 that the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), also known as The Khmer Rouge Tribunal would begin formal

⁴⁹⁶ Slocomb, *The People's Republic of Kampuchea, 1979-1989*, 2003; Lưu, *Ngoại Giao Việt Nam, 1945-1995*; Mysliwiec, *Punishing the Poor*.

⁴⁹⁷ Baker III, "Letter to Roland Dumas"; Acharya, Lizée, and Peou, *Cambodia - The 1989 Paris Peace Conference*; United Nations and Paris Conference on Cambodia, *Agreements on a Comprehensive Political Settlement of the Cambodia Conflict, Paris, 23 October 1991*.

proceedings against the former Khmer Rouge leaders for crimes against humanity and genocide, and not until 2018 that all the major surviving leaders of the Khmer Rouge had been convicted of these crimes.⁴⁹⁸ Despite criticism from many quarters, no Western government has publicly apologized for having supported the Khmer Rouge in the 1980s or for delaying recognition of Cambodia's genocide.

The experience of the Third Indochina War did help inform the development of Responsibility to Protect (R2P). Former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans, an important intermediary in the resolution of the Cambodian conflict, later identified this conflict as a pivotal event that convinced many world leaders at the 2005 World Summit of the need to radically transform the existing principle of sovereignty from absolute to conditional.⁴⁹⁹ The Summit defined R2P as “the responsibility of a state to its own people not to either commit such mass atrocity crimes or allow them to occur (now referred to as Pillar One); the responsibility of other states to assist those lacking the capacity to so protect (Pillar Two); and the responsibility of the international community to respond with ‘timely and decisive action’ (including ultimately with coercive military force if that is authorised by the Security Council) if a state is ‘manifestly failing’ to meet its protection responsibilities (Pillar Three).”⁵⁰⁰ However, in overstepping the United

⁴⁹⁸ Some of the worst perpetrators including Pol Pot, Ta Mok, and Son Sen were incapable of being tried due to having died or old age, and trials for those below the very top level were deemed too politically divisive. To date, only Nuon Chea, Khieu Samphan, and Kang Kek Iew “Duch” were tried, and it is unlikely there will be any others. See: Fawthrop and Jarvis, *Getting Away With Genocide*, 2004; Seth Mydans, “11 Years, \$300 Million and 3 Convictions. Was the Khmer Rouge Tribunal Worth It?,” *The New York Times*, December 22, 2017, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/10/world/asia/cambodia-khmer-rouge-united-nations-tribunal.html>.

⁴⁹⁹ Gareth Evans, *The Responsibility to Protect: Ending Mass Atrocity Crimes Once and For All* (Brookings Institution Press, 2009), 24.

⁵⁰⁰ “The Responsibility to Protect: After Libya and Syria,” accessed October 5, 2019, <http://www.gevans.org/speeches/speech585.html>.

Nations Security Council (UNSC) mandate of establishing a no-fly zone by carrying out airstrikes in support of regime change in Libya in 2011, the NATO coalition irreparably lost the trust of Russia and China, making it deeply unlikely that these two permanent members of the UNSC will in the future allow for R2P to become established policy.⁵⁰¹

The 1991 Paris Peace Agreement provided for Cambodia to be administered by UNTAC for a period of two years (1992-1993). While this period was largely stable, peaceful, and heralded the arrival of massive humanitarian aid to the war-weary Cambodian people, it was built on fragile political compromises that failed to settle the underlying conflicts between the Cambodian parties. The departure of UN peacekeepers in 1993 quickly saw the country descend anew into a civil war between the government and the Khmer Rouge that lasted until Pol Pot's death and the political and military victory of Hun Sen's "win-win" campaign in 1998.⁵⁰² UNTAC's greatest success, the revival of the Cambodian economy, was built upon the momentum of the PRK's 1980s recovery, which had been heavily supported by humanitarian aid from the socialist bloc. Yet, this earlier humanitarian aid is mostly absent in Western narratives, which credit UNTAC, Western leadership, and capital injection for the successes. These narratives serve to perpetuate the myth of the Western world saving Cambodia from domestic authoritarianism and Vietnamese expansionism.⁵⁰³ By downplaying or erasing the role of the Vietnamese (and their

⁵⁰¹ David Rieff, "R2P, R.I.P.," *The New York Times*, November 7, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/08/opinion/r2p-rip.html>.

⁵⁰² MacAlister Brown and Joseph Jeremiah Zasloff, *Cambodia Confronts the Peacemakers, 1979-1998* (Cornell University Press, 1998), 165–235.

⁵⁰³ Trevor Findlay, *Cambodia: The Legacy and Lessons of UNTAC*, 1 edition (Oxford: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 1995); "Cambodia: The Legacy and Lessons of UNTAC | SIPRI," accessed October 6, 2019, <https://www.sipri.org/publications/1995/cambodia-legacy-and-lessons-untac>; Tom Riddle, *Cambodia and the Year of UNTAC: Life and Love in Cambodia's 1993 Election*, None edition (Toronto Buffalo Lancaster (U.K.): Guernica Editions Inc, 2017).

Soviet and Eastern Bloc sponsors) in rebuilding Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge, these works inadvertently paint the Vietnamese military occupation as being of little benefit for Cambodia, opening the door to a return of anti-Vietnam sentiments.

The two actions by the Khmer Rouge that catalyzed the Vietnamese intervention were the border attacks and the violence targeting Cambodia's Vietnamese population. Yet today, both the Cambodian government and opposition continue to use the ethnic Vietnamese and the border demarcation as tools to evince their nationalistic fervor and to question the opposition's patriotism. For example, On August 15, 2017 Prime Minister Hun Sen signed sub-decree 129 announcing the "cancellation and revocation of irregular documents used by foreigners in Cambodia" and set a deadline to exit the country by June 30, 2019. The Cambodian government has gone on to withdraw more than 30,000 documents (90% of which were held by ethnic Vietnamese), deport around 15,000 illegal immigrants, and forcibly relocate around 2,300 residents from the floating villages to dry land, though many have returned to the water due to poor conditions at the sites of their relocation.⁵⁰⁴ In March 2018, responding to opposition leader Sam Rainsy's baseless claim that the government was handing over land to Vietnam in the border demarcation negotiations, Hun Sen turned the tables on Rainsy, accusing him of treason over a 2013 video in which he pledged some autonomy to Montagnard minorities on the borderlands.⁵⁰⁵

⁵⁰⁴ Long Kimmarita, "Immigration Department to Revoke 'Irregular Documents', National, Phnom Penh Post," accessed March 24, 2019, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/immigration-department-revoke-irregular-documents>; "Vietnamese Evicted From Cambodia's Tonle Sap Begin to Return," Radio Free Asia, accessed March 24, 2019, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/cambodia/return-01252019152315.html>.

⁵⁰⁵ Ben Sokhean and Andrew Nachemson, "PM Hun Sen Questions Vietnam's Loyalty, Accuses Sam Rainsy of Treason," The Phnom Penh Post, March 14, 2018, <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/pm-hun-sen-questions-vietnams-loyalty-accuses-sam-rainsy-treason>.

It is clear that despite having first-hand experience of the dangers of the Khmer Rouge's targeted killings of the ethnic Vietnamese among other minority groups and the war with Vietnam, today Cambodians on both sides of the political divide are very willing to risk stoking ultranationalist sentiments and use the ethnic Vietnamese minority and relations with Vietnam as pawns for an advantage in the polls.

Conclusion

Today, Southeast Asia is outwardly largely peaceful, prosperous, integrated, and open for international business. The Third Indochina War would appear to be a distant memory, but its shadow still looms large upon regional institutions, norms, and practices. ASEAN has few mechanisms to discourage member states from engaging in organized mass violence. As I have tried to show, state censorship in China, political opportunism in Cambodia, institutionalized norms in ASEAN, pride in the West, and selective memory in Vietnam still prevent countries from learning lessons from history that would prevent a recurrence of serious human rights violations in the region.

In these circumstances, scholars can and should speak up about questions of human rights in the region. My hopes for this dissertation are two-fold. First, I hope that it will make a clear contribution to our understanding of Vietnamese foreign policy between reunification in 1975 and ASEAN membership in 1995, showing that before, during, and after the Third Indochina War, Vietnamese leaders consistently but often unsuccessfully sought multilateralism and economic integration. Second, I hope this dissertation will speak truth to power and play a part in

highlighting the lesson we ought to learn from the Third Indochina War: that while in the short run leaders can get away with ignoring human rights violations in pursuit of national self-interest, later generations will one day judge their actions.

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