

Diplomat
December 1, 2018

Vietnam's Invasion of Cambodia, Revisited

Forty years after the invasion that toppled the Khmer Rouge, it's clear that China emerged the ultimate winner.

By Nayan Chanda

On the morning of January 7, 1979 a small unit of the Vietnamese army swept into Phnom Penh virtually without firing a shot and ended the violent reign of the Khmer Rouge. It also dealt a heavy blow to China. The Vietnamese victory, however, turned out to be hollow, literally and metaphorically.

Hours earlier, the leaders of Democratic Kampuchea had fled the capital's wide coconut tree-lined boulevards. The rumble of Vietnamese tanks and jeeps echoed from the abandoned buildings forcibly evacuated four years before when the Khmer Rouge had swept into power. Small numbers of Khmer Rouge cadres, soldiers, and families who camped out in the ghost city had been rushed to the station to cling to a train leaving for Battambang. The train carried Pol Pot's brother-in-law Ieng Sary and other senior officials. There were decomposing bodies on the street but most overpowering was the stench of rotting fish. Residents would have no chance to savor the precious catch, piled high and abandoned, from the annual fishing season on the Tonle Sap.

The smelly shell of a capital devoid of inhabitants that the Vietnamese army took over in 1979 could not have been more different from the bustling Saigon that Hanoi troops had stormed into four years before – ironically, days after the Khmer Rouge took over Phnom Penh. On April 30, 1975 I watched North Vietnamese tanks crash through the gates of the presidential palace and raise the communist flag. Ironically, the North Vietnamese colonel Bui Tin, who was present at the palace to take the surrender of the last president of South Vietnam, found himself in Phnom Penh four years later too. But this time there was no surrender to receive. He hovered over the abandoned capital in a helicopter.

The first Vietnamese disappointment came five days earlier, when a Vietnamese sapper unit's attempt to kidnap Prince Norodom Sihanouk, who has been under house arrest since 1976, was foiled. The alarmed Khmer Rouge, who had kept the prince confined in a small corner of the palace, hurriedly put him in a car to drive to the northern town of Battambang. Then-Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach told me that the Vietnamese had been planning to “liberate”

Sihanouk and place him at the head of a Cambodian liberation front. Chinese leaders, who had unsuccessfully pushed the Khmer Rouge to free Sihanouk from house arrest and build a broad-based nationalist government, now had their chance.

With the Democratic Kampuchean government not quite toppled (albeit withdrawing from the capital) it was now time to snatch Sihanouk out of Phnom Penh and present him to the United Nations as the representative of a wronged country. On the evening of January 5, Sihanouk, back in Phnom Penh from Battambang, was taken for his first meeting with Prime Minister Pol Pot. “From now on if you want to go to China very often, you can do that,” he told a stunned Sihanouk, calling himself “your servant.” As Sihanouk recounted to me later, he was told, “You are free. If you come back, you will be very warmly welcomed.” Sihanouk could only stutter. “Oh, really? Thank you very much.”

In the afternoon of January 6, as the Vietnamese army was closing in on Phnom Penh, Sihanouk was driven to the airport in the hope that a Chinese evacuation flight would still be able to land. As instructed, Sihanouk and his wife Monique carried two bags: one with suits to wear in Manhattan and a second backpack stuffed with tinned food, khaki shirts, pajamas, Cambodian *kramas* (scarves), and Ho Chi Minh sandals. With cannon fire sounding increasingly close to Pochentong airport, the Chinese civil aviation Boeing 707 touched down. As dusk fell, a grateful and tearful Sihanouk, as well as some 150 lucky passengers on board the Boeing, took off for Beijing.

Phnom Penh’s fall to the invading Vietnamese forces after barely two weeks of fighting was a shock, but not a total surprise. The preparation for a showdown had been going on for more than a year. On December 31, 1977 the Pol Pot regime had broken off diplomatic relations with Vietnam. Although it was secret at the time, in January 1978 the Vietnamese Politburo decided to start preparations for the removal of the Pol Pot regime. A string of murderous attacks on Vietnamese villages along the border, though hidden from public eyes by the Vietnamese, only added to the urgency of the preparations. In 1978, the Vietnamese leadership decided to lift the veil over this border war with its erstwhile comrades, which was taking hundreds of lives.

While on a trip to Saigon in March 1978, I was shaken out of my bed early one morning by my Vietnamese foreign ministry minder. I was rushed to the airport where I found myself with two other foreign correspondents on a rusting Chinook helicopter with missing window panes. At the order of a top Vietnamese leader, we were flown to Ha Tien in the southern tip of Vietnam. As we walked to the village a wafting stench told us what to expect. It was still a revolting sight. Fifteen men, women, and children, battered to death by the Khmer Rouge, lay strewn about their

thatched huts. The explanation for the grisly attack was on the mud walls of a hut, where someone had scrawled with charcoal in Khmer “this is our country.”

Traveling the length of the border, we saw similar scenes of devastation. In camps for Khmer refugees who had been brought in by the Vietnamese we also saw signs of preparation of a “liberation” force. Vietnam clearly was getting ready for war. Hints of how the war might unfold on the Cambodian side of the border were beginning to appear.

In November 1978, during a routine lunch in Hong Kong, a well-placed Chinese source quietly dropped a bombshell. The Vietnamese are about to invade Cambodia, he said, and when they do the Khmer Rouge will again retreat to the jungle to engage in guerrilla war. I published an article summarizing this plan, “Pol Pot Eyes the Jungle Again” (December 15, 1978), in the *Far Eastern Economic Review (FEER)*. In November, Chinese Vice Premier Wang Dongxing visited Cambodia to advise Pol Pot on what, in retrospect, appears to have been a prescient course. As the *FEER* reported, Wang argued that by abandoning the capital in the face of Vietnamese and insurgent attacks Cambodians would not only underline Hanoi's “aggressive designs” to its worried Southeast Asian neighbors, but would also eventually defeat the Vietnamese by bogging them down in a costly guerrilla war.

Although Pol Pot did not agree with the recommendation, his hand was forced by the Vietnamese blitzkrieg in late December. As a Chinese diplomat later reported, a panicked Khmer Rouge official came to the Chinese embassy on the evening of January 2 to urge a thousand-odd personnel to pack up and leave for Battambang within an hour. Ambassador Sun Hao ordered all cables and documents to be destroyed and the embassy sign taken down.

A long convoy of trucks and cars carrying diplomats and other personnel set out at night. It was the beginning of a jungle odyssey for dozens of Chinese diplomats, headed by the ambassador. Since the envoys of the People's Republic of China were supposed to be where the center of government was, Chinese diplomats wandered through the rainforest of western Cambodia for 61 days, sleeping in thatched huts and eating canned food. The itinerant existence of the diplomats ended when the Vietnamese mustered their forces to clear the forest quarters. On the afternoon of April 11, 1979, a bedraggled and tearful Chinese ambassador and seven of his colleagues quietly slipped into Thailand. For the first time, representatives of the Middle Kingdom fled in disgrace from what was once a tributary kingdom.

But this was only the beginning of a new phase. The Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia brought global condemnation. Beijing had Hanoi in a vice. China's long game involved ignoring the genocide that might have taken over 1 million lives (on being told about the killing fields I had seen in Cambodia, Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Han Nianlong told me the Khmer Rouge

made “serious mistakes”); keeping alive a rump Khmer Rouge regime as a legitimate government in the UN; and mobilizing international opinion against Vietnam. The goal was to isolate Hanoi diplomatically, punish it economically, and bleed the occupation force by arming an anti-Vietnamese guerrilla army.

Ieng Sary, who had escaped to Thailand and arrived in Beijing, held a meeting with Deng Xiaoping and other senior leaders on January 15. Deng had just returned from a secret trip to Thailand, where he had arranged with the Thai Prime Minister Kriangsak Chomanan for the delivery of Chinese supplies to the Khmer Rouge. But the leaders read Ieng Sary the riot act. If they wanted Chinese help they would have to embrace Sihanouk as their head of state, develop a united front, and fight guerrilla war against the Vietnamese. As a first installment, Beijing deposited \$5 million with the Chinese embassy in Bangkok to defray the Khmer Rouge’s expenses.

During the dozen years of confrontation with Vietnam that ensued on the battlefield via proxies and in the international diplomatic fora, China doggedly pursued the course it had laid down in secret meetings in Beijing and Thailand. Chinese strategy bore fruit in September 1990 when Vietnam’s senior leaders secretly flew to Chengdu, China to reach a compromise. Vietnamese troops had already been withdrawn from Cambodia in 1989 under intense diplomatic pressure, including from the Soviet Union, with whom China had achieved détente. Vietnamese leaders who had insisted on never allowing the Khmer Rouge to return to power agreed to power-sharing – paving the way for a UN-led peace settlement in 1991.

The whole conflict had arisen because of the hubris of the Khmer Rouge after what they believed to be their victory against U.S. imperialism. They saw themselves as ready to restore the powerful Angkor empire to its old glory. But their radical vision was opposed by traditional members associated with the Vietnamese Communist Party. Pol Pot and friends suspected the historical enemy, Vietnam, of trying to strangle the new Cambodia. Internal purges and border attacks were pursued despite Chinese advice about moderation and a united front with deposed monarch Norodom Sihanouk. While the Khmer Rouge pressed China for help against Vietnam, a Soviet ally, its advice was quietly ignored.

By the end of 1977, Vietnam, ever suspicious of its own historical enemy, China, concluded that Beijing was trying to catch Vietnam in a pincer with the pugnacious Khmer Rouge attacking from the southwest. Hanoi saw a preemptive offensive against Cambodia as the wisest policy. That massive attack did bring about a swift collapse of the government in Phnom Penh, but thanks to the patient Chinese counterstrategy Vietnam won the battle but lost the war.

Four decades after the Chinese embassy in Phnom Penh was abandoned and exhausted, while Chinese diplomats fled to Thailand, Cambodia has now earned the sobriquet of a Chinese province. Gareth Evans, a former Australian foreign minister who was once involved in peace negotiations for Cambodia, has called the country a “wholly owned subsidiary of China.” Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen, who was long derided by China as a Vietnamese puppet, has emerged as China’s staunchest ally. In another era Hun Sen called China, the backer of the Khmer Rouge, the “root of everything that is evil.” But in 2012 his strong advocacy of China foiled the consensus-bound ASEAN’s attempt to make even an oblique critique of China’s aggressive posture in the South China Sea.

From private airlines to casinos, large beach developments to sugarcane plantations, not to mention a deep water port as part of China’s Belt and Road Initiative, Cambodia’s economic fortune is increasingly intertwined with China’s. Cambodia has emerged as the largest recipient of Chinese loans and grants (over \$10 billion) in Southeast Asia and one of the most important destinations of Chinese investments. The extent of the country’s dependence on China is underlined by the fact that 62 percent of Cambodia’s current debt is owed to China. Plus, Cambodia’s most influential businessman is Fu Xianting, a former officer of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army who, as a *Financial Times* investigation found, has helped to arm and equip Hun Sen’s 3,000-strong private body guard unit.

As the world commemorates the 40th anniversary of the toppling of China-backed Khmer Rouge regime, it is an appropriate occasion to acknowledge the success of ruthless determination and tenacity of Chinese policymakers. They turned defeat into victory.

The Author

- **Nayan Chanda** is author of *Brother Enemy: The War After the War*, (1986), correspondent and editor of the Far Eastern Economic Review, and founding editor of YaleGlobal Online. He is currently Associate Professor of International Relations at Ashoka University, India.