

Termination of War: The Cambodian Conflict (1978-1991)

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Introduction

The literature on the subject of “War Termination” or how wars end has apparently received lesser attention from scholars than studies on the origins and causes of war. It is thus extremely commendable that the National Institute for Defence Studies (NIDS) have chosen “*Termination of Wars in Historical Perspective*” as the theme for this year’s symposium. Every war must end, as the late-Fred Charles Ikle noted and titled his famous book first published in 1971,¹ and rightly so. Thus the question before us is not whether a war will end but “*how*” a war will end and “*why*” it ended the way it did. In short, the issue that needs to be addressed is the process in which belligerents bring war to a conclusion.

I have chosen for this symposium to examine the processes which led to the end or termination of the Cambodian conflict (1978-1991), which I think is a fascinating and challenging case-study given the multiple actors involved, directly and indirectly, and at multiple levels, as well as the long-drawn out duration of the conflict, stretching for more than a decade.² A useful approach is to adopt Michael I. Handel’s suggestion that the study of war termination should take into account the three levels of analysis in international relations theory—the *international system*, *domestic politics* and *the role of individual actors*³—and applying the craft of the historian, weave them all together into a coherent whole.

But before that, we need to first understand why there was a war in the first place and the motivations of those directly and indirectly involved. Vietnam-Cambodia (Kampuchea) relations had been poor since the 1960s while Sino-Vietnamese relations had been poor since the 1970s, particularly after Ho Chi Minh’s demise. But their troubled relationships were masked by the exigencies of the Vietnam War which ended in April 1975.

Relations between China and Cambodia, on the other hand, had been good under Sihanouk. State-to-state relations were bad during the brief tenure of Lon Nol (who ousted Sihanouk in March 1970 and which drove Sihanouk into the arms of Pol Pot). Sihanouk and Pol Pot maintained good relations with the Chinese leadership. In that sense, there was continuity in China-Cambodia ties. Personality played a big part in Sino-Vietnamese relations as well. It is well-known that Le Duan who succeeded Ho Chi Minh was not close to the Chinese. The war that began in December 1978-January 1979 was therefore the culmination of years of sweeping differences under the carpet. That said, poor relations did not mean that they needed to go to war with each other. War was not inevitable.

¹ Fred Charles Ikle, *Every War Must End* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971).

² This essay is condensed from my book, *Singapore, ASEAN and the Cambodian Conflict 1978-1991* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013) which is based on the documents of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Singapore). The documents cited in this essay are from this depository.

³ Michael Handel, “The Study of War Termination,” *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, May 1978.

While the Vietnamese might have jettisoned the idea of an Indochina Federation, they retained a neo-colonialist attitude/disposition towards Cambodia which irked the Khmer Rouge leadership who were very sensitive of their sovereignty and territorial integrity. The Khmer Rouge after taking over power in 1975 in Kampuchea provoked a series of border conflicts and subsequently broke off diplomatic relations with Vietnam in December 1977, which eventually spiralled into an all-out war with the Vietnamese. The removal of Pol Pot through a military invasion and installation of a pro-Vietnam regime was initially not the preferred option. There were differences within the Vietnamese leadership whether or not to invade Kampuchea. The decision to invade was taken in incremental steps.

It was not a proxy war but the Vietnamese invasion and occupation was made possible with the backing of the Soviet Union.⁴ The Chinese did try unsuccessfully to persuade the Khmer Rouge to manage their relationship with the Vietnamese better, but given their own increasingly poor relationship with the Vietnamese (which eventually ended in a breakdown in their relationship in 1978), supported the Khmer Rouge. Beijing would do its utmost to ensure that Hanoi did not control Kampuchea.

For the Vietnamese, the failure to normalise relations with the United States post-1975 coupled with the impending Sino-US normalisation fuelled Vietnamese paranoia of being encircled by China and Kampuchea. For Beijing and Washington, the central focus was the Soviet Union (not Vietnam). This was the lethal combination which drove the Vietnamese finally into the full embrace of the Russian bear. There had been throughout the Vietnam War years a tussle between the Soviet Union and China for influence in Vietnam. Moscow was however far less successful, if at all, in Cambodia and Laos. The opportunistic Russians were able to exploit the situation to gain a foothold in Southeast Asia. There was one more set of players, that is, the ASEAN countries, which perceived the Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea as destabilising the region and against international norm.

The Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea began on 25 December 1978 and lasted fifteen days. On 8 January 1979, the Vietnamese-installed government in Phnom Penh announced the formation of the Khmer People's Revolutionary Party (KPRP) that included Heng Samrin as the President, Hun Sen as Minister of Foreign Affairs and Chea Sim as Minister of the Interior). The Vietnamese believed, Ha Van Lau (Vietnamese Permanent Representative to the United Nations) told his Singapore counterpart at the United Nations, Tommy Koh, that "in two weeks, the world will have forgotten the Kampuchean problem."⁵ Hanoi had envisaged an invasion that resembled the Soviet invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia—"a quick blitzkrieg operation, destruction of all resistance, rapid establishment of a fait accompli that would survive the (brief) world condemnation..."⁶ The horrors of the Khmer Rouge regime under Pol Pot, Hanoi hoped, could soften international criticisms and objections. Unfortunately for the Vietnamese, it was not to be. The problems, issues and dynamics of all the relationships

⁴ David W.P. Elliot, *Changing Worlds: Vietnam's Transition from Cold War to Globalization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 28.

⁵ K. Mahbubani, "The Kampuchean Problem: A Southeast Asian Perspective," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 62, no. 2, 1983-84.

⁶ Ibid.

described above would need to be resolved and untangled before the war could end. There was the early realisation that the problem was complex and would take time to resolve, but no one was sure how long it would take. Most anticipated a long battle of attrition with no easy solution. Then-prime minister of Singapore Lee Kuan Yew in 1982 thought that it would take more than four or five years. In early 1984, he told Sihanouk it might take another seven to eight years.⁷ No one could see the entire picture but the immediate and urgent task was first to deny the Vietnamese legitimacy. It was thus a “one step at a time, one battle at a time” approach.⁸ While no one can say how long the conflict would last, Singapore was certain that the longer it took to resolve the problem, the greater the disadvantage to ASEAN. As Singapore’s foreign minister S. Rajaratnam said, “Nobody could go on supporting a cause forever.” He warned that the longer the Cambodian conflict continued, the greater would be the possibility of more people seeing the problem differently from ASEAN. It was therefore imperative to think about how to move quickly towards a solution of some kind.⁹ In the end, it took more than a decade for that to happen.

The task of terminating the war began almost immediately after the invasion. The initiative was taken by ASEAN. On 12 January 1979, a special ASEAN Foreign Ministers closed-door meeting was convened in Bangkok, the capital of Thailand, the country most anxious about the implications of the Vietnamese invasion given its geographical proximity and its role during the Vietnam War, to discuss the invasion. Although the Bangkok meeting was called by the Thai Prime Minister Kriangsak Chomanan, the idea of the meeting was initiated by S. Rajaratnam, the Foreign Minister of Singapore—the other Southeast Asian country which was most distressed by the invasion. For Singapore, “Cambodia’s problems could become Singapore’s problems in the future.”¹⁰ The meeting marked the beginning of a long process to bring the war to an end. Both Singapore and Thailand played the key roles in leading the rest of the ASEAN members to work towards the termination of the war. In turn, ASEAN ensured that the invasion would not be forgotten in two weeks as the Vietnamese had hoped.

ASEAN did not envisage an eventual military solution to the Kampuchean problem. As S. R. Nathan (Permanent Secretary, Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs) noted, “it was a political, rather than a military war which was waged in Kampuchea,”¹¹ a view similarly expressed by Minister of Defence Goh Keng Swee who predicted that the Vietnamese would have to seek a political settlement in Kampuchea,¹² and Minister of Foreign Affairs S.

⁷ Ang Cheng Guan, *Singapore, ASEAN and the Cambodian Conflict 1978-1991* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013), 166.

⁸ Dhanabalan interview, 1994, B 001500/09, Senior ASEAN Statesmen Oral History Interviews (Singapore: Oral History Centre, 1998). Dhanabalan was Singapore’s Foreign Minister from 1980-1988.

⁹ Notes of conversation between 2DPM, Minister and Son Sann, Prime Minister, Government of DK, MFA, 12 March 1984.

¹⁰ Notes of conversation between PS Chia Cheong Fook and Sam Rainsy (Advisor to Prince Sihanouk), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 4 March 1983.

¹¹ Notes of conversation between IPS and Edith Lenart, journalist for *The Economist* and *Sunday Times* (Paris), 18 December 1979.

¹² “The Vietnam War: Round 3,” in *Wealth of East Asian Nations: Speeches and Writings by Goh Keng Swee*, ed. Linda Goh, (Singapore: Federal Publication, 1995), 312.

Rajaratnam who explained that “all wars must end through a political act” thus the political warfare in Kampuchea needed to be maintained. The Vietnamese, he said, would only give up the fight when they were convinced that they were not winning the war, and it would be a matter of time before losing it.”¹³

As mentioned earlier, the termination of, in this case, the Cambodia conflict, required the alignment of three complex sets of interacting factors—the international system, domestic politics and the role of individual actors.

The International System:

The war took place against the backdrop of both the Cold War and the Sino-Soviet conflict. Because the two main protagonists were supported by China and the Soviet Union respectively, there could be no solution as long as China and the Soviet Union were involved in protecting their respective interests. Of the two, the Soviet Union carried a heavier burden having essentially to bankroll the Vietnamese. Thus, it would be up to the Soviets to decide the cost factor. Without Soviet assistance, Vietnamese determination would reach its limits.¹⁴ There was a possibility that Moscow would decide at some point to pull the stops as the Soviets were known not to put everything into one basket. The Kampuchean problem was also not central to Moscow’s strategic objectives, as compared to its priorities in Afghanistan and in the Middle East.¹⁵ The Chinese strategy was to get the Soviets committed further and further into the bottomless pit just like the United States found itself once in Vietnam. When the Soviets could not withstand the strain anymore, they would “lose Indochina altogether.”¹⁶ Beijing concurrently aimed to isolate Vietnam and impose heavy costs on the Vietnamese for the invasion. Indeed, for years afterwards, Vietnam, still recovering from the Vietnam War, was forced to support considerable forces on its northern border in order to forestall a possible second Chinese attack (the first was in February 1979).¹⁷

The chessboard was further complicated by the involvement of the United States. ASEAN believed that the United States was the only country which could provide aid to the non-communist side which could match that of the Soviet Union to Vietnam or China to the Khmer Rouge.¹⁸ However, there were little expectations of the American role at the initial stage. The United States had not overcome the “Vietnam syndrome.” American officials were

¹³ Notes of meeting between Minister Ieng Thirith, Minister of Social Affairs of DK, Delegate Lounge of the UN in Geneva, 27 May 1980.

¹⁴ Notes of conversation between IPS and Edith Lenart, journalist for *The Economist* and *Sunday Times* (Paris), 18 December 1979.

¹⁵ Transcript of an interview given by PM Lee Kuan Yew to Major-General Agus Marpaung of Antara News Agency, Istana Annexe, 11 August 1980.

¹⁶ *Malaysia: International Relations, Selected Speeches by M. Ghazali Shafie* (Kuala Lumpur: Creative Enterprise Sendiran Berhad, 1982), 297. See also speech by the Minister of Home Affairs to the Malaysian Armed Forces Staff College at the Officers Ministry of Defence, Kuala Lumpur, 8:30 pm, 9 June 1980, *ibid.*, 311-321; See also Nayan Chanda’s interview with Chinese Vice-Foreign Minister Han Nianlong in Nayan Chanda, *Brother Enemy: The War after the War* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 379.

¹⁷ Henry Kissinger, *On China* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2011), 373.

¹⁸ Visit of PM Son Sann to Singapore (9-14 March 1984), *Information Note on Kampuchea*, 22 March 1984.

doubtful of the capabilities of the non-communist forces, as well as sceptical of ASEAN's ability to stay the course. Washington also did not want to complicate US-China relations despite Singapore's repeated argument that the United States should do more to increase Thai options and reduce Bangkok's dependence on the Chinese for its security against Vietnam. In 1981, the top priority was to initiate the flow of funding and then attempt to gain commitment from Washington. Since 1981, Singapore had been lobbying for increased American assistance to the non-communist forces. Both Singapore's foreign minister Rajaratnam and his successor Dhanabalan, during their visits to Washington, stressed to American leaders and officials the vital role of the United States in building up a credible non-communist force in Cambodia.¹⁹ At a one-to-one meeting with President Reagan in June 1981, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew told President Reagan that the Soviets had been causing trouble in Southeast Asia, and of Deng Xiaoping's view that China did not want satellite states around it and was prepared to accept whichever party won a free vote in Cambodia. This, according to Lee, helped win the support of Reagan who was "absolutely against the Vietnamese and the puppet regime." However, a conversation with Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and the Pacific, John Holdridge, in November led Lee to conclude that a Heng Samrin victory was as unacceptable to the Americans as it was to the Chinese.²⁰ In December 1981, the Reagan Administration for the first time agreed to provide the non-communist Khmers with "administrative and financial propaganda and other non-lethal assistance." The amount was however insignificant compared to US aid to other parts of the world.²¹ Washington also did not want to dispense aid directly. When the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) was formed in 1982, Washington welcomed its formation but did not recognize it. In a nutshell, Washington generally adopted a rather lukewarm attitude towards the Cambodian issue. US Department of State officials dealing with Southeast Asia preferred a passive, minimal involvement, and a low-risk US policy towards Cambodia.²² Thus, in the early years following the Vietnamese invasion, no one was able to tell how long it would take. The question was who would take the first step to resolve the conflict.²³

In summary, the progress of efforts to bring a comprehensive solution to the Cambodia crisis was influenced by, and quickened in tandem with developments in the East-West Cold War as well as the Sino-Soviet conflict. The process of glasnost and perestroika initiated by Gorbachev and the eventual withdrawal of Soviet force from Eastern Europe leading to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990, as well as the ending of the Sino-Soviet dispute transformed the global geopolitical situation against which the Cambodia problem had been

¹⁹ US Support for Non-communist Khmer Groups, *Information Note on Kampuchea*, 23 October 1981.

²⁰ Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story: 1965-2000* (Singapore: Times Editions, 2000), 378.

²¹ US Assistance to the Non-communist Cambodian Resistance, *Information Note on Kampuchea*, 4 July 1984.

²² US Attitude towards the Cambodian Government (CG), *Information Note on Kampuchea*, 11 November 1982; American Attitudes towards the Cambodian Problem, *Information Note on Kampuchea*, 22 June 1983.

²³ Extract of notes of conversation between IPS and David Dodwell, *Financial Times* correspondent, MFA, 30 October 1979.

played out. The Soviet defeat and withdrawal from Afghanistan presaged the Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia in 1989.²⁴

Domestic Politics:

Neither the Pol Pot regime nor the Heng Samrin government were acceptable to the major powers, including ASEAN. It was Singapore which felt the most urgency to form a united front or coalition government. Lee Kuan Yew presented the benefits of forming a coalition government: By forming a coalition, and by receiving ASEAN support, Sihanouk's and Son Sann's forces could offer the Kampuchean people alternative leaderships to Pol Pot or Heng Samrin. Although a Democratic Kampuchean coalition government would help the Khmer Rouge gain international acceptability, in the longer term, it would increase the likelihood of the non-communist forces returning to Phnom Penh through free elections and a political settlement acceptable to both Vietnam and China and diminish the chances of the Khmer Rouge returning to power by force. Lee emphasized that ASEAN would not be a party to any plan to restore the Khmer Rouge to power by force and against the will of the Cambodian people.²⁵

As for how one could reconcile ASEAN arming the non-communist Kampuchean with ASEAN's aim for a political solution to the Kampuchean problem, Nathan (Singapore's Permanent Secretary for Foreign Affairs) explained that ASEAN's objective was to achieve a non-communist Kampuchea if possible. But before this could be attained, the non-communists had to be strengthened so that they could stand up to or be at parity with the Khmer Rouge, which was fully supported by China. ASEAN had as much right to help the non-communist groups as Beijing. In his words "there was no question of morality—as one could not speak of it in absolute terms.... There will always be the moral problem, but our interest had to be the primary consideration."²⁶

On the one hand, the Vietnamese lacked the ability to win the war, and on the other, the Kampuchean resistance forces were unable to form a united front and to find a common agreed leader.²⁷ It took nearly three years after the December 1978 Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea to bring Sihanouk, Son Sann and the Khmer Rouge together in Singapore in September 1981; and that was only the first of many hurdles to cross. It was by no means easy to convince the three groups to form a coalition government; but the CGDK was eventually formed on 22 June 1982 in Kuala Lumpur. Much to the exasperation of Singapore and others, throughout the duration of the conflict, a truly cohesive united front was never really formed. In a 1994 interview, Dhanabalan would describe the difficulties with the CGDK as "dealing

²⁴ Email correspondence with Mushahid Ali (former Singapore's ambassador to Cambodia), 29 August 2009.

²⁵ Text of an interview with Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew by Derek Davies, Editor, and Susumu Awanoara, Correspondent of *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Istana Office Wing, 16 October 1981, lky/1981/lky1016.doc, <http://stars.nhb.gov.sg/stars/public/>

²⁶ IPS's conversation with Munawir Szadzali, Director-general, DEPLU, Dorado Room, Changi International Airport, 30 September 1981.

²⁷ "A Country Without People," *Nikkei*, 24 October 1979.

with a lot of prima donnas.” It was, in his words, “a fragile coalition.”²⁸ This leads me to the next level of analysis.

Role of Individual Actors:

Of the many personalities involved in the conflict, none were more important than Sihanouk and Hun Sen. Singapore in particular placed high hopes on Sihanouk. Comparing him to another well-known Cambodian, Son Sann, who had served under Sihanouk in various capacities, including as Prime Minister in the 1960s, S. R. Nathan remarked that Sihanouk was dexterous, resourceful, had charisma and international standing and would be acceptable to lead the Kampuchean people, even though he was unpredictable. On the other hand, Son Sann, despite having the backing of Bangkok and Beijing, would not be able to keep Kampuchea independent of China, Soviet Union and Vietnam. Sihanouk was also revered by the Kampuchean peasantry whereas Son Sann did not have the same standing.²⁹ Hun Sen, on the other hand, a former Khmer Rouge cadre who fled to Vietnam in 1977, was Foreign Minister and then Prime Minister in the Vietnamese-installed People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). From 1985, he was the de facto leader and remains the Prime Minister till today. With Hun Sen, the wily Sihanouk has certainly met his match. Sihanouk once described Hun Sen as “the son I should have had.”³⁰

The Cambodians clearly wanted to be in control of their own fate and destiny, and not be manipulated by the external powers. Sihanouk and Hun Sen met and sparred on five occasions between 1987 and 1989. The first was on 2-4 December 1987 Fere-en-Tardenois. The meeting showed that both had emerged as the co-centres of any future agreements with regard to Cambodia. The Cambodian problem was now portrayed as a civil war and the role of the external powers was now confined to endorsing and guaranteeing any solution arrived at by Sihanouk and Hun Sen. While the first meeting was more exploratory, the second held in January 1988 at Saint-Germain-En-Laye, was convened specifically to discuss concrete questions such as Vietnamese withdrawal, the future provisional government and internationally supervised elections. Both failed to reach agreement and a third meeting was held, also at Fere-en-Tardenois in November 1988, followed by the fourth in May 1989 in Jakarta and the fifth in July 1989 in Paris. Both needed each other and between them, they cobbled a power-sharing arrangement.

End Game

The stalemate over Cambodia lasted till around 1986-1987 when there was a flurry of political and diplomatic activities aimed at finding a political solution. Before, the Vietnamese insisted that the situation in Kampuchea was “irreversible.” Hanoi now expressed a willingness

²⁸ Dhanabalan interview, 1994, B 001500/09, Senior ASEAN Statesmen Oral History Interviews (Singapore: Oral History Centre, 1998).

²⁹ Notes of conversation between IPS and Edith Lenart, journalist for *The Economist* and *Sunday Times* (Paris), 18 December 1979.

³⁰ See <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/10/the-final-return-of-king-sihanouk/263865/>, accessed on 8 February 2016.

to reach a solution by political means. Whereas previously, there had been no communication between the CGDK and the PRK, Sihanouk and Hun Sen met for the first time at the end of 1987 as described earlier. Also new was the acceptance of a two-stage talk—first amongst the various Khmer factions to be followed by Vietnam and other interested countries at a later stage. In effect, the Sihanouk-Hun Sen talks were in fact proxy talks with Vietnam. The Soviet Union had in the past refused to discuss the Kampuchean problem on the grounds that it was not involved. Now Moscow under Gorbachev demonstrated a willingness to play a helpful role in the seeking of a political solution.³¹ Moscow's change of mind coincided with internal developments within Vietnam. There was, within the Vietnamese leadership echelon, "a reappraisal of its endemic poverty and its performance vis-à-vis the relative prosperity and dynamism elsewhere in Southeast Asia."³² Indeed the re-assessment began as early as 1984 which would account for Hanoi's first announcement that it was prepared to withdraw forces as early as 1985 (which of course no one wanted to believe).³³ In retrospect, the Vietnamese have since admitted that the invasion was a strategic mistake.³⁴

The Soviet Union completed its withdrawal from Afghanistan in February 1989 and the first Sino-Soviet summit (since 1959) was held in May in the same year. Even the United States which had been rather disinterested in the Cambodian problem was willing to discuss the issue with the Soviet Union at the summit level. Except for China which as late as 1988 still refused to talk directly with the Vietnamese and thus held back any possible progress to resolve the problem. The first Sino-Vietnamese meeting, at the Vice-Ministerial level, in nine years, took place in January 1989. It was not till September 1990 that both sides reached agreement with regard to Cambodia, mostly on Chinese terms. Both countries finally normalised relations in November 1991. By this time, Le Duan (July 1986) and Le Duc Tho (October 1990)—the key architects of the Vietnamese invasion—had passed away and a new generation of leaders had replaced them. Van Tien Dung who led the 1978 invasion and "the least inclined to cooperate with China"³⁵ had been retired. But this episode must be the subject of another presentation.

The changes in the regional and international environment also had significant impact on ASEAN's Cambodia strategy. The challenge for ASEAN was to ensure that its interests and role in the Cambodian issue would not be side-lined. Bilahari Kausikan (Singapore's Second Permanent Secretary of Foreign Affairs) recalled that when finally the Permanent Five members of the UN decided to involve themselves directly in the issue, Singapore could "take a step back given the UN's enhanced role that institutionalized certain safeguards." In fact, when the Permanent Five took over the Cambodia issue in 1990, ASEAN had "lost control" of the agenda.³⁶ Moreover, Singapore had noted the relationship between Hanoi and Moscow

³¹ See Gorbachev's Vladivostok speech of 28 July 1986.

³² Sergey Radchenko, *Unwanted Visionaries: The Soviet Union Failure in Asia at the End of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 136.

³³ *Ibid.*, 144.

³⁴ Elliot, xi.

³⁵ Radchenko, 139. He was retired in 1986.

³⁶ Notes of lunch meeting hosted by 2PS Bilahari Kausikan, Tanglin Room, MFA, 5 August 2009.

had been shifting since Gorbachev came into power and Soviet aid had been cut drastically. Vietnam's economy was in a shambles and in Singapore's assessment, Hanoi would not, for a long time to come, have the resources to support substantial forces in Cambodia and effectively control both countries.³⁷ The second International Conference on Cambodia in Paris (October 1991) finally brought the war to an end.

³⁷ From Mrs. Chua Siew San to PS (Foreign Affairs), 11 June 1990.

