

American wars, French borders

Thailand's acrimonious adjacency to Cambodia (Part 1)

The end-games to two tremendous historical conflicts in Cambodia have lately gained the sporadic notice of the international press: the small-scale war on the Thai-Khmer border, and the legal proceedings against a number of former Communist leaders. In the reporting, some historical facts have been repeated out of context, with distortive results. In the first of two articles Eisel Mazard argues that the intersecting causes of these two conflicts are to be found in American support for Cambodian Communism without which neither the history nor the present can be understood.

Eisel Mazard

Royalists under Communist patronage

The timeline of American support for the forces that became infamous under the unofficial name of the 'Khmer Rouge' is one of the least known matters of fact in Asia's history. I was spurred to research the matter more thoroughly due to the lack of any firm date stated in the new introduction to Vickery, 1999 – a text that I found too vague in alluding to the advent of this US policy decision (p. vii, cf. 308).

The precise answer is not a secret, and never has been. Many of the prevalent misconceptions seem to have no source other than Shawcross, 1979, a book that attempts to foist moral responsibility for the Khmer Rouge onto China (op. cit., 387).

On the contrary, the origin of one of history's strangest alliances is to be found in another, perhaps even stranger: China supported King Sihanouk consistently from the mid-1950s forward, to the exclusion of any support or sympathy for the Khmer Rouge. The latter remained without Chinese patronage until they joined forces with Sihanouk, following the *coup d'état* of 1970.

Sihanouk's relationship with Beijing did not formally originate in the misalliances of the Geneva agreements of 1954, but seems to have emerged soon thereafter. The strong personal friendship between Sihanouk and both Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai dates from 1955-6 (Basu, 1987, p. 17).

The mutual respect these leaders held for one another would endure for decades. As early as 1956, Sihanouk's interest in drawing 'neutral' (Royalist) Cambodia ever closer to China was explicitly stated in terms of an alliance against Vietnamese encroachment upon the smaller country.

China's apprehension of an independent and Soviet-aligned Vietnam (some 20 years before this was to eventuate) can only be understood in the context of the over-arching Sino-Soviet hostility that dominated foreign policy in that era. Mao's own son had recently died in Korea because the Soviets did not provide expected aerial support in combat (to deter American bombing); the possibility of a pan-Communist alliance had died with him. The Korean War demonstrated that Soviet priorities were in Eastern Europe, looking West.

By contrast, the priority that Mao placed on his support for Sihanouk was demonstrated in 1966 when China refused to receive Cambodian refugees (including members of parliament) fleeing the latest wave of brutal repression against leftists. Given the recent memory of the 1963 massacre of some 90%



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of Cambodian People's Party members, this refusal must have been keenly felt (Basu, 1987, p. 11).

The Cambodian Communists did learn from the experience: the only way they would gain Chinese support was to subordinate themselves to Royalist leadership, and this is precisely what they did in 1970. At that late date the PRC first began to support the Khmer Rouge, but only as a subsidiary part of the 'government in exile' allied against the dictatorship of Lon Nol, led by Sihanouk, and based in Beijing.

Communism under American patronage

Lon Nol's ejection of Sihanouk is often casually reported to have been a CIA plot; this begins to seem less likely when we consider that the Soviets actively tried to court Lon Nol's favour following his takeover and that the US was already negotiating with China to 'betray' him in 1971. In a career marred by lies, it is possible that Nixon was stating the truth when he protested that 'Lon Nol's coup came as a complete surprise to us. We neither encouraged it nor knew about it in advance' (Nixon, 1985, 117). In any case, neither the US nor China were pleased with the results.

1971 seems to be the first year when an explicit anti-Vietnamese policy is attested by extant Khmer Rouge materials (Bizot, 2004, 113; Vickery, 1999, 215). Despite underlying ethnic tensions, such a policy would not make much sense before they had gained Chinese patronage, which came with an anti-Vietnamese agenda as its necessary proviso.

In the same year, Henry Kissinger arrived in China to negotiate an alliance largely defined by the two countries' common hostility toward the North Vietnamese. This entailed the immediate withdrawal of US troops from Taiwan and the eventual inclusion of the PRC in the UN.

The stipulation that the Americans would support the Khmer Rouge was sealed in mid-June of 1973 (finalising the negotiations initiated in 1971), two years before 'the fall of Phnom Penh' to Communist troops in '75, and six years before the Vietnamese invasion to drive them out. The latter is often falsely stated as the justification for American support for Cambodian Communism (e.g., Kiernan, 1996, 384-5). Nixon himself was evidently proud of this pact, leaving the historical record without any ambiguity:

"Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai also wanted to prevent a North Vietnamese victory in Indochina. China wanted closer relations with the United States to counter increasing hostility from the Soviet Union. Therefore, it was directly contrary to Peking's interests for Moscow's clients in Hanoi... to achieve hegemony in Indochina... We had the elements necessary to strike a deal. We had significant influence over Lon Nol. China could pull the strings of the Cambodian Communists. Sihanouk... the nominal head of the opposition forces, would listen to Zhou's council. We soon put together a plan ...Sihanouk and Khmer Rouge forces would settle the war in exchange for an end to our bombing".

Source: (Nixon, 1985, 176-7)

The one aspect of Nixon's summary that seems disingenuous is the suggestion that his offer to end the bombing was somehow crucial to securing the subordination of the Khmer Rouge to Sihanouk's 'nominal' leadership. During these negotiations, Nixon was already in violation of the Congressional Order of Jan. 2nd, 1973 to end all military operations in Indochina (excepting withdrawal) inspiring another, more explicit bill (passed the same June) to stop all funds for bombing of any kind, effective August 15th.

Peace means war by other means

Although he hardly tells his own story in such terms, Nixon had been negotiating from a position of weakness. Congress had even refused to fund his proposed 'enforcement' of the Paris peace accords (with \$1.45 billion in overt military aid, plus something like 1973's total of \$2.27 billion of supposed non-military aid to South Vietnam) and he was left with no choice but to withdraw in defeat, or else continue the war by other means (Nixon, 1985, 186; 188).

In effect, both would transpire. The alliance with China allowed America's war to continue through other channels, though almost all of the decision-makers who sealed the pact died or fell from power soon thereafter. Nixon resigned in '74, while both Mao and Zhou died in '76. The preparations for the proxy war they agreed upon continued without them, but the importance of these personal relationships remained evident in all that ensued.

The last attempt at averting a Sino-Vietnamese war over the control of Cambodia was negotiated by Zhou Enlai's widow;

on her return from Phnom Penh in 1978, Beijing declared Cambodia the victim of Vietnamese aggression. (Basu, 53-4) This remained their justification for supporting Pol Pot's troops on the ground through to the 1990s. (Zhu, 1990, 426-442) Sihanouk continued living like a king under Beijing's patronage despite the categorical change in political circumstances, likely because of the halo he retained from his personal relations with Mao (certainly not on the basis of his ability to command or control the Khmer Rouge).

China had portentously occupied the Paracel Islands in January, 1974. In preparation for the war to come, large-scale purges of (perceived) pro-Vietnamese elements within the Khmer Rouge were well underway in 1975. There were armed confrontations on both the Sino-Vietnamese border and the Khmer-Viet border in 1978, prior to the declaration of the 'Salvation Front' (KUFNS) to liberate Cambodia from Pol Pot's rule in December of the same year.

China's large-scale invasion of Vietnam might originally have been planned in support of a Cambodian resistance that had, astoundingly, already collapsed a month before. Nobody could have expected the Vietnamese victory to follow as rapidly as it did, but the widespread starvation and atrocities that have since made the Khmer Rouge infamous also eroded domestic support for their side and decimated their capacity to sustain a war. Basu observes that the invasion that did eventuate (February 17th, 1979) served to protest against (or deter) Heng Samrin's signing of the Friendship Treaty (on February 18th) that clearly aligned Cambodia's new government with Vietnam (Basu, 77).

As Vietnam's victory was already *fait accompli*, it must have been something of an embarrassment that the conference to assemble all of China and America's allies (79 nations in total) to declare their unanimous support for Pol Pot could not be organised until July, 1981 (Zhu, 1990, 426-442).

By this time, what the UN was alleging to be Cambodia's 'legitimate government' was a scattered guerilla army with a tenuous connection to the deposed king speechifying in Beijing, but already legendary for their brutality and sheer numbers of civilian casualties.



The diplomatic difficulty of directly referring to Pol Pot as America's ally was evaded with the creation of a new acronym in 1982: 'CGDK' would thenceforth serve as the polite code-word for bankrolling and arming the Khmer Rouge.

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