

មជ្ឈមណ្ឌលឧបកសារកម្ពុជា

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THE KHMER ROUGE IN A COLD WAR CONTEXT

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It's always a pleasure and an honour for me to talk to Cambodians about your history, even when it's a part of your history that is full of brutality and sadness.

Today I want to place the Khmer Rouge movement--and Cambodian history before and since -- inside a wider historical context than its brief time in power. I will be emphasizing the context of the Cold War, and how the pressures of the Cold War helped the Khmer Rouge to come to power and to remain relatively powerful until the 1990s.

The Cold War probably seems pretty faraway to you these days. After all, it came to an end over twenty years ago. Nonetheless, it was a crucial element in world history for almost fifty years beginning in 1946 and ending in the early 1990s. Cambodia was swept into the Cold War and the Khmer Rouge would never have come to power without it, but most non-Communist Cambodians had no desire to be on either side of the conflict, that is to say, they didn't want to be on the of the so called Free World, led by the United States, or on the side of the Sino-Soviet Bloc led by China and the Soviet Union.

In the late 1960s, when the North Vietnamese secretly stationed troops on Cambodian soil, and when the United States began to bomb Vietnamese supply lines inside the country, Cambodia was forced into the Cold War. Under Lon Nol, Cambodia was forced into the Free World. Under Pol Pot and the PRK, it fell first under Chinese and later under Soviet-Vietnamese influence. Cambodia escaped from the Cold War when it ended in 1989-1990. I will be talking about that period as it affected Cambodian history, and how it relates specifically to the Khmer Rouge, so as to place Cambodian history inside a larger context.

Another way of putting Cambodian history into a global context is to ask: Did the Khmer Rouge and Democratic Kampuchea have to happen? Was the Khmer Rouge's rise to power, because of international factors, in some way "inevitable"? I think not, but I will argue today that its rise to power was made more likely by

external events, starting in March 1945, and by the Cold war after that than by anything else.

Historians sometimes play the game of imagining alternative histories, asking what might have happened had certain events not occurred. What would have happened, for instance, if Napoleon had won at Waterloo, or if US President John Kennedy had not been shot?

Before I go on to discuss the relationship between the Khmer Rouge and the Cold War I want to ask one of these "what if" questions: what would have happened in Cambodian history if the Japanese had not given power to local authorities in Indo-China on March 9, 1945?

This half-forgotten event, which took place a year or so before the Cold War began, was extremely important for the states of French Indo-China. Cambodia was one of these, and I believe that The Khmer Rouge might never have come to power had the events of March 9, 1945 and the next six months not occurred. The Cold War began a few months later, so the picture is complicated, but March 9 marked a crucial turning point in the history of the region.

The events of March 1945 in turn, depended on a sequence of previous events. These included the Japanese occupation of Indo-China, beginning in 1941, France's humiliating defeat by Germany in 1940 and the organizational skills and political energy of the Indo-China Communist Party (ICP) founded by Ho Chi Minh in 1930.

The ICP was a secret, highly organized, idealistic and illegal party, whose objectives were to remove the French from power and impose a Marxist- Leninist regime on what the ICP called the feudal states of Indo-China. In March 1945, many of the Party's leaders has been imprisoned by the French while the Party's leader, Ho Chi Minh and his poorly armed followers were bottled up in the mountains of North Vietnam. The chances of their seizing power at that point seemed very poor. After March 9, the fortunes of the ICP changed dramatically and what the Party did had a strong influence on later Cambodian history,

But first, I need to provide a little background

In 1940, after France had been defeated by Germany, the French were powerless to resist Japanese military expansion into French Indo-China, and its officials on the spot chose not to do so -- in contrast later on, to the British in Burma and Malaya, the Americans in the Philippines and the Dutch in Indonesia. With Japanese permission, French authorities remained in command of the day-to-day

administration in Indo-China even though Japanese forces were stationed on French Indo-Chinese soil.

In early 1941, following a brief war between Thailand and France where France had been defeated on land and the Thai had been defeated at sea; the Japanese arbitrated a peace treaty between the two countries that was advantageous to the Thai. The provinces of Battambang and Siem Reap (but not the ruins of Angkor), as well as parts of Laos, were taken over by the Thai.

For the next four years the French and the Japanese lived in a fragile, uncomfortable alliance that was humiliating to the French. By the end of 1944, it was probably clear to the Japanese that they were going to lose the war. In France, meanwhile, the newly established government of Charles de Gaulle wanted to take part in the Pacific War, without having any troops to send into the region, and established a secret, ineffective resistance movement in Indo-China. The Japanese were aware of these developments. They also feared an Allied invasion, and, as proud Asian nationalists they hated the idea of Europeans coming back to restore colonialism. The Japanese followed a policy of "Asia for Asians" which attracted support among local people throughout the region, although in French Indo-China, where the French had repressed nationalists, and especially the ICP, the party that the French viewed as a genuine threat, nationalism was still relatively weak, and political parties did not exist. There were none in Cambodia before 1946.

On March 9, 1945, the Japanese authorities took the French completely by surprise. They staged a coup de force, imprisoning French officials and military personnel. They advise each of the region's local leaders (the Vietnamese emperor, the King of Laos and 23 year old King Norodom Sihanouk) to declare independence.

Over the next few months, the Japanese released all of the political prisoners-- many of them members of the ICP- from colonial prisons. Most of these revolutionaries quickly took up political struggle, especially in northern Vietnam, without any fear of being arrested.

At this time, ICP guerrillas, no longer threatened by French military forces, moved out of their mountain hiding places along the Chinese border and peacefully took control of large stretches of northern Vietnam. The Japanese did nothing to prevent this and in September 1945, after the Japanese had formally surrendered to the Allies in Japan and while French forces Indo-China were still interned, the Ho Chi Minh declared at a mass meeting in Hanoi that Vietnam was now truly independent, and not independent as a gift of the Japanese. The regime that had been established by the Vietnamese emperor, Bao Dai, resigned almost immediately. Arming themselves with Japanese weapons, the new, ICP-dominated regime was prepared to negotiate with the French from a position of strength.

In Cambodia, the situation in the months after the Japanese coup de force was less clear. No political party existed that could declare complete independence, and King Sihanouk, then only twenty-three years old, was not prepared to take such a drastic step on his own. Instead the patriot Son Ngoc Thanh, the Japanese-installed prime minister, tried for a time to maintain Cambodia's fragile independence, without funds or weapons, He was unable to do so. The French returned in force to southern Vietnam in October 1945 and released the officials and military personnel who had been interned by the Japanese. They swiftly arrested Son Ngoc Thanh. Sihanouk, perhaps reluctantly, perhaps not, welcomed the French return,

If the Japanese had not staged the March 9 1945 coup, the French would have remained in control of Indo-China until the end of World War II. If this had been the case, Vietnam could never have declared its independence so forcibly and the Cambodian independence movement (to say nothing of the Khmer Rouge) would have taken more time to develop. It's also possible and that other, non-Communist roads to independence might have opened up.

But of course the March 9 coup did occur, and the events that followed from it were almost, but not quite, inevitable.

At the end of 1945 the French knew that they had to make concessions in Indo-China, at least for the time being, when they had so few troops on the ground. Many Cambodians --including King Sihanouk-- had enjoyed a brief a taste of independence, however, and sensed, after March 9, that the French were not as invulnerable as they had always seemed to be. The seeds of independence had been planted. Faced with this new situation, France negotiated cautiously with Cambodia for a new relationship between the two countries.

In early 1946, the French agreed to allow political parties to form in Cambodia, a constitution (Cambodia's first) to be written, and a National Assembly to be elected. The mildly anti-French Democrat Party, formed at the time, won elections in 1946 and 1947| this momentum distressed the French, even though the Democrats had no real power. The French were in charge of all expenditures in the kingdom, after all, and the Democrats had no guns.

The new constitution was modelled on the French constitution (the only one Cambodians had ever seen) and allowed for a relatively weak chief of state and a supposedly powerful national assembly but all real power remained in French hands, French. In 1945-1949, Cambodia was still very far from independence and the French faced very little armed opposition. King Sihanouk, although powerless, did not feel threatened by these arrangements, primarily because he enjoyed string French support.

In another development, toward the end of World War II Thailand, whose leaders had always opposed to the French protectorate, sheltered some Cambodian nationalists and had sponsored a non-Communist Cambodian independence movement known as the Khmer Issarak. The movement was small, without leadership, and lacked weapons--unlike the Communists in northern Vietnam. The movement couldn't associate itself with the new, Democrat- dominated government in Phnom Penh whose leaders hoped to achieve independence more gradually and without armed struggle. In any case, over the next few years its Thai patrons abandoned the movement and many of its members especially in eastern Cambodia joined the ICP-led resistance to the French.

In the meantime, the Cold War had begun, Soon after World War II; Communist parties supported by the Soviet Union had seized power in several countries in Eastern Europe, and threatened to come to power in parts of Western Europe as well. The French Communist party was the largest and most powerful in the region. The United States, calling itself the leader of the Free World, was fearful of a Communist victory in France, and viewed the Cold War as a global confrontation between good and evil. Their almost religious reading of the situation seemed to be justified when the Communists seized power in China in 1949 and when this action was followed, in June 1950, by a Communist invasion of southern Korea.

The Communist victory in China soon changed the character of the First Indo China War, which had broken out between the French and resistance movements throughout Indo-China, and especially in northern Vietnam, at the end of 1946. For several years the French had the military advantage, but after 1949 China increasingly provided shelter, weapons and support for the Vietnamese resistance. In 1950 the Vietnamese began to stage and win set battles against the French.

In 1949, in the context of these developments, the French were able to convince US officials that the First Indo-China War was not primarily a war of colonial oppression but was a crucial part of the global war against Communism. The United States, angered at what they called the "loss" of China agreed to provide extensive military aid to the French, but only through the Indo-Chinese states. At the end of 1949, the French agreed, and granted what Sihanouk later called "50% independence" to Cambodia, Laos, and the components of Vietnam. Genuine power over finance, defence and foreign affairs remained in the hands of the French.

With hindsight an important aspect of these arrangements, unnoticed at the time, was that the Cambodian Ministry of Education came under local control, and the moderately anti-French Democrat Party was able to prepare the lists of students who would be sent on scholarships to France. The pro-Democrat students named in

1949-1952 included Pol Pot, Son Sen, Ieng Sary, and Khieu Samphan, who all became members of the French Communist Party, as well as many others who never did so.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, along the eastern border of Cambodia, Vietnamese Communist guerrillas or Viet Minh recruited many young Khmer to help them in what they saw as an Indo-Chinese struggle -- rather than a purely Cambodian one -- against the French. In 1951, just as the war began to go badly for the French the Vietnamese helped to found the Khmer People's Revolutionary Party (KPRP). Its leaders were Khmer who were fluent in Vietnamese.

Thus, if we consider the students in Paris as genuine patriots anxious to remove the French from power (even though they later did many murderous things!) We can see that by the early 1950s there were three Cambodian streams of opposition to France. One of these, which were controlled by Vietnam, was concentrated in the eastern part of the country, and drew its support largely from poor peasants. A second stream, which became important later, was among Communist students in France, and ironically was more nationalistic, and more anti-Vietnamese, than the Cambodians who were actually fighting the French. The third, more peaceable stream included the Democrats in Cambodia and others, including King Sihanouk who wanted to gain independence from France without resorting to armed struggle. The first two streams--the one supported by Vietnam and the one containing Cambodians who had become Communists in France- were intimately linked to the Cold War. The third one was not--or can we say: not yet? If we notice that there was no royalist nationalist "stream" before 1955, yet, we can see the ancestors of the four political groupings that emerged from the Paris Agreements of 1991.

Most of the fighting in the First Indo-China war took place in northern Vietnam, so the supporters of the KPRP gained little combat experience. However many of them received political training from Vietnamese- trained cadre who convinced them that a Communist state would be preferable to a royal one. The Communist students in France agreed, but hoped that such a state would be independent of Vietnamese control. Both strands of resistance had responded to foreign influences -- from the ICP in Indo China and from the French Communist Party in France. The more peaceable strand responded to conditions inside Cambodia, and had not yet been affected by the Cold War--except by the fact that the Cold War had made the French give the Democrats more power in 1949.

As the war went badly for the French, and as the Democrats consolidated their political power in Phnom Penh, King Sihanouk boldly decided to strike out on his own. In 1952-3 his vigorous, well-orchestrated and beautifully timed royal crusade for independence led the French to grant independence to Cambodia at the end of 1953, and led many Cambodians to believe that the King had achieved this result

single-handed. In a sense these people were correct for France would never have negotiated Cambodia's independence with the Democrats, whom they distrusted, or with the Vietnamese-dominated KPRP.

In the summer of 1954, after the battle of Dienbienphu, the First Indo China war ended as a humiliating defeat for the French. Because non-Communist leaders in Vietnam and Laos had not been able to wrest freedom from France, however, they had far less leverage than the Cambodian delegation enjoyed at the Geneva Conference convened to end the war. The Cambodian delegation was able to press for many concessions from France and the Vietnamese Communists at Geneva. These concessions served Cambodia well for the next fifteen years.

In the aftermath of the French defeat, the United States established a regional anti-Communist alliance, called SEATO that the Americans hoped would prevent further Communist victories in the region. Unfortunately for the United States only two Southeast Asian countries, Thailand and the Philippines, joined the alliance.

In 1955, King Sihanouk riding a wave of popularity in Cambodia, attended the conference of supposedly non-aligned nations at Bandung in Indonesia where he befriended the Chinese leader Zhou En Lai, India's Nehru, Indonesia's Sukarno and other world leaders. He quickly became convinced that a non-aligned foreign policy that would remove Cambodia from the playing an active role in Cold War -would benefit his country far more than an alliance either with the so called Free World or with the Soviet Bloc.

For as long as Sihanouk was in power, he happily accepted foreign aid from as many countries as offered it--although he rejected aid from the United States after 1963. Domestically he was especially harsh with opponents on the left. As a result, and the Cambodian Communist movement, as we shall see, remained small and fractured for many years. By making friends with powers on both sides of the Cold War and accepting assistance from them, Sihanouk and Cambodia, ironically, were beneficiaries of the Cold War, before they became its victims.

Sihanouk was able to put his ideas to work later in 1955 when he abdicated the throne and formed a political movement, the Sangkum Reastr Niyum. Sangkum candidates, hand-picked by the Prince, swept the elections for the National Assembly in 1955. The buoyant and energetic ex-monarch became a politically effective head of state.

I believe that Sihanouk's neutral policy, and his attempt to stand aside from the Cold War, made sense for Cambodia, as long as participants in the Cold War, including North Vietnam and the United States, left Cambodia alone. Sihanouk's neutrality depended on the good will of larger, more belligerent powers. When,

starting in the mid 1960s it was in the interests of these powers to ignore or override Cambodian neutrality, time began to run out for the Prince and for the Khmer. In the meantime, it is hard to see what other choices Sihanouk could have made. An alliance with the United States, and with his hostile neighbours South Vietnam and Thailand, would certainly have accelerated Cambodia's participation in the Second Indo-China War. See would an open alliance with North Vietnam.

On the other hand, while Sihanouk always tried his best to extricate Cambodia from the Cold War, it eventually overwhelmed his country, and I would argue that without the Second Indo-China War (1959-1975) the Khmer Rouge would never have come to power. It's also unlikely that Sihanouk would have been deposed.

To give you some idea of the outside forces at play in Cambodia in the early 1960s, when the kingdom was an "island of peace" and when Sihanouk was immensely popular, I'll insert a personal note at this point,

I first became interested in Cambodia 52 years ago, in 1959, when I volunteered for Khmer language training in Washington DC. I was then a low ranking member of the American diplomatic service. I thought Cambodia would be an interesting place to work, and it certainly was.

When I worked in the American Embassy in Phnom Penh, between 1960 and 1962, American policy toward Cambodia was based on the Cold War; which is to say on attempting to arrest the progress of Communism throughout the world and specifically in Southeast Asia. A country, the Americans declared, was either for us, or against us. Cambodia was confusing, because it was neither!

The Second Indo China War has not begun in earnest, but the United States felt that it had to hold the line against Communism in South Vietnam, and to do so it preferred its Cold War allies in Saigon and Bangkok to the independent -minded and therefore unreliable Prince Sihanouk in Phnom Penh. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the Prince was not fond the United States, largely because the pro-American regimes in Saigon and Bangkok both wanted to remove him forcibly from power and also because the only Western country he had ever liked, or made an effort to understand was France,

Outside of the Cold War framework, the years when I worked in Phnom Penh - although I had no effect in anything that was happening there--were good years for Cambodia. They probably marked the high point of Sihanouk's popularity. Cambodia seemed to many people, myself included, to be a genuine 'island of peace' in an increasingly disorderly world, and the possibility that the Prince would be removed

from power either by a pro- American coup or by a Communist revolution were so remote as to be unimaginable.

But since both of these events happened in the 1970s we need to turn our attention back to the Khmer Rouge, about whom almost nothing was known in the years when I was working in Phnom Penh.

The last we saw of Pol Pot was in 1952, when he was joining the Communist Party in Paris. He came back to Cambodia in 1953, after failing all of his examinations, and spent a brief time in the Vietnamese-dominated resistance, where he was accepted as a member of the ICP and worked closely with a Cambodian KPRP cadre named Tou Samouth. Because Pol Pot came home sooner than his Communist colleagues in France, he gained an important foothold in the Cambodian Communist movement, especially because of his close association with Tou Samouth.

In the late 1950s, Pol Pot married a fellow radical nationalist named Khieu Ponnary and began to teach in a private school, while secretly carrying out Communist Party work. The Party in those days was small, disorganized, poorly financed, and harassed by Sihanouk's police.

Most of the men and women who had fought alongside the Vietnamese in the First Indo - China War resumed their lives after Cambodia gained its independence. The Cambodian Communist movement became, for the first time, largely an urban phenomenon, cut off from the countryside and from the movement's rural supporters. North Vietnam was not yet willing to sponsor armed struggle in South Vietnam and had not yet reactivated its old networks inside Cambodia. For local Communists in South Vietnam and Cambodia the 1950s and early 1960s were a dangerous, disillusioning period that coincided in Cambodia, as we have seen, with a high tide of Sihanouk's popularity, skill and self-confidence as chief of state. By repressing Communists in Cambodia and making friends with China, the Prince was sure he could keep Cambodia from being taken over by the Communists and also out of the war in Vietnam,

To be fair to the Prince, he could not foresee the ferocity of the Second Indo-China War which more than anything else ended his years in power and led in 1975 to the victory of the Khmer Rouge.

Although Pol Pot and most of his colleagues in the clandestine Communist leadership managed to escape the attention of Sihanouk's police, they were shaken when Tou Samouth the secretary of the party disappeared in 1962 and was presumed to have been killed. Pol Pot took his place and in the following year and fearing arrest, took refuge, with several associates in a Vietnamese Communist military base near Memot on the border with Vietnam. He stayed there for two

years. Surprisingly, perhaps he never gave up hope. In 1965 he was summoned to Hanoi for consultations. Probably connected with the intensifying conflict in South Vietnam. He travelled north for several months, largely on foot, happy that the North Vietnamese had recognized him as secretary of the Cambodian party, and looking forward to sharing his revolutionary ideas with his opposite numbers in Hanoi.

In fact the North Vietnamese authorities had little interest in the ideas of the Cambodian party. Instead, were eager to reinstate Cambodian co-operation for their military efforts and to protect their supply routes that ran through "neutral" Laos and Cambodia into the battlefields of South Vietnam. In other words, they wanted to reestablish the alliance they had forged with rural Cambodians in the First Indo-China War.

By this time, Sihanouk had broken relations with the United States and had made friendly gestures toward the Communist Vietnamese, whom he believed were going to be victorious in South Vietnam. Like Pol Pot, and much less willingly, he was being drawn inexorably into the battlefields of the Cold War.

Over the years, with his fellow Communists, Pol Pot had developed an ambitious and radical revolutionary program for their Party. Among other things the program involved inaugurating armed struggle against Sihanouk and destroying what the Communists saw as the "feudal" and oppressive character of Khmer society.

When Pol Pot reached Hanoi, he presented the program his opposite number, the secretary of the Vietnamese Workers' Party, Le Duan, who told him bluntly that the Cambodian program was unsatisfactory because it ignored the international aspects and obligations of Communism in general and the Cambodian revolution in particular. The program ignored the Communists' alliance with North Vietnam. Le Duan told Pol Pot to subordinate his party and its program to Vietnamese priorities, and to delay armed struggle until the North Vietnamese had defeated South Vietnam and United States. Although he may not have mentioned the issue to Pol Pot, Duan probably also wanted to protect the secret agreements that the Vietnamese Communists had recently reached with Sihanouk, whereby they were allowed to station troops inside Cambodia and move supplies through the kingdom in exchange for causing no harm to the population and agreeing to honour Cambodia's frontiers. Pol Pot's reaction to Le Duan's criticism is not recorded, but his sense of humiliation and resentment is easy to imagine.

To be fair to Sihanouk, there is no way he could have refused the Vietnamese demands, and he probably believed that by entering into these secret arrangements before American power in the region became too overwhelming he would be able to keep Cambodia out of the war and to benefit from Vietnamese friendship after the Communists had won.

In early 1966 Pol Pot travelled from Hanoi to China, which was then on the eve of the Cultural Revolution. Officials there told him that China supported revolutions throughout the world that did not emphasize international socialist aspects and obligations, but responded instead to conditions inside each individual country. In other words, China seemed to support revolutions like the one that Pol Pot had in mind. Because China was still formally allied to Sihanouk, however, Pol Pot's visit was kept secret and the officials who met him had to be discreet. They could hardly offer him the same levels of friendship and armed support as they did in the 1970s.

Nonetheless, Pol Pot probably saw that there would be greater advantages for him and for his radical idea of revolution, when the circumstances allowed, to be allied with China than to remain subordinate to Vietnam. When he returned home, he established his headquarters in the north-eastern part of the country, where he still enjoyed the protection of Vietnamese Communist troops but no longer lived under day-to-day Vietnamese supervision. Over the next two years (1966-1968) he gathered support and refined his program. At the same time, he and his colleagues did not yet feel confident enough to inaugurate armed struggle, at least without Vietnamese approval and assistance, on the surface at least it looked as if the Khmer Rouge remained obedient to Vietnam.

In this same period, the political landscape in Cambodia was changing, to Sihanouk's disadvantage. For many reasons, governing Cambodia more or less single-handed was becoming increasingly difficult for Sihanouk. The economy was faltering. Cambodia was isolated from the region, and members of the Cambodian elite, especially in Phnom Penh, were becoming impatient with Sihanouk's highly personal style of rule. Next door, the fighting threatened to spill over into Cambodia and some members of the elite and officers in the army, including General Lon Nol, were unhappy with the way that Sihanouk seemed to favour Communist countries over the United States.

In the National Assembly elections in 1966 all the candidates, as usual, were members of the Sangkum. However the elections were the first ones since independence for which Sihanouk had not handpicked the candidates. As a result the ones who took office after the election owed nothing to the Prince, and in some cases ran without his support. As evidence of Sihanouk's growing unpopularity among the elite, for example, some members of the Assembly whom Sihanouk disliked, including the Communists Khieu Samphan and Hu Nim and the pro-Western ex-Democrat, Douc Rays, regained their seats with increased majorities. Always adept at assessing his position, but incapable of leaving the scene, Sihanouk began to lose confidence in 1967 and spent more and more of his time making films.

In February 1968, as Vietnamese troops poured out of their Cambodian sanctuaries to take part in the Tet Offensive in South Vietnam, the Khmer Rouge

inaugurated armed struggle by capturing a police station and its weapons in rural Battambang. Over the next year scattered skirmishes took place in the Cambodian countryside between Khmer Rouge guerrillas and the Cambodian army. The development alarmed Prince Sihanouk, who knew he had already lost the confidence of the urban elite. He had always assumed that the "Khmer Rouge" as he called them, were subordinate to the Vietnamese, who now seemed to be betraying their secret alliance with him by unleashing their "puppets."

Edging away from his former policies the Prince reinstated diplomatic relations with the United States, secretly allowed the Americans to bomb the Ho Chi Minh Trail and appointed the conservative anti-Communist Lon Nol, as the new prime minister. In 1969, in an effort keep his Cold War account balanced, Sihanouk was the only chief of state to attend Chi Minh's funeral in Hanoi.

These sensible moves came too late to avert disaster, but it is impossible to imagine a scenario in which Cambodia, under Sihanouk or anyone else could have opted out of the Second Indo-China War or, more widely the Cold War in which it had no genuine interest. Cambodians didn't want to be part of the Free World or part of the Communist Bloc, Understandably they wanted to be Cambodians living lives that made sense to them.

Instead we can say that Cambodia was crushed by the forces released by the Cold War, and also that it has revived not only thanks to the resilience common sense and energy of its people but also because the Cold War came to an end.

Meanwhile, in the United States, Richard Nixon, a Cold War figure par excellence, had come to office as President. He pledged to end the Second Indo-China War in what he thought would be an honourable way. While he continued the negotiations with the North Vietnamese that had been opened under President Lyndon Johnson, he also believed, for reasons that remain obscure, that Cambodia was in some sense the "key" to America's future strategy in Indo-China. This miscalculation had disastrous long-term effects.

In March 1970, while he was travelling in Europe, Prince Sihanouk was voted out of office as Cambodia's chief of state by the National Assembly. The coup was the climax of a long history of disaffection with the Prince on the part of Cambodia's urban elite. The coup quickly met with approval from the United States, which was eager to have an ally at this stage in the Second Indo-China War. I don't think it occurred to anyone in the United States that such an alliance would be ruinous for Cambodia, because your country was a chess piece, not a chess player in the Cold War, and the United States walked away from it when the game was lost.

In effect, = the coup was a death warrant for Cambodia as an "island of peace" and Prime Minister Lon Nol's request soon afterwards that all Vietnamese troops leave Cambodia immediately was hopelessly naïve. The Vietnamese troops were there, as they had been since 1964, to "liberate" South Vietnam. As a nation and its interests as a nation were of no concern to them.

The blame for what happened from then on (as far as the Cambodian people are concerned) can be shared by the North Vietnamese, the United States, the Khmer Republic and the Khmer Rouge but the war that was set in motion by the coup also depended to a large extent on the decisions that Sihanouk made when, after hearing of the coup in Moscow, he sought refuge in Beijing and decided to declare war in the new regime in Phnom Penh.

Almost as soon as his plane landed, Sihanouk's old friend Zhou Enlai, the Chinese prime minister, promised to return the Prince to power. The North Vietnamese Prime Minister, Pham van Dong, soon seconded the promise, which was visiting Beijing, and Political backing from China and open-ended military support from North Vietnam were very pleasing to Sihanouk. The new alliance also legitimised the Khmer Rouge, who now had access to Vietnamese weapons and military training. They also capitalized on the "treason" of the coup to claim, in the Cambodian countryside, that they were devoted to Sihanouk and wanted to restore him as chief of state. This propaganda gained them thousands of recruits and international support in anti-American circles.

For the next five years Cambodia was a battlefield in the second Indo-China War-- precisely the fate that Sihanouk, fully aware of Cambodia's military weakness, had tried so hard to avoid during his years in power. In 1970-1972 the Khmer Rouge forces benefited enormously from Vietnamese weapons training and support. Meanwhile, North Vietnamese forces were able to inflict stinging defeats on Lon Nol's poorly trained and poorly led forces.

What would have happened if Sihanouk had not entered into what turned out to be such an unholy alliance? The war between the Lon Nol regime and the North Vietnamese would certainly have continued and intensified and US involvement was unavoidable. In fact, sad to say, once the machinery of war had set in motion, nothing Sihanouk did or might have done made any difference. Cambodia slipped out of his hands--once he placed the country in other peoples' hands-- and fell into the Cold War.

The Khmer Rouge, when they came to power, wanted to present them as a purely Cambodian revolution, owing nothing to foreign help or inspiration. In doing so, the Khmer Rouge leaders denied their long associations with Vietnam and their developing alliance with China. They to place themselves in a global context,

although for the next three years it became clear that China saw the Khmer Rouge as a counter-weight to the pro-Soviet regime that had taken power in Vietnam in 1975. Once again Cambodia, without wanting to do so, had become a pawn on the Cold War chessboard.

China encouraged the Khmer Rouge to be hostile to Vietnam, but never provided troops or air support once war broke out between Cambodia and Vietnam.

After 1979, China and the United States, allied against the Soviet Union, continued to support the Khmer Rouge membership in the UN --the only government in exile to be so honoured. Meanwhile, the new, Vietnamese regime in Phnom Penh received very little foreign assistance and as a result recovered slowly from the damage inflicted by the civil war and by the traumas of the Khmer Rouge period.

Cambodia didn't emerge from the Cold War until the Cold War ended in 1989-90, over twenty years ago. Norodom Sihanouk did his best to keep Cambodia removed from the Cold War. First the North Vietnamese, and then the United States, did not allow this to happen. Later on, Lon Nol and Pol Pot, participants in the Cold War, thought that their alliances with the United States and China would be sufficiently powerful to prevent defeat. The alliances were not, and two successive regimes were removed from power against their will. The PRK, seen from the perspectives of the Cold War was treated as satellite of the Soviet Union rather than as a country that needed foreign support and membership in the UN.

Speaking in 2011, I see no virtues stemming to Cambodia from the Cold War, which was enormously expensive in terms of human lives, expenditures, and physical destruction. A renewal of these antagonisms, on a global scale, is difficult to imagine, but if there are lessons for Cambodia to learn from the Cold War one lesson would be not to become too closely allied with any single country, for fear of having to serve that country's national interests, rather than to serve the interests of the Cambodian people. In terms of the damage and entanglements brought to Cambodia by the Cold War, none of Cambodian history before 1990 is worth repeating, but it is equally important for you not forget it, any more than we should ever forget the dark history of the Khmer Rouge regime, that is so ably set out in the volume we will be discussing and studying over the next few days and weeks.

Thanks very much

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