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## Diplomatic History Series | 3



# THE VOTE FOR CAMBODIA

*Australia's Diplomatic Intervention*

Richard Broinowski

**THE VOTE FOR CAMBODIA:  
AUSTRALIA'S DIPLOMATIC INTERVENTION**

**Richard Broinowski AO**



**Australian Institute of International Affairs**



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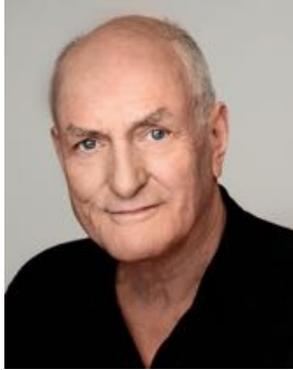
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Richard Broinowski was schooled in Melbourne and Adelaide. He obtained his Bachelor of Laws degree at Adelaide University in 1961 and was admitted to the Bar in Adelaide in 1963. He later earned a Master's Degree in Public Administration from the John F. Kennedy School at Harvard (1978).

In 1963, Richard joined the Department of External Affairs and studied Japanese at ANU. He was posted to Tokyo as Third Secretary in 1965, then as First Secretary to Rangoon (1970-71) and Tehran (1972-73), and as Councillor and Deputy Head of Mission to Manila from 1975 to 1977. He was Executive Director of the Japan Secretariat in Canberra from 1979 to 1982.

Richard was appointed as Ambassador to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam from 1983-85, and to the Republic of Korea from 1987-89. He took time off from diplomacy to be General Manager of Radio Australia from in 1990 and 1991 and re-joined the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in 1993. In 1994 he was appointed Ambassador to Mexico, with concurrent accreditation to the Central American Republics and Cuba.

He retired from DFAT in 1997, and became an Adjunct Professor in Media and Communications, first at the University of Canberra, then at Sydney University. In this capacity he initiated a scheme to send young media students from several Australian universities to work as journalists in English-language newsrooms, including in Bangkok, Manila, Kuala Lumpur, Phnom Penh, New Delhi, Seoul, Tokyo, Beijing, and the United Arab Emirates. Financed initially by the Myer Foundation, then DFAT, over 130 media students have worked in a total of 14 Asian newsrooms since the year 2000. Richard became an Officer of the Order of Australia in the Queen's Birthday Honours List in 2019.

Richard was President of the Australian Institute of International Affairs in New South Wales from 2015 to 2017. He now comments on public affairs on radio and television. He is Patron of the Kosciuszko Historical Society. He is also the author of five books – *A Witness to History, the life and times of Robert Broinowski* (MUP, 2001), *Fact or Fission* (Scribe, 2003), *Driven – a diplomatic autobiography* (ABC Books/HarperCollins, 2009), *Fallout from Fukushima* (Scribe, 2012) and *Under the Rainbow – the life and times of E W Cole* (Miegunyah Press, 2020).

Richard lives with his wife, Dr Alison Broinowski AM, another former diplomat, in Paddington, Sydney.

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## Foreword

*Dr. Bryce Wakefield*

*National Executive Director of the Australian Institute of  
International Affairs*

The Australian Institute of International Affairs' mission is to promote interest among the Australian public of international relations and to support engagement in Australia's role on the international stage. We want Australians to know more, understand more, and engage more in international affairs.

Central to the role of knowledge, understanding, and engagement in international affairs is the figure of the diplomat.

Our growing Diplomatic History Series aims to bring into the spotlight Australia's contributions to the shaping of international politics, engaging directly with Australian diplomats on the frontlines of political events. We ask seasoned diplomats to produce work on a particular event or activity informed by both archival research and their own experience. In doing so, these monographs do not serve solely as descriptors of national crises, but rather evaluate the longer-term role of Australia's influence in the greater regional and international sphere during and in the immediate aftermath of the event in question. The goal is to produce works that can outline object lessons for current diplomats and the general public.

The Australian Institute of International Affairs was delighted to work with Richard Broinowski AO to publish this in-depth analysis of Australia's efforts to secure free and fair democratic elections in Cambodia following decades of political unrest.

Broinowski had a rich and diverse career within Australia's foreign service, appointed as Ambassador to Vietnam, Ambassador to South

Korea and Ambassador to Mexico. He has produced five books and is an Officer of the Order of Australia in recognition of his services to international relations. His diplomatic experience abroad, including serving as a departmental adviser in Australia's parliamentary delegation to Cambodia in 1970, makes him well equipped to present this piece on that country.

For most of the latter half of the 20th century, Cambodia's political circumstances were marred by internal conflict, foreign occupation, and ideological struggle. The world watched in horror as Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge committed widespread killings. And as the great power politics of China, the Soviet Union and the United States tore the nation apart, each nation attempted to fill what they saw as a post-war power vacuum in Southeast Asia after the withdrawal of colonial forces.

Australia's formal position holds that shaping the rules-based international order and support for the dissemination of democracy within the region have been at the heart of its foreign policy tradition. And so, a role for Australia in securing political stability in Cambodia and encouraging the nation to follow a trajectory toward free and fair elections should be of no surprise. The Labor government of Bob Hawke saw the importance of this, and lead Australia's efforts to develop peace in the region.

Broinowski's book spans the period of intense conflict in the 1960s to the early 1990s. It is a *tour de force*, and Australia's role in the country thus becomes clearer in the latter half of the volume, as Cambodia prepares for democratic elections.

Despite the collective efforts of dedicated actors such as Australia and the United Nations to monitor and administer Cambodia's first democratic elections in 1993, concerns about the nation's free and fair democratic future have all but dissipated after Cambodia's major opposition party was forcibly dissolved by the Supreme Court in 2017, sparking outrage from the international community.

Writing from his own experiences on the ground in Cambodia as a representative of the Australian government, Broinowski delves into the contributions made by Australia to Cambodia's post-World War II environment, and the reception received from Cambodian nationals. In a time of unremitting crises and attacks on democratic institutions today, understanding Cambodia's story has never been more pertinent.

We thank Richard for the hard work that he has put into this monograph, but we also recognise that it must have been a labour of love for him. His lithe and lucid prose also means that it is a pleasure to read. We cannot think of a better addition to our diplomatic history series.

Bryce Wakefield

## Acknowledgements

It has been extraordinary to me how much of one's professional past can be lost to memory. That is why I owe such a debt of gratitude to several friends and colleagues who shared their own experiences working in and around Indochina with me back in the day. First are four highly motivated and helpful Embassy colleagues in Hanoi – First and Second Secretaries Robert Scoble and Phillip Stonehouse, replaced at the end of their assignments by Caroline Millar and Lyndall McLean. Second are others who lived and worked in Indochina, including Garry Woodard, Milton Osborne, Ian Lincoln, and Tony Kevin. Also, Michael Hayes, who as owner and editor of the *Phnom Penh Post*, kept me grounded about many Cambodian realities, and who over several years generously took on as interns a number of my media students from various Australian universities.

Other colleagues and friends who shared with me their perspectives about the complex situation in Cambodia include Greg Clark, and Peter Timmins. John Sanderson has been extremely frank and generous in sharing with me his experiences, both as adviser to the United Nations Secretary-General in 1991 and as UNTAC Force Commander in Cambodia in 1992 and 1993.

DFAT historian Matthew Jordan was an ever-present source of encouragement. Andrew Cairns and Ritchie George at the National Archives of Australia were conscientious in providing me with the relevant files when I made my frequent research visits to Canberra from Sydney. I must also thank those invisible security officials who apparently had sufficient trust in my discretion to grant me a security pass to roam the Department and access the files during the duration of my research in 2020.

The inevitable editorial process involved five gimlet-eyed individuals, a number of whose comments and suggestions very much improved the text. They are Allan Gyngell, Brendan Taylor, Meg Gurry, Matt Jordan (again) and Bryce Wakefield. I thank them for their thoughtful and informed suggestions. Cahill Di Donato, assigned as my sub-editor, did much leg-work with unfailing energy.

Because of the COVID-19 lockdown in Victoria, I was unable to discuss my project with Gareth Evans face-to-face. As Australia's Foreign Minister from 1988 to 1996, he was the main mover in the whole Cambodian exercise. But we did have a productive exchange of emails, and I have taken on board a number of his suggestions. His and Bruce Grant's *Australian Foreign Relations* (MUP, 1991) and his later *Incorrigible Optimist* (MUP, 2017) have also helped shape my narrative.

Gareth also reminded me of perhaps the most comprehensive contemporary account of the whole process leading up to and including the 1993 elections in Cambodia. It is *Cambodia – From Red to Blue – Australia's Initiative for Peace* (Allen and Unwin, 1997), written by Ken Berry, a diplomatic colleague in Manila in earlier days. Ken's account of Michael Costello's epic shuttle diplomacy in December 1989 and January 1990 to convince all players to support a United Nations administration in Cambodia to see through the elections was particularly detailed.

Paddington NSW

July 2021

# Map



Map of contemporary Cambodia.  
*Peter Hermes Furian/Shutterstock.com*

## Introduction

*“When the first soldiers walked along Monivong Boulevard early on the morning of April 17, they waved as the townspeople cheered, embraced them and wept. Small children danced around, the government ordered all troops to cease fire. At last, it seemed to those who saw the scene, the fratricide was over, guns would be laid aside, the ‘gentle, smiling Khmer’ would re-unite. It was a cruel deception, and a short one.”<sup>1</sup>*

This essay concerns Australia's diplomatic involvement in Cambodia. It is a complex story, inextricably linked with the Vietnam War and its aftermath.

To my mind, it is important as one of the few post-World War Two occasions where Australia took a leading role in achieving regional stability, unencumbered by the need to impress great and powerful friends. Dr Herbert Vere Evatt was a giant who strode the international stage through his involvement in the formation and early days of the United Nations (UN). Australia's assistance in achieving Indonesia's independence from the Netherlands in 1949 was another example. So were our roles in negotiating the Bougainville Peace Agreement in 2001; in establishing and leading INTERFET, the multilateral non-UN peacekeeping task force which effectively addressed the humanitarian and security crisis in East Timor in 1999 and 2000; and our leadership of RAMSI, the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomons in 2003.

Our Cambodian experience showed how Australian diplomats helped shape events in the former states of Indochina. Their views counted,

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<sup>1</sup> From Chapter 24 of *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia* by William Shawcross, A Washington Square Publication of Pocket Books, a Simon and Schuster division of Gulf and Western Corporation (1979)

and politicians and bureaucrats took their advice. Some politicians claim that international problems can be solved by a simple phone call between leaders. This has never been so, least of all in Indochina. The hard grind of diplomats on the ground remains the bedrock of understanding.

Nevertheless, powerful lobby groups supporting particular views about foreign affairs increasingly vie for the attention of our politicians. This leads to megaphone diplomacy in which good sense and objectivity are absent. The current serious decline in our relations with China could have been better handled through quiet discussion between professional diplomats rather than aggressive public statements by think-tank spokespeople who don't speak Mandarin or otherwise have an uncertain grasp of Chinese history or culture. Our involvement in Cambodia began when Australia's first diplomats were accredited to that country. They were initially based in Saigon in the late 1950s, then moved to Phnom Penh. Like everyone in External Affairs, they were new to the trade. Until the Second World War, Australia had not established a diplomatic service. Successive Australian governments allowed Whitehall to protect Australia's overseas interests. This meant that apart from London, where we had maintained a high commission since 1910, we had no overseas posts.

Australian complacency was shattered in 1939 when the European war began with Hitler's march into Poland, and Prime Minister Menzies' famous declaration that Australia was at war because Britain was. Australian diplomatic missions were quickly established in Washington, Tokyo and Ottawa in 1940, in Nanking in 1941, in Wellington in 1943, in New Delhi in 1944, and in Paris in 1945.

After the war, it became clear that Australia could no longer define or reliably pursue *any* of its interests through Britain, which was now absorbed in its own post-war rehabilitation. Australian diplomats were new at the diplomatic game, especially in a region as complicated as

our near-north neighbourhood. They had no traditional colleagues to get advice from about the moves for self-determination occurring there.

Events in Australia's region were moving rapidly. Encouraged by Japan's easy victory in 1942, the peoples in Southeast Asia objected when the European colonial powers wanted their colonies back after the war and agitated for independence. A vigorous process of decolonisation took place, accompanied by aspirations for non-alignment. Between 1945 and 1950, the Indonesians gained independence from the Dutch; the Burmese, Malayans and Singaporeans from the British; and Filipinos from the United States (US).

The French, who regarded their colonies as part of France, were more obdurate. After the humiliation and impoverishment of their homeland at the hands of Nazi Germany, they wanted to retain their overseas possessions and the riches they provided. In Southeast Asia, these included the three Vietnamese colonies of Cochin China, Annam and Tonkin, and the two French 'protectorates' of Laos and Cambodia. The issue was decided by the bitter war the French waged in the late 1940s and early 1950s against Vietnamese nationalists under Ho Chi Minh. When the French forces were defeated in May 1954 by General Vo Nguyen Giap at Dien Bien Phu, northwest of Hanoi near the Lao border, France abandoned Indochina altogether.

In what followed, the US tragically mistook the victory of the Vietminh as a victory of world Communism. Instead, it was a victory of nationalism by a small patriotic group of Vietnamese led by Ho Chi Minh over their French colonial masters. But the Vietminh were seen from outside as stooges of either the Soviet Union or China. Who the ringmasters were depended on who in the West, particularly in Washington, was making the accusation.

American paranoia was understandable. China had been 'lost' to the Communists in 1949 (as if China was America's to lose). The North Koreans, with Moscow's blessing, had invaded South Korea in June 1950, leading to a three-year war against Chinese forces which ended in stalemate and an armistice in 1953. North Korea remained Communist. In Washington, 'appeasement' became a dirty word. The thinking was that unless the US took a stand in Vietnam, the whole of Southeast Asia would fall to international Communism directed from either Moscow or Beijing. It was never made clear which was the main culprit, but the domino theory was simple, and convinced many.

The 1954 Geneva Agreement which followed the French defeat temporarily divided Vietnam into two at the seventeenth parallel. The Agreement stipulated that nation-wide elections would be held in 1956. In the interim, the Americans appointed Ngo Dinh Diem, an expatriate autocratic Catholic steeped in Confucian tradition, to lead a new government in South Vietnam. But Diem and his American backers rightly feared that a free vote would result in a victory for Ho Chi Minh in the south as well as the north and refused to participate in elections. Civil war intensified between Diem's forces and the Vietcong, the latter increasingly getting the upper hand.

Diem became increasingly unpopular, and with US connivance he and his brother Ngo Dinh Nu were assassinated by Vietnamese generals in November 1963. A succession of military leaders followed, none gaining any degree of popularity. A "strategic hamlets program", in which peasants and their families were herded into concentration camps behind barbed wire, leaving the countryside a free fire zone, did not help. Nor did the regular bombing and napalming of villages and hamlets perceived to be Communist. Psychological operations ('psyops') were deployed to win over "hearts and minds".

General William Westmoreland took command of theatre operations in 1964. He called for a massive increase in US troops, which at their peak

numbered more than half a million. He measured success by the body count of enemy dead. Regular US/South Vietnamese press briefings at the Rex Hotel in Saigon were cynically dubbed the “Five O'clock Follies”. They produced unrealistic figures to show that the war was being won, only increasing the scepticism of reporters.

A moment of jarring reality abruptly intruded during the Vietnamese New Year celebrations in early 1968, when in coordinated attacks across South Vietnam, North and South Vietnamese Communist forces occupied many towns and cities. Although the insurgents were beaten back with many casualties, the 'Tet Offensive' made the Americans realise that their opponents were numerous, coordinated and probably unbeatable. After all the effort and money he had put into winning the war, President Johnson was deeply shocked. His pre-occupation with Vietnam destroyed his plans for a Great Society. He announced that he would not stand for a second term in 1968.

President Nixon was inaugurated in January 1969. With the connivance of his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, he announced his so-called Guam Doctrine at a press conference in July that year. He said:

The US would assist in the defence and development of allies and friends, but would not undertake all the defence of the free nations of the world.<sup>2</sup>

In Washington on 3 November 1969, he subsequently announced the withdrawal of the US military from Vietnam without making it appear as a defeat. He would 'Vietnamize' the war, turning it over to the South Vietnamese. It would be presented as peace with honour, at least for the US.

Withdrawal did not occur immediately. Indeed, war began to engulf Cambodia. For years North Vietnam had been sending troops and

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<sup>2</sup> Announced at a press conference on Guam on 25 July 1969

supplies into South Vietnam down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. There had also been periodic clashes between Cambodians and Vietnamese - from both the North and South. As the war intensified, the Trail broadened into several tracks, some of them straying westward into Laos and eastern Cambodia. Nixon decided, secretly and contrary to international law, to bomb alleged Vietnamese base camps and supply lines in eastern Cambodia. The missions, by B-52 aircraft, began in 1969 and were coded 'menu targets' - breakfast, dinner, dessert, snack, supper and lunch. Bomber crews did not know they were straying into Cambodia until they were near their targets. Nixon made no announcement and the American public did not know about the illegal raids and the shocking loss of life they caused - at least, not until 1973. Nixon calculated that the bombing would disrupt supply lines from North to South Vietnam and put pressure on North Vietnam negotiators at the Paris Peace Talks. The bombing continued over four years, gradually extending deep into Cambodia from the initial border areas. More bombs were dropped on rural eastern Cambodia by B-52 bombers than over all of Vietnam throughout the long war.

Australian diplomats in Phnom Penh had argued for years that it would not be in Australia's interests to see Cambodia lose its neutral status and become involved in the war. The country's neutrality had allowed it to maintain a fragile peace, as well as protecting it from undue Chinese influence. Despite Canberra's support of their arguments, Cambodia's neutrality was destroyed as a result of Nixon's bombing, and the war ineluctably spread into its eastern provinces. Lon Nol, the conservative politician who ousted Prince Sihanouk in Phnom Penh 1970, permitted the bombing to continue until he in turn was ousted by the Khmer Rouge in 1975. The evacuation of Cambodian towns and cities followed, leading to 'Year Zero' and the beginning of terrible national genocide at the hands of Pol Pot.

Australia pulled its diplomats out of Phnom Penh and a 16-year hiatus in bilateral relations began: four years of Pol Pot's genocide followed by ten years of occupation by Vietnam. Australia resumed diplomatic relations with Cambodia in 1991.

I will concentrate on this period, including the consequences of Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia in December 1978 and the efforts of neighbouring countries, individually and as members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), to get them to withdraw. I also describe the diplomatic activities of the great powers - China, the Soviet Union and the United States - and the tough negotiating position adopted by the Vietnamese to protect what they saw as their national security.

Under the government of Bob Hawke, Australia moved from the margins to play a central role in the development of peace in the region. This began when Foreign Minister Bill Hayden met Hun Sen in Ho Chi Minh City in 1985, and decided that he was not a satrap of occupying Vietnam but a genuine Cambodian patriot. I continue with the active diplomatic role Australia played between then and 1988 in exploring various peace options, in Australia's involvement at meetings in Jakarta, and the failed 1989 Paris Peace Conference. I then discuss Gareth Evans' successful advocacy of a central role for the United Nations, not just in keeping the peace and monitoring elections when they were held, but in actually administering Cambodia during a transition period. I conclude with an analysis of how Cambodia, the 'Land of Smiles', is faring today.

## Chapter One: The 1960s

This monograph does not seek to rewrite history. But it acknowledges the pride Cambodians felt about their former greatness, their determination to maintain independence from their powerful neighbours, Thailand and Vietnam, and to secure independence from France.

In 802, King Jayavarman II, second of the Khmer Empire Kings, laid the foundations of the mighty Khmer Empire on the shores of the Tonlé Sap. With the Mekong River feeding this lake during the rainy season, the irrigation system Jayavarman and his heirs developed supported one of the largest pre-modern urban populations in the world. On the strength of it, Cambodia ruled Laos, southern Vietnam, Thailand, and parts of Burma (today's Myanmar), as far as the Bay of Bengal. From such magnificence, the Khmer Empire began to decline in the 13th century. Its borders shrank as Thailand from the west and Vietnam from the east expanded into Khmer territory.

French colonisation began in 1858, almost by accident, when French ships bombarded the Vietnamese port of Tourane (now Danang) to avenge the execution of Catholic missionaries. French occupation of Saigon in 1860 expanded to absorb six provinces towards the end of the 19th century. They included Annam, Tonkin, Cochin China, and Kouang-Tcheou-Wan on the Vietnamese peninsula, and the protectorates of Laos and Cambodia to the west. Until the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, a French *Resident Superieur* governed each province under the authority of a French Governor-General in Hanoi.

Norodom Sihanouk was a Cambodian King of the modern Norodom Sisowath era. He was chosen by the French to ascend the throne following the death of his maternal grandfather Monivong in 1941. The French had infantilised their colonial subjects, including the king and the mandarins, quarantining them from politics. To break free from

such constraints, Sihanouk, following French withdrawal in 1954, abdicated the throne in favour of his father, Suramarit. Still with the status of a prince, but now also as prime minister, Suramarit could run Cambodia through his political party, the Sangkum Reastr Niyum. He was a tough and wily survivor. He became head of state in 1960, a position he retained until he was exiled following a coup by political rival Lon Nol in 1970. To give the coup respectability, the Cambodian National Assembly voted him out of power, but according to Julio Jeldres, Counsellor to Sihanouk's Cabinet, they had no choice as the Assembly was surrounded by tanks.



Prince Norodom Sihanouk, charismatic King of Cambodia (1941–1955, 1993–2004), Head of State (1975 – 1979).

*“Prince Sihanouk”, by Rob Croes, licensed under CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication*

From bases in China and then North Korea, Sihanouk aligned himself with the Khmer Rouge resistance movement operating in Cambodia's jungles and formed a government in exile, before returning to be made nominal head of state at the hands of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge in

1975. Following the Vietnamese invasion in 1978, he was exiled again and headed another resistance group called the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK), an uneasy alliance of his Royalists, the Khmer Rouge, and the Khmer Peoples' National Liberation Front (KPNLF). With no credible claim to government (it had no significant territory or population), the CGDK was nevertheless internationally recognised, except by the Soviet Union, India, and Eastern European countries, and retained Cambodia's seat at the United Nations (UN). Sihanouk was recognised as Cambodia's head of state.

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Australia's diplomatic accreditation to Cambodia began on 15 January 1952, when R G Casey, Minister for External Affairs announced that agreement had been reached between Australia and the Associated States of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia for the exchange of diplomatic representatives at a Legation level. The Head of Mission would be accredited to His Majesty Bao Dai, head of the Vietnamese State, and at the same time to the Heads of State of the Governments of Laos and Cambodia. The non-resident status in Cambodia changed when an ambassador, Noël Deschamps, was accredited to the Cambodian government, resident in Phnom Penh from 1962. Deschamps, a career diplomat and French speaker, represented Australia in Cambodia for seven years.

Deschamps had two main preoccupations - to support Sihanouk's policy of neutrality during the Vietnam War, and to develop a bilateral relationship with Australia which had substance. Neutrality, he repeatedly told Canberra, was the only way to preserve political unity in Cambodia under a non-Communist leadership. Sihanouk, despite his faults, was the natural leader. If Cambodia became a divided country, Australia would witness the same problems it faced in Vietnam. Australia must not, he asserted, exclude Cambodia from Western focus

and support simply because it followed a neutralist line. Otherwise, Cambodia would turn to China.

Fear of Chinese regional influence was strong in Canberra at the time, as indeed it is today. At a policy meeting on 3 March 1960, senior Australian diplomats admitted that Australia would find it difficult to alert Sihanouk to the dangers of getting too close to Beijing. They thought perhaps the French could be enlisted to do so, but there might be other ways of making Sihanouk conscious of Australian concerns, which would involve what is now called “soft power.” Suggestions for achieving the desired outcome included arranging a naval visit, but not too soon after a Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) exercise. As well, proposed initiatives included inviting more Cambodian students to study in Australia, sending sports coaches to coach budding Cambodian athletes (John Hopman, Harry Hopman's brother, was chosen to coach tennis players), training Cambodian pilots in Australia, sending more aid, foodstuffs such as flour and condensed milk, and equipment such as irrigation pumps, and seeing whether one of Sihanouk's (legitimate) sons, one of “kingly timber,” could be invited to study at a select school in Australia.<sup>3</sup>

In January 1964, Deschamps compared Chinese and American influences in Cambodia. He asserted that the Chinese were intelligent, restrained, and supple, compared to the clumsy Americans.<sup>4</sup> He was concerned that Sihanouk might become a prisoner of his own exaggerated statements about Chinese influence, and Australia could not afford to sit back and watch. It needed to express empathy without nagging or lecturing, be active but not obvious, always be present but never obtrusive, and refrain from offering gratuitous advice. Deschamps believed Australia should back the French in their wise

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<sup>3</sup> The main participants in this and a number of later meetings on evolving Australian policy towards Cambodia were Francis Stuart, Colin Moodie, John McMillan, H D Anderson, F J Blakeney and P R Haydon: from file 3016/10/1

<sup>4</sup> Cable from Deschamps to J K Waller, First Assistant Secretary, South East Asia Division, 28 January 1964: *ibid*

counsel to Sihanouk about China, even if it also meant supporting the wishes of Washington.

But Sihanouk was making it difficult to attract Western endorsement for his neutrality. On 10 March 1964, he appealed through the Cambodian National Congress “to parliamentarians throughout the world”:

We must defend and safeguard ourselves and our national independence against the threats and aggression of neighbouring countries. American imperialists and their allies have not ceased plotting to overthrow the legal government. Criminal machinations of the imperialists include attempted assassination against the King and Queen. There have been repeated violations of Khmer territory and reckless claims to islands off the Cambodian coast. Western powers have refused to participate in an international conference guaranteeing Cambodian neutrality.

Sihanouk also resoundingly attacked Western journalists, some of whom accused him of living off foreign aid and doing little or nothing to help Cambodia himself. Australian journalists -- Dennis Warner in particular -- were prime targets. As Deschamps had reported after the 15th Cambodian National Congress held on 1 July 1963:

Monseigneur's dialectical debating method does not spurn unfairness, inaccuracy, or false attribution, bases the wildest and most extravagant of generalisations on the most tenuous evidence.<sup>5</sup>

In May 1964, Deschamps admitted in his post review to Canberra that Sihanouk's relations with “the so-called free world” had steadily deteriorated. Mutual incomprehension contrasted with the Western powers' close military association with Thailand and South Vietnam,

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<sup>5</sup> Deschamps to Waller, 4 July 1963: *ibid*

Cambodia's enemies. He asserted that there were “baseless accusations” that Cambodia was helping the Vietcong.

Deschamps characterised American diplomacy as “clumsy, unimaginative and excessively rigid.” He said that Sihanouk had been glad to see the hated Diem regime go in South Vietnam in November 1963, but strongly objected to infringements of Cambodian territory by South Vietnamese forces. Meanwhile, Sihanouk was getting more and more assistance from the Soviet bloc, including from Czechoslovakia, Albania, Cuba, North Korea, and North Vietnam, as well as from China. This aid included AA guns, hospitals, plywood and cement factories, paper mills, and a hydroelectric plant.

Against this pessimistic background, Deschamps said relations with Australia were surprisingly good. Sihanouk appreciated receiving Australian irrigation pumps and agricultural services for a dam project at Prek Thnot, the promise of rolling stock, hand tools, livestock and poultry breeding equipment, and radio receivers. It was a “clear indication,” Deschamps asserted, “of our efforts to establish an individual and supportive Australian identity in Cambodia, a bridge between East and West”.<sup>6</sup>

In the same year, Radio Australia broadcast a program on Cambodia sympathetic to Sihanouk and his policy of neutrality. It went down very well with the prince

In April 1965, Deschamps noted Canberra's decision to send a battalion of troops to South Vietnam, but played it down in Phnom Penh and warned that “even one Australian soldier, if involved in an incident on the Cambodian border, would be disastrous for Cambodian-Australian relations.”<sup>7</sup> This did not happen because Australian forces were fully engaged in Phuoc Tuy province southeast of Saigon, far from the

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<sup>6</sup> Excerpts from Phnom Penh's 1963-64 Post Review, 6 May 1964, file 3016/10/1

<sup>7</sup> Cable from Deschamps to Department, 30 April 1965: *ibid*

Cambodian border. Nevertheless, it reflected Sihanouk's repugnance of the war. A press release from the Cambodian Ministry of Information in May declared that “countries sending troops are engaged in a very nasty business which will put them henceforth in an untenable moral position in relation to other countries of Asia which unreservedly support the cause of the Vietnamese people in their struggle against Imperialism.”

It was a measure of the trust Sihanouk had in Deschamps and the Australian relationship, however, that in July 1965 he requested Australia to become the “protecting power” for Cambodian interests in Saigon. Australia had already become the protecting power for US interests in Phnom Penh when Sihanouk broke off diplomatic relations with Washington in May.

Not that either responsibility gave Australia much influence over American policy. At the end of 1965, Secretary of Defence Robert J. McNamara and Undersecretary U. Alexis Johnson authorised “limited” South Vietnamese military action on Cambodian soil combined with a concerted press campaign alleging Cambodian aid to the Vietcong. In May 1966, Deschamps challenged US claims that Sihanouk was permitting the Vietcong to operate in Cambodia: if the US had such evidence, he said, it should come clean about it.

Meanwhile, regional concern was growing over the Vietnam War, its escalation, and the involvement of great powers. ASEAN was founded in August 1967. The political overtones of its leaders suggested it was intended to serve as an anti-communist grouping to replace SEATO, and a counter to alleged expansionist ambitions of China. Its first priority, however, was to encourage economic, social and cultural cohesion among its members. Second was to secure the essential conditions of peace and stability, both domestically and internationally

in the surrounding region.<sup>8</sup> Its political elites shared an antipathy towards the communist insurgency in Vietnam, and the possibility of it infecting their own countries. They considered that their collective voice would be more difficult to ignore than their views expressed individually. Nor would the great powers - the United States, China, and the Soviet Union - be able to play them off against each other if they acted with one voice. Their guiding principle was basically that of the United Nations - that dispute should be settled peacefully, and that force should only be resorted to in self-defence.

This is not to say that the five ASEAN nations had the same approach to the Vietnam conflict. Thailand and the Philippines had sent military forces to assist the South, and both had permitted the US to launch bombing raids from US bases on their territory. On the other hand, neither Singapore nor Malaysia approved of the war nor sent forces. Indonesia, a leader of the non-aligned movement, considered itself to be the senior ASEAN member and had ambitions to become an honest broker between the warring factions. It allowed both the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong to maintain diplomatic missions in Jakarta. Nevertheless, the five ASEAN nations developed and maintained a united front of concern about the war and how it could destabilise the region if allowed to expand.

Meanwhile, Deschamps' repeated assertions that Sihanouk was a genuine neutralist who had not and would not allow the North Vietnamese to infiltrate Cambodia were viewed with increasing scepticism by the Department of External Affairs. Canberra's main focus in Indochina was on supporting American efforts to win the war in Vietnam, a motive not to be prejudiced by supporting the increasingly divergent views of its envoy in Phnom Penh. In January 1969, Deschamps was transferred from Phnom Penh to become

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<sup>8</sup> Roger Irvine, The formative Years of ASEAN, a chapter in *Understanding ASEAN*, edited by Alison Broinowski (MacMillan, 1982)

Australian Ambassador to Chile. He was replaced in Phnom Penh by Graham Feakes, a rising and younger French-speaking diplomat.

Desultory peace talks had been conducted between Hanoi and Washington since 1964, without result. In spite of Australia's contribution to the Vietnam War, it was not invited to participate. Following the January 1968 Tet Offensive, President Johnson realised that the Vietcong had far wider support than his commanders were telling him, and that the war was basically unwinnable. He sent a senior envoy, Averell Harriman, to Paris for more serious negotiations with Xuan Thuy, a former North Vietnamese foreign minister. In October, he also ordered a halt to US bombing of North Vietnam.

When Richard Nixon became the 37th US president on 20 January 1969, he had to devise a formula that would allow the country to shed some of its onerous and costly obligations to its allies. At a press conference on 25 July at the strategic US naval base on Guam, he announced his Guam Doctrine, in which US allies would henceforth be more responsible for their own security, while the US would provide them with a “nuclear umbrella” when requested. Nixon formalised this doctrine on 3 November, at the same time announcing his intention to “Vietnamize” the war - to hand over the fighting to the South Vietnamese while gradually withdrawing American ground troops.

Meanwhile, peace talks continued in Paris but with a different team. Nixon replaced Averell Harriman with Henry Cabot Lodge, another veteran diplomat. He also arranged secret parallel talks between Henry Kissinger, his new national security adviser, and a senior and very experienced Vietnamese official, Le Duc Tho. Tho insisted that a peace agreement would not be possible unless the US removed Nguyen Van Thieu as head of the South Vietnam government and found someone more acceptable to Hanoi. Nixon refused. It did not make sense to voluntarily replace someone whom the Vietcong had not been able to overthrow with force of arms. The problem was that both sides had

different motives. Nixon wanted to withdraw from the war without humiliation – “peace with honour”. Ho Chi Minh, however, wanted to stall and frustrate a US withdrawal and create breathing space while consolidating Hanoi's power in the South to ensure victory when the US finally withdrew.

Meanwhile the war dragged on with increased ground fighting between the Army of the Republic of South Vietnam (ARVN) and the Vietcong and its North Vietnamese backers. Heavy bombing also continued by the United States Air Force, both tactical and strategic - openly across both Vietnams, secretly in Cambodia.

In Phnom Penh, Sihanouk was powerless to stop ground fighting which had spilled over into Cambodia, let alone the so-called “secret” bombing, even if he knew its full extent. By the end of 1969, his precious neutrality had been severely compromised, a situation that would become much worse in 1970.

## Chapter Two - the 1970s

Lon Nol was a Cambodian politician and general. He served as prime minister under Sihanouk and as head of state from 1969 until March 1970, when he led a military coup which ousted Sihanouk. The coup was given a gloss of respectability when the Cambodian National Congress declared that “a crisis has been provoked in the nation by the occupation of Khmer territory by North Vietnamese and Vietcong forces, and by the attitude of Samdech Euv Norodom Sihanouk contrary to the will of the Khmer people. It leads to the deprivation of Prince Sihanouk of his functions of Head of State of Cambodia as from that date.”

Sihanouk was in France for “medical treatment” when he was ousted. He then went to Moscow and later Beijing. Taking advantage of a newly benign environment in Phnom Penh, the US re-established its embassy there. Previously surreptitious military incursions by both American and South Vietnamese forces into eastern Cambodia now became more open. On 30 April, President Nixon announced that troops had entered Kampong Cham province, whose 'Fishhook Salient' protrudes into Binh Long and Tay Ninh provinces of South Vietnam, 80 kilometres north-west of Saigon. According to US intelligence, it contained the elusive headquarters of the Communist Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN). Civilians in the area had already been traumatised by secret B-52 raids since mid-1969. The ground attack made things worse. No headquarters were found, but there were many casualties on both sides. At the same time, fighting broke out between the forces of Lon Nol and the Khmer Rouge.

Canberra noted these developments with concern but was careful not to refer to a 'coup'. Australia continued to recognise the Cambodian government as if there had been no change of leadership. The Australian Embassy reported on a wider conflict across the country

between an estimated 30,000 Vietnamese troops and 37,000 Khmer Rouge. Phnom Penh was under threat from Khmer Rouge forces. Embassy personnel shredded their files but stayed put. They reported to Canberra that all 108 registered Australians in the country were safe, including a Snowy Mountains engineering team at the Prek Thnot Dam project and a team at a Sokilait milk recombination plant.

In June 1970, a mixed Australian parliamentary delegation led by the Minister for Repatriation, Mac Holten, visited Phnom Penh after a swing through the war zones in South Vietnam. Wherever they went in Vietnam, smartly uniformed South Vietnamese officers had told them the war was being won. Liberal Country Party members agreed and referred scathingly to American and Australian doves who opposed the war: Holten called Senator William Fulbright, chairman of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee and an opponent of the war, 'Senator Halfbright'. Another Liberal, Dr Malcolm McKay, photographed every captured North Vietnamese weapon with Cyrillic markings to 'prove' Soviet overall control and direction of the war. Labor members Gordon Bryant and Reg Bishop opposed Australia's involvement in the war, and were appalled at the dirty equipment, low morale and pervasive smell of marijuana they encountered among American troops at Bien Hoa and other US bases.

From my posting as First Secretary in the Australian Embassy in Rangoon I was asked to join the delegation as a departmental adviser and participate in their discussions. In Phnom Penh we met Lon Nol and the new American Ambassador, Emory Swank, who both gave them reassuring messages that Cambodia was stable and that the Khmer Rouge were on the back foot. I do not recall that any of the delegation asked the Ambassador whether the US had been involved in Sihanouk's removal, but it seemed logical to me that they had been. In later years, an American friend, Michael Hayes, owner/editor of the *Phnom Penh Post*, disputed this. He asserts that there was no official

policy in Washington to overthrow Sihanouk. What is not in dispute, however, is that the US involved themselves quickly in providing military aid shortly thereafter.

In November 1970, Australia's ambassadors to Vietnam (Ralph Harry), Cambodia (Graham Feakes), and Laos (Peter Curtis), met in Vientiane to evaluate the situation. Feakes described three zones in Cambodia - the north where Hanoi had gained complete control, the south where Lon Nol still held provincial capitals, and the north-west, which was relatively calm, and possibly subject to Thai intervention. Meanwhile Lon Nol's army was receiving US military aid but was still ill-equipped and poorly trained. Most Cambodians recognised the overriding need for unity, and that there was no real alternative to a Lon Nol government.



Lon Nol, Prime Minister of Cambodia (1969 - 1971), President of Khmer Republic (1972 - 1975).

*"Lon Nol", Unknown Photographer/Great Norwegian Encyclopedia, licensed under Public Domain Mark 1.0*

Ambassador Harry gave an unrealistically optimistic assessment from the perspective of Saigon. He asserted that there had been a vast change in South Vietnam since Tet 1968, when many Vietcong and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) soldiers were killed. They could no longer

attack across the countryside at will. The government had re-established administrative control over almost the entire population. The armed forces now had over a million men under arms, and the regional forces were giving effective security to the hamlets. Police forces had been established at village level everywhere, and the signs were good that their control would continue during the withdrawal of American forces. Morale among the ARVN was high since they had received M-16 rifles. Vietnam was now remarkably stable, and in coming elections, the people were sure to re-elect a non-communist government. The Vietcong were diminished and 75 to 80 per cent of communist forces in the South were now North Vietnamese.<sup>9</sup>

Harry's assessment was used by Canberra to justify the partial withdrawal of Australian troops. Australia did this in lockstep with 'Vietnamization' as US troop withdrawals were called. On 22 April 1970, Prime Minister Gorton announced the repatriation of one Australian battalion. In March 1971, Prime Minister McMahon announced the withdrawal of another. In doing so, McMahon continued to emphasise the menace of China, a threat narrative that had served the Liberal Party so well in every post-war election since Robert Menzies came to power in 1949. McMahon said Australian forces had been sent to South Vietnam in 1965 because the government had been in imminent danger of collapse from North Vietnamese aggression. Behind them stood a militant China - a China which was giving direct moral and material aid to North Vietnam, and which had in the recent past occupied Tibet and fought on the border of India - a China whose ambitions and policies in the area were causing great concern.

Extending Chinese obloquy to Sihanouk, Prime Minister Gorton described him in November 1970 as "an instrument of Peking", and vowed to support Cambodian 'neutrality' and survivability as an independent state. As Australian military forces in Vietnam were being

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<sup>9</sup> Situation Report from Phnom Penh to Department by Graham Feakes, 23 November 1970: file3020/10/1

withdrawn, Australian assistance to Cambodia was being increased. The Department actively considered sending more logistic support equipment, dual-purpose equipment, cross-country vehicles, DC-3 cargo/passenger planes, and “arms if necessary”. 100 all-terrain Australian trucks were consigned to Cambodia on HMAS *Sydney* via Vung Tau in South Vietnam.

Such assistance was much needed. The Khmer Rouge were becoming more daring. In January and February 1971, they launched mortar attacks on Phnom Penh's Pochentong Airport, causing many casualties and the destruction of Cambodian military aircraft. They also destroyed an oil refinery in Kampong Som province.

Meanwhile, the Americans were becoming more open with Australian diplomats in Washington about cross border raids. On 4 February, Bill Sullivan, a senior State Department officer in Washington (later US Ambassador to the Philippines, then Iran) briefed the Australian Embassy.<sup>10</sup> Further cross-border raids by the ARVN with US air support would be undertaken into eastern Cambodia. Two further Cambodian provinces were targeted - Kratie and Kampong Cham. Laos was not immune. On 8 February, South Vietnamese troops with massive US air support invaded southern Laos to eliminate enemy bases. Although the US claimed the invasion was a success, it was more like a rout, with the South Vietnamese forces retreating in disorder after 44 days.

Meanwhile, despite more than 100 sessions, the Paris Peace Talks showed no progress. North Vietnam still demanded unconditional allied withdrawal and replacement of the Government of South Vietnam by a “coalition government”. Neither the Australian Embassies in Washington or Paris were briefed about the talks or US tactics and continued to be optimistic about their outcome.

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<sup>10</sup> Cable from Australian Embassy Washington to Canberra, 5 February 1971: file 3016/10/1

The Liberal Country Party government was voted out of office in December 1972. The view of its conservative members had been that Indochina was a war of aggression by North Vietnam, directed by China and the Soviet Union, against the 'democratic' South, after which neighbouring states would be threatened. Unless communism was stopped in Vietnam, it would spread to the rest of Southeast Asia, eventually to threaten Australia. Appeasement through negotiations would not work.

Gough Whitlam's Labor government held different views. Whitlam saw Vietnam as a civil war, driven as much by nationalism as communist ideology. North Vietnam would win, and unify the country under a communist government, but without necessarily precipitating the fall of Vietnam's neighbours to the same ideology. In December 1972 he promptly recognised China and withdrew all remaining Australian troops and advisers from Vietnam.

Meanwhile, the question remained of what a Whitlam government should do about Cambodia, if anything. Did Australia have any influence to broker peace between the warring factions? The outgoing McMahon government had described the situation as very bad. Popular support for Lon Nol's republic had dissipated. The Khmer Rouge had grown stronger and were a match for Lon Nol's forces, even without North Vietnamese/Vietcong support. Now was not the time to make overtures to the exiled Sihanouk, who was on the nose with the Americans. In the absence of a feasible alternative, Australia should maintain low-key support for Lon Nol.

Whitlam took a different view. He wanted to talk to Sihanouk and his Royal Government of National Union (GRUNK), based in Beijing. Although exiled since 1970, diplomatic intelligence suggested that Sihanouk still enjoyed the support of the majority of Cambodian peasants who were royalist and conservative. He might be encouraged to return to Phnom Penh and form an alliance with Lon Nol against the

Khmer Rouge. In June 1973, Whitlam sent trade Minister Dr Jim Cairns to Beijing to see what could be done. Cairns believed that Sihanouk had two postures towards Lon Nol: a public one of confected anger, and a private one of moderation and caution. Cairns had talks with Penn Nouth, Sihanouk's prime minister. Nouth was amenable to Cairns' idea of opening negotiations with Lon Nol, but was promptly opposed by the GRUNK Ministry for Information, which asserted that "the Cambodian Peoples' Armed Forces never had, nor would ever have, any contacts, meetings or negotiations with the traitors Lon Nol, Sirik Matak, Son Ngoc Thanh, In Tam or Cheng Hong."<sup>11</sup>

Whitlam himself met Sihanouk in Beijing in November 1973. Sihanouk assured him that when installed in Phnom Penh, he would retain friendship with Australia. The visit was criticised by the Australian Opposition and press, but vigorously defended by Senator Don Willesee, Whitlam's acting foreign minister. Willesee also expressed his deep concern to Marshall Green, Washington's newly appointed Ambassador in Canberra, about US bombing in Cambodia, and his opinion that US support for Lon Nol was only prolonging the war. Green patronisingly told him that the US had both greater responsibilities and more accurate sources of information than Australia and knew what it was doing. Willesee replied that the US had similar resources in Vietnam, but that did not prevent similar errors of judgement being made. Green also expressed concern that Australia was contemplating the suspension of all aid to Cambodia. Both agreed to keep their different perspectives confidential.<sup>12</sup>

As part of Whitlam's policy of disengagement from the Lon Nol government, Australia's ambassador to Cambodia, Marshall Johnson, was recalled to Canberra in April 1974. The Embassy Chargé d'Affaires, Frank Milne, reported that there was no common view

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<sup>11</sup> Cable from Australian Embassy Beijing reporting Grunk declaration made in Beijing on 2 August 1973; also Cairns' conversation with Penn Nouth. File 3016/10/1

<sup>12</sup> Departmental Record of Conversation, 26 November 1973: file 3020/10/1

within ASEAN towards Lon Nol. Thailand was most in favour of continuing support, Malaysia the most sceptical.

In June 1974, the military situation continued to worsen. Khmer Rouge forces had opened their pre-dry season offensive (the dry season starts in October/November) by cutting all highways out of Phnom Penh, and continued rocket attacks on the city, killing 2,000 squatters and refugees on the city's outskirts - by then there were about one million of these desperate people from Phnom Penh camped out everywhere. The Khmer Rouge were now strong enough to break into the city, although a semblance of law and order remained under Lon Nol. Sihanouk continued to be a remote figurehead for the anti-government movement.

The situation dragged on for six months, but Milne judged it as increasingly untenable and dangerous. In February 1975, he reported that the Lon Nol government now controlled very little of Cambodia and recommended evacuation of all Australians, but not by the Americans, which would make Australia seem to be camp followers.<sup>13</sup> Dick Woolcott, head of the Southeast Asia Division in Canberra agreed, pointing out that RAAF Hercules were available from Butterworth in Malaysia. Just over 100 Australians remained in country, including a Snowy Mountains team of engineers and a few technicians at a milk recombination plant.

Concerned Australians became increasingly restive and asked the Department what was going on. James Green, immediate past president of the University of New South Wales Students' Union was given the standard department line: Australia was withdrawing embassy staff because they might be injured or killed. Indeed, Prince Sihanouk from Beijing had urged embassies to close. Australia would continue to have

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<sup>13</sup> Milne to Canberra, 28 February 1975: file 3016/10/1

diplomatic relations with whichever government was installed in Phnom Penh.<sup>14</sup>

On 4 April, Lon Nol fled Phnom Penh to the sound of exploding rockets, to be replaced on 17 April by the Khmer Rouge. The evacuation of cities, and the beginning of Year Zero soon followed. Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese and Vietcong on 30 April, 26 days later.

By this stage, it was clear that the insurgent apparatus in Cambodia was controlled directly by the Khmer Rouge and its 20 Central Committee members. Membership of the Central Committee remained a closely guarded secret, but Saloth Sâr (Pol Pot) was generally believed to be in charge, outranking Khieu Samphan. Ieng Sary also occupied a strong position in the hierarchy. Ties with Hanoi remained ambivalent – Khmer distrust was deeply rooted in Cambodia's historical experience with Vietnamese expansion. While the Khmer Rouge seemed reluctant to keep Sihanouk on as a nominal post-war leader, it recognised that he was an adroit political operator and a domestic rallying point.

A penetrating article by an anonymous writer, 'Cambodia on the Rack' appeared in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* on 25 July 1975. It claimed that Cambodia was stretched on a Procrustean bed by a little-known group of Marxist zealots, who ignored the realities of Cambodian life and culture and stampeded towards a socialist nirvana, while Sihanouk extended his vacation in North Korea. Contrast that with the situation in South Vietnam, which had just applied for membership of the United Nations, where its North Vietnamese conquerors had displayed flexibility and pragmatism towards their captives, and where there were no hasty purges. Re-education was better than forceful expulsion into the countryside without food, medicine, or shelter.

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<sup>14</sup> Record of conversation M J Cook, FAS North and South Asia Division to J M Green: file 3016/10/1

North Vietnam had come to terms with Marxism the hard way, learning painfully from their excesses of their post-1954 land reforms. The Khmer Rouge had not learned to temper their anger with moderation. They had insecure leaders forcing the pace of 'reconstruction' before an alien power such as Vietnam or Thailand could fill the vacuum.

Another impression of the Khmer Rouge was that of Greg Clark, a former diplomatic colleague who left the Department in 1965 after writing *In Fear of China*, a book critical of Australia's failure to recognise China. During a visit to Beijing in the heady days of ping-pong diplomacy in 1971, Clark had met Sihanouk who showed him a film of the then-emerging Khmer Rouge guerrilla army. It included the faces of young, idealistic guerrillas lined up in the jungle, many of them women, before they were brutalised by US bombing. Years before, the Australian journalist Wilfred Burchett had shown Clark photographs of young Vietcong showing the same idealism. It should be kept in mind that another factor in the Khmer Rouge's rapid growth after Sihanouk's coup was his repeated radio appeals, calling for people to join the maquis. Even Hun Sen's official resume says he joined the resistance in 1970 after hearing Sihanouk's radio messages.

As 1975 wore on, news of Khmer Rouge atrocities filtered out to the world. Australia was one of many countries deeply concerned. Japan opened diplomatic relations with GRUNK on 19 September 1975, and Australia did likewise, but without re-opening its embassy in Phnom Penh. In October, Sihanouk addressed the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in New York with re-assuring words. He described the rehabilitation of Cambodian agriculture in optimistic terms; he re-affirmed Cambodia's neutrality; he attached high importance to cordial relations with neighbours; and he promised restoration of diplomatic relations with counties in the chronological sequence in which they had recognised GRUNK after 1970.

The Whitlam government was dismissed by Governor-General John Kerr in November 1975 before the shape of Australia's future relations with Cambodia had been resolved. On 5 February 1976, Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser's new foreign minister, Andrew Peacock, reminded parliament that Australia had formally recognised the GRUNK government in exile in Beijing on 17 April, and was exploring the modalities of resuming diplomatic relations. The Australian Embassy in Hanoi was instructed to explore this with Sihanouk's people there. The Department of Trade wanted work to resume on its milk recombination plant in Cambodia. Foreign Affairs resisted the pressure, saying that the Khmer Rouge had nationalised all private enterprises.

By August 1976, a clearer picture of Khmer Rouge atrocities in Cambodia was emerging. An Amnesty International report claimed that Cambodian refugees in Thailand were painting a grim picture of the situation in Cambodia. Many people had died after being forced out of the cities. Many workers, ex-Lon Nol soldiers and officials, and three of seven 'super traitors', former Premier Long Boret, Prince Sisowath Sirik Matak and Lon Non, Lon Nol's brother, had been executed.

On the question of Australia re-establishing an embassy in Phnom Penh, David Sadleir, acting head of the North and South Asia Division, advised Peacock that yes, Sihanouk and his moderate government in exile were theoretically part of the Khmer Rouge government (or more accurately, the Khmer Rouge was part of a coalition with GRUNK). And yes, having a presence in Phnom Penh would allow Australia to monitor the situation without necessarily implying approval of Khmer Rouge policies. But the reality was that Pol Pot and his henchmen were

running the show, and the Australian public would react adversely if Australia established an embassy in Phnom Penh at this stage.<sup>15</sup>

Peacock replied that he was not yet prepared to move. He refused a suggestion that he talk to Ieng Sary, the Khmer Rouge Foreign Minister at UNGA, and postponed any further consideration of Australia's relations with Cambodia until he had spoken to his colleagues at an ASEAN regional conference in April 1977.

On 6 November 1978 however, the Department made another policy submission to Peacock. It asserted that the time had come to move. Adherence to the status quo was no longer serving any useful purpose. There was a growing need to balance Australia's relations between Vietnam and Cambodia. There was heightened military tension between the two states. A Vietnamese offensive (although not a full-scale invasion) could be expected in late November or early December. Establishing diplomatic relations in Phnom Penh would indicate the strength of Australia's concern that Cambodian independence be maintained. The move would be well received in the region.

On 13 December 1978, Peacock announced at a press conference that negotiations would be opened in Phnom Penh with a view to entering into diplomatic relations. He nominated Garry Woodard, Australia's ambassador to China, to be jointly accredited to Phnom Penh once formalities had been concluded.

But it was too late. On Christmas Day 1978, a substantial Vietnamese ground force of 150,000 invaded Cambodia. By January 1979, they had routed the Khmer Rouge from Phnom Penh and forced the remnants into sanctuaries along the Thai border. As the dust settled, the Department sent a submission to the Australian Foreign Minister, Andrew Peacock. It advised the Minister that a Vietnam-backed government led by Heng Samrin, known as the Kampuchean United

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<sup>15</sup> Ministerial submission from D M Sadleir, 20 August 1976: file 3016/10/1

Front for National Salvation (KUFNS), had ousted Pol Pot and taken control of most of Cambodia. The Department doubted that KUFNS had any independence from Hanoi. It was too early to tell how much support if any Heng Samrin had in the country, or whether he was merely a puppet of Hanoi. Prime Minister Fraser was highly critical of Vietnam's invasion, and there would be absolutely no advantage in granting KUFNS early recognition. Only Vietnam, Laos, the Soviet Union, the Eastern Bloc countries, and Cuba would recognise it, as well as some non-aligned countries. Percival's advice was accepted without comment.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ministerial submission from R J Percival, A/FAS North and South Asia Division, 31 December 1978: file 3016/10/1

## Chapter Three - the 1980s

As the eighties began, confusion surrounded Cambodia and who governed it. The Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc countries recognised Heng Samrin and his Peoples Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) installed by Vietnam in Phnom Penh. Notwithstanding its horrendous human rights record, Pol Pot's Democratic Kampuchea (DK) continued to be recognised by China, the US, Japan, the ASEAN countries and some European countries. This was even though the DK lacked stable territory, population and competent administration, three attributes of a legitimate government.

At first, Australia also recognised the DK, if only by sending New Year greetings to its Prime Minister, Khieu Samphan and Foreign Minister Ieng Sary. But on 14 January 1980, Foreign Minister Peacock warned parliament that Australia could not prolong recognition of “such a loathsome regime,” and would not recognise it “beyond the short term.” Only a week later, on 21 January, he advised his ASEAN counterparts, and those in the UK, US, Japan, Canada, New Zealand and China that Australia would soon de-recognise the DK.

The US reaction came from John Negroponte, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs. He ponderously noted that “objectively speaking, international recognition of the DK was an important part of the strategy of maintaining legitimacy for resistance to the Vietnam-installed PRK regime.” Beijing responded by advising Australian Foreign Minister Tony Street, newly appointed in Fraser's fourth ministry, that China accepted Australia's de-recognition proposal, but asked Australia to “please continue to condemn Vietnam's occupation of Phnom Penh.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Cable from Austemba Beijing, 25 January 1981: file 3016/10/1.

New Zealand decided not to follow Australia in de-recognition before consulting with ASEAN.<sup>18</sup>

The ASEAN states strongly disapproved of Australia's decision. Malaysia was “deeply concerned and disappointed” at Australia's timing, as it cut across an ASEAN resolution to work for the refurbishment of the DK's image through a new leadership, and made ASEAN look incompetent in the eyes of the Non-Aligned Movement. Thailand was taken aback by Australia's lack of consultation and urged deferral. Singapore expressed strong disappointment mixed with disapproval. All of them urged Australia to postpone de-recognition until after the forthcoming foreign ministers' meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement in New Delhi in early February.<sup>19</sup> Australia agreed to postponement, but de-recognised the DK immediately afterwards, on 13 February 1980.

At the same time, Minister Street informed ASEAN heads of mission in Canberra that Australia had no sympathy for the Heng Samrin regime installed by the Vietnamese in Phnom Penh, nor any intention of recognising it.

On 16 February, Melbourne newspaper *The Age* commented:

It (de-recognition) should have been done 18 months ago when it was clear that those mad, murderous fanatics were no longer in control of the country they had ravaged. The population of the country had been reduced from eight to six and a half million. It was a cynical absurdity and misguided diplomacy to continue to recognise Pol Pot. So we no longer recognise either the Pol Pot regime or that of Heng Samrin. And we must continue to call for the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops.

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<sup>18</sup> Cable from Aust High Commission Wellington, 27 January 1981: *ibid*

<sup>19</sup> Cables from respective Australian missions, late January 1981: *ibid*

This remained Australia's position throughout the last two years of Fraser's government. In mid-1982 however, a little flexibility was introduced when, on 23 July, the Department gave the following rather complex guidelines to all posts:

- Australia recognises no Cambodian government, neither the Vietnam installed PRK, Sihanouk's Beijing-based Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK), nor Pol Pot's DK.
- There shall be no formal acknowledgement or official contact with any of them, although Australian officials need not go out of their way to avoid contact on social occasions.
- The government will continue to leave open the possibility of dialogue with Sihanouk and his National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC), but not in his capacity as part of the (CGDK), which includes the Khmer Rouge.
- Meanwhile, the government will not however *initiate* contact with Sihanouk, Son San, or DK representatives, and shall abstain on UN voting regarding Cambodian credentials at international meetings including at the UNGA.<sup>20</sup>

Fraser's strong condemnation of Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in 1978 and his suspension of Australian aid produced a downturn in relations with Vietnam. Towards the end of his posting in 1981, Philip Knight, Australia's Ambassador to Vietnam, described what had been an arid and unproductive relationship with officials in Hanoi.

In an end-of-posting despatch to Canberra he candidly admitted that he had had almost no access. The Vietnamese were either abrasive or dismissive, and the Embassy's isolation was compounded by

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<sup>20</sup> All posts guidelines cable from DFA Canberra, 23 July 1982: *ibid*

inadequate and slow communications equipment. To give direction to at least one important Embassy activity, however, Knight said he would like a clear statement from the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs about Vietnamese refugees, their orderly departure, and Australia's attitude towards internees. A marginal note on his cable to Canberra written by the departmental desk officer added 'So would we!'

Knight was instructed during his farewell calls to tell the Vietnamese that while Canberra did not expect Vietnam to withdraw from Cambodia immediately, any settlement should provide for their eventual departure; and to tell them that Australia was concerned about the expansion of Soviet power in the region, particularly its use of Vietnamese naval facilities at Cam Ranh Bay, which "disturbed the regional power balance." Knight was not received by Prime Minister Pham Van Dong, nor the President of the National Assembly, Truong Chinh. He was however given a farewell dinner by a deputy in the Foreign Ministry, and was able to call on Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach, who praised Australia for de-recognising Pol Pot. Rather cold comfort, received too late.

Another career diplomat, John McCarthy, replaced Knight in Hanoi in May 1981. The Vietnamese seemed more helpful to him than to Knight, and he enjoyed renewed access after the Labor Party swept the Fraser government from office in March, at the 1983 Federal Elections. The new Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, and his Foreign Minister, Bill Hayden, were determined to reverse the ill-will generated by Fraser's condemnation of Vietnam's invasion. They wanted to engage Vietnam in a constructive dialogue about its plans in Cambodia, while building back Australian aid begun by Fraser which had been abruptly terminated after the invasion of Cambodia.

Hayden's initial visit to Hanoi as foreign minister took place in June 1983. He promptly began a dialogue with his opposite number, Nguyen Co Thach. Hayden had a lot on his agenda: to invite Thach and other

Vietnamese Ministers to Australia, including those for Education and Agriculture, begin academic exchanges, encourage intellectual contacts, start English-language training for Vietnamese in Australia, start a dialogue on human rights and on Australian soldiers missing in action during the war, encourage the Vietnamese to restrict the number of boat people fleeing the country, and begin an orderly departure program.

Prime Minister Pham Van Dong wrote to Hawke expressing gratitude for Hayden's visit. In his reply sent in June, Hawke told Dong that the Australian Labor Party had long favoured a policy of friendship and cooperation with all its neighbours, regardless of policy differences. Australia was a country aligned with the US, as well as a friend of China and the ASEAN countries. It was a sovereign country, part of the Asian region, and it wanted to play a constructive role where it had the capacity, including in Cambodia.

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I replaced McCarthy as Ambassador to Vietnam in September 1983. I had already worked on Vietnam. My first job as a diplomatic cadet in 1964 had been to send galvanised iron sheeting and barbed wire for the strategic hamlets program under the SEATO Aid program. And I had received a taste of the war when I was detached from my posting as First Secretary in Rangoon as adviser to the Veteran Affairs Minister Mac Holten's parliamentary delegation which toured South Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand in 1970.

Before I left Canberra, Hayden gave me four clear instructions. The first was to develop an Australian aid program under the auspices of UN and NGO agencies. Direct Australian aid would have irritated the US which wanted to punish Vietnam for invading Cambodia; it would also have upset the ASEAN countries, especially Thailand and Malaysia, for much the same reasons.

Second, I was to encourage Australian companies to explore trade opportunities. I hosted several trade missions from companies which had done business in Vietnam in the past.

Third, I was to finish all the unfinished business of the war. This included formally handing back Australian Embassy properties in Saigon to Vietnam, seeking permission for a team to look for MIAs, Australian servicemen missing in action, and gathering evidence for a Royal Commission convened to determine the effects of Agent Orange on Australian forces.

Hayden's fourth instruction to me was paramount: engage the Vietnamese as fully as possible in discussions about their plans in Cambodia - how long they planned to stay, when they intended to leave, who if anyone they planned to leave behind.

The US, China, and the ASEAN countries were all reluctant to recognise the Vietnam-installed Heng Samrin regime in Phnom Penh. They persuaded the UNGA to accept the credentials of the CGDK (which included Pol Pot's DK) as Cambodia's legitimate government. Within the CGDK, the Khmer Rouge held the foreign ministry portfolio, so one of Pol Pot's cronies was CGDK Ambassador to the UN. During my final round of consultations in Canberra, Deputy Secretary Alf Parsons advised me that the ASEAN states may not regard this as a permanent situation. In a press release on 9 July 1983, the Indonesian Foreign Minister Mochtar Kusumaatmadja had been quoted as saying he wanted to explore the problem of recognition "at several levels through ASEAN."

In my first 12 months in Hanoi, I had to concentrate on many bilateral issues between Australia and Vietnam, including finding accommodation for a rapidly expanding Embassy staff, improving our woefully inefficient communications system, and playing host to an increasing number of visiting politicians and journalists. I had to also

oversee a burgeoning aid program, still under UN agency and NGO auspices. By June 1984, it included medical equipment and medicines, maternal and child care, English-language training to the Hanoi Language Institute, technical advice on a proposed giant prawn factory in Ho Chi Minh City, and a study on salinity intrusion in the Mekong Delta.

I also developed useful contact with diplomats in the few non-communist embassies in Hanoi, including representatives from Germany, France, Sweden, the UK, Japan, Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines. I developed a useful dialogue with the Chinese Ambassador, who outlined the slight but real consolidation of Beijing's authority in Phnom Penh.<sup>21</sup>

I also cultivated the Soviet Ambassador, who behaved in some respects more like a governor-general than the diplomatic representative of a foreign country. I would periodically call on him for a splendid early breakfast in his vast embassy, a former French girls' lycée, and gather news about various Soviet projects around the country. After many toasts in neat vodka to the undying friendship between our two great nations which punctuated our conversation, I would weave my way back to my office and attempt to compose a lucid cable to Canberra.

A strange omission from my staff was a military attaché. The intelligence and defence communities in Canberra were anxious to know what kind of defence support the Soviet Union and China were giving Vietnam. Australia had professional defence attachés in practically every other Asian post. I made a point of attending every military parade in Ba Dinh Square overlooked by Ho Chi Minh's Stalinesque mausoleum. With the help of several volumes of Jane's, the authoritative British annual publications on all the world's military forces, land sea and air, I managed to identify the different Soviet and

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<sup>21</sup> This dialogue was appreciated in Canberra, and acknowledged at the time in a cable to the Embassy from Jerry Nutter, FAS, North and South Asia Division: file 3020/10/1

Chinese tanks, APCs, trucks, overflying MiG 21s 'Fishbeds' (their North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) appellation), and small arms (invariably AK-47 rifles and RPGs - rocket-propelled grenades). I think the intelligence community in Canberra was grateful.



Pol Pot (born Saloth Sâr), leader of the Khmer Rouge regime, the so-called Democratic Kampuchea (1975 – 1979).

*“Pol Pot”, Unknown photographer/Great Norwegian Encyclopedia, licensed under Public Domain Mark 1.0*

In discussions with Vietnamese Foreign Minister Thach, I mentioned Canberra's concerns about an expanding Soviet presence in Vietnam, especially Soviet use of the naval base at Cam Ranh Bay. Thach dismissed them out of hand. The Soviets would eventually leave Vietnam, he said, and the Vietnamese would not be sad to see them go. Culturally, linguistically and socially, Vietnamese and Russians had little in common. But Australia should be concerned about China, which had occupied Vietnam for centuries, and would return if Vietnam did not stand up to them. As recently as 1979, China had invaded the northern Vietnam provinces to “teach us a lesson” for occupying Cambodia. Thach commented dryly that they did not succeed. ‘We taught *them* a lesson.’ But even as Thach and I talked, he said, the Chinese were conducting raids across Vietnam's northern borders while supporting the murderous Khmer Rouge regime.

I reported to Canberra that there would be no modification to Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia until China and Thailand ceased their support of Pol Pot. The Vietnamese were prepared to suffer international opprobrium because national security was more important than international acceptance or economic development. Thach said he continued to be open to joining a regional meeting on Cambodia, but Vietnam would not take part in a conference sponsored by the UN while it continued to accept DK credentials.

In February 1984, General Benny Moerdani, head of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Indonesia (ABRI), visited Hanoi. During a private meeting, he told me that Indonesia had a somewhat different view about Vietnam from the other ASEAN states. Indonesia considered Vietnam to be a bulwark against China and did not believe that it threatened its neighbours. With Vietnamese backing, Heng Samrin's PRK was in firm control of Cambodia. In contrast, Pol Pot's DK party was "a house of cards."

Incremental progress towards Australia's involvement in some kind of peace process continued. In March 1984, Thach visited Australia. He told Hawke that China's support for the DK in Cambodia stemmed from a desire to prevent the growth of Soviet and Vietnamese influence. He recounted the origins of recent Chinese antagonism towards Vietnam. Tension had arisen in April 1978 with the exodus of Chinese capitalists from the south to China and Hong Kong. Relations were exacerbated in June of that year when Vietnam was accepted as a member of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, and further in November, when Hanoi signed a treaty of friendship with Moscow. China ended all aid to Vietnam and closed its borders. During Thach's visit, he and Hayden - with the close involvement of Hayden's Principal Private Secretary Michael Costello - agreed on a five-point plan for achieving a Cambodian settlement. The central provision was

Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia matched by arrangements to prevent the Khmer Rouge from returning to power.

In September 1984, Prince Sihanouk made a largely ceremonial visit to Australia from Beijing. He was now head of the CGDK, which made him an internationally recognised head of state to those countries that recognised this government in exile. He explained to his interlocutors that his status was a matter of convenience, not proof that he supported the Khmer Rouge, which was a component of the CGDK, along with Son Sann's Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF). Sihanouk's son, Prince Norodom Ranariddh also visited Australia in 1984 as President of the National Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC), an exiled royalist party founded by his father Norodom Sihanouk.

At a seminar while on leave in Canberra in October 1984, I expressed pessimism about Cambodia. China continued to tie the Vietnamese occupation down by militarily assisting the Khmer Rouge, and the Vietnamese were responding by attacking Khmer Rouge camps along the Thai border. I doubted these attacks would lead to any substantial Vietnamese penetration into Thailand. I compared ASEAN and Vietnam positions on Cambodia. Before any negotiations, the ASEAN states wanted a cast-iron guarantee that Vietnam would withdraw its military forces, either phased, or in one move. ASEAN also envisaged an international peace-keeping force replacing the Vietnamese. As for Vietnam, I believed that they *would* withdraw, providing they were not immediately replaced by the Khmer Rouge. They insisted that Cambodians must be given an opportunity to endorse the Heng Samrin government.

Back in Hanoi, I told Prime Minister Pham Van Dong that Hayden had offered to hold a regional meeting in Australia, an offer still on the table. Hayden was also alert to other avenues for dialogue, for example, the possibility that current Indonesia-Vietnam maritime boundary talks

could be broadened into a general discussion on Cambodia. It turned out they could not. Dong replied that he appreciated Australia's position, but that Vietnam would not accede to ASEAN pre-conditions for a troop withdrawal without assurances that Khmer Rouge forces would not automatically replace them. If this were given, there was no reason why talks could not be held.<sup>22</sup>

In January 1985, we faced a new challenge. Vietnamese officials in Australia were being harassed and assaulted by Vietnamese refugees who had fled South Vietnam after 1975. Shots had been fired and officials in Canberra and Sydney injured. A conference organised by the Australia-Vietnam Society in Wollongong was called off following threats of violence. All that the Protocol Branch of Foreign Affairs could do was reassure Vietnamese diplomats that everything possible would be done to protect their safety, and ask local and federal police for extra vigilance.

In March 1985, Bill Hayden made his second visit to Vietnam. Before he came, I had been firmly instructed by senior officers in the Department to avoid arranging any kind of meeting between Hayden and Hun Sen. But one's minister overrules one's department heads. As soon as he got off the plane at Noi Bai Airport in Hanoi, Hayden was sniffing the wind. He wondered whether such a meeting could discreetly be arranged? He wanted to make his own assessment of the man: was he a genuine patriotic Cambodian or a mere Vietnamese satrap?

I called Foreign Minister Thach, and we promptly arranged for Hun Sen to fly from Phnom Penh to a safe house in Ho Chi Minh City. I flew from Hanoi with Hayden to the meeting in an unusual place, the residence of the former British Ambassador to South Vietnam. During a two-hour talk over tea served in fragile Doulton china cups embossed

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<sup>22</sup> Meeting took place in Hanoi on 6 November 1984, reported to Canberra the same day: file 3020/10/1

with the British crown, Hayden made up his mind that Hun Sen was a genuine Cambodian patriot, not a puppet. If Australia eventually decided to recognise the legitimacy of the PRK, this knowledge would give Hayden confidence in justifying the move to a sceptical Australian parliament and press. Hun Sen had lost an eye - his left one, while fighting in his younger days with the Khmer Rouge against the forces of Lon Nol. After the meeting, Hayden asked me which was Hun Sen's glass eye. I told him. Not entirely in jest, Hayden remarked that this eye was his human one.

Back in Hanoi, Hayden held a press conference at which he repeated Vietnamese assurances that during current dry-season fighting with Khmer Rouge forces, the Vietnamese had not invaded Thailand. That was true in the sense that they had not made permanent incursions. But they *had* made temporary ones to get behind Khmer Rouge redoubts and attack them from the rear through Thai territory. Hayden had a rough time when he arrived in Bangkok, not least from the Australian Embassy, which told Hayden's press entourage of the temporary incursions. Reflecting Thai fears, some in the embassy took the line that the Vietnamese wanted to stay in Thailand and re-align the borders. Vietnamese intentions towards Thailand remained the subject of on-going debate between the two embassies. Our position in Hanoi was that the Vietnamese had enough to worry about without taking on Thailand.

Khieu Sampan, a Khmer Rouge leader exiled in Bangkok, kept feeding the media the line that the CGDK had the upper hand in Cambodia, and Vietnam-backed PRK forces were restricted to the big towns. The Bangkok press was only too willing to print such nonsense.

At an April 1987 UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific meeting in New Delhi, India recognised the PRK as the sole legitimate government of Cambodia. China, Thailand, Japan, the

Solomon Islands supported the DK's presence at the conference, and there being no consensus, the DK retained its seat.

In his book *Inside Asia* published in December 1986, the noted Australian-born American scholar on Southeast Asia, Ben Kiernan, described the situation in Cambodia as he then saw it. While 140,000 Vietnamese troops remained in-country, there was little chance of the PRK regime being overthrown. But 30,000 Khmer Rouge troops remained, and they were making a sustained effort to de-stabilise the PRK with massive Chinese support. The Khmer Rouge had split from their bases in the Thai border, and were spread across the country in small groups. They were capable of terrorist raids and continued to kill peasants and travellers. They were much hated. In contrast, Phnom Penh was relatively safe. There was a curfew every night. It had revived since Pol Pot evacuated it in 1975, and its 600,000 lively inhabitants frequented noisy and active local markets. One noise they heard all too often however, was the sound of grenades going off. The Soviet Embassy ordered all Soviet and Eastern Bloc residents to shop in only one market, Tuol Tompong, as they could only guarantee the safety of their people there. Hence, Tuol Tompong is now called the “Russian Market.”



Russian Market in Phnom Penh.

*“Russian Market”, by Chris Ellinger, licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0*

In April 1987, *The Economist* editorialised that the only chance Cambodians had to live in peace was for expatriates led by Sihanouk to swallow hard and talk to Cambodia under Hun Sen. The Khmer were to Vietnam what the Poles were to the Russians - different adherents to the same religion. Hun Sen could get the Vietnamese to leave if they were satisfied that Kampuchea was genuinely neutral and posed no threat to Vietnam. The guerrilla war was hurting the Vietnamese, and their Russian mentors were keen for them to depart as a component of Gorbachev's hoped-for détente with China and the West.

This assessment was supported by pronouncements by Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, who had visited Bangkok the previous month, and urged dialogue between Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia with the ASEAN countries “in order to head off US efforts to transform the region into a closed hotbed of serious tension.”

By 1988, the situation was becoming clearer. Conflict was occurring at three levels:

- *Internally* between Heng Samrin’s PRK on the one hand, and a fragile three-way coalition of the Khmer Rouge and two non-communist factions - Sihanouk's Royalist FUNCINPEC, and Son Sann's KPNLF, on the other.
- *Regionally* between Vietnam-backed Hun Sen and his ASEAN opponents.
- *Internationally* between the great powers, with China supporting the Khmer Rouge and the Sihanoukists, the Soviets supporting Hun Sen and the PRK, and the US supporting the two non-communist resistance groups.

Strenuous efforts were made between 1987 and 1989 to break the impasse. Some of the elements of a peaceful settlement were beginning to take shape.

First, at a meeting in July 1987 between ASEAN's spokesman, Indonesian Foreign Minister Mochtar and Vietnamese Foreign Minister Thach, Vietnam accepted in principle a meeting between the warring factions.

Second, two Joint Informal Meetings (JIMs), were arranged by Indonesia in Jakarta between the factions. At the first, in July 1988, the internal question of the civil war in Cambodia was de-coupled from the external issue of the Vietnamese invasion in 1979. At the second, chaired by new Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alitas in February 1989, the Vietnamese accepted the idea of an “international control mechanism” to oversee a peace process. The meetings were inconclusive, but they delineated the complex issues involved.

Third, on 19 January 1989, Gareth Evans (who had replaced Bill Hayden as Australian Foreign Minister on 2 September 1988) and Nguyen Co Thach met in Ho Chi Minh City. Thach informed Evans that Vietnam and China had reached an agreement on internal and external elements of the Cambodian question. Evans asked Thach whether he saw a role for the UN in a settlement package. Yes, replied Thach, if the UN dropped its recognition of Pol Pot.

Fourth, under Soviet pressure, but for their own economic and political reasons as well, the Vietnamese announced on 6 January 1989 that they would withdraw their troops from Cambodia in September 1989. The pressure was due to the melancholic fact that Soviet funding would be no more when the Union collapsed.

Fifth, an ambitious Paris Conference on Cambodia was held in July-August 1989 under French-Indonesian chairmanship. It brought together all four Cambodian factions, the ASEAN six, the Permanent Five (P5) members of the UN Security Council, Vietnam, Laos, Australia, Canada and India, Zimbabwe representing the Non-Aligned Movement, and a representative of the UN Secretary-General. Gareth

Evans claimed, at a roundtable meeting at Monash University on 2 November 2012, that the Conference almost succeeded. A comprehensive settlement strategy was worked out, but it broke down over the demand of the three combined resistance forces of Sihanouk, Son Sann and the Khmer Rouge that each should have a role in any transitional administration. Hun Sen and his backers, Vietnam and the USSR, were not prepared to allow the Khmer Rouge to have such a role and refused.

Sixth, international support for the Khmer Rouge was rapidly eroding. The P5 were realising how artificial and unprincipled it was to recognise such a blood-thirsty scattering of fighters along the Thai-Cambodian border as the 'government' of a country when another regime was in firm control. On 20 September 1989, James Lilley, the US Ambassador to Beijing, told an assembly of ASEAN ambassadors that the US public had developed a complete repugnance for the Khmer Rouge, which would limit Washington's flexibility on Cambodia. China was now the only member of the P5 to support the Khmer Rouge claim to govern Cambodia. The US and Soviet Union then initiated a series of consultations with France, UK, and China - the other three permanent members of the Security Council - which strongly endorsed an enhanced transitional role for the UN in Cambodia.

More was to come.

## Chapter Four - into the 90s

As the new decade began, Bill Hayden changed Australia's long-standing policy of recognising both states and governments to recognition of states only. He was prompted as much as anything by the odious nature of the Pol Pot regime. Australia's position was spelt out to Karen Dean, an official of the Melbourne City Council, when she asked the Protocol Branch in DFAT which Cambodian flag the city should fly during a town hall festival.

The Department sternly replied:

Australian policy is to recognise States, not governments. Australia recognises the state of Cambodia, but does not accept the claims of either the State of Cambodia regime (formerly the PRK) led by Hun Sen in Phnom Penh, or the National Government of Cambodia (formerly the CGDK) led by Prince Sihanouk, to be the government of Cambodia, and does not have government-to-government dealings with them. So, you should refrain from flying *any* Cambodian flag.

Below the surface however, Australia was actively working with others to find a breakthrough to solve the Cambodian problem. On 24 November 1989, two months before the Department's advice to the Melbourne City Council, Foreign Minister Gareth Evans had put to the Senate what he called an Australian peace proposal. This urged the UN to become directly involved in the civil administration of Cambodia during a transition period. He proposed that once a cease-fire had been agreed, especially between the Khmer Rouge and the Hun Sen regime (the main antagonists), the UN should send a military force to monitor it. Only with comparative calm could a neutral political environment conducive to free and fair elections be achieved. Evans stressed that the UN should take a direct part in organising and conducting the elections, and in administering the country until they were held.

As Evans explained in *Incorrigible Optimist: A Political Memoir* (MUP, 2017), at page 154:

At the heart of the idea of giving unprecedentedly central control to the United Nations, not just in peacekeeping or electoral monitoring, but in the actual governing of the country during the transitional period, was that it would give China a face-saving way of withdrawing its support from the Khmer Rouge, which would then wither on the vine.

The Evans proposal was unprecedented. The UN was being asked to actually *govern* a country, even if only temporarily. Prince Sihanouk had on several occasions raised the idea of a UN trusteeship over Cambodia, but not one including hands-on control. Evans' plan was first, to send in a UN peace-keeping force to supervise a cease-fire between the warring factions. It was not an easy task. The peacekeepers would have to separate not only the forces of Hun Sen from those of the Khmer Rouge, but Sihanouk Royalists from the “Republicans,” that is, the remainder of the Lon Nol-ists who had stuck it out after 1975 and lived. The Royalists blamed the Republicans for engineering the 1970 coup against Sihanouk, and the Republicans blamed the Royalists for supporting the Khmer Rouge after 1970.

If successful, the separation of factions would provide a relatively calm nation-wide atmosphere in which to organise and run elections, and administer the country until they were held. It would also give the major powers a face-saving way of withdrawing support - China from the Khmer Rouge, the Soviet Union from the Vietnam-installed PRK in Phnom Penh, and the US from the Sihanouk/Son Sann non-communist coalition.

Evans admitted that the idea was fraught with difficulties and would need convincing arguments to gain international support. The country was in poor shape. The US had extensively bombed much of it with B-

52 strikes during the closing stages of the Vietnam War. There had been decades of fighting both against the Vietnamese and between various internal factions. Civil war was still going on. The people were traumatised. Even if a cease-fire could be negotiated, it would be fragile. Lack of communications, damaged roads, destroyed bridges and mine-fields would make it dangerous to move across country to monitor the disarmament of guerrilla forces, especially since UN peace-keepers would have no authority to exercise force.

What gave the proposal legs, however, was a diplomatic blitz of shuttle diplomacy undertaken at Evans' instructions in December 1989 and early 1990 by Michael Costello, at that stage a DFAT Deputy Secretary. It was a feat of extraordinary endurance and resilience - thirty major meetings in thirteen countries. Costello talked to Hun Sen in Svey Rieng, Khieu Samphan and then Thai representatives in Bangkok. He later spoke to Sihanouk and Chinese representatives in Beijing, and to Son Sann; and then to French and British representatives in Paris. He spoke separately to Russian and Japanese representatives in Tokyo, American representatives in Washington, and UN officials in New York. He kept feeding back his interlocutors' thoughts and suggestions, which led to modifications in the Australian proposal on the run.

Costello believed the trick was not to try to force the Australian proposal on sceptical officials which they would inevitably resist, but engage the parties in a dialogue. First principles: Did everyone agree that peace was better than interminable warfare? Was disarmament of the factions under an international body better than a voluntary undertaking to do so? Could a United Nations body better supervise such a cease-fire than one arranged by the factions? Would not central executive authority exercised by the United Nations be less divisive than the continuation of factional fiefdoms?

If general agreement could be obtained on these principles, practical options would have to be negotiated. These could include a root and branch approach of replacing around 200,000 Cambodian officials with UN ones (not very practical); *replace* only senior officials from each administration, maybe 300-500 personnel; *superimpose* UN officials over existing administrations or give them *additional authority* alongside that of the factions.

Costello played down the results of his preliminary discussions. In a cable to Evans midway through his meetings, he assessed his progress:

I said to you earlier that I thought the chance of success had come down from one in a thousand to one in twenty. I think it is now one in ten. That is encouraging, but a ten percent chance is still a long shot – and while a journey of a thousand miles may begin with a single step, it will be the last few steps of this journey that will be harder than all the rest.

Costello's assessment was too pessimistic. The outcome of his talks was that the central principle of UN involvement in the administration of Cambodia was acceptable to all major players, and all the warring factions bar one – the Khmer Rouge. But even Khmer Rouge obduracy weakened under pressure from their main backer, China.

In Canberra however, things were not going smoothly. On 22 February 1991, the Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence discussed abandoning the peace process altogether and simply recognising Hun Sen's State of Cambodia government outright. Costello appeared before them and robustly defended his efforts.

People ask me, can you guarantee the country will be stable? Can you guarantee the Khmer Rouge will abide by it if they lose the elections? Can you guarantee there won't be an outbreak of fighting? The answer is of course I can't. What I can say is that I'm actually certain that fighting will continue if nothing is done. What

I can say is if there is a peace settlement and...an elected government is in place which is recognised by everyone in the world...[it] has got a damn sight more chance of success than any government there in the absence of a settlement.

Do you cope with [the Khmer Rouge] by saying alright...we'll recognise the SOC and will try and bolster the SOC? There's not the slightest chance that China in these circumstances will cut off Pol Pot, not the slightest. Here's our assessment ... that slowly but surely over the next two or three years, in these circumstances, the Khmer Rouge would win.

To keep the discourse moving, Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas succeeded in arranging a meeting at the end of February in Jakarta between delegates from all four warring Cambodian factions, plus delegates from Laos, Vietnam and the ASEAN countries. Australian technicians who had already surveyed border regions in Cambodia to see whether UN surveillance, communications and control would be feasible were invited as "resource delegates."

The findings of the meeting formed part of *Cambodia: an Australian Peace Proposal*, called the "Red Book," (after the colour of its cover), a 155-page series of working papers produced by staff in Senator Evans' office augmented by officers from DFAT. It outlined a process where a cease-fire was maintained by each of the factions in their own areas of occupation, aided by the UN through a framework of observers who also covered the border regions to ensure the absence of foreign forces from the country. The factions would be disarmed and their troops cantoned. The Red Book also estimated the cost of UN involvement – US \$1.3 billion for an 18-month operation. Not a bad guess, but it inevitably blew out. A later escalating estimate was close to US \$1.7 billion. Still later, the cost was estimated at US \$2.3 billion.

The Jakarta meeting provided a sensible framework for consensus-building. But frustratingly, it broke down over Khmer Rouge resistance to including in the record specific reference to preventing “recurrent genocidal policies and practices”. Nevertheless, steady progress continued through 1990, especially in the UN, when the Security Council and General Assembly endorsed the Australian plan in resolutions in September and October.

In a *tour d'horizon* on 14 May 1990 in London with Douglas Hurd, British Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs,<sup>23</sup> Evans said events in Cambodia were taking place on three parallel tracks:

- The four Cambodian political parties were slogging it out on the ground
- Regional players, particularly Thailand, were trying to find a solution
- Internationally, at the top of the pile, the P5 were in negotiations.

Evans told Hurd he doubted the CGDK (Khmer Rouge faction) would give up its UN seat voluntarily. In Australia there was a strong pro-Hun Sen and Vietnam lobby, as well as an anti-Hun Sen one, particularly among Cambodian refugees. Australia wanted to be even-handed and would not lead any charge to legitimise Hun Sen. Evans was unconvinced by reports suggesting that the Khmer Rouge were stronger than they were, or that the Vietnamese military and traders were coming into Cambodia in large numbers. Generally speaking, the Vietnamese had never been popular in Cambodia. Meanwhile, Australia’s bilateral relations with Vietnam were good, although the Vietnamese continued to be irritated by the absence of direct Australian bilateral aid. Evans noticed that under the strain of constant

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<sup>23</sup> Record of Conversation from Departmental file 3016/10/1

negotiations over Cambodia, Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach was looking thin, worn and old.

Meanwhile, Australian organisations continued to give unofficial but vigorous support to Evans' peace plan; and began to build substance into bilateral relations. In September 1990, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation sent ten hours of high-quality television programming to stations in Phnom Penh via an NGO. At about the same time, as General Manager of Radio Australia, I initiated a daily Khmer language short-wave service to Cambodia from our studios in Melbourne. The Australian energy company SANTOS proposed with to drill for offshore oil with agreement from Cambodia. In October 1990, a satellite earth station was installed by Australia's Overseas Telecommunications Corporation in Phnom Penh, Cambodia's first modern telecoms link with the outside world.

In November 1990, a group calling itself the Australian Council of War Veterans urged the government to:

Pursue with utmost vigour the early conclusion of a comprehensive political settlement involving an enhanced role of the United Nations during a transitional period, in which the Cambodian people may choose their own political and economic systems as well as their own leaders through free, fair and democratic elections.<sup>24</sup>

Internationally, steady progress continued to be made. The basic elements of an Australia-initiated peace plan were endorsed by a UN Security Council Resolution in September 1990 and a UN General Assembly Resolution the following month. Evans' hopes for quick and painless progress towards elections in Cambodia were however frustrated by reservations from Cambodia and Vietnam about some parts of the negotiating text.

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<sup>24</sup> *ibid*

What followed was the sudden and unexpected emergence of Prince Sihanouk from months of self-imposed isolation in Beijing and Pyongyang. Sihanouk convened a meeting in late June 1991 in Pattaya, Thailand, between the coalition partners of his Supreme National Council (SNC), a hybrid government body consisting of six representatives of the Vietnam-installed Phnom Penh regime and six representatives of the resistance coalition that had been fighting Phnom Penh since 1979. Until this point, the SNC had failed to conduct any business because the regime and the resistance could never agree on a leadership formula.

The meeting agreed on a cease-fire and elections in which the UN would have a supervisory role. This led in turn to the “Agreements on a Comprehensive Political Settlement of the Cambodia Conflict” being signed by the four Cambodian parties and 19 other countries at the Paris Peace Conference on 23 October 1991. Specifically, this committed the signatories to:

- A permanent cease-fire
- Cessation of outside military assistance and withdrawal of foreign military forces
- The holding of free and fair elections and the adoption of a new democratic constitution under the supervision of a United Nations Transitional Authority (UNTAC)
- Rehabilitation and reconstruction of the country
- Human rights protection including the voluntary return of refugees and displaced persons

In such an encouraging environment, the Australian government decided it should begin to modify its strict non-recognition policy and establish some kind of interim presence in Phnom Penh. On 3 July 1991, it appointed Richard Butler, Australia's Ambassador to Thailand, as a “permanent representative and non-resident ambassador to the

Supreme National Council of Cambodia,” that is, the interim coalition of the two non-communist factions FUNCINPEC and KPNLF with the DK.

Butler's time in the new job was short, as his appointment in Bangkok was almost over. He was replaced by John Holloway, another career diplomat, who this time resided in Phnom Penh. Holloway presented his credentials to Prince Sihanouk in Phnom Penh in December 1991. At the customary after-ceremony conversation, Sihanouk told Holloway that he was a neutral leader between the Khmer Rouge, KPNLF and FUNCINPEC. He distinguished between the 'de facto' Hun Sen government and the 'de jure' SNC government. He had stepped back from his earlier strong endorsement of Hun Sen and wanted to maintain an even-handed posture between the factions. He was the “father of all Cambodians, a healing influence.”



The temporary flag of Cambodia during the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia from 1992 – 1993. The Khmer script in the centre of the flag reads “Kampuchea”.

*“Flag of Cambodia under UNTAC”, licensed under Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0*

On 1 April 1992, Prime Minister Paul Keating addressed the House of Representatives in Canberra about UNTAC, the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia, established after the Security Council passed a resolution on 28 February of that year.

Keating said that UNTAC's objectives were to end the civil war and allow the Cambodian people to choose a new government through free and fair elections. It would draw 15,900 military personnel, 3,600 civilian police and 3,300 civil administrators from more than 50 countries. The military personnel would have a peacekeeping role. They would supervise, monitor and verify the cease-fire, partially demobilise the armed forces of the four Cambodian factions, confiscate and store their weapons, supervise their cantonment, assist in clearing mine fields, and ensure the cessation of outside military assistance. The weapons would be handed back after a new Cambodian government was formed. The police would be responsible for supervising the orderly conduct of the elections. The civil administrators would be responsible for the supervision of the country until a new elected government was in place, and the organisation of the elections themselves, including enrolment of voters. UNTAC had its own radio station and a jail. The cost over 18 months would be US \$1.9 billion.

Keating said that Australia had several important roles. It would provide 495 Defence Force personnel for a Force Communications Unit, including 65 already deployed as part of a UN Advanced Mission in Cambodia (UNAMIC) and 40 signallers from New Zealand; ten police officers to help supervise peaceful elections, and a deputy electoral commissioner. Australia would also supply UNTAC's military commander, Lieutenant General John Sanderson, who had already begun duty in Cambodia in November 1991 as part of the UNAMIC. He worked closely with UNTAC's overall head, Yasushi Akashi, a senior Japanese diplomat and UN administrator, and Brigadier General Klaas Roos, a police commissioner from the Netherlands who was in charge of the police force.

Keating said that with peace in Cambodia, Australia and its neighbours could welcome the countries of Indochina back into the mainstream of regional activities, especially Vietnam, which would emerge from its

isolation. Australia could also resume direct bilateral aid, which would include AUD \$49 million in development assistance to Cambodia, and AUD \$7.7 million in disaster relief. Keating acknowledged that the Khmer Rouge would be involved in the peace process, because without them there was little chance of peace at all. Neither Australia, nor the other countries involved in UNTAC could enforce or impose peace: the Cambodian people must do that. Keating concluded by saying that May 1993 had been set as election time, and that the Security Council intended to withdraw UNTAC forces about six months after that date.<sup>25</sup>

A shadow was cast on Keating's optimism when Gareth Evans talked to Prince Sihanouk as President of the Supreme National Council, CGDK in Beijing on 10 April 1992.<sup>26</sup> It was a typical free-flowing stream of consciousness from Sihanouk. He began by saying the atmospherics in Phnom Penh were not good. The factions did not trust each other. Particular tension existed between Sihanouk's son, Prince Ranariddh, and Hun Sen. Ranariddh's non-communist Royalist faction, FUNCINPEC, included intellectuals resident in France, who despised Hun Sen. They accused him of being a puppet of Hanoi, and of corruption, including selling state property. Ranariddh accused his father of being pro-Hun Sen, when all he was trying to do was be neutral. If Ranariddh stopped listening to his friends in France, he could begin to trust Hun Sen. Three prominent American foreign policy experts, New York Representative Stephen Solarz, and State Department diplomats Richard Holbrooke and Morton Abramovitz, had urged Sihanouk to cooperate with Hun Sen. Meanwhile, Sihanouk himself kept quiet about Hun Sen's corruption, but his discourse made it clear that he knew what was going on and thought that Hun Sen had good political skills. It was not hard to see the corruption. Large street demonstrations occurred in Phnom Penh in late 1991, with police

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<sup>25</sup> Hansard, 1 April 1992

<sup>26</sup> Beijing cable to Canberra, 10 April 1992: file 3016/10/1

killing a number of protesters along Monivong Boulevard. They were protesting against the sale of state-owned factories.

Sihanouk said that bickering between the factions only served Khmer Rouge interests. He had officially complained to UNTAC about Khmer Rouge behaviour. They continued to violate the cease-fire, most recently by attacking units of Hun Sen's Cambodian Peoples' Armed Forces in Siem Riap and Kampong Thom provinces, especially along Route 12, the national road running north from Kampong Thom City to the capital of Preah Vihear province. Sihanouk did not believe the Khmer Rouge were continuing to practise genocide, but they could do so again if given the opportunity. Cambodian military chief Ta Mok was very cruel and his relationship with Pol Pot was like that between Himmler and Hitler. Cambodians, Sihanouk observed, continued to hate and fear the Khmer Rouge.

Sihanouk observed that China remained ambivalent and could not be pinned down about a peaceful settlement, even though they were a party to the Paris Peace Agreement. They would prefer the separate existence of the four factions rather than their merger. He concluded his observations to Evans by asserting that it would be very difficult to disarm the Khmer Rouge. "You need elephants, not helicopters to go into their camps and bases."

On 18 July 1992, the Khmer Rouge made a disingenuous offer to disarm their troops progressively in step with disarming the political structure of the Hun Sen regime. But this was not possible without undermining the whole peace process, which had determined that the factions could maintain administrations in their own areas until elections. Meanwhile, Australian diplomats worked with colleagues from the P5, Japan, Indonesia and Thailand to devise the best way of encouraging the Khmer Rouge to re-enter the peace process. They toyed with sanctions against the Khmer Rouge if they remained obdurate and contemplated isolating them if they refused to cooperate.

On the same day, 18 July 1992, the Department's Parliamentary and Media Branch circulated an interview between Evans and UN Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali.<sup>27</sup> Boutros-Ghali had ordered UN military inspectors to hang onto their rifles near Khmer Rouge redoubts. He observed that the Khmer Rouge continued to raid villages and fight forces of the PRK, while making official complaints that the UN had not ensured the removal of all Vietnamese soldiers, nor ensured a “neutral” political environment. Evans said that the Khmer Rouge were certainly making life difficult. They seemed determined to continue to fight even if there was a slim chance of winning the civil war.



The infamous Tuol Sleng genocide prison of the Khmer Rouge in Phnom Penh, a former school. A most depressing place.

*“Khmer Rouge Cambodia Prison S21”, Daniel-Alvarez/Shutterstock.com*

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<sup>27</sup> Radio broadcast on SBS 18 July 1992

## Chapter Five - UNTAC on the Ground

We now examine the disarmament process through the eyes of Lieutenant General John Sanderson AC, appointed by the UN Security Council as UNTAC Force Commander in 1992.<sup>28</sup>

Sanderson had a distinguished military career. He served in Malaya and Vietnam, and was later Chief of the Australian Army from 1995 to 1998. A civil engineer, he would need all his technical expertise in what was to become a challenging assignment.

Sanderson went into Cambodia in the third week of November 1991 as part of a United Nations Advanced Mission in Cambodia (UNAMIC). The group's entry points were the camps of the two smaller Cambodian factions, the royalist FUNCINPEC and the anti-communist KPNLF, along the Thai-Cambodian border. Many of the soldiers they met were sick with malaria or dysentery and were highly vulnerable to attacks from the Khmer Rouge or the forces of Hun Sen. Despite this, they still declared themselves strongly committed to the UN peace process.

From there, Sanderson flew into Phnom Penh on 21 November 1991, during preparations for Bon Om Touk, the annual water festival marking the turning of the waters of the Tonle Sap. The city appeared superficially busy, but with an underlying tension. His first survey of the countryside in a French reconnaissance plane revealed massive damage to roads and bridges, and, on closer examination, the presence of numerous anti-personnel and anti-vehicle mine-fields. Sanderson realised that an enormous engineering effort would have to be made to get voters safely to the polls and bring refugees safely home.

Equally challenging was the task of disarmament, not only of an estimated 450,000 light infantry weapons held by the four Cambodian factions, but heavy armour and artillery pieces owned by some of them. Hun Sen's faction also had a riverine force of small Soviet-built ships,

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<sup>28</sup> As related to the author in Canberra by General Sanderson on 22 September 2020

and the remnants of an air force of Soviet-origin MiG 19 fighters, Antonov transport aeroplanes and Hind helicopters. Complicating the disarmament process was the frustrating fact that disarming Hun Sen's police force, which had considerable political clout in and around Phnom Penh, was outside his brief.

It was clear to Sanderson that disarmament of the Khmer Rouge would be his toughest challenge. The Khmer Rouge held Cambodia's seat in the UN. It also claimed (quite speciously), to have the support of the Khmer people. It certainly had the support of China as well as extensive links with the Thai military and strong commercial links with Thai businessmen with whom it did a brisk trade in timber and gemstones.

If he was to take effective command, Sanderson's first task was to become familiar with the four Cambodian factions. He set up an inclusive Mixed Military Working Group (MMWG) with representatives of all factions. The MMWG was designed in the hope of encouraging maximum cooperation between the Cambodian factions. Owing largely to the obduracy of the Khmer Rouge, it only partially succeeded.

The first half of 1992 did not go particularly well. Sanderson had been told that he would be invited to New York soon after his November 1991 country reconnaissance, but that did not happen. The chaos that was unfolding in Cambodia was a reflection of inaction in New York. Many UN bureaucrats did eventually go to Cambodia and did fine work – but, at the time, none of the negotiating team. And the five Permanent Members of the Security Council (P5) pursued their own national interests under a veneer of international altruism.

In January 1992, Sanderson took himself off to New York to shake things up. With the moral support of Gareth Evans, in New York at the time, and Peter Wilenski, Australia's Permanent Representative to the UN, he met Marrack Goulding, the British UN Under Secretary for Peacekeeping. Goulding was initially rude and dismissive of Sanderson and his role but changed his mind rather abruptly as he absorbed

Sanderson's account of the vicious on-going civil war, and the prospective failure of the whole UNTAC mission if it continued. Sanderson got himself appointed as Military Advisor on Cambodia to the UN Secretary General and met for the first time Yasushi Akashi, the former Japanese diplomat, now UN bureaucrat, who had been appointed to oversee UNTAC. In March 1992, Sanderson was officially appointed Force Commander by unanimous vote of the Security Council, with the standing of an Acting Secretary-General of the United Nations.

The planning in New York with the authority of his new position enabled Sanderson to send instructions to contributing countries so that their contingents would arrive knowing what they were going to do and were prepared and equipped to do it. This allowed the UN to make a rough estimate of the cost of the operation.

Planning in New York was done on the basis of an election in 1992. But most of the military mission was not deployed until October, too late to gain effective country-wide control before the elections. Nevertheless, Sanderson quickly put his new multinational team of staff officers to work. The time-frame was fierce. Within about 18 months, they had to receive and billet the overseas component of the UNTAC military force, deploy them to enforce the ceasefire agreement, mark and clear mines, control the borders, and, most challenging of all, organise the separation, disarming and cantonment of the warring factions.

Sanderson's forces would include 12 large infantry battalions with 800 men per battalion, divided into 60 rifle companies. Because UN bureaucrats in New York thought it inappropriate that a United Nations force should run an intelligence operation in a country they were administering, he did not have an intelligence unit. Without it, he was flying blind.

One of his main problems was that the PDK would not let Sanderson send UN troops into any areas they claimed to control. Nor would they mark the minefields in these areas as promised, perhaps because they actually had no control over them at all. Son Sen kept promising Sanderson that he would give access, but he disappeared off the radar. The last time Sanderson saw him was at a luncheon in early April 1992 at Pailin, a district town in Battambang Province in the country's north-west close to the Thai border.

Despite his hosts attempting to make a good impression by engaging in reasonable conversation over an excellent meal, they did not convince Sanderson of their good intentions. Khmer Rouge attacks against the forces of other factions and civilians in general continued around the country, even intensified. Sanderson and his staff wondered why they were doing this. He thought it was an attempt to boost the morale of the National Army of Democratic Kampuchea (NADK) and hold it together, when in fact it was falling to pieces.

As Sanderson was setting up his own team, a civil component was being formed to gain control of the nation's administration in five designated areas: finance, foreign affairs, defence, internal affairs (which included civil administration and running a police force), and public information. Closely associated with the civil component were preparations for an electoral roll, and the safe return of refugees and displaced persons to their home villages, or to designated camps.

Another concern for Sanderson was what to do with thousands of soldiers once they were de-mobilised. Without income or work, many of them would be bound to become disruptive and cause trouble (as occurred a decade later in American-occupied Iraq once US forces had deposed Saddam Hussein). Sanderson's solution was to incentivise de-mobilised soldiers with generous wages, and train them in mine clearance.

Throughout 1992, Sanderson had continuous problems with the Party of Democratic Kampuchea (PDK), the fractious Khmer Rouge faction. They saw the new UNTAC legal framework as robbing them of power, and suspected that the Vietnamese military of using false Khmer names to get on the electoral roll. It was an act of desperation - the PDK could not, or would not, point out who these Vietnamese were. The PDK also refused to allow UNTAC reconnaissance teams into mined areas. A prominent General, Son Sen, PDK Defence Minister, tried to persuade his colleagues to relent, but without much success. PDK forces continued to attack other factions and civilians, and their radio propaganda continued to inflame Khmer hatred of the Vietnamese and suggested that UNTAC could not protect Khmer peasants from them.

The PDK was not the only faction to belittle the effectiveness of UNTAC. Hun Sen's SOC propaganda was almost as derogatory, constantly telling its listeners that UNTAC could not protect them from Khmer Rouge banditry. Sanderson realised that the only counter to such propaganda was for UNTAC to have its own radio station. The idea came from Tim Carney, a junior American diplomat, a Khmer speaker attached to UNTAC's Education and Information Division. The UN initially resisted this, partly on the grounds of too deep an intrusion in the affairs of the people, but then relented. An old Soviet amplitude modulation (AM) system was pulled out of mothballs and re-activated after having been used for country-wide propaganda since Vietnam's 1979 occupation. The Japanese provided 600,000 battery-operated portable receivers for radio reception around the provinces.

Apart from emphasising the progress UNTAC was making in developing a safe environment in which free and fair elections could be held, the UNTAC broadcasts attempted to counter the scepticism of Khmer civilians that an elected government would be responsive to their wishes, that it would adopt an impartial system of law instead of

one subject to patronage or force, and that it would accept a monarch who reigned but did not rule.



An UNTAC river patrol meeting a group of children on the shores of Kampong Ous, a Cambodian village along the Tonle Sap.

*“United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC)”, UN Photo/John Isaac. Licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0*

UNTAC broadcasts emphasised that all UNTAC personnel were emissaries for the international community and were there to help Cambodians achieve peace and freedom. Sanderson hammered the same message home to his multi-national military force. Some force components were responsive and treated Khmers under their watch fairly. Others were less responsive, especially those from countries even poorer than Cambodia, whose pay cheques were their families’ main source of income.

Sanderson still encountered suspicion from some of his staff, especially the French, some of whom saw him as part of an Anglo-Saxon conspiracy to thwart the renaissance of French language and culture, evidenced in particular by the efflorescence of English-language schools in Phnom Penh. In vain did Sanderson tell them that it was the Khmer themselves who wanted to learn English, which had far more international currency than French. The French in Hanoi entertained a

similar suspicion of the Australian Embassy's efforts to encourage English-language schools in Vietnam.

In 1992 UNTAC was invested with more energy. In May of that year the Secretariat moved into new premises - the former French governor's residence adjacent to Phnom Penh's Wat Phnom, where pre-fab structures were erected on the grounds to house a growing number of support staff.

A more constructive dialogue was developing between UNTAC and the four factions in the MMWG, and cracks were starting to appear in the façade of Khmer Rouge arrogance. They were beginning to realise that the liberal message preached by UNTAC was more of a threat to them than the presence of Hun Sen's SOC in Phnom Penh. The Khmer Rouge were taking UN observers as short-term hostages in remote provinces as bargaining chips. Young soldiers of the National Army of Democratic Kampuchea (NADK) were starting to desert and walk into UN units, "just boys who wanted to go home." PDK broadcasts about the menace of the Vietnamese were starting to wear thin. Sanderson's view was that Khmer Rouge capacity to influence the outcome on the battlefield was becoming very limited.

Meanwhile, "wild west chaos" was growing in border camps along the Thai-Cambodian border, especially at Banteay Meanchay Province, and on the Dangrek escarpment near the ancient Preah Vihear temple. It involved a messy plethora of brothels and bars frequented by Thais and unruly elements of at least two Cambodian factions, the Khmer Rouge and KPNLF, all profiting from the illicit sale of Cambodian timber and gemstones to Thai companies with the backing of the Thai military.

UNTAC also had to close the Poipet/Aranyaphet border to their people when a news report showed that at night many UNTAC cars were parked in front of a large brothel just across the border in Thailand. Thai military personnel were its main customers, also

KPNLF and CPAF soldiers. It is unlikely that Khmer Rouge soldiers participated, being too poor and too well-disciplined.

In September 1992, a serious effort was made to curb the PDK's continuing non-compliance with the Paris Agreement's ceasefire provisions. Ali Alatas and Roland Dumas, the Indonesian and French co-chairs of the Paris Conference, were asked to consider imposing sanctions on PDK leaders, or banning them altogether from the UNTAC process. Khieu Samphan protested, saying this would signify a victory for Hun Sen. Son Sann, the venerable President of the KPNLF, supported him saying UNTAC had to get rid of the Vietnamese before weakening the Khmer Rouge.

In October 1992 voter registration began for the Cambodian electoral rolls. It was the end of the wet season and the beginning of UNTAC countrywide operations. A parade was held on 24 October to celebrate UN Day and UNTAC. It also provided a much-needed opportunity to acknowledge Sihanouk's central role in affairs and his popularity among the people. Several times he had wavered in his support for UNTAC, expressed unhappiness at the thought of being sidelined in the new constitution, and suggested cutting short the Paris process by inserting himself into a presidential relationship with the SOC. To celebrate his forthcoming birthday on 31 October, he was asked to stand on a dais as a guest of honour during the parade.

Not to be outdone, Sihanouk celebrated his birthday in his own palace with elaborate parties orchestrated by himself. This presented excellent opportunities for the diplomatic corps and other observers to gather intelligence about emerging political parties and alliances forming in Phnom Penh. Sihanouk also hosted film evenings and performances of traditional Cambodian dance by the Royal Ballet. The films included those he made himself in the 1950s and 1960s, often with him in starring roles. Sanderson observed that their narratives were often difficult for foreigners to follow.

By October 1992, Sanderson's staff were plotting Khmer Rouge movements which indicated delivery of the vote to all provinces the following May would be difficult. He would have to divert more forces around Ta Mok's command on the Thai border, and concentrate more capable battalions, like the Dutch, into the area. He would rotate the rest of the UNTAC Force in a clockwise direction, putting more capable battalions into troublesome spots. The Chinese battalion was proving to be resilient and adaptable. He was still waiting on a Japanese engineering battalion. Immediate combat training and ammunition were needed, both of which were expensive. Sanderson needed authorisation to begin deployment of his Force by the end of October. He briefed Yasushi Akashi of his plans and got neither a yes nor a no. His staff agreed to interpret his silence as a "yes."

Sanderson received staunch support for his plans from all UN Security Council P5 ambassadors whose delegates were all regularly observing SNC and MMWG meetings. He particularly enjoyed the quiet support he received from the Chinese Ambassador, Fu Xuezhang, and the more robust support from the Russian Yuri Miakotnykh. At these meetings, Sanderson was at pains to emphasise that all he planned was in strict accordance with the 1991 Paris Peace Agreements.

Two developments complicated Sanderson's plans. The first was having to release from cantonment up to 55,000 soldiers from the four factions for the Cambodian rice-planting season. He ensured that they did not take their weapons with them. The second was a sharp increase in Khmer Rouge-instigated violence around the provinces, coinciding with a worrying non-attendance of Khmer Rouge representatives at regular MMWG meetings following the departure of two Khmer Rouge generals who had seemed sympathetic to UNTAC aims - General Men Ron and General Chu Chin, from Ta Mok's Khmer Rouge command in the north.

A further complication was the sudden departure of Sihanouk, ostensibly for medical treatment in Beijing, which tended to weaken the legitimacy of UNTAC. But then, just as suddenly, he invited the

SNC to meet in Beijing. The Indonesian and French co-chairmen of the Paris Peace Agreement also went, and without prior consultation with interested delegates, supported a Thai/Japanese proposal to circumvent the constitutional process agreed to in Paris, by allowing Sihanouk to stand as a presidential candidate at the same time as the main vote for a Constitutional Assembly.

Sanderson and other UNTAC people were aghast. Whether to have a presidential system was for the Constitutional Assembly to decide. The Thai/Japanese suggestion reeked of the old colonial indifference to the wishes of the people. It was not taken up.

On 15 November 1992, UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali issued a statement condemning Khmer Rouge obstructions to holding nation-wide elections for the Assembly, and declaring that the UNTAC force would be maintained at its present level until they were held (there had been talk of a Force reduction). On 30 November, Boutros-Ghali's statement was reinforced by Security Council Resolution 792 which *deplored* Khmer Rouge activities, *condemned* their lack of cooperation and *demande*d appropriate behaviour from all factions. The Resolution went further, putting a moratorium on the exploitation of Cambodian resources such as gemstones and timber and restrictions on the import of petroleum. Enforcing the moratorium would require UNTAC military involvement along the Thai border.

In the end, and despite all these problems, the elections went ahead in May 1993.

From the time he arrived in country up until the auspicious date of the first elections, Sanderson had faced difficulties in commanding the military forces of 34 disparate countries. Apart from barriers to communication, sources of tension between the battalions included pay scale differentials. Contingents from developed countries received vastly higher wages than those from emerging countries, where corruption sometimes resulted in soldiers being paid very little or not at all. Depending on the quality of their leaders, the behaviour of different UN battalions towards the Khmer population also varied.

Some showed care and concern, others indifference and crude behaviour.

Sanderson's solution was to travel to all points of the country, speak to all UNTAC soldiers, constantly affirm his appreciation for their efforts, and emphasise that they were all in this together on behalf of the international community, and were powerfully involved in building the reputation of their nations. Almost on a daily basis, he shared these intentions with the press gathered in Phnom Penh.

## Chapter Six - the Elections

The May 1993 elections in Cambodia approached amid growing excitement. Although sceptical that anyone they elected would do their bidding through a democratic process, the people entered the spirit of the election process with enthusiasm.

As Sanderson observed, the complexity of the proposed electoral rolls was increased by the need to embrace those Cambodians outside the country who might have been born elsewhere but who had at least one parent who was born in Cambodia. Attempts were also made to include ethnic Cambodians born in southern Vietnam (known as Khmer Krom in Cambodian historical terms) but were rejected as adding additional complications in preparing the rolls. The PDK and SOC already had deep reservations about the Electoral Law, and feared that such inclusivity would allow Vietnamese culture to dilute Khmer culture.

Registration of voters began in October 1992 - a year after the Paris Peace Agreements. UN electoral staff had to bring in processing equipment as well as hundreds of additional UN volunteers to recruit and train thousands of locals to use it. Every voter had to be checked and photographed and issued a registration card. These cards attested to the universal transformation and empowerment of the population in a way that had no historical precedent in the country.

Meanwhile an avalanche of political parties registered for the elections. The two front runners were the royalist FUNCINPEC led by Sihanouk's son, Prince Ranariddh, and the Conservative Cambodian Peoples' Party (CPP), led by Hun Sen. The next half dozen included the Buddhist Liberal Democrats (BLDP); another, secular, Liberal Democratic Party (LDP); the Movement for the National Liberation of Kampuchea (MOULINAKA), a pro-Sihanouk military organisation formed in 1979; the Khmer Neutral Party; the Free Independent Democratic Party; and the Free Republican Party.

Other parties were less well-known. They included the Liberal Reconciliation Party, the Cambodian Renaissance Party, the Neutral Democratic Party of Cambodia, the Republican Coalition Party, the Khmer Farmers' Liberal Democratic Party, and the Free Development Republican Party. They bring to mind the People's Front of Judea, the Judean People's Front and the Judean Popular People's Front and their violent fights over marginal differences in Monty Python's satirical film, *Life of Brian*.

But the founders of these Cambodian parties were altogether earnest about their participation in such a novel and exciting democratic experiment. Gareth Evans was one of many to express his surprise and delight at the 4.267 million registered voters who actually participated in the elections between 23 and 28 May 1993. In his address at Monash University on 2 November 2012, he recalled:

The elections proceeded with an almost 90 percent turnout and, to everyone's surprise and delight, with almost no violent disruptions. I don't think I have ever been more moved than when I saw those first satellite pictures of men, women and children lined up at the polling stations in their scores of thousands, knowing the risk of bomb attacks, but thrilled at the prospect of peace at last, and the chance to have some say in how they lived their lives.

When the votes were counted, FUNCINPEC was the clear winner with 47 percent of the vote, giving it 58 seats in the Assembly. Second was Hun Sen's CPP, with 38 percent of the vote and 51 seats. The Buddhist LDP was a rather distant third with 3.8 percent of the vote and ten seats. With 1.37 of the vote MOULINAKA scored one seat. No other party won a seat.



Cambodians awaiting to vote at a polling station during the first Cambodian elections in May 1993.

*“Cambodian Election Held Under UN Supervision”, UN Photo/John Isaac*

There was a contentious aftermath. At the beginning of June, Hun Sen announced that he did not accept the result, and filed a complaint with UN representative Yasushi Akashi over voting “irregularities”. Negotiations followed between Akashi, Hun Sen and Prince Ranariddh. An uneasy solution envisaged the ministries in the new government being divided equally between FUNCINPEC and the CPP with Prince Sihanouk assuming full executive powers as Head of State.

Ranariddh initially opposed the deal, as he had been the clear winner. He was supported by the US, the UK, Australia and China. On 14 June however, a settlement very close to the earlier compromise was reached: Sihanouk was temporally installed as Head of State and Ranariddh and Hun Sen became 'First Prime Minister' and 'Second Prime Minister' respectively, with equal executive powers. Sihanouk presided over an interim administration for the next three months, and on 21 September, he resigned to re-assume the role of King.

As Evans pointed out in his 2012 Monash address, the UN-supervised settlement had imperfections, but it achieved its principal aims. It succeeded in removing the Cambodian conflict as a source of regional tension; it allowed Vietnam to emerge from its status as a regional and

international pariah; it enabled external patrons like China, the United States and Russia to withdraw material support for their political groupings, thus sucking out the oxygen that had sustained civil war for so long; it allowed more than 365,000 Cambodians displaced along the Thai border to return to their villages; and it cleared the decks for serious reconstruction of a torn and traumatised country.

But the process also left serious gaps in administration. The most urgent was the need for an effective criminal and civil justice system to prevent corruption and human rights violations, an absence that became more and more obvious as the post-election, self-governing years after 1993 went by.

Strains between the First and Second Prime Ministers erupted on 4 July 1997, when a small-scale civil war broke out between military forces loyal to Ranariddh and those loyal to Hun Sen. An anti-Hun Sen interpretation suggests it was an attempted coup d'état initiated by Hun Sen to force Ranariddh out of government. Not so, according to a Cambodian government white paper, whose credibility is backed by Tony Kevin, Australia's Ambassador in Phnom Penh at the time. It was instead an inept and cowardly effort by Ranariddh (who had prudently and secretly fled to Bangkok with all his FUNCINPEC ministers before the fighting began) to unseat Hun Sen, his own Second Prime Minister, and thus violate the UNTAC power-sharing accord. Kevin believed that Hun Sen was probably as surprised as anyone at the outbreak, as he was on holiday with his family at Vung Tao beach in Vietnam at the time. But as Kevin reported to Canberra, Hun Sen's personal security forces were on high alert as tension had been building for weeks. They outfought Ranariddh's personal security forces led by General Nhek Bun Chhey. The army proper stayed out of it. Kevin and the rest of the diplomatic corps knew something was up when there was not a single FUNCINPEC Minister present at the US Embassy 4<sup>th</sup> of July reception

in Phnom Penh, in contrast to a full complement of senior CPP Ministers except the holidaying Hun Sen.

Ranariddh's aborted attempt to oust Hun Sen backfired and he effectively removed himself from government. No doubt encouraged by his mini victory, Hun Sen now began to reveal his dictatorial ambitions. Between 1997 and 1998, 89 extra-judicial killings of those opposed to Hun Sen took place in Phnom Penh, officially attributed to no-one. The next national elections were held on 26 July 1998, with a voter turn-out of 93.7 percent. Hun Sen's CPP won 64 of 122 seats and he became Prime Minister in his own right.

In the four national elections held from then until 2018, Hun Sen continued to consolidate his power until he had virtually no opposition:

- 27 July 2003: The CPP won 73 of 123 seats.
- 27 July 2008: The CPP won 90 seats. A European Union observer mission said that the CPP majority was so large that there must have been massive fraud. Voter turn-out was low.
- 28 July 2013: With a record low turnout of 69.6 percent of voters, the CPP's majority was reduced to 68 seats, losing many seats to the official opposition, the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP), a merger of Sam Rainsy's Candlelight Party with the Human Rights Party, which won 55 seats.
- 29 July 2018: Following the arrest on trumped-up charges of Kem Sokha, deputy leader of the CNRP on 3 September 2017, Hun Sen dissolved the CNRP party and in doing so effectively destroyed all opposition to his rule. Voter turn-out was minimal. Electors appeared to have lost hope that there would be, or could be, a revival of the democratic process that had so galvanised them in 1993.

In an article published on 23 July 2020 in John Menadue's *Pearls and Irritations*, Evans observed that Hun Sen had created a one-party state, and has resorted in recent years to extreme violence against his opponents. Over the last two years in particular, he has arrested and incarcerated many human rights advocates, political analysts, social activists, and even those from local communities known to have supported the now-silent opposition party.

In 2020, Hun Sen initiated the passage through the National Assembly of emergency legislation ostensibly designed to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in Cambodia. The legislation is open-ended and has no sunset clause. It closes borders, suppresses freedom of speech and assembly, allows government control of technology by any necessary means, and imposes draconian penalties including jail terms and property confiscation for offenders.

Evans asks what Australia, and other countries which so heavily invested in the grand democratic experiment in the early 1990s, could possibly do to counter such abuse of human rights? He proposes that each country could consider enacting 'Magnitsky' type legislation, named after a Russian dissenter accused of tax fraud who died in prison in Moscow in 2009. Such laws, now in place in the US, the UK and Canada, allow the imposition of unilateral sanctions such as asset-freezing and visa restrictions against any abusers of power whom their countries decide to target. In Cambodia, that could include Hun Sen and his extended family. The Parliamentary Joint Standing on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade considered recommending a bill to Parliament on Magnitsky-type legislation in 2020, but no further action was taken at the time. On 5 August 2021, however, Foreign Minister Marise Payne said the Government had revived the matter, and was considering legislative reform to modernise Australia's autonomous sanctions law to enable targeted financial sanctions and travel bans. Presumably the targets would include selected Cambodian officials.

Meanwhile, China, the Philippines, Laos and Thailand remain strongly supportive of Hun Sen and his government.

Australia may not share their enthusiasm, but the democratic principles that Australia advocated in 1993 still apply. Nevertheless, they do not give Australia the right to impose sanctions on Cambodia or on its elected leader unless they are endorsed by the UN Security Council.

One bright spot which slightly alleviates the failure of democracy in Cambodia, was a Tribunal set up in Phnom Penh in June 2003 by the Hun Sen government to try Khmer Rouge leaders for crimes against humanity. Established on 6 June 2003, and endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly, it comprised several chambers according to the French judicial system, with judges from Ireland, Sri Lanka, Zambia, Tanzania, Republic of Korea, France, and the United States, as well as Cambodia. Its deliberations led to the conviction of 14 senior Khmer Rouge officials, but let a couple go who had switched sides.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ben Kiernan: *Bringing the Khmer Rouge to Justice*, Human Rights Review April-June 2000; Milton Osborne, *Cambodia's genocide verdict: better late than never*, The Interpreter, Lowy Institute 20 November 2018

## Epilogue

One of two final thoughts in this monograph comes from a colleague who has extensive experience as a foreign correspondent in Phnom Penh:

Keep in mind, as one UNTAC staffer told me many years ago, that the 1993 elections guaranteed a free and fair election, but they did not guarantee that the government elected would be democratic. As I and others have said for years, it is hard to have a democracy without democrats. Cambodians know when their rights are being violated, but if they were in power, it doesn't mean that they would respect those same rights for others. It is not in their software. Exercise control, pay for positions of power, blandish the boss, and pass perks to relatives and allies who will unquestionably support you in return. The present in Cambodia may be ugly from where we sit, but from a vertical point of view, it all fits in with the local, historical consciousness. Hun Sen has out-worked, out-smarted, out-muscled, and out-fought his enemies and defeated all of them. He now has total control, like any other king who tried to run the country before. A tough nut to crack by high-minded and noble outsiders.

Similar views were expressed in 1996 by anthropologists Dr. Stephen Heder of London University and Professor Judy Ledgerwood of the University of Northern Illinois:

The propaganda that Cambodian politicians hurled at each other, at other Cambodians, and at Vietnamese and other foreigners was part of a political culture that legitimized all forms of elite rule. Violence was permitted and encouraged by the terms of the propaganda and within the context of a political culture in which rivals, 'inferiors', and foreigners could be physically eliminated so long as they were dehumanized by labelling them as 'non-Khmers,'

‘traitors,’ ‘genocidalists,’ or ‘criminals.’ And despite the successful holding of ‘free and fair elections’ by UNTAC, the underlying political realities of Cambodia have not been fundamentally altered.

These observations could apply to a greater or lesser extent to other regimes in the region. None of the ASEAN nations, with the possible exception of the Philippines, Indonesia and Singapore, consistently follow democratic principles. Certainly not Vietnam or Laos, nor the military regime in Myanmar, nor the Thais, burdened as they are by feudal monarchist laws and a tendency for the military to take out a democratically elected government at intervals. Brunei is an absolute monarchy. In Malaysia, to cite George Orwell, all people are equal, but some are more equal than others. Timor-Leste, with more women elected to Parliament than any country on earth, is a work in progress. Each ASEAN nation applies its own history and culture to its evolving method of governance.

As the experience of Cambodia shows, it is insufficient in seeking change just to target the men at the top. They will only be replaced by others with similar values. It will take more than one plebiscite to change a mind-set developed over centuries, if indeed that is our aim.

I’d like to think that the foreign affairs establishment in Canberra is gradually beginning to take countries and governments as they are, and not try to get them to adopt democratic principles. Such moral urgings seldom work. Former Foreign Minister Julie Bishop’s lecture in Singapore on 13 March 2017 is a case in point. She said China would never reach its full potential as a country until they embraced democracy. It inflamed the Communists Party in Beijing, and no doubt strengthened it in its resolve never to embrace democracy.

So, if not democracy, what *did* we achieve in Cambodia? Actually, something very significant. Motivated by his strong convictions about

human rights and the need for countries to abide by international law, Gareth Evans stirred the United Nations and the G5 out of their torpor. The warring factions were disempowered and UNCTAD was created. Cambodia was saved from chronic and destructive civil war. And a precedent was created in the minds of the people: elections had been successfully held once, and could possibly be held again.

‘Punching above one’s weight’ is a boastful cliché too often used by Australian politicians to aggrandise themselves and Australia’s foreign policy activities. It should not apply to our activities in Cambodia. It would be more accurate to describe what we did as principled and disinterested – principled by doing something to advance prospects for regional peace and stability, and disinterested as far as our alliance relationship with the United States was concerned.

I played a minor role in the performance by getting Evans’ predecessor, Bill Hayden, against departmental advice, to meet Hun Sen in Saigon. Hayden was able to convince his colleagues in the Hawke government that Hun Sen was a Cambodian patriot, not a satrap of Vietnam. This gave us legitimacy in breaking away from the views of Washington, Beijing, and the countries of ASEAN that the CGDK, including Pol Pot, was Cambodia’s legitimate ruler, deserving to hold the country’s seat at the United Nations.

What other thoughts can I give in this monograph to those interested in pursuing a career in Australia’s foreign policy establishments?

It is an increasingly common perception that DFAT has lost its traditional influence on foreign policy-making and has been reduced to little more than a consular service. Other line departments such as Defence and Prime Minister and Cabinet, and so-called independent think-tanks like the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), are seen to have usurped the foreign policy role. There may be some truth in this, but if so, highly-qualified young recruits are needed more than

ever in DFAT. The need to acquire objective knowledge from posts abroad, uninfluenced by political spin, is more important than ever.

A more urgent reason for re-invigorating DFAT derives from recent changes in Australia's geo-strategic environment. Until now, most of our wars were fought in distant countries which posed no threat to Australia, and where Australia's main purpose was to support its US ally. With the rise of an increasingly assertive China, this has changed. If increasing tensions spill over into war between the US and China, the ANZUS Treaty could be invoked, and Australia could be involved. It is possible that for the first time since 1942, our territory could be attacked. One reason for China to do this would be to send a warning to the US that American bases can be attacked with impunity. All recent American war-games have resulted in loss to the US and victory to China. A war in which the PRC is defending its home territory is unlikely to favour the US, which would be protecting its distant interests in East Asia. The damage to Australia would be very much greater than to the US.

Australian diplomats are frequently instructed to make representations about human rights abuses abroad. That is because we are a multiracial and multi-ethnic society, and politicians are anxious to satisfy their constituents' concern that human rights abuses in former countries are being addressed. They are legitimate requirements, but I'd like to think we can pursue them with a sense of comparison. Australia is far from perfect in our treatment of our own minorities, refugees and indigenous people, as the Chinese like to point out (or did when they were still talking to us). No government likes being lectured to about human rights issues. Quiet discussion between equals is best.

A related observation concerns the so-called 'rules-based international order'. China, Russia, and an increasing number of other countries are resisting advice from Western governments and Australian ministers to follow this order. For it is in fact an American-imposed order, devised

at the end of World War Two when Washington held the levers of international power, and operated them primarily to safeguard American interests. Washington is itself inconsistent in following such rules. It would be more legitimate to push other countries to respect the UN Charter and the rules of international law. This always motivated Gareth Evans, who sought to make Australia a 'good international citizen', leading others by example.

## Glossary

**ACB** – Administrative Consultative Body

**ANKI** – Independent National Khmer Army (army of FUNCINPEC)

**ANS** – Armée Nationale Sihanoukienne (later ANKI)

**ASEAN** – Association of Southeast Asian Nations

**BLDP** – Buddhist Liberal Democratic Party (formerly KPNLF)

**CGDK** - Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea, an uneasy coalition of Royalists, Khmer Rouge and the Peoples' National Liberation Front (KPNLF). The President was Prince Sihanouk, the Prime Minister, Son Sann of the KPNLF, and Foreign Minister, Khieu Samphan of the Khmer Rouge. It was recognised as the legitimate holder of Cambodia's United Nations seat from 1979 until peace talks in 1991, even though it had no territory, population or administrative role in Cambodia.

**CIVPOL** – UNTAC Civilian Police

**CMAC** – Cambodian Mine Action Centre

**CPAF** – Cambodian People's Armed Forces

**CPP** - Cambodian Peoples' Party - Hun Sen's Vietnamese-backed party, and de facto rulers of Cambodia pending the May 1993 general election.

**DK** - Democratic Kampuchea, the name of Cambodia the Khmer Rouge gave themselves when in power from 1975 to 1979.

**FCU** – Australian Force Communications Unit

**FUNCINPEC** - National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia - founded by Sihanouk in 1981, an exiled resistance movement against the PRK.

**GRUNK** - Royal Government of the National Union of Kampuchea, a government in exile headed by Prince Sihanouk and based in Beijing between 1970 and 1976.

**ICK** – International Conference on Kampuchea

**ICM** – International Control Mechanism

**IPSO** – International Polling Station Observer/Officer

**JIM** – Joint Informal Meetings in Jakarta

**KUFNS** - Kampuchean United Front for National Salvation: the Vietnam-backed government of Cambodia led by Heng Samrin.

**KPNLF** - Kampuchean Peoples' National Liberation Front, a non-communist resistance party led by former Buddhist politician Son Sann, in fragile coalition with Sihanouk and the Khmer Rouge in the CGDK.

**KPRP** – Khmer People’s Revolutionary Party (former name of CPP, also name of original Cambodian communist party formed in 1951).

**MMWG** - Mixed Military Working Group, a consulting group of the heads of UNTAC military forces involved in disarmament and cantonment of warring factions in Cambodia, chaired by Force Commander General John Sanderson.

**NADK** – National Army of Democratic Kampuchea (Khmer Rouge)

**NCR** – Non-Communist Resistance (that is, FUNCINPEC and KPNLF)

**NGC** – National Government of Cambodia (title adopted by CGDK in February 1990 to counter Hun Sen regime’s change of name to SOC, ‘State of Cambodia’)

**P5** - The five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council - Britain, China, France, the Soviet Union and the United States.

**PDK** – People’s Democratic Kampuchea, the name the Khmer Rouge gave themselves

**PICC** – Paris International Conference on Cambodia

**PRK** – People’s Republic of Kampuchea - appellation of the Vietnam-installed Hun Sen regime in Phnom Penh.

**SNC** - Supreme National Council - interim administrative body headed by Prince Norodom Sihanouk and comprising the three anti-PRK factions of the KPNLF, Funcinpec and the Khmer Rouge, plus Hun Sen's SOC.

**SOC** - State of Cambodia, the name adopted by Hun Sen for the government put in place by the Vietnamese following their occupation of Cambodia in December 1978.

**UNAMIC** – United Nations Advance Mission in Cambodia

**UNTAC** - United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia established on 28 February 1992 to oversee the cease-fire, disarmament, and administration of Cambodia pending free and fair elections.

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**Note:** It would be uninformative to footnote every single piece of information obtained from these primary sources. Some cables, records of conversations, memos and despatches are footnoted. But at least 50 folios each have been accumulated over the years of two basic files – Cambodia: Relations with Australia, and Australian-Vietnam Relations. The reader may be assured however that I have combed through all of them, and have footnoted some of the more relevant ones. But unattributed material from these files is still authentic. I have also tried to ensure that dates of all relevant papers are accurately recorded.

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Under the supervision of the United Nations, Cambodia held its first democratic elections on the 23rd May 1993, an event which was hailed as a monumental victory for democracy. Australia played a prominent role in the lead-up. However, optimism that free and fair elections would continue to be held as a matter of course was eroded during the following years, and finally ended following the forced dissolution of Cambodia's major opposition party, the Cambodian National Rescue Party, in 2017.

Reflecting on his own experiences as a diplomat in the Department of External Affairs, Richard Broinowski AO dissects the impact of Australia's contribution to the emergence of contemporary Cambodia. Whilst Australia played a prominent role in supporting the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia to stabilise the region, its efforts to build a lasting democratic system is proving to be in vain.

In this first-hand account, Broinowski strings together archival documents and private conversations with senior officials to recount Australia's role in Cambodia's tumultuous rise and evaluate the future of peace and stability in the country.



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