RETURN OF THE KILLING FIELDS?

While the Vietnamese withdrawal from Kampuchea poses a new stability in the region, the threat of the Khmer Rouge remains. Ben Kiernan assesses.

The cause of Vietnam’s invasion of Kampuchea in 1979 was Pol Pot’s Democratic Kampuchea regime’s attacks on Vietnam. From early 1977, after more than a year of peace, Khmer Rouge forces staged fierce raids into undisputed Vietnamese territory, massacring thousands of Vietnamese civilians and causing hundreds of thousands to flee from their homes. Vietnam’s complaints to this effect were corroborated at the time by both US intelligence reports and the testimony of Vietnamese refugees fleeing abroad from the war zone, and they have since been extensively documented from both sides of the border.

Before Vietnam had responded to these attacks, China informed both sides that it supported Democratic Kampuchea. In early 1978, Vietnam offered to negotiate a ceasefire and a settlement under international supervision. Democratic Kampuchea refused, and the war continued. China openly backed Kampuchea, and later invaded Vietnam itself. For these reasons, it is not correct under international law to describe Hanoi’s 1979 invasion as aggression or “unprovoked attack”. The aggressor states were Democratic Kampuchea and the People’s Republic of China.

Whatever its longterm goals, Vietnam’s immediate reason for intervention in Kampuchea was self-defence, the repulsion of armed attacks already launched against its own territory.

To counter this argument, it is not adequate to point out that Kampuchea was militarily incapable of overthrowing the Hanoi government. Its ally China is. And Kampuchea’s small size is not a licence to commit armed aggression against any part of another’s territory. So long as the Khmer Rouge maintain an effective military capacity in Kampuchea and an alliance with China, Vietnam will continue to regard them as a security threat. Nevertheless, in 1985 Hanoi pledged to withdraw all its troops from Kampuchea by 1990, and so far is keeping to that promise.

Vietnamese Troop Strength in Kampuchea, 1979-88 (US Sources)

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(Vietnamese Projections)

The Elder Brothers

Since its overthrow of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979, however, part of Hanoi’s policy and practice in Kampuchea has been to patronise the Khmer people. Kampuchea has often been treated not as an equal, but as a subordinate. This lop-sided, patron-client relationship has made Kampuchea vulnerable to Vietnamese political domination, best illustrated by the long confinement in Hanoi and Phnom Penh of the PRK’s first Prime Minister, Pen Sovan.

At times, the People’s Republic of Kampuchea has even reflected patronising Vietnamese attitudes in its own propaganda, for instance in this broadcast on Radio Phnom Penh in 1984:

By nature Kampucheans are loyal, gentle, kind and polite. They have already done well in preserving the Kampuchea-Vietnam bonds of solidarity ... while defending and building their own country ... As for the Vietnamese people, who are champions of independence and freedom ... [they] have proved their traditional heroic abilities in helping free the Kampuchean people from the danger of genocide ... 

One might fruitfully compare this statement with one made by Francois Ponchaud in 1863:

And so in 1863 Cambodia became a French Protectorate. For ninety years, the Khmer people and their monarchs were able to doze out of the way of the great worldwide changes, an island of happiness isolated in another century.
Vietnamese advisers in Kampuchean ministerial offices and local administration have varied in quality, from excellent, responsible and appreciated, to corrupt, supercilious and arrogant. (The Vietnamese troops have generally conducted themselves well.) However, since 1980 the advisers have gradually been withdrawn as Kampuchean cadres have become more experienced. In 1988 the Vietnamese ambassador in Phnom Penh predicted that the remaining two to three hundred civilian and military advisers would return to Vietnam by January 1989, a year prior to the planned total troop withdrawal. This has since been carried out, and it is a welcome development.

As in Laos, Hanoi has attempted to create a junior ally in the People’s Republic of Kampuchea. As one commentator has argued, this does not mean a colonial relationship, but a satellite relationship in which the junior partners are subordinate.4 Thus, Laos and Kampuchea have military provisions in their respective treaties with Vietnam, but not in their treaties with each other. So far, all military roads lead to Hanoi. There is extensive six-way co-operation in modern Indochina, and it covers nearly all fields; the exception is that there are currently Vietnamese troops in both Laos and Kampuchea, but no Lao or Kampuchean troops garrisoned in Vietnam. Hanoi has recently pledged to withdraw all its troops from Kampuchea by September this year, or if there is no political settlement, in 1990. And it withdrew most of its forces from Laos in 1988.

Hanoi has painted its intervention in Kampuchea as an exercise in international solidarity. In the outside world it would have been wiser to adhere to its case of self-defence under international law. But inside Kampuchea it has preferred to stress that the three countries of Indochina will "either die together, or live together". Heng Samrin has himself asserted that "separation from Laos and Vietnam means death, while unity with Vietnam and Laos means victory".5

This is partly a reflection on Vietnamese dominance, and partly gratitude for real Vietnamese assistance to Kampuchea. Vietnam sheltered over 300,000 refugees from the Pol Pot regime. And during the threatened famine of 1979-80, Vietnam provided Kampucheaans with "tens of thousands of tonnes" of rice, and about 50,000 tonnes thereafter, according to William Shawcross.6 Other unpaid, non-military assistance has been in the fields of agriculture, health, transport and communications, technical training, administration and education. In some of these fields, Vietnam has found opportunities to increase its influence over Kampuchean affairs, in others it has not. In all of them, Vietnamese assistance has helped re-establish a Kampuchean state from the wreckage left behind by the Pol Pot regime. Even if it is a dependent one, the existence of such a state is a precondition for Kampuchea’s long-term independence.

The Khmer reaction

In its last years at least, the Pol Pot regime was on a genocidal track. It is not surprising that most Kampucheaans were glad to see it overthrown. Nor, despite historic animosities, is it surprising that many Kampucheaans were grateful to the Vietnamese, whom they saw risking their lives against the Khmer Rouge. Kampucheaans I interviewed in France, who had quickly decided to make their way abroad, nevertheless expressed the view that the Vietnamese invasion had been a genuine liberation.
Tae Hui Lang, an ethnic Chinese woman recalled in August 1979 how a few months before the Khmer Rouge had tried to round up villagers and drive them into the forest. "The rural population would gather together and then run behind the Vietnamese lines", Lang said. She told how Vietnamese soldiers had provided protection, transport, food and medicine for herself, her baby, and a pregnant Khmer woman. "I don't know what their politics was about, but from what I saw they did good things... Their leaders were nice," Lang added. She said that Kampuchean were grateful to the Vietnamese for "letting us have freedom to do what we wanted... The people like the Vietnamese much more than the Khmer rouge... The Vietnamese have more heart than the Khmer Rouge.

The Vietnamese also impressed Kampuchean with their discipline, and their lack of racial prejudices. Whereas in Lang's account many local Khmers held China and the ethnic Chinese responsible for their sufferings under Pol Pot, the Vietnamese attempted to discourage racialist sentiments.

When Khmer civilians prepared to stage an anti-Chinese demonstration in Battambang city, a Vietnamese leader addressed the crowd, pointing out that the ethnic Chinese had suffered under Pol Pot as well, and he asked people to calm down. He said that those who wished to fight the Chinese could go and help defend Vietnam from Chinese attack.

Ang Ngeck Teang, an ethnic Chinese girl from Phnom Penh, was fourteen years old when the Vietnamese invaded in 1979. All ten of her family members had perished of starvation and disease under Khmer Rouge rule in 1977-78. Safe with relatives in France soon afterwards, she recalled:

When the Vietnamese came, the Khmer rouge ran away... The Vietnamese were good... very honest... If we asked them for food, they gave it. If we were sick, they gave us medicine. My hand was infected, they cured it. I asked them for a lift to Phnom Penh, where my elder brother found me... My house had been destroyed by the Khmer Rouge... 8

Tae Hui Lang noted that in the first months of 1979 there were 100 Vietnamese soldiers for every 10 Khmer PRK troops. Khmer officials were flanked by Vietnamese from whom "they had to ask permission to get things done". Lang thought this might have been because the Vietnamese "wanted to take over our land but at the same time give the false impression that the Khmer have power". Or alternatively it might have been the lack of education and experienced Khmer administrators, of whom "out of a hundred, only two or three had survived the Pol Pot years. Like Lang, many Khmers harboured suspicions of Vietnam's ultimate intentions, best expressed by the one who asked journalist Martin Woollacott in Phnom Penh in 1980: "Yes, the Vietnamese have saved us, but what have they saved us for?"

Some Khmers in the PRK government service have regarded their superiors, including even cabinet ministers, as merely the "letter-box" for Vietnamese advisers wielding the real power behind the scenes. The real grounds for these suspicions have lessened with the withdrawal of the advisers over the years, although many of the same Khmer dissidents probably object just as much to an independent Kampuchean socialism as to Vietnamese domination. When Pen Sovan was proclaimed prime minister of the PRK in 1979, he was considered by some as a Vietnamese stooge, and Heng Samrin was considered a "Khmer nationalist" who had been confined to a figurehead role. But when Samrin ousted Sovan in 1981, little changed, and gossip now had their positions reversed. Over the decade since 1979, Khmers have become more accustomed to the PRK leadership, while new faces and names have appeared gradually as part of a normalised political process, and public opinion is much better informed. By early 1987, there seemed relatively few Khmers in Phnom Penh who doubted that the Vietnamese troops would eventually withdraw from the country, although suspicions lingered about the advisers.

Two issues worth canvassing in this context are the teaching of the Vietnamese language and of Kampuchean history in schools. The Vietnamese language has been slow to appear in the PRK school curriculum. By 1988 it was taught only in the three final years of high school, for two hours per week. Students at this level took either Vietnamese or Russian. In the PRK, it is the Khmer language which has occupied a more central place in the Kampuchean school curriculum than ever before. The 1,000 trainee teachers at the Phnom Penh Higher Pedagogical School are offered Vietnamese language courses, but they are trained to teach only the Khmer language when they take up posts in schools.

Until 1988, no Kampuchean history was yet taught in PRK schools. History was discussed in classes on "Political Morality" and in a series of books of "Folk Tales" published by the PRK, but history classes were not part of the school curriculum. The "explanation" given by some PRK officials was that the country's history had yet to be written! The near-total destruction of books and libraries in the Democratic Kampuchea period is no excuse for such a view: even a detailed, 584-page, Khmer-language history of Kampuchea published in the Soviet Union was banned in the PRK for two years because it allegedly contained errors. One suspected that Kampuchean history would not be officially "approved" until first defined in terms of Vietnamese history.

But in 1988 two new developments occurred. Firstly, a school history textbook printed in 1986 came into use in the fifth grade of PRK schools, as did new textbooks for the sixth, seventh and eighth grades. The subjects studied at each level are Kampuchean History, and World History.

The fifth-grade text, at least, does not avoid discussing previous Vietnamese interventions in Kampuchea, notably that of the 1830s. It states that, in response to Thai domination, "our Khmer kings ran to rely on the feudalists in the east, that is, the Vietnamese kingdom", then based at Hue.

The intervention of the Hue court became steadily more active, especially beginning in the reign of King Ang Chan II (1794-1834). This king firmly believed that he could strengthen his throne by relying on the forces of both the Hue court and the Bangkok court. Ang received a gold seal from the Hue court. The Thai king, unhappy with such an attitude, used force to pressure King Ang Chan II and to encourage him to accept absolute Thai sovereignty. Worried by such pressure, King Ang
Chan II requested help from the Hue court. Immediately the Hue court sent troops into Kampuchea as a matter of urgency.

Then a war began. The Vietnamese troops defeated the Thai troops ...

King Ang Chan II died in 1834 leaving no heir. The Hue court at this time had very great influence over the Khmer royal family and it began to use manoeuvres to enthrone Princess Ang Mey, who was a daughter of King Ang Chan II, as ruler of the kingdom. In order to strengthen its own influence and eliminate Thai influence, the Hue court intervened in the internal affairs of the Oudong court with increasing power. Thus it happened that the city of Bangkok pressured Kampuchea more powerfully and, along with this, the court and the people of Kampuchea were not happy either.

Then in March 1988, Phnom Penh University reopened after thirteen years. It began teaching over 2,000 students. Its History Faculty consists of three lecturers, some of whom had helped write the texts now used in the schools. The medium of instruction is Khmer.

Could the Khmer Rouge Come Back?

There was little Khmer Rouge activity in Prey Veng province, on the east bank of the Mekong River, from 1979 to 1985. The province governor was wounded when his car hit a mine in July 1981, but he recovered.

Then, in early January 1986, Khmer Rouge (KR) snipers assassinated a sub-district official in Sithor Kandal district in the north of Prey Veng near Kompong Cham, and then made their escape. Later, on the night of 20 January, 90-100 Khmer Rouge massed and attacked the district town of Sithor Kandal. The province governor and other officials were conducting a meeting there. The governor escaped but four Vietnamese troops, nine civilians and two Khmer soldiers were killed. The district chief escaped only in his underpants. The KR burned down "everything", including the district office, the district medical clinic and the district school. They suffered three dead in the fighting. They beheaded their dead comrades and took the severed heads with them as they retreated, so that they could not be recognised. (One of the KR later defected in Kompong Thom province; he asked to return not to his home district of Sithor Kandal but to another district in the same province. He was, however, sent home under supervision, to see if he was a genuine defector.)

These KR were led by Khan Soeun, commander of the DK’s 920th "Brigade". Soeun’s parents, who were natives of the area, were taken in for questioning by PRK officials. They said he had joined the KR in 1970, and disappeared until 1975, when he came home for three days after the war ended. His no-doubt circumspect parents claimed that they had never seen him again until 1986. He is variously said to have been a regimental commander in the district from 1975 to 1979, or even Vice-Minister of Defence under Pol Pot’s Deputy Prime Minister, Son Sen. Soeun had obviously retreated to the west with the DK forces in the face of the Vietnamese onslaught of 1979.

Khan Soeun returned to visit his parents early in 1986. Locals quickly reported his unit’s arrival to the PRK authorities, but troops sent out to capture them were unable to locate them, and the Vietnamese forces in the area were disinclined to believe the story. It appears that the KR were mostly locals who had returned from the Thai border, and were able to count on their relatives to supply them with food. One such relative was the district chief who turned out to be Khan Soeun’s cousin. After his bare escape, he was demoted to member of the district committee.

On 8 January 1987, Khan Soeun’s forces returned to the fray in Prey Veng and attacked a district/provincial armed forces base at Khum Kompong Prang in Peareang district. They were well armed. (A section of 10 KR is reported to have 7 AK-47s and 3 B-40 rocket launchers.) It is not known whether they inflicted any casualties in this attack, but that night I overheard a PRK officer say that if there were any, it would be kept quiet “to prevent the people getting confused”. "The situation is not good," he said. "Wow, they even dared to attack an army position," a militia guard said after...
the officer had left.

In August 1987, the last Vietnamese advisers withdrew from Sithor Kandal district, and they were followed by the remaining Vietnamese troops. But in December 1987-January 1988, Soeun's band came back to his village there on five occasions, looking for food. The local authorities did not discover this until the group had crossed the Mekong and returned to Kompong Thom province, where they hide out during the rainy season. But before then they struck again. On 4 January 1988, twenty of Soeun's guerrillas disguised themselves as civilians to attend a video screening in a village near Chhe in neighbouring Kompong Cham province. After the screening was over, the infiltrators opened fire from the crowd, killing the sub-district police chief and one militia member, and wounding two others.

Three days later, while the country was celebrating the ninth anniversary of the defeat of the Pol Pot regime, a force of ninety of Soeun's troops was seen on the road between Prek Pou and Koh Sautin. Soon afterwards they returned to Kompong Thom, and there were no more incidents in the area in 1988. But fighting broke out again in Sithor Kandal in January 1989, following the usual pattern of the previous three years.

Across the Mekong in Kompong Cham, a village forty kilometres north of Phnom Penh was attacked by Khmer Rouge forces in early 1985. The terrified villagers were unarmed and unable to prevent the attackers burning down a government office and destroying a rice mill. PRK regular forces came and drove the Khmer Rouge away, but the losses suffered by the villagers totalled 40,000 riels.

Then, on 24 January 1986, the same village was treated to a massive display of force. Eight hundred Khmer Rouge marched through the village in broad daylight. They were very well armed, each carrying two B-40 rocket launchers, according to a witness. They didn't harm anyone, but villagers feared and distrusted them because of their murderous record. According to the witness, the situation had improved by 1987, with the Vietnamese and Heng Samrin government forces in a "much stronger": position than in early 1986. There were still, however, some Khmer Rouge sup-

porters living in the village. "There is no problem now," the villager said, but others there were not so sure. By 1989, the same villager expressed much greater confidence in the local 33rd Regiment of the PRK army which "protects the area" from the Khmer Rouge troops who were now confined to a distant forested area.

These incidents in Prey Veng and Kompong Cham may be a good illustration of the war in Kampuchea. The KR are able to strike in many parts of the country, even those far from the Thai border, they are well armed, and they benefit from limited local support; but they also have many enemies who will report their movements to the PRK, and their ability to damage the PRK is limited even in a province like Prey Veng where there are few, if any, Vietnamese troops. The PRK has to pour out much of its budget on defence, but six incidents in three years have not disturbed its control of the province. The PRK militia in Prey Veng consists of 17,000 armed villagers, and there are at least ten battalions of PRK district forces, plus a provincial regiment. These face about a hundred Khmer Rouge, but have been unable to defeat them so far.

According to one observer, the mid-year rainy season in 1986 passed without a general Khmer Rouge offensive, the first failure of their rainy season campaigns since 1980. In 1987, according to military analysts, the Vietnamese had their enemies "on the run" for most of the year. And 1988 saw little rebel military activity at all.

The insurgency in Kampuchea seems to have peaked in 1986, but it had still reached a much higher level than in the early 1980s. In April 1984, Khmer Rouge forces attacked right into the town of Kompong Speu; in 1985 they penetrated Siemreap city on five occasions (but not since). In early 1986 they overran Sithor Kandal in Prey Veng. In August and September 1986 Khmer Rouge raiders slaughtered twenty-easy peasants and burnt down a number of houses in two attacks on a single village in Kandal province, not far from Phnom Penh itself. (These murders may have been the work of Khan Soeun's forces, who are believed to be able to move through the forest from Prey Veng right up to Arey Khsat across the Mekong from the capital. Such brutality outside of their own area may prefigure events should the Khmer Rouge ever regain state power.) In October 1986, a Khmer Rouge unit penetrated the city of Kampot...

It would be unwise to write off the Khmer Rouge after the Vietnamese withdrawal is completed.

NOTES


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