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# The Geopolitics of Cambodia During the Cold War Period

SOK UDOM DETH

Ohio University

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Sok Udom Deth was born in 1985 in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. After finishing high school at Zaman International School in Phnom Penh in 2002, Deth studied in Turkey and in 2006 received a B.A. in Sociology at Bogazici University in Istanbul. Deth is currently a M.A. student in Southeast Asian Studies at Ohio University and working on his thesis titled *The People's Republic of Kampuchea 1979-1989: A Draconian Savior?*

After gaining its independence from France in 1953, Cambodia, like many other newly independent countries, had to face the new escalating global problem of the time: the Cold War. As far as Cambodia was concerned, the effects of the Cold War were discernible from the outset, with the formation of the Indochinese Communist Party in 1951 in Vietnam and its influence on the communist movement in Cambodia. However, it was not ideological conflict alone that accounted for the destruction of Cambodia in the following decades. Michael Leifer, for instance, notes: "Ever since the decline of the ancient Khmer Empire, geography has combined with politics to shape the fortunes of the Cambodian state."<sup>1</sup> Similarly, British journalist William Shawcross also writes: "Cambodia is a victim of its geography and of its political underdevelopment."<sup>2</sup> This essay therefore intends to examine the main factors that were crucial to the development of Cambodian geopolitics during the Cold War era. I would argue that the geopolitics of Cambodia from 1953 to 1991 is characterized mainly by three factors: the Vietnam War, the legacy of French colonial rule, i.e. the country's territorial disputes with her neighbors, and finally, the rivalry of hegemonic

powers in the region as well as the politics of the Cold War itself.

## *The Impact of the Vietnam War*

In order to better understand the key points of discussion in this paper, it is useful to offer a definition of "geopolitics." In the context of this paper, geopolitics refers to the influences of geography on politics, i.e., the relationships that exist between a country's politics and its geography, or the influences that geography has on political relations between countries.<sup>3</sup>

As the development of the Cold War polarized the globe, Cambodia, like the rest of the world, had to come to terms with the new political landscape. After successfully demanding Cambodia's independence from France in 1953, King (later Prince) Norodom Sihanouk tried to pursue neutralist policy with the hope of keeping his country out of war, while continuing to accept financial support from rival powers. Eventually, however, Sihanouk's foreign policy began to shift towards the left, so that he was labeled "procommunist" by the United States.<sup>4</sup> Sihanouk's decision to align himself with the left

stemmed from his belief that the communists would finally win the Indochina war. Additionally, the prince displayed distrust toward Thailand and South Vietnam, two countries that were backed by the U.S. in this period. Internally, his move was an attempt to diminish the leftists' opposition, but it also had the effect of alienating the right wing of his government, especially army officials. In fact, in 1963, Sihanouk decided to cut off U.S. economic and military assistance, which had totaled about US\$404 million since the country gained independence. Moreover, he nationalized Cambodia's banks and the country's export-import trade.<sup>5</sup> By 1965, Cambodia broke off relations all together with the United States, meanwhile turning to China for international alliance. In fact, as early as 1955, Sihanouk's rejection of the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) already won him economic support from China and political support from the Viet Minh (the communists of North Vietnam).<sup>6</sup> In 1966, Prince Sihanouk made a move that was to become a factor leading to the coup against him in 1970. Perceiving that the North Vietnamese would win its war against the United States, Sihanouk secretly allied himself with the North Vietnamese. To quote from David Chandler:

Under the terms of the alliance, the North Vietnamese were allowed to station troops in Cambodian territory and to receive arms and supplies funneled to them from North Vietnam and China via the Cambodian port of Sihanoukville. In exchange, they recognized Cambodia's frontiers, left Cambodian civilians alone, and avoided contact with the Cambodian army. South Vietnamese and U.S. officials soon knew about the presence of North Vietnamese troops in Cambodia, and the movements of weapons and supplies, without knowing the details of the agreement Sihanouk had reached. Sihanouk denied for several years that any Vietnamese troops were in Cambodia, which angered the United States and South Vietnam but enhanced the image of injured innocence that the prince projected to the outside world.<sup>7</sup>

It was under such circumstances that the so-called "Sihanouk Trail"—the southern terminus of the more widely known "Ho Chi Minh Trail"—came into being. The trail, cutting through Laos and Cambodia, served as the logistical supply route utilized by the People's Army of Vietnam (PAV) and its southern supporters, the National Liberation Front (Viet Cong). The emergence of the Vietnamese sanctuaries on

Cambodian territories resulted in the U.S. secret bombing missions authorized by President Nixon. According to historian John Tully, the U.S. dropped almost 540,000 tons of bombs on Cambodia during the first half of the 1970s, exceeding the total of 160,000 tons of bombs dropped by the Allies on Japan in all of World War II.<sup>8</sup> Estimates of the death toll range widely from 150,000 to the U.S. historian Chalmers Johnson's perhaps inflated estimate of 750,000.<sup>9</sup>

On March 18, 1970, while Sihanouk was abroad, the National Assembly of Cambodia voted 86-3 to remove Sihanouk from power. The U.S.-supported Khmer Republic was eventually proclaimed, with General Lon Nol as its Prime Minister. There is no direct evidence to support the claim that the U.S. was behind the coup; yet, it was clear that the U.S. was supporting Lon Nol's government thanks to its military strategy in the Vietnam War. Among Cambodians, the 1970 coup was more popular among educated people in Phnom Penh and the army, who were upset with Sihanouk's handling of the economy and the rupture with the United States. In the rural areas, however, people were still in favor of Sihanouk.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, as David Chandler noted, for most people the idea that Vietnamese forces should leave Cambodia was more popular than the coup itself.<sup>11</sup> In fact, when the Vietnamese ignored Lon Nol's ultimatum that they leave Cambodian territory in forty-eight hours, tens of thousands of Cambodians joined the armed forces to drive the Vietnamese out, only to be defeated by the more experienced Vietnamese combatants.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, Lon Nol's army was not only fighting against the Vietnamese, but also against the Cambodian communists—the Khmer Rouge.

It is useful to note here that while the bombing missions by the U.S. on Cambodia's eastern parts had the effect of postponing the Communists' victory, it also drove some peasants to join the Khmer Rouge in the jungle, while many others fled to the capital Phnom Penh. Yet, not everyone who joined the Khmer Rouge was communist. Some went into the jungle to fight for exiled Prince Sihanouk who—now allying himself with his former enemy, the Khmer Rouge—encouraged his people to fight against Lon Nol.

When the U.S. lost the Vietnam War and finally withdrew its troops from Indochina, the Khmer Republic, without any more support from the U.S., was

left on its own and finally collapsed when the Khmer Rouge took over Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975. Between 1975 and 1979 Cambodia was renamed “Democratic Kampuchea” under the leadership of Saloth Sar—the man who came to be more widely-known as Pol Pot. Despite the fact that it was short-lived, Democratic Kampuchea was a devastating regime in which approximately 1.7 million out of about 7 million people lost their lives to mass execution, inhumane working conditions, and starvation. Almost every Cambodian who lived through the period lost at least a few members of their family. The development of collectivism, the breaking of family ties, and the abolishment of the market economy along with a variety of civilian rights highlighted the main characteristics of Democratic Kampuchea. Alongside the execution of intellectuals and professionals, city and town dwellers were forced to resettle in the countryside where they became peasants to achieve the communist party’s (known to the local population as *Angkar*) unrealistic Four Years Plan to transform Cambodia into a land dominated by agrarian wealth. The regime was also known to have purged tens of thousands of its own cadres whom it suspected to be enemies at the infamous interrogation center S-21 in Phnom Penh. Sihanouk, on the other hand, was imprisoned in his own palace after the Khmer Rouge took power.

### ***Border Disputes with the Neighbors***

Once Pol Pot’s faction emerged amidst internal struggles among the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, border incursions to neighboring countries, namely Vietnam, and to a lesser extent Thailand and Laos, intensified.<sup>13</sup> In terms of territorial disputes, both Thailand and Vietnam had often been in conflict with Cambodia. Thailand’s conflicts with Cambodia were more numerous during the French colonial rule over Cambodia (1863–1953); Cambodia’s disputes with Vietnam were more frequent during the Cold War era, specifically under the Khmer Rouge. Interestingly, Thailand’s territorial conflicts with Cambodia took place with the French who ruled Cambodia at the time, while Cambodia’s conflicts with Vietnam involved the two countries directly.<sup>14</sup>

Before coming to power the Khmer Rouge were trained by Vietnamese communists. Once in power, however, they became hostile to their ex-comrades.

The conflicts between the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese had been simmering since as early as May 1975, when the Khmer Rouge attacked several Vietnamese-held islands in the Gulf of Thailand with the hope of gaining the territories in the confusion of the final stages of the Vietnamese civil war.<sup>15</sup> The territorial dispute between Cambodia and Vietnam can be traced back to the French colonial rule of Indochina, if not earlier. Cambodia became a French protectorate in 1863, and in 1874 some Khmer provinces were incorporated by the French authorities to the separate colony of Cochin-China (now southern Vietnam, referred to as *Kampuchea Krom* by Cambodians).<sup>16</sup> This legacy of dispute certainly influenced leaders on both sides. Pol Pot was suspicious of Vietnam’s territorial intentions, and this feeling of distrust deepened when Vietnam signed a treaty of cooperation with Laos in July 1977, a move that Pol Pot interpreted as an attempt to encircle Cambodia and to reconstitute what had once been French Indochina.<sup>17</sup> During these times, the Khmer Rouge demanded that Vietnam respect Cambodia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity and abandon the Indochinese Federation policy, which Vietnam denied pursuing. The Khmer Rouge also claimed parts of the Gulf of Thailand, where they wished to benefit from offshore oil deposits, while the Vietnamese rejected this claim for the simple reason that they had harbored similar hopes.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, skirmishes alongside the borders led leaders of both sides to distrust each other’s sincerity. In fact, it is claimed that the Khmer Rouge had committed atrocities upon Vietnamese villagers in provinces along the Khmer border, killing 222 people, scorching 552 houses, and burning 134 tons of paddy. Nguyen-vo estimates that Cambodians experienced equal losses through Vietnamese violence.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, the Khmer Rouge had strengthened their ties with the People’s Republic of China (PRC), who had antagonistic feelings toward a pro-Soviet Vietnam. This alliance allowed the Khmer Rouge to receive large quantities of arms, ammunition, and other military equipment from China.<sup>20</sup>

Democratic Kampuchea finally collapsed when some 100,000 Vietnamese troops, together with the Kampuchean United Front of National Salvation (KUFNS) (which comprised former DK’s officials who had defected to Vietnam in 1977 and 1978, and other Cambodians who had stayed in Vietnam during DK’s

rule) took over Phnom Penh on January 7, 1979. A pro-Vietnamese government, comprising members of the KUFNS, known as the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) was established in 1979, although it was not recognized by any non-Communist countries, except India.<sup>21</sup> Despite losing hold of the country, the Khmer Rouge were still far from complete defeat, as they were able to retreat to the Thai borders and eventually strengthen themselves with the support of Thailand, China, ASEAN and the United States. Likewise, Sihanouk managed to escape to China before the arrival of the Vietnamese.<sup>22</sup> The period 1979–1991 marked the combination of the politics of the Cold War and regional conflicts that, once again, were to shape the fate of Cambodia and its people.

### ***The Regional and International Factors***

By early 1979, the conflict in Cambodia had gained momentum and international attention. In February 1979, viewing the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia as an act of Soviet encirclement, China accused Vietnam of “militarism, wild aggression and expansion” and launched an attack on the northern parts of Vietnam that would eventually cause heavy destruction on both sides. The Khmer Rouge, who had recently retreated to western parts of Cambodia, managed to receive shelter along the Thai borders because Thailand also feared Vietnam's expansionism. The Khmer Rouge army was not the only resistance force to the Phnom Penh government after 1979. The Royalist group known as FUNCINPEC<sup>23</sup> led by Prince Sihanouk and the republican group led by Sonn San were the other two major groups resisting the Vietnamese-backed People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). The perception of Vietnam's invasion to Cambodia as a threat to the security of the region also led ASEAN to oppose the PRK. In 1982, ASEAN, together with China, was able to persuade the three Cambodian resistance factions to form the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK).<sup>24</sup> Fear of Vietnamese and Soviet aggression in this period eventually internationalized the Cambodian conflict and produced two camps of rivals: the Cambodian CGDK (who continued to retain its seat at the UN), China, ASEAN, and the United States on the one side, and Phnom Penh's People's Republic of Kampuchea, Vietnam, and the Soviet bloc on the other.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the conflicts between the Phnom Penh government and the resistance forces and their respective supporters was the creation of the “K5 Plan,” adopted by the Phnom Penh government, presumably under pressure from their Vietnamese advisors. While the PRK was trying to consolidate their power and credibility inside the country, fighting continued between the People's Army of Vietnam and the resistance forces, who were sheltered by Thailand and received military support from China. In 1984, the Politburo in Phnom Penh discussed “the mobilization of several hundred thousand Cambodian civilians to chop down forests, construct more roads, and lay down hundreds of kilometers of earthen walls, two-and-a-half-meter-deep spiked ditches, barbed wire, and minefields.”<sup>25</sup> This policy was codenamed the “K5 Plan” (*Phenkar Kor Pram* in Khmer). Evan Gottesman stated that the plan's ultimate motive was to “build a Berlin Wall of sorts that would stretch along the Thai-Cambodian border and prevent resistance soldiers from infiltrating.”<sup>26</sup> The attempt to seal the 829-Km long Cambodian-Thai border presumably required a great number of laborers. In fact, in the first phase alone, 90,362 laborers were involved in building the defense line.<sup>27</sup> At the end of 1985, Vietnamese officials estimated the total K5 workers for the year at 150,000.<sup>28</sup> There seemed to be no clear figure of the total number of people conscripted for the K5 Plan, but Margaret Slocomb estimated the total number of conscriptions between late 1984 and mid 1987 at 380,000.<sup>29</sup> It is important to note here that a high number of people conscripted for the K5 Plan lost their lives to malaria and landmines. This strategy of border defense was not something new. During the reign of Minh Mang, between 1820 and 1841, Vietnam colonized Cambodia, and, to enhance its security against Thai attacks, Minh Mang ordered the digging of the Vinh Te canal in 1820–21. The harsh treatment of the Vietnamese overlords caused deep resentment among the Cambodians in a similar way that the K5 undermined the popularity of the PRK and the Vietnamese presence in Cambodia.<sup>30</sup>

The K5 Plan was not the only manifestation of geopolitical cruelty that caused misfortune among Cambodians. Immediately following the Vietnamese invasion, tens of thousands of Cambodians in the west fled the country and took refuge in Thailand. Facing

the influx of refugees without immediate support from the international community, Thai authorities forcefully repatriated as many as 45,000 Cambodian refugees back to their country through the cliffs full of landmines at Preah Vihear, the “no man’s land” between the two countries. Horrifically, those who refused to go down the cliffs were mercilessly shot by Thai soldiers.<sup>31</sup> After making their way through minefields and enduring extreme hunger, receiving food aid from Thai villagers and sometimes by the Vietnamese soldiers and Khmer villagers on the other side, only about two thousand refugees were eventually rescued by the U.S. Embassy and the UNHCR.<sup>32</sup>

Another harsh effect of geopolitical conflict facing Cambodia during this period was the heavy use of landmines by all sides. The history of planting landmines dated back to the Vietnam War when Vietnam, and the U.S. in response, planted landmines on neutral Cambodia. The Khmer Rouge also set up mines during the early 1970s to seal off their “liberated zones” against the Khmer Republic’s army, and along the borders with Vietnam and Thailand once they were in power. The number dramatically rose during the Vietnamese occupation, especially after the withdrawal of the Vietnamese army from Cambodia in 1989, which left the Phnom Penh government to defend itself against the CGDK’s forces. In fact, Eric Stover (a freelance writer and consultant to Human Rights Watch and Physicians for Human Rights) and Rae McGrath (director of the Mine Advisory Group) wrote a report in 1992 and referred to this process of heavy planting of landmines by all fighting forces as “the cowards’ war.”<sup>33</sup> The sheer magnitude of devastation for Cambodian civilians is so remarkable that one out of every 240 Cambodians is estimated to be the victim of a landmine in modern Cambodia.<sup>34</sup>

Only with the end of the Cold War did the conflicts in Cambodia gradually come to an end. The decline of Soviet aid made the stationing of Vietnamese troops in Cambodia difficult, for Vietnam was experiencing both its own problems at home and international isolation during the last decade thanks to its invasion of Cambodia in 1979. Peace talks among Cambodians in the late 1980s finally resulted in the Paris Peace Agreement in October 1991, which was designed to allow the establishment of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia as a peacekeeping force to ensure the peaceful process of the 1993

National Election. Cambodia’s politics thereafter were largely dominated by internal conflicts that resulted in the 1997 coup, while regional cooperation was further enhanced when Cambodia became the tenth member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in April 1999.

### Conclusion

This paper was written with an attempt to illustrate the relationship between Cambodia’s tragedies and its geopolitical position during the Cold War period. After gaining independence, Sihanouk’s efforts to keep Cambodia neutral were undermined by its complex geopolitical situation. The Vietnam War that erupted in the 1960s spilled over into Cambodia, which eventually led to the rise of Democratic Kampuchea, the deadliest regime Cambodia had experienced in its entire history. Once in power, the Khmer Rouge provoked border disputes—a legacy of French colonial rule in Indochina—with Cambodia’s neighbors that would lead to its own demise. The invasion by Vietnam into Cambodia and the establishment of the People’s Republic of Kampuchea did not leave Cambodia at peace, for the country became a battleground that served the interests of bigger powers in the region and beyond. It is not the aim of this essay to attribute responsibility for the conflicts described to purely geographical or ideological factors occurring in Cambodia. Neither does this paper wish to suggest that external actors and circumstances are solely responsible for this tragic era in Cambodian history. Clearly, geographical and political factors, both internal and external to Cambodia, shaped this chapter in history. It is therefore necessary to examine the whole matrices of Cambodia’s geopolitical position in the Cold War era, in order to better understand and contextualize the misfortune of the country and its people.

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## End Notes

- 1 See Leifer (1975), p. 531.
- 2 William Shawcross's report on Cambodia, *Cambodia's New Deal* (1994), p. 5.
- 3 Microsoft Encarta 2007 DVD. Definition of "geopolitics."
- 4 See Chandler (1992), p. 192.
- 5 Tully (2005), Pp. 143-44.
- 6 Gottesman (2003), p. 18.
- 7 Chandler (1992), p. 194.
- 8 Tully (2005), p. 167.
- 9 Ibid., p. 167.
- 10 Chandler (1992), Pp. 204-05.
- 11 Ibid., p. 206.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 For more details on the border disputes with Thailand during the 1970s, see Rowley & Evans (1984), Pp. 113-121.
- 14 After Cambodia gained her independence, the most remarkable dispute between Thailand and Cambodia was over the ancient Khmer temple of Preah Vihear, which is located on the Thai-Cambodian border. In October 1959, Cambodia brought the case to the International Court of Justice, which in 1962, voted in favor of Cambodia, thereby placing the temple under Cambodian jurisdiction. The issue only re-emerged and still going on when Preah Vihear Temple was enlisted in the World Heritage Sites in July 2008; in protest of Cambodia's claim over the territory, hundreds of Thais troops confronted with their Cambodian counterparts in various sites along the border. Thus far, while talks have been held between the Cambodian and Thai commissions, the dispute has not been solved. For discussion of Thai conflicts with Cambodia during colonial time, see Tully (2002), *France on the Mekong*.
- 15 Chandler (1992), Pp. 219-220.
- 16 Leifer (1961-1962), p. 361.
- 17 Ibid., p. 120.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 See Nguyen-vo (1992), chapter 5.
- 20 Ibid., p. 221.
- 21 For the discussion of the PRK, see for instance, Evan Gottesman's *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge* and Margaret Slocomb's *The People's Republic of Kampuchea*.
- 22 Becker (1986), p. 439.
- 23 FUNCINPEC is the French acronym for "National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative Cambodia."
- 24 See Lau Teik Soon (1982), Pp. 548-560
- 25 Gottesman (2003), p. 231.

26 Ibid.

27 Slocomb (2003), p. 231.

28 Gottesman, p. 232.

29 Ibid., p. 236. Esmeralda Lucioli, a Western medical worker, estimated the number at one million, which seemed excessively exaggerated. See Esmeralda Lucioli, *Le Mur de bambou: Le Cambodge après Pol Pot*.

30 See Nguyen-vo (1992), Pp. 7–8.

31 For further details, see Shawcross (1984), *The Quality of Mercy*, Pp. 88–92.

32 Ibid.

33 For the impacts of landmines on civilian Cambodian, see also Davies & Dunlop (1992), *War of the Mines*.

34 Gottesman (2003), p. 237.