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Ho Chi Minh's long-cherished political dream *

The communist conquest of Phnom Penh and of Saigon (renamed Ho Chi Minh City) in April 1975 seemed to presage realization of Ho Chi Minh's long-cherished political dream--stated in a 1935 resolution of the ICP--an Indochinese federation comprising Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Many observers believed--because of Vietnam's efforts to nurture a Cambodian communist party that was tied closely to Hanoi--that the Indochinese federation that emerged would be controlled by Hanoi. The Khmer Rouge victory of 1975, however, won by Pol Pot's chauvinistic and hardline party faction with its abiding distrust of Vietnam, doomed this prospect for the time being.

In mid-1975, a series of border clashes erupted between Cambodian and Vietnamese forces. Each side blamed the other for initiating the conflicts, which occurred even as Hanoi defended the Pol Pot regime against international criticism of atrocities inside Cambodia. Border fighting increased in 1977, according to some reports. In June of that year, Vietnam proposed negotiations to settle the border dispute, but the Khmer Rouge said negotiations would be premature. In December, Cambodia accused Vietnam of aggression, demanded withdrawal of its troops from the country, and severed diplomatic ties. In February 1978, Hanoi called for an immediate end to all hostile military activities in the border region and for the conclusion of a peace treaty. At the same time, Hanoi denied the allegations that it had been trying to incorporate Cambodia into an Indochinese federation, adding that Vietnam had not entertained the idea of federation since the ICP was dissolved in 1951. The Pol Pot regime continued to claim, however, that Vietnam had never abandoned the idea of a federation, and the regime called on Hanoi to cease activities aimed at overthrowing the Government of Democratic Kampuchea.

Cambodia in Turmoil

On December 25, 1978, Vietnam launched a full-scale invasion of Cambodia. Phnom Penh fell, after minimal resistance, on January 7, 1979, and on the following day an anti-Khmer Rouge faction announced the formation of the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Council (KPRC), with Heng Samrin as president of the new ruling body. On January 10, the KPRC proclaimed that the new official name of Cambodia was the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK--see Appendix B). Within a week, the PRK notified the United Nations Security Council that it was the sole legitimate government of the Cambodian people. Vietnam was the first country to recognize the new regime, and Phnom Penh lost no time in restoring diplomatic relations with Hanoi. From February 16 to February 19, the PRK and Vietnam held their first summit meeting in Phnom Penh and cemented their relationship by signing a twenty-five-year Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation. The treaty declared that the "peace and security of the two countries are closely interrelated and that the two Parties are duty-bound



to help each other...." Article 2 of the treaty dealt specifically with mutual security assistance to help each defend against "all schemes and acts of sabotage by the imperialist and international reactionary

forces." The two governments also signed agreements for cooperation on economic, cultural, educational, public health, and scientific and technological issues.

In rapid succession, the Soviet Union, other Marxist-Leninist states, and a number of pro-Moscow developing countries had also recognized the new regime. By January 1980, twenty-nine countries had recognized the PRK, yet nearly eighty countries continued to recognize the Khmer Rouge.

More countries voiced opposition to Vietnam's involvement in Cambodia. Most vocal was Thailand, the security of which was threatened directly by the turn of events in Cambodia. (Thailand shares an 800-kilometer border with Cambodia, and historically it has regarded the country as a buffer against Vietnamese expansion) The Thai government demanded Vietnam's immediate withdrawal from Cambodia so that the Cambodians would be able to choose their own government without foreign interference. Thailand's allies in ASEAN-- Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore--agreed with Bangkok's position.

The United States also agreed with Thailand's position. Although it had never recognized Democratic Kampuchea and disapproved of the human rights violations perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge, the United States nonetheless supported Democratic Kampuchea's request for an emergency session of the UN Security Council. China expressed its support for the Khmer Rouge and even accused Vietnam of attempting to force Cambodia into an Indochinese federation and of serving as an "Asian Cuba"--a surrogate for the Soviet policy of global hegemony.

Soviet leaders hailed the PRK's "remarkable victory" and expressed their full support for a peaceful, independent, democratic, and nonaligned Cambodia that would advance toward socialism. Moscow also accused Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge regime of genocide and implied that China had imposed the regime on Cambodia.

Despite objections from the Soviet Union and from Czechoslovakia, the UN Security Council allowed Prince Sihanouk to argue the case for Democratic Kampuchea in early January 1979. Sihanouk--who had distanced himself from Khmer Rouge brutality, charged that Vietnam had committed flagrant acts of aggression against Cambodia, and he asked the council to demand an end to Hanoi's interference in Cambodian affairs. He also urged that the council not recognize the puppet regime in Phnom Penh, and he appealed to all nations to suspend aid to Vietnam.

In the UN Security Council debate, Vietnam unsuccessfully challenged Sihanouk's claim to represent Cambodia, asserting that he spoke for a regime that no longer existed. Vietnam also charged that the Pol Pot regime had provoked the border war and that Hanoi's presence in Cambodia was necessary and was strictly an issue between Vietnam and the PRK. Hanoi argued, moreover, that the Cambodian crisis was a matter of internal strife among rival groups that was brought on by Pol Pot's atrocities against his own countrymen. Hanoi actually asserted that there was no "Cambodian problem" that warranted a debate in the UN or anywhere else in the international political arena.

The fifteen-member UN Security Council, however, failed to adopt a resolution on Cambodia. Seven nonaligned members on the council had submitted a draft resolution, which was endorsed by Britain,



China, France, Norway, Portugal, and the United States. But the draft, which called for a cease-fire in Cambodia and for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from that country, was not approved because of objections from the Soviet Union and from Czechoslovakia.

The fate of Cambodia was interwoven with the security interests of its Asian neighbors. For example, on February 17, 1979, China attacked Vietnam, apparently to ease Vietnamese pressure against Thailand and against Chinese-supported Khmer Rouge guerrillas. The Cambodian question surfaced again in the UN Security Council session that was convened on February 23 to consider ending the hostilities along the Vietnamese-Chinese border and in Cambodia. This time the focus was on regional power politics; China demanded that the UN Security Council censure Vietnam for its invasion of Cambodia, and the Soviet Union asked that the council condemn China for its "aggression" against Vietnam. The United States called for the withdrawal of Chinese forces from Vietnam and of Vietnamese forces from Cambodia.

In late 1979, the stage was set for an international political showdown over Cambodia. In September of that year, the UN General Assembly rejected the efforts of the Soviet Union, the Congo, and Panama to challenge the legality of Democratic Kampuchea and decided that it should continue to be represented at the United Nations. The vote was seventy-one to thirty-five in support of the decision, with thirty-four abstentions. (Sihanouk, who no longer represented the Khmer Rouge regime, argued that the Cambodian seat should be left vacant because neither of the two Cambodian claimants had the mandate of the Cambodian people.) In November, the UN General Assembly adopted an ASEAN-sponsored resolution by a vote of eighty-one to twenty-one, with twenty-nine abstentions, calling for immediate Vietnamese disengagement from Cambodia. The resolution also called on all states to refrain from interference in, and acts of aggression against, Cambodia and its Southeast Asian neighbors. The assembly mandated the UN secretary general to explore the possibility of an international conference on Cambodia and appealed for international humanitarian aid for the country's population and for its refugees who had fled to neighboring countries.

Cambodia's PRK regime, under the leadership of Heng Samrin, set out to restore the country's social and economic life, which had been racked by a decade of political turmoil. During 1979 the country was still reeling from the horrors of the Khmer Rouge, and the lack of educated and qualified personnel to staff administrative posts was hampering efforts to reestablish a civil government. Most of the country's educated elite had been murdered during the Pol Pot era, while others had fled to safety in Vietnam. (In August 1979, a Phnom Penh "people's revolutionary tribunal" tried Pol Pot and his closest confidant, Foreign Minister Ieng Sary, in absentia, on charges of genocidal crimes and then sentenced them to death.) Another complication for the Heng Samrin regime was the growing Khmer Rouge guerrilla resistance in the western and the northwestern border areas.

By mid-1980, life in villages and in towns had stabilized somewhat, and relief aid from the Soviet Union, Vietnam, and some Western countries had helped to prevent mass starvation. Meanwhile, the regime had managed gradually to extend its administrative control to outlying areas close to the Thai border and had initiated the drafting of a constitution in January 1980. The National Assembly, which had been elected in May 1981, formally adopted and promulgated the Constitution in June.

But opposition to the Heng Samrin regime had been growing since 1979. The most prominent opposition group was the Khmer Rouge, which sought to reestablish its political legitimacy and to mobilize the Cambodian people against the Vietnamese. In January 1979, Khmer Rouge leaders announced the formation of the Patriotic and Democratic Front of the Great National Union of



Kampuchea (PDFGNUM), a popular front organization in which the Kampuchean (or Khmer) Communist Party (KCP), under Pol Pot planned to play a dominant role.

As part of an image-rebuilding effort, the Khmer Rouge announced the replacement, in December 1979, of Prime Minister Pol Pot with the politically moderate Khieu Samphan. The replacement did not affect Pol Pot's position as leader of the KCP or his control of the Khmer Rouge armed forces, officially called the National Army of Democratic Kampuchea (NADK). Khieu Samphan retained his position as president of the State Presidium of Democratic Kampuchea, a post equivalent to head of state under the 1975 constitution of Democratic Kampuchea. At about the same time, it also was disclosed that the political program of the PDFGNUM, adopted in December, would serve as the provisional fundamental law of Democratic Kampuchea until free elections could be held. Sihanouk described the episode as a ploy designed to give the Khmer Rouge's "odious face" a mask of respectability.

The first and principal noncommunist resistance group was the Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF) led by Son Sann. The front's military arm was the Khmer People's National Liberation Armed Forces (KPNLAF). It was originally formed, in March 1979, by General Dien Del, a former army officer under Lon Non's Khmer Republic. Son Sann's formation of the KPNLF on October 9, 1979, coincided with the ninth anniversary of the founding of the Khmer Republic and therefore symbolized rejection of "Sihanoukism." After 1979 Son Sann and Sihanouk often clashed over the issue of coalition-building and national reconciliation, despite their common distaste for the Khmer Rouge and for the Vietnamese occupation. After 1985 the KPNLF fell into disarray as a result of leadership disputes in the movement's top echelon. By late 1987, it still had not regained its former stature or fighting strength.

The second noncommunist, nationalist resistance faction was the Sihanouk group called initially the Movement for the National Liberation of Kampuchea (Mouvement pour la Libération Nationale du Kampuchéa - MOULINAKA), formed in August 1979 by Kong Sileah after his split with General Dien Del. In September, Sihanouk set up the Confederation of Khmer Nationalists from his base in Pyongyang, Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea). The confederation lacked support because key actors in the Cambodian situation perceived it to be merely a forum, and that only for "committed Sihanoukists." Around March 1981, the MOULINAKA group joined with other small pro-Sihanouk factions to establish a political organization called the National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative Cambodia (Front Uni National pour un Cambodge Indépendant, Neutre, Pacifique, et Coopératif (FUNCINPEC). The movement soon formed its own armed wing, the Sihanouk National Army (Armée Nationale Sihanoukiste - ANS), which began minor incursions into Cambodia. As a political movement, FUNCINPEC quickly acquired a legitimacy beyond its numbers, because of the impeccable nationalist credentials of its head, Sihanouk. Moreover, although it remained the smallest of the Khmer resistance groups until 1985, its quest for stature was abetted by its having neither the opprobrious human rights record of the Khmer Rouge to live down, nor the debilitating leadership disputes of the KPNLF with which to contend.

* The title is proposed by Khmer Diffusion in line with the content of the text.