

Thailand's Response to the Cambodian Genocide

by

Dr. Puangthong Rungswasdisab
Research Fellow
Cambodian Genocide Program
Yale University

Text

Yale University
Genocide Studies Program
Ben Kiernan, Director

Yale Center for International and Area Studies
Luce Hall, 34 Hillhouse Avenue
New Haven, CT 06520-8206

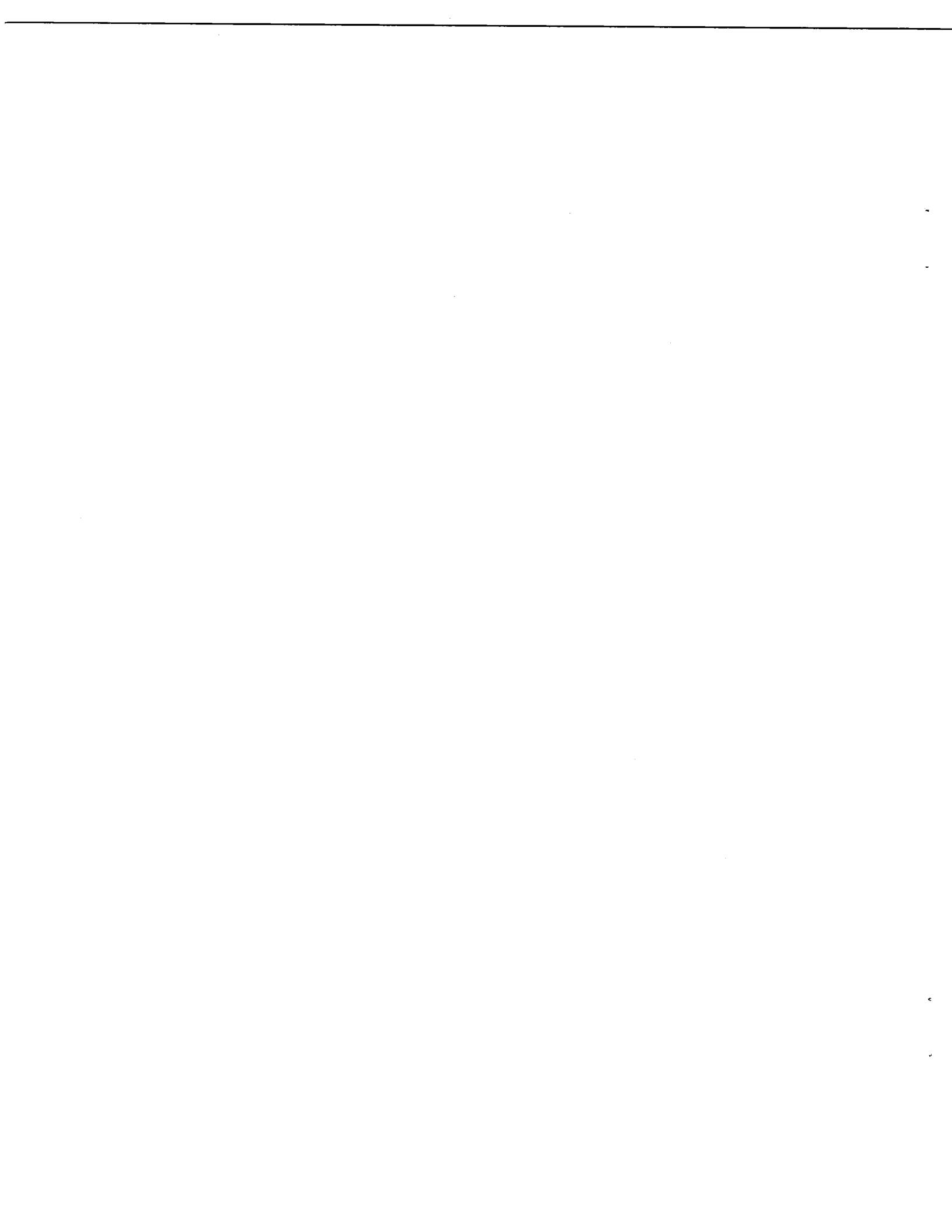


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Introduction

Since the popular uprising of 14 October 1973, which overthrew the military regime of Thanom Kittikachorn and Praphat Jarusathien, Thai society has undergone various changes. Civilian groups, such as the political parties, student, intellectual, media, non-governmental organizations, peasant and labor movements, have been allowed to participate in various aspects of Thai politics. Though democratic development was sporadically interrupted by attempts to restore military rule through several coups, the spirit of the 14 October revolution has continued to develop. The country has become more pluralistic with the growing influence of the business elite and of integration into the world economy. Two decades after the October 14 revolution, further civilian challenges to military interference in politics significantly contributed to the decline of the Thai military's power. Thai society has become a more open society than it was before 1973. It may be said that nowadays political ideas such as "decentralization of power," "bureaucratic reform," "political reform," "public participation," "transparency," etc., have become central to the country's political, social and economic development.

Amidst a stream of public calls for reform of the Thai political system, one aspect has hardly been challenged or questioned by the growing political forces in Thailand. That was the country's foreign policy towards its neighboring countries, in particular the Indochinese states.¹ In this area, decision-making has remained heavily dominated by bureaucrats and military. In fact, it is the only aspect of Thai politics, where one can find a consensus among the foreign policy-makers (the foreign ministry, the National Security Council and the army), some academics and the media. We have hardly heard calls for a rethinking or change of the Thai foreign policy direction. Not to mention the Thai government policy of supporting the Khmer Rouge, which has been strongly criticized internationally. In fact, critics of the government's policy comprised only a small group of academics, and their criticism received little attention from the Thai media. Some appear to have limited their comment to the role and implication of the military in the foreign policy-making process. Their disapproval of the policy on the Cambodian conflict often focused merely on different tactics in negotiations with Vietnam, or the degree to which Thailand should get involved in, and the implications of, this protracted conflict.²

Thus, as Suchit Bunbongkorn and Sukhumbhand Paribatra have pointed out, the power of the military in Thai politics has been significantly challenged since 1973. But developments in foreign affairs in the 1980s, dominated by the Cambodia-Vietnam issue, still served to strengthen the Thai bureaucratic polity in general and the power of the military in particular. The Cambodian conflict allowed the Thai armed forces to

¹ An exception was the period between the 14 October 1973 revolution and the 6 October 1976 coup, when the open political system was operated in Thailand and thus allowed a participation of internal political forces in various governmental policies, including foreign policy. This issue will be discussed in chapter one.

² See several articles in William S. Turley (ed.), *Confrontation or Coexistence: The Future of ASEAN-Vietnam Relations*, Bangkok, Institute of Security and International Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 1985.

monopolize all channels of information concerning border problems and to increase the defense budget as well as to expand its manpower. The Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, in early 1979, reinforced traditional suspicions and fears of Vietnamese imperialist ambition, and catalyzed security concerns. It effectively enhanced the role of bureaucrats, both civilian and military, in the decision-making process because they were considered "specialists". While foreign affairs has been an area in which extra-bureaucratic actors tend to take less interest, criticisms or suggestions from them were usually dismissed as motivated by ignorance or interference.³

Chai-anan Samudavanija has noted that the prolonged Indochina conflict gave the Thai military a justification to exert its role in internal politics by keeping the perceived threat of communism alive in Thai politics, despite its earlier claim of victory over communism. Moreover, the issue of the Indochina conflict and its implications did not receive much attention from political parties. No Thai party included a plank on the Cambodian conflict in its platform, or voiced concern over the government's policy on the issue. The belief that "specialists" had handled the problem effectively appeared to result in a lack of serious attention among the Thai political parties.⁴ They seemed to trust that agencies involved in foreign policy would do their utmost to protect "Thai national interest". Such belief and trust was also shared by the mainstream Thai academics.

Various publications were produced to support the Thai government's policy towards Vietnam and the Cambodian coalition forces of Pol Pot-Sihanouk-Son Sann on the Thai-Cambodian border, with the Institute of Asian Studies at Chulalongkorn University playing a leading role. The Institute's view was expressed in an interview with its director, Khien Theeravit, which appears in its publication on *The Kampuchean Problem in Thai Perspective: Positions and Viewpoints Held by Foreign Ministry Officials and Thai Academics*.⁵ His view was similar to the official view, and even stronger than those of some of the officials. In the closed-door discussion between the foreign ministry officials and the invited academics, which comprises the first section of

³ Suchit Bunbongkorn and Sukhumbhand Paribatra, "Thai Politics and Foreign Policy in the 1980s: Plus ça Change, Plus C'est la Meme Chose?," in Jackson, Karl D. *et al* (eds.), *ASEAN in Regional and Global Context*, Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 1986, pp. 64, 70-75. Also, see Chai-anan Samudavanija and Sukhumbhand Paribatra, "In Search of Balance: Prospects for Stability in Thailand during the Post-CPT Era," in Kusuma Snitwongse and Sukhumbhand Paribatra (eds.), *Durable Stability in Southeast Asia*, Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1987, pp. 194-195.

⁴ Chai-anan Samudavanija, "Implications of a Prolonged Conflict on Internal Thai Politics," in William Turley (ed.), *op.cit.*, pp. 84, 87.

⁵ Institute of Asian Studies, *The Kampuchean Problem in Thai Perspective: Positions and Viewpoints Held by Foreign Ministry Officials and Thai Academics*; Bangkok, Chulalongkorn University, 1985. This book is also available in the Thai version. Also, see some of the Institute's publications in relation to the Cambodian problem: Phuwadol Songprasert and Noppavan Chongvatana, *Thailand: A First Asylum Country for Indochinese Refugees*, 1988; Khien Theeravit, "Conclusion: Problems and Solutions," in Supang Chantavanich and Bruce Reynolds, *Indochinese Refugees: Asylum and Resettlement*, Bangkok, Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 1988. Sumai Phasuk, *Nayobay tangprathet khong thai: sukxa krabuankan kamnot nayobay khong rattaban phol ek chatchai choonhavan to panha kampucha* (Thailand's Foreign Policy: Study of the Decision-making Process Concerning the Cambodian Problem During the Chatchai Choonhavan Government), Bangkok, Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 1998. For some other academic works supporting the Thai government's policy on Cambodian conflict, see Kramol Tongdhamachart, "Thai Perspectives on the Conflict in Kampuchea," in Robert A. Scalapino and Jusuf Wanandi, *Economic, Political, and Security Issues in Southeast Asia in the 1980s*, Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 1982, pp. 75-81.

the book, no academic challenged the wisdom of the Thai government in supporting the Khmer Rouge forces.

Thai academic and media circles seem to have agreed with the military's idea of national security and interest. They did not question the secret nature of the information provided by the concerned government agencies. The Thai public tends to accept that because foreign affairs is highly sensitive and concerned with the national interest the information is to be kept highly confidential among specialists only.⁶

The Thai elite's perceptions of the impact of the Cambodian conflict on national security issues was also a reason why the policy received strong public support. In a 1985 survey of the Thai elite's perceptions, almost all respondents (over 98 percent) saw Vietnam as a threat to Thailand's national security. Vietnam also ranked high in many forms of threat, including direct military invasion, political subversion, undermining of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations's regional solidarity, and support of military aggression by other countries. The majority of respondents (almost 60%) also felt that the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia produced a grave impact on Thailand's security, while 38% saw the impact in a lesser light. Most agreed that the impacts came in various forms, including armed tension along the Thai-Cambodian border, transformation of Kampuchea into a base for threatening Thailand's sovereignty and territorial integrity, aggravation of regional tension and intensification of superpower rivalry in Southeast Asia. In addition, 98% of the respondents rejected the notion of acquiescence to the Vietnamese military occupation in Cambodia as an acceptable outcome. Most of the Thai elite also considered Vietnam's patron, the Soviet Union, a threat to Thailand's security.⁷ The Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia had exacerbated a historical agony between the Thai and the Vietnamese. Both of them had tried to dominate Cambodia and Laos since the eighteenth century.

The attitude of the population of one country towards another is also an important basis for its foreign policy. The standard text books on Thai history, at both school and university levels, usually begin with the migration of the Thai race from the North to the Chaophraya River basin, where the *Khom*, or Khmer, had earlier settled. Then the Thais, under capable leaders, were soon able to drive off the Khmer from the river basin. The rapid expansion of the Thai kingdom finally brought down Cambodia's Angkorean Empire, forcing the Cambodians to move their capitals southward, from Angkor to Lovek, Udong, and Phnom Penh respectively.

A new interpretation by a Western scholar arguing that the southward movement of the Cambodian capitals tended to be influenced by the changing economic environment- as the maritime trade in the region became increasingly important to the post-Angkorean statecraft,⁸- has not been welcomed by Thai scholars. Perhaps, such interpretations do not go well with the notion of the greatest Thai kingdom, successfully bringing down the Angkorean empire.

⁶ Suchit and Sukhumbhand, *op.cit.*, p. 70.

⁷ Kramol Tongdhamchart et als., *The Thai Elite's National Security Perspectives: Implications for Southeast Asia*, Bangkok, Institute of Security and International Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 1985, cited in Suchit and Sukhumbhand, *op.cit.*, pp. 68-69.

⁸ See, Michael Vickery, *Cambodia After Angkor, The Chronicular Evidence from the Fourteenth to Sixteenth Centures*, Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1977; *idem*, "The 2/k. 125 Fragment, A Lost Chronicle of Ayutthaya," *Journal o the Siam Society*, 65 (1) (1977), pp. 1-80.

Moreover, Thai popular history books by amateur historians describe Cambodia as a subordinate, untrustworthy neighbor, often shifting its loyalty between the Thai and the Vietnamese courts. Cambodia sought to attack Siam whenever the Thai kingdom was facing trouble. The classic case with which the Thais have been familiar was the execution of Cambodian King Lovek, known as *Phraya* Lovek in Thai, by the Ayudhyan King Narasuen. The Thai chronicles tell of King Lovek, who had raided and evacuated villagers in the Siamese eastern border while King Narasuen was occupied by war with Burma. King Narasuen decided to take revenge on Cambodia. The Thai chronicles depicted a dramatic execution of Phraya Lovek. The Thai king mercilessly beheaded the Cambodian king and washed his feet with the latter's blood.⁹ It was considered the act of contempt for the enemy. In fact, however, evidence from Western missionaries reveals that the execution never happened. The Cambodian king was able to take refuge in southern Laos.¹⁰ However, this Thai version of the King Lovek story still dominates the general understanding of Thai-Cambodian relations among average Thais. The wars and chaos in Cambodia have always been described as the fault of untrustworthy and factional Cambodia rulers, while the Thai invasions were interpreted as based on rights to control their tributary state and/or to prevent Cambodia from Vietnamization.

Such historiography has enhanced a nationalistic feeling of a great nation with a great history in comparison to its neighboring countries. On the other hand, it has depicted Cambodia, and of course Laos, as inferior nations. This leads to the question of the situation of Indochinese studies in general, and Cambodian studies in particular in Thailand. Perhaps, the perception of Indochinese countries, as poor, inferior countries with little business potential, has dictated the direction of area studies in Thailand. In contrast to American, European and Japanese studies, which dominated international studies in Thailand for three decades, Indochina is much less attractive to Thai academics as a field of study. Thus, the situation of Indochinese studies in Thailand now is not much different from what Charnvit Kasetsiri described in 1991, when he asserted that Thai academic institutions so far have not yet paid enough attention to Southeast Asia as a study area. He wrote that "despite the fact that Thailand belongs to the area, there is no serious attempt to pursue such study. The Thai government, elite and academic specialists, know very little of the economies, politics, society and culture of its neighbors, without mentioning further away Southeast Asian countries."¹¹ Charnvit further noted that in Thailand only Silpakorn University offered an M.A. Program in the field of Southeast Asian History, while the Institute of Asian Studies at Chulalongkorn and the East Asian Studies Institute at Thammasat University, which have concentrated on China and Japan, are primarily research institutions.¹²

⁹ For example, Nai Honhuai (pseudonym), *Phongsawa (san) dan khmen* (Chronicles of the Khmer Trait), Bangkok, Watcharin karnphim, 1994; Kukrit Pramoj, *Krissadaphinihan an botbang midai* (The Shining Omnipotence), Bangkok, Samnakphim Sayamrath, 1980, p. 31.

¹⁰ Emma H. Blair and Alexander Robertson (eds.), *The Philippine Islands, 1493-1898*, Ohio, The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1903-1909, Vol. 9, pp. 76-78, 161-168, 197-203; Vol. 10, p. 226.

¹¹ Charnvit Kasetsiri, "Introduction: Southeast Asian Studies in Thailand," in Charnvit Kasetsiri et als, (compiled), *Bibliography Southeast Asian Studies in Thailand*, Bangkok, Samnakphim Prakaipruk, 1992, pp. 1-5.

¹² The Institute of Asian Studies at Chulalongkorn University in the last several years has paid much attention to Indochinese studies. However, as I have noted earlier, the Institute's works tended to support the Thai government policy.

Thus, nationalistic attitudes and ignorance became an obstacle for Thailand to develop a constructive policy towards neighboring countries both during and after the Cold War. With national interest, politically and economically, as the most important priority, Thailand's foreign policy towards the Khmer Rouge simply bypassed Cambodia's human cost and tragedy.

For two decades already, Thailand has thrown clandestine support behind the Khmer Rouge group, ever since the murderous regime was overthrown by the Vietnamese forces. It is thus timely to examine the relationship between Thailand and the Khmer Rouge. This study will therefore examine Thailand's policy towards the Khmer Rouge from 1975 to the early 1990s. It will focus on the response of Thai governments as well as the perspectives of various Thai political groups on the crimes committed by the Khmer Rouge.

I.

The Khmer Rouge as a threat

The Khmer Rouge rule began as Thailand was going through a transitional period, from four decades of military dictatorship to democratic rule, and from its role as an American client to a rapprochement with the communist states. The transition was a result of the rapid changes in both the domestic and regional situations. The unstable civilian governments after the 14 October 1973 revolution were forced to cope with the challenges in fear of expansive communist power. The open political system permitted the internal political forces to participate in various policy issues, including foreign affairs. The intense struggle between the left and the right subsequently led to a massacre of students in the heart of the Thai capital, and the military coup on 6 October 1976. Between 1973 and 1976 there were rapid shifts of Thailand's foreign policy toward its neighbors from anti-communism to co-existence and then back to anti-communism again. It was also the only period in which the country's foreign policy towards its neighbors was heavily criticized by non-bureaucratic elements. This chapter will discuss the factors which influenced the establishment of relations between Thailand's civilian government and Cambodia between 1973 and 1976, and the subsequent suspension of the relationship after the Thai military staged the bloody coup of October 1976.

Changes and new friends

Since Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat took power in 1958, Thailand had served as a springboard for the United States to conduct covert operations against the communist movements in Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia.¹³ The Thanat-Rusk Agreement, signed by the Secretary of State Dean Rusk and the Thai Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman in 1962, provided reassurance that the U.S. would stand by Thailand in fighting against both internal and possible outside communist attacks. The agreement also promised Thailand economic and social aid as indirect measures to contest the local communist movement. While the Thai military enjoyed extensive American military training and aid, it in return allowed the presence of seven U.S. military air bases on Thai soil, which were used to wage war against the communist movements in Indochina. The U.S. presence was in fact a supporting pole for the military power in Thai politics. Benedict Anderson has termed Thailand in the period between Sarit's rule (1958-1963) and the Thanom-Prapath regime (1963-1973), the "American Era".¹⁴

The Thai military had always believed that U.S. military power would no doubt defeat the communists in Southeast Asia and that they could rely on the U.S. commitment

¹³ William Shawcross, *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia*, New York, Washington Square Press, 1979.

¹⁴ Benedict Anderson and Ruchira Mendiones, *In the Mirror: Literature and Politics in Siam in the American Era*, Bangkok, D.K. Book House, 1985, introduction.

in the region. But the U.S. failure in the Vietnam War as well as Washington's shift of focus to the Middle East, Europe and Latin America forced Washington to abandon its full involvement in Southeast Asia. The U.S. signed the Paris Accord with Vietnam in January 1973, and Congress prohibited direct or indirect U.S. combat activities in Indochina after August 1973. Meanwhile, the Thai military was facing serious political storms from both domestic and regional political changes. The collapse of the Thanom-Prapath regime in the popular uprising on 14 October 1973 not only threatened the power of the Thai military in the domestic politics, but also their leading role in foreign policy-making. Thailand's military-led anti-communist foreign policy became a target of liberal political forces.

After the October 14 incident, the new civilian governments were therefore forced to adopt two interrelated policies: the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Thailand and the establishment of normal relations with the communist countries.¹⁵ Soon after the royally appointed Prime Minister Sanya Dhammasakti (October 1973-February 1975) had taken office, his government announced that the U.S. was no longer allowed to use the air bases in Thailand to support its war in Indochina. The successive governments of M.R. Seni Pramroj (February-March 1975 and April-October 1976), and his younger brother M.R. Kukrit Pramroj (March 1975-April 1976) also adopted the same policy. The Sanya administration also tried to establish relations with Vietnam. Later, Kukrit announced the establishment of diplomatic relations with China, visiting Beijing on July 1, 1975.

Pressures for Thailand to adopt such policies arose from both democratic forces and the political situation in the region. In fact, criticism of the patron-client relationship between the Thai military and the U.S. had emerged at the beginning of the 1970s. American-educated Thai intellectuals played a major role in raising concern over the atrocities the Americans were committing in Indochina. They strongly criticized the presence of the U.S. troops as violating Indochina's internal affairs, and also objected to Thailand's role in the Vietnam War. At the beginning, the young Thai intellectuals expressed their voices in an academic journal named *Sangkhomsat Parithat* (Social Science Review). Later, this critical view was widely adopted and appeared in several new journals and magazines after the October 14 uprising in Thailand and the collapse of the right-wing regimes in South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos in 1975. The withdrawal of the U.S. bases in Thailand became one of the top campaign issues for the leading student organization, the National Student Center of Thailand (NSCT), after 1973.¹⁶

The post-October 14 civilian governments were apparently unable to resist the increasingly strong pressure for the U.S. withdrawal. For example, *Siang Puang Chon* (Voice of the People), urged the Seni government that the U.S. presence meant the loss of Thailand's sovereignty and honor as well as future damage to the country and its neighbors. The newspaper warned that Thailand would become another Vietnam and Cambodia if the government still followed the U.S. strategy of communist suppression, which had just brought catastrophe to Saigon and Phnom Penh. The daily went on to encourage the NTSC to carry on their fight against the presence of U.S. bases in

¹⁵ Surachart Bamrungsuk, *United States Foreign Policy and Thai Military Rule, 1947-1977*, Bangkok, D.K. Book House, 1988, pp. 174-175.

¹⁶ Anderson and Ruchira, *op.cit.*, pp. 30-31. Also see David Morell and Chai-anan Samudhavanija, *Political Conflict in Thailand: Reform, Reaction, and Revolution*, Cambridge, Oelgeschlager, Gunn & Hain, 1981, pp. 164-167.

Thailand.¹⁷ Several Thai newspapers criticized the Seni and Kukrit governments for Thailand's involvement in sabotage activities against the new communist regime in Phnom Penh and a possible setback on Thailand's security. They stressed the need for Thailand to immediately oust the U.S. forces and, instead, establish contact with Cambodia.¹⁸ The Seni government finally announced that the U.S. must be pulled out in 18 months, while Thailand would seek to normalize relations with its neighboring countries.¹⁹

In fact, the governments of Seni and Kukrit, which comprised conservative and right-wing politicians, were initially reluctant to force the U.S. troops from Thailand, particularly at the time of the rapid expansion of both domestic and regional communism. They believed Thailand's security would be in danger if the Khmer Rouge-Sihanouk group came to power in Cambodia. Thailand would be the next domino to fall. At the beginning of his tenure of office in February 1975, Prime Minister Seni Promoj primarily stressed the necessity of maintaining U.S. troops in Thailand, reasoning that it was Thailand who had invited the U.S. troops and that Thailand should, therefore, give them time for withdrawal. He even expressed the gratitude to the U.S. for recently providing planes to transport rice to help the flood victims in southern Thailand. Thailand should therefore repay such gratitude by allowing the American troops in Thailand.²⁰ The expected fall of the Lon Nol regime at the time even necessitated the presence of American troops. Seni's Defense Minister General Thawit Seniwong expressed deep concern that the fighting in Cambodia would threaten Thailand's security if the North Vietnamese forces got involved, and that Thailand would seek assistance from other members of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO).²¹ As the situation in Phnom Penh entered the terminal period, the Thai Army Commander General Kris Sivara expressed strong opposition to the calls for immediate withdrawal of the U.S. troop. Kris pointed out that "the situation in Cambodia was most critical. The danger is very close to Thailand. We would rather see a war in foreign countries than fighting in our own land." He wanted the U.S. troops presence as a deterrent against communist attacks in neighboring countries.²²

The short-lived Seni government, which failed to obtain parliamentary approval, was succeeded by that of his brother M.R. Kukrit Promoj in mid-March 1975. Though the Kukrit administration saw a necessity to revise the country's foreign policy toward its communist neighbors, it was apparently reluctant to implement this option, and that resulted in its contradictory policy toward the Khmer Rouge.

In March 1975, as the anti-U.S. campaign was continuing and calls for revising Thailand's policy toward its neighbors were getting louder, the Thai public learned that the U.S. was freely using the U-Tapao airbase in southeastern Thailand for the airlift of arms and ammunition to the falling Lon Nol government. The U.S. also employed trucks

¹⁷ *Siang Puang Chon*, 26 Feb 1975.

¹⁸ *Bangkok Post*, 24 Mar 1975; 27 Mar 1975; *The Nation*, 26 Mar 1975; 27 May 1976, *Prachachat*, 2 Apr 1975, p. 6; *Thai Rath*, 24 May 1975; *Ban Muang*, 24 May 1975; *Prachathipatai*, 24 May 1975; *Siang Puang Chon*, 24 May 1975.

¹⁹ United States, *Foreign Broadcast Information Service - Asia and Pacific*, (hereafter *FBIS-AP*), 3 Mar 1975, p. J7.

²⁰ *Siang Puang Chon*, 26 Feb 1975.

²¹ *The Nation*, 27 Feb 1975.

²² *Bangkok Post*, 1 Mar 1975.

from the Thai state enterprise, Express Transport Organization (ETO), to transport arms across the border at Aranyaprathet, in Prachinburi Province, to the Lon Nol forces in Battambang. After this U.S. operation was exposed to the public, Prime Minister Kukrit immediately told the press that he had ordered the suspension of the use of the base for shipping arms to Cambodia and that the American had no right to do this. Kukrit and his deputy and Defense Minister, Major General Pramarn Adireksarn stressed that Thailand did not want to interfere in its neighbors' affairs, and would provide them only humanitarian aid. However, one week later the Thai media revealed that the operation across the Aranyaprathet-Poipet was still underway. Prime Minister Kukrit appeared to be furious at the reports, claiming that he had no knowledge of the arms shipment. He publicly blasted Defense Minister Pramarn for allowing the U.S. operation.²³ Obviously, the U.S. arms shipments went on with cooperation from the Thai military as the custom official told the press that the ETO trucks to Cambodia had the supreme military command office's immunity, and they were not subjected to any search. Besides, the customs office did not receive an order either from the military or the government to stop the arms transport.²⁴

Another move to save the Lon Nol regime came from Kukrit's Foreign Minister Major General Chatichai Choonhavan. On the eve of the Khmer Rouge's seizure of Phnom Penh, Chatichai announced that the Thai government was willing to offer Thailand as a site for peace negotiations between the Lon Nol government and the Khmer Rouge, claiming that Thailand wished to see peace in Cambodia.²⁵ Despite a warning from Prince Norodom Sihanouk, nominal president of the National United Front of Cambodia (NUFC), that Thailand should stop playing the U.S. henchman and interfering in Cambodian affairs, Chatichai did not want to give up this effort. He announced out of the blue that he had already arranged a meeting between Lon Nol's Prime Minister Long Boret and a Khmer Rouge representative in Bangkok. Chatichai's claim was soon dismissed by both Boret and the Khmer Rouge leader Khieu Samphan. Sihanouk lashed out at the Thai foreign minister's initiative as "a figment of the too-fertile imagination of the Thai authorities".²⁶ Kukrit told the public that he himself did not know anything about the arranging of negotiations, and Thailand did not want to have any role in it. Typically for a Thai politician, Chatichai now told Kukrit that he had never made such a statement.²⁷

It is intriguing that Kukrit apparently pretended that he had no knowledge of what his cabinet members were doing. Some scholars have suggested that a contradictory policy toward Cambodia was a result of the right-wing and military groups while the civilian governments tended to favor a rapprochement policy and the withdrawal of U.S. troops.²⁸ But, considering Kukrit's background as a royalist and a long-term anti-

²³ *Prachachat Weekly*, 2: 77 (8 May 1975), pp. 40-42; *FBIS-AP*, 21 Mar 1975, p. J1; *The Nation*, 31 Mar 1975.

²⁴ *The Nation*, 31 Mar 1975.

²⁵ *FBIS-AP*, 27 Mar 1975, p. J2.

²⁶ *FBIS-AP*, 2 Apr 1975, pp. H1-2; 8 Apr, 1975, p. J1; 9 Apr 1975, pp. H1-2, J2; *Prachachat Weekly*, 2: 77 (8 May 1975), pp. 40-42.

²⁷ *FBIS-AP*, 9 Apr 1975, p. J2.

²⁸ Steven Heder, *Thailand's Relations with Kampuchea: Negotiation and Confrontation Along the Prachinburi-Battambang Border*, unpublished paper, Cornell University, 1977, pp. 16-20; Surachart, *op.cit.*, p. 179.

communist leader, it would be too optimistic to believe that the Thai Prime Minister easily adopted a friendly attitude toward the communist neighbors. Some evidence suggests that Kukrit himself shared the idea of the leaders of military factions in his government, Pramarn and Chatichai. While Kukrit always stressed that his government did not want to interfere in the internal affairs of neighboring countries, he urged Washington on the eve of the Khmer Rouge victory that South Vietnam and Cambodia would not be able to survive if they did not receive enough aid. If these two states fell, the political situation in the region would change, including Thailand's foreign policy.²⁹ His conservative daily newspaper, *Siam Rath*, was one of a few presses in 1975 opposing the calls for immediate U.S. troops withdrawal from Thailand. The paper argued that the deteriorating situation in Cambodia had made conditions along the Thai-Cambodian border more dangerous.³⁰

When the situation dispelled all hope for the U.S. military intervention in Indochina, the Thai leaders realized that they had to try to live with communist neighbors. As it became clear in April 1975 that Washington had decided to abandon its client Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam, Kukrit told the press that he had never thought of relying on the U.S.³¹ The Thai Supreme Commander, General Kris Sivara, later denied a report that he would lead a team of senior military officers to seek assurance and military assistance from Washington. Kris even scorned U.S. assistance to Southeast Asian countries as unreliable, since the U.S. had already deserted some of its allies.³² The Kukrit government soon moved toward a rapprochement by offering the Khmer Rouge regime recognition on 18 April.³³

However, the Thai elite has never trusted communism. It was considered necessary for Thailand to maintain the rebel armed forces along the borders to destabilize the communist regimes. Some may argue that the Thai civilian governments had limited power over the security and border issues. But secret support for guerilla forces has never created real conflict between the civilian faction in the governments and the armed forces, in contrast to other domestic issues. Whether the civilian governments have chosen to turn a blind eye, or have secretly approved such clandestine operations, does not make much difference. This two-faced diplomacy toward neighboring countries has been common practice for Thai governments even nowadays, as I will show.

The rapprochement with the Democratic Kampuchea by the Kukrit administration was soon testified by the so-called Mayaguez incident. On 12 May 1975, the Khmer Rouge force seized and charged an American cargo ship named the SS Mayaguez with trespassing in its waters. The Ford administration demanded the unconditional release of the ship and her crews of thirty-nine. Washington immediately ordered its Seventh Fleet to sail for the Gulf of Siam the next day. The Kukrit government had informed the U.S. chargé d'affaires in Bangkok that the Thai government would not permit the Americans to use the air bases in Thailand in the Mayaguez dispute. But the next day, Thailand saw 1,100 U.S. marines from Okinawa landing at the U-Tapao air base. The U.S. forces launched heavy attacks on the Cambodian port at Kampong Som and on Tang Island.

²⁹ *FBIS-AP*, 14 Apr 1975, p. J1.

³⁰ *Siam Rath*, 30 Mar 1975.

³¹ *Prachachat Weekly*, 2: 77 (8 May 1975), pp. 40-42.

³² *FBIS-AP*, 23 Apr 1975, pp. J2-3.

³³ *FBIS-AP*, 21 Apr 1975, p. J1.

Finally, the Mayaguez was released at the end of 14 May. The Thai government sent a protest note to the U.S. Embassy, charging the Americans with violating Thailand's sovereignty. The Thai ambassador to Washington was recalled.³⁴ The NTSC and civil groups joined the government in condemning the Mayaguez operation. Various Thai-language dailies urged the government to implement an immediate pullout of the U.S. troops, stressing that the establishment of friendly relations with neighboring countries would not be possible as long as Thailand allowed the presence of U.S. troops in its soil.³⁵ Washington finally conveyed regret to the Kukrit administration.

It is unlikely that the U.S. use of U-Tapao air base took place without the cooperation from the Thai military. The White House adviser Henry Kissinger told the press that they should not pay attention to Thai politicians, but rather to the Thai military, who was willing to let the Americans use U-Tapao during the Mayaguez operation.³⁶ Defense Minister Pramarn Adireksarn even asserted that the U.S. operation did not violate Thailand's sovereignty, but was only a breach of promise between the two countries.³⁷

Soon after Thailand offered the Khmer Rouge regime recognition, contacts between the two sides began. In late April 1975, twenty Khmer Rouge soldiers reportedly contacted Thai border authorities at Aranyaprathet district of Prachinburi Province, stating that they wanted the Thai-Cambodian border to reopen as soon as the situation in Cambodia returned to normal. They added that the Khmer Rouge wanted to be friends with the Thais.³⁸ Thai authorities turned a blind eye to a resumption of unofficial business between Aranyaprathet and Poipet. Gasoline and rice were the two top products brought to Cambodia.³⁹ Later, the Cambodian government conveyed messages, via its border officers and China, to the Kukrit government that it wanted to establish diplomatic and trade relations with Thailand.⁴⁰ Finally, full diplomatic ties between the two countries were established following Cambodian Deputy Premier and Foreign Minister Ieng Sary's five-day visit to Thailand in late October 1975. The meeting succeeded with an issue of a joint communique, which promised an exchange of ambassadors, establishment of liaison offices on the border provinces, a mutual respect of the exiting frontiers. Both sides also pledged that they would not allow any third party to use their territories to violate each other's sovereignty, and would not resort to the use of force in solving their differences. The Cambodian delegates also expressed their need to begin official trade with Thailand as Cambodia was facing shortage of food.⁴¹ A liaison committee was set up on 17 November, following a meeting in Poipet between Thai Foreign Minister Chatichai and Ieng Sary. Cambodia reportedly wanted to buy ten thousand tones of salt each month from Thailand. The return of all the Cambodian refugees in Thailand was another issue raised by the Khmer Rouge leader.⁴²

³⁴ *FBIS-AP*, 14 May 75, pp. J1-2.

³⁵ *FBIS-AP*, 15 May 1975, pp. J4-5; 29 May 1975, pp. J4-5.

³⁶ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 30 May 1975.

³⁷ *Prachachat Weekly*, 2: 79 (22 May 1975), pp. 15-19; 2: 81 (5 June 1975), pp. 7-10.

³⁸ *Bangkok Post*, 26 Apr 1975.

³⁹ Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1996, pp. 139-140.

⁴⁰ *Bangkok Post*, 3 July 1975; 26 July 1975; *The Nation*, 12 Aug 1975; *FBIS-AP*, 27 Aug 1975, pp. J1-2.

⁴¹ *Bangkok Post*, 12 Nov 1975.

⁴² *Bangkok Post*, 18 Nov 1975; *FBIS-AP*, 25 Nov 75, p. H1.

However, diplomatic relations between Thailand and Democratic Kampuchea was built up in parallel with tension along the Thai-Cambodian border. In April, the Khmer Rouge troops stationed opposite Pong Nam Ron District of Chanthaburi Province threatened to attack Thailand, after Thai authorities refused to hand over six armored personnel carriers brought to Thailand by fleeing Lon Nol military officers.⁴³ Another 60 Khmer Rouge troops contacted Thai authorities on the border at Trat Province for permission to cross into Thailand to suppress the Lon Nol troops. But the request was turned down. A Thai navy patrol boat was sent to reinforce the coastal border of Trat.⁴⁴ The first territorial dispute began on 12 May 1975, when the Khmer Rouge forces opposite Trat Province claimed that Cambodia had lost a large amount of land to Thailand during the Lon Nol period. They gave Thailand seven days to withdraw to a demarcation line one kilometer from the existing line. Otherwise they would do it by force. The Khmer Rouge also held four Thai fishermen, charged with violating Cambodia's maritime border.⁴⁵ At the end of May, another Thai fishing boat on the Trat coast was attacked and set ablaze by Khmer Rouge soldiers.⁴⁶ Two weeks later Thai Marine Police engaged in an hour-long fight with Cambodian forces off the Trat coastal district of Ko Kut. At least seven Thai officers were wounded. At the same time, another clash between the Thai and Cambodian forces took place on the Aranyaprathet-Poipet border.⁴⁷ Thai border security forces in Surin Province also faced a series of border attacks by the Khmer Rouge forces.⁴⁸ A Thai security officer summed up: from the day the Thai-Cambodian border was closed on 18 April to the end of June, Khmer Rouge troops had purposely intruded across the Thai border in Surin Province more than 30 times. The intruders, the Thai officers added, had planted mines along the border inside Thai territory, abducted villagers and stole their food.⁴⁹ In November 1975, fighting between Thai and Khmer Rouge forces on the Aranyaprathet-Poipet border area became intensified.⁵⁰

With some sympathy for the communist revolution, the Thai left-wing press tried to tone down the border clashes as ordinary conflict between neighboring countries. They even blamed some the right-wing groups for exaggerating the conflict. Later on when the border conflict intensified, they emphasized the sabotage activities by the Thai military-supported Cambodian opposition forces as a major cause of misunderstandings and casualties in the border area.⁵¹

Part of the border conflict was due to the overlapping claims over border areas by Thailand and Cambodia.⁵² It was also believed to be the work of the guerilla operations of the Cambodian right-wing forces, which received secret support from the Thai armed forces and were allowed to use the Thai border areas as their sanctuaries. These forces, generally known as the Khmer Serei, comprised various ex-Lon Nol government groups.

⁴³ *Bangkok Post*, 21 Apr 1975.

⁴⁴ *FBIS-AP*, 28 Apr 1975, p. J4.

⁴⁵ *Bangkok Post*, 13 May 1975.

⁴⁶ *Bangkok Post*, 31 May 1975.

⁴⁷ *Bangkok Post*, 13 June 1975.

⁴⁸ *Bangkok Post*, 26 June 1975.

⁴⁹ *FBIS-AP*, 2 Jul 1975, pp. J6-7.

⁵⁰ Heder, *op.cit.*, p. 13.

⁵¹ *Prachachat Weekly*, 2: 77 (8 May 1975), pp. 28-40; 2: 81 (5 Jun 1975), pp. 13-14.

⁵² Heder, *op.cit.*, pp. 10-15.

One of them belonged to the former Cambodian Prime Minister In Tam, whose base was on the border of Prachinburi and Battambang Provinces. In late November, Prime Minister Kukrit and his Foreign Minister Chatichai publicly blamed In Tam's force as the cause of the border conflict.⁵³ Kukrit finally ordered In Tam to leave Thailand within seven days in order to show the Cambodian government his own government's good intention.⁵⁴ However, the Prime Minister's order was contradicted by his Deputy Interior Minister, Colonel Prakop Prayoonphokharat, who told reporters that In Tam would need more than a week to seek asylum in a third country. Prokop also pointed out that, in fact, Thailand did not give In Tam a one-week deadline.⁵⁵ Moreover, the Thai hard-line National Security Council simply declined to follow the premier's order, by announcing that In Tam need not meet the deadline.⁵⁶ But the Cambodian rebel leader was finally forced to leave for France at the end of December after the Thai government had pointed the finger at his troops as being responsible for several serious clashes between Thai and Khmer Rouge forces in December.

Interestingly, In Tam denied the accusation made by Kukrit and Chatichai that he had instigated the border clashes. Instead, he revealed that the cause was escalated by a conflict between two Khmer Rouge groups. One group of twenty-four defecting Khmer Rouge soldiers was pursued across the border by seventy others who had then been confronted by Thai Border Patrol Policemen. In Tam also refuted Chatichai's earlier statement that he had asked the former Prime Minister Seni Promoj to allow him to stay in his border sanctuary in Aranyaprathet. Instead, he himself had always wanted to come to Bangkok, but Chatichai told him to stay in the border area.⁵⁷ Besides, he pointed out that the border skirmishes were also the work of the Thai military, which supported Cambodian gang. This gang often robbed Cambodian villagers' cattle and smuggled Cambodians out of the country for money.⁵⁸

Another active Cambodian right-wing force on the Thai-Cambodian border was known to belong to the former governor of Battambang Province, General Sek Sam Iet. This group reportedly gathered intelligence for the Thai Supreme Command office. They often penetrated into Cambodia for harassment activities against the Phnom Penh government. Sek Sam Iet's group operated near Aranyaprathet and sometimes extended their activities into the Phnom Malai range in Cambodia. Moreover, this group ran a clandestine business with Thai army officers in smuggling Cambodian logs into Thailand. The group also behaved like bandits gang as they robbed wealthy Cambodian refugees.⁵⁹ This was later confirmed by the Police Department, which reportedly wanted to force Sek Sam Iet to leave Thailand.⁶⁰ However, the idea was not implemented; as it later appeared that the Cambodian rebel leader was allowed to continue his sabotage activities on the Thai-Cambodian border. Border conflicts, therefore, did not end with In Tam's flight.⁶¹

⁵³ *The Nation*, 28 Nov 1975; 15 Dec 1975.

⁵⁴ *The Nation*, 28 Nov 1975.

⁵⁵ *FBIS-AP*, 28 Nov 1975, p. J8.

⁵⁶ Heder, *op.cit.*, p. 24.

⁵⁷ *The Nation*, 20 Dec 1975.

⁵⁸ *Prachachat Weekly*, 3: 112 (8 Jan 1976), pp. 11-13.

⁵⁹ *The Nation*, 27 May 1976; *Prachachat Weekly*, 3: 118 (19 Feb 1976), pp. 17-18.

⁶⁰ *The Nation*, 28 May 1976.

⁶¹ *Bangkok Post*, 29 Dec 1975; 7 Jan 1976.

Chatichai and Ieng Sary agreed to meet again on Cambodian soil to discuss the territorial dispute on the Prachinburi-Battambang border on 27 February 1976.⁶² In order to please his Cambodian counterpart, Chatichai announced that Thailand would not accept any more Indochinese refugees and would prosecute them in court and deport them back to the countries they come from. Chatichai said he would inform Sary about this decision during the scheduled meeting, and could ask the Cambodian government to take back almost ten thousand Cambodian refugees, which was one of the important issues raised by Cambodia during the Sary-Chatichai meeting in Poipet in November 1975.⁶³ However, the Cambodian side decided to postpone the meeting, citing the unsafe conditions as a reason.

Again, the relationship between Thailand and Cambodia was challenged by a strange incident on 25 February, when the Cambodian town of Siem Reap was bombed by unidentified jet fighters. Cambodia blamed this terrorist act on the Americans. It pointed out that the F-111 jet fighters had flown from the direction of Thailand and that the bombings had occurred after the defeat of sabotage attempts by the Lon Nol forces stationed on the Thai border. Thai officials denied any involvement in the incident, claiming that all U.S. F-111 bombers had left the country since June last year and other types of combat planes had left since January 1976.⁶⁴

The new government of Seni Promoj, which resumed office after Kukrit's dissolution of parliament and the April election, continued the effort to strengthen the unstable relationship with the Cambodian government. In mid-June 1976, Seni's Foreign Minister Bhichai Rattakul and his team made a secret journey across the border to Sisophon district of Battambang with numerous issues to discuss with Ieng Sary. These topics included the exchange of ambassadors, international trade, border demarcation, the release of Thai fishermen in Khmer Rouge custody, and the return of Cambodian refugees.⁶⁵

Despite the ongoing border conflict, significant development in the relationship between the Seni and the Khmer Rouge governments was evident particularly in the ambassadorial exchange and trade issues. In August 1976, the Thai government prepared for a reopening of the Cambodian embassy in Bangkok. Private trading at the Aranyaprathet-Poipet border point was finally allowed to resume.⁶⁶ Later on, the Cambodian government requested the Thai to hand over Sek Sam Iet and three other former Lon Nol officers.⁶⁷

Reversal of the tide

For the Thai armed forces and rightists, the three years of an open political system in Thailand following the October 14 incident had exposed Thai society to communist infiltration. They believed the very foundations of the nation: the monarchy, Buddhism and the stability of the nation, were in a real danger. They saw the student-led campaign

⁶² Heder, *op.cit.*, p. 26.

⁶³ *Bangkok Post*, 17 Feb 1976.

⁶⁴ Heder, *op.cit.*, pp. 27-28.

⁶⁵ *Bangkok Post*, June 19, 1998.

⁶⁶ Heder, *op.cit.*, p. 31.

⁶⁷ *Bangkok Post*, 4 Sep 1976, p. 1.

for the withdrawal of American troops from Thailand as a communist tactic to weaken the Thai armed forces' capacity to fight the communists. The open society allowed the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) access to expand its urban activities, heavily infiltrating the growing student, labor and peasant movements. In June 1976, the Army Commander General Boonchai Bamrunghong confirmed fear of the communist threat by stressing that the CPT had been increasing its rural guerilla activities in some quarters, and it was believed that the insurgency would even extend as far as Bangkok within three months.⁶⁸ Besides, after enjoying a long honeymoon period with the U.S., the American troop withdrawal meant that Thailand for the first time since World War II was left with a vulnerability to potential military aggression from communist neighbors. These developments caused frustration for the Thai military, unable to fully control the country's direction as it had in the past. The Seni government thus resumed office when Thai society was in a peak period of polarization between left and right. Violence became a common method employed by the military-supported right-wing organizations against the leftist movement. Grenade attacks as well as political assassinations against known activists escalated during this three-year period. Between March 1974 and August 1975, at least twenty-one farmer leaders were killed. The most shocking act of political violence was the assassination of Dr. Boonsanong Punyodhayana, secretary-general of the Socialist Party of Thailand, in February 1976. Boonsanong, a young academic at Thammasat University, was popular among Thai students.⁶⁹

By early 1976, the Thai public repeatedly heard the Thai military and rightists' warning of the outside communist threat to Thailand, stressing Indochina's military support for the expanding Thai communist movement. A police report disclosed in February 1976 that a group of seventy Thais and descendents of Vietnamese refugees born in Thailand planned to infiltrate into northeast Thailand after they had completed guerilla warfare and sabotage training in Hanoi.⁷⁰ The Khmer Rouge also helped the Thai communists establish an organization called "Angkar Siem", which provided terrorist training for Thai youths from three provinces on the Thai-Cambodian border: Si Sa Ket, Buriram and Surin.⁷¹ The Commander of the Second Army Region Lt Gen Prem Tinsulanon, also confirmed that there was evidence of outside support for the Thai insurgents.⁷²

The fear that Thailand would follow the fates of the Thieu and Lon Nol regimes appeared to lead some conservatives to reverse their opinions on U.S. military relations with Thailand. *The Bangkok Post*, which in early 1975 had blamed the Thai government for the war in Cambodia by allowing the Americans to use air bases to prosecute war in neighboring countries, later urged the U.S. Congress to continue American military assistance to Thailand. Otherwise, it would endanger the security and peace of Thailand as well as that of the U.S. A *Post* editorial stressed that the U.S. government's policy of building up the economies of friendly countries and providing military assistance could help the Thai people to defend themselves against communist aggressors.⁷³

⁶⁸ *FBIS-AP*, 16 Jun 1976, p. J4.

⁶⁹ Morell and Chai-anan, *op.cit.*, Part II.

⁷⁰ *Bangkok Post*, 11 Feb 1976.

⁷¹ *FBIS-AP*, Mar 30, 76, p. J2. For more information on the Angkor Siem organization, see David Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1991, pp. 280-281.

⁷² *FBIS-AP*, 12 Feb 76, pp. J5-6.

⁷³ *Bangkok Post*, 3 Apr 1976.

Following violence against long-term Vietnamese refugees in the northeastern Thai province of Sakon Nakhon, a Thai-language newspaper, *Prachathipatai*, strongly criticized the Seni government as pro-Vietnamese. It was dissatisfied with Foreign Minister Phichai who told Vietnamese officials that the anti-Vietnamese activity was instigated by Thai criminal gangs who held personal grudges against the refugees. Instead, the newspaper believed the Vietnamese refugees must be responsible for the troubles since some of them were collaborating with the communists.⁷⁴

The intensification of anti-communist fears finally led to a massacre of students at Thammasat University on the morning of 6 October 1976, followed by the announcement of a coup led by Admiral Sa-ngat Chaloyu in that evening. The coup group, who called themselves the National Administrative Reform Council (NARC), installed the ultra-conservative Supreme Court judge, Thanin Kraivixien, as the country's new leader.⁷⁵ Reversion of Thailand's foreign policy back to that of the anti-communist era soon began. Colonel Thanat Khoman, former Foreign Minister of the dictatorial Sarit Thanarat regime and now an adviser for foreign affairs to the NARC, told the public that the future government of Thailand should try to restore the deteriorating relationship with Washington. In relation to neighboring communist countries, Thanat added that the Thai government must not show weakness or submission, because the communists would become more arrogant and domineering.⁷⁶ The ultra-rightist government of Prime Minister Thanin followed the NARC adviser by announcing a "strong intention to revitalize" Thailand's relationship with the U.S. in both economic and military aspects.⁷⁷ Thanin later disclosed his wish for the return of U.S. troops to Thailand.⁷⁸ In January 1977, the government imposed a ban on all official visits to communist countries.⁷⁹ Thanin's hatred of communism was shown in his comment on the Khmer Rouge's atrocity against three Thai border villages in Prachinburi Province in February 1977: "only communists could commit such a crime, because they live on hatred an indignation."⁸⁰ His cabinet member, a well-known ultra-rightist Interior Minister Samak Sundaravej apparently tried to stir up fear of the Vietnamese threat. In mid-December, Samak came out of the blue and told newsmen that the Socialist Republic of Vietnam had set upon 15 February 1977 as a "D-Day" to invade Thailand. Worse, he warned the Thai people of a possible danger from Vietnamese refugees by making a false statement that most of the 76,000 post-1975 refugees in Thailand were Vietnamese.⁸¹ In fact, Vietnamese made up the smallest group among Indochinese refugees in Thailand. As of November 1976, Thailand housed 79,689 refugees from Laos, 23,028 from Cambodia, and 8,036 from Vietnam.⁸²

⁷⁴ *Prachathipatai*, 18 Sep 1976.

⁷⁵ William Bradley, David Morrel, David Szanton, Stephen Young, *Thailand, Domino by Default?: The 1976 Coup and Implications for U.S. Policy*, Ohio University, Center for International Studies, 1978, chapter I; Surachart, *op.cit.*, pp. 174-184.

⁷⁶ *Siam Rath*, 13 Oct 1976.

⁷⁷ *Bangkok Post*, 31 Oct 1976.

⁷⁸ *Morning Express*, (Bangkok) 24 Dec 1976.

⁷⁹ *Nation Review*, 11 Jan 1977. *Nation Review* was a new name of *The Nation*, which was one of the newspapers closed down by the NARC on 16 October for their radical views. The newspaper later returned to its previous name.

⁸⁰ *FBIS-AP*, 17 Feb 77, p. J1.

⁸¹ *FBIS-AP*, 14 Dec 1976, p. J1.

⁸² *FBIS-AP*, 22 Nov 1976, p. J7.

The key NARC leaders, such as Admiral Sa-ngat and General Yot Thephasdin, also had a record of preferring force to negotiation in dealing with past border disputes with Cambodia.⁸³ Throughout the one-year rule of the ultra-rightist administration there was a tendency to use all-out offensive operations against the Khmer Rouge forces by the Thai armed forces. Border clashes between the Thai and Cambodian forces, resumed quickly in early November 1976 and subsequently got much worse than in the pre-1976 coup period. Thanin claimed that between January and August 1977 Cambodian forces invaded Thailand more than four hundred times.⁸⁴ The worst two incidents took place in late January 1977 and early August 1977. According to the White Paper issued by the Thai Foreign Ministry, during the night of 28 January 1977, around 300 Khmer Rouge soldiers launched a three-pronged attack on three villages of Ban Nong Do, Ban Khlong Kho and Ban Noi Parai in Aranyaprathet. The Cambodian troopers killed twenty-one Thai villagers, including children, babies and a pregnant woman. Some women were raped. All houses in Ban Nong Do village were set on fire.⁸⁵ The Thai government sent a protest note to Cambodia, demanding the latter take responsibility and pay compensation to the victims. The Khmer Rouge, however, replied that the three attacked villages were inside Cambodian territory, implying that they could do whatever they pleased there.⁸⁶

The August massacre of Thai villagers took place in Ban Sanlo Cha-ngan, Ban Sa-ngae and Ban Kasang in Taphraya District of Prachinburi. The Khmer Rouge forces killed twenty-nine Thais. According to the eyewitness, the Khmer Rouge soldiers ransacked houses and killed every living thing, including women, children and even cattle.⁸⁷

In order to put pressure on Phnom Penh, in February the Thanin government decided to cut off the pipeline of essential goods to Cambodia. An embargo was imposed on the border trade. Those who violated the government order were severely punished. Twenty-two Thai officials were sentenced to five to fifteen year jail.⁸⁸

The shortage of food in Cambodia eventually turned the Khmer Rouge soldiers into bandit forces. Their raids were increasingly associated with looting Thai villages, taking back crops, cattle and other property with them to Cambodia.⁸⁹ According to a former member of the Khmer Rouge-backed Angkor Siem organization, Kasien Tejapira, whose base was inside Cambodia opposite the south of Surin Province, the Thai communists decided to adapt the CPK tactic of "sweeping up the masses". The CPT wished to gain converts by forcing Thai villagers across the border into Cambodia for political training. However, the cross-border incursions by the Khmer Rouge soldiers soon "degenerated into raiding parties. Civilian casualties were high; the political aims were forgotten by the Cambodians, who became overexcited by combat and loot."⁹⁰ Such

⁸³ Heder, *op.cit.*, p. 34.

⁸⁴ *Bangkok Post*, 19 Aug 1977. For detail of border clashes, see Heder, *op.cit.*, pp. 36-44, 46-51.

⁸⁵ *The Massacre of 28 January 1977: Relations between Thailand and Democratic Kampuchea*, Bangkok, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1977.

⁸⁶ *Bangkok Post*, 15 Feb 1977.

⁸⁷ *Bangkok Post*, 3 Aug 1977

⁸⁸ *Bangkok Post*, 11 Feb 1977; 26 July 1977.

⁸⁹ *Bangkok Post*, 4 Feb 1977; 12 Apr 1977; 24 Apr 1977; 28 Apr 1977; 3 Aug 77; 28 Oct 1977.

⁹⁰ Chandler, *op.cit.*, p. 281. Kasien pointed out that the sweeping masses tactic begun in 1978, but according to the Thai villagers' accounts, the looting by the Khmer Rouge cadres had already taken place in 1977, see note 77.

raiding parties appear to conform with Michael Vickery's analysis of the Khmer Rouge cadres in northwestern Cambodia namely that they were not disciplined revolutionaries, but "rather guerillas right out of the woods."⁹¹

It appears that not all border incursions were directed by the CPK Center, but there was no attempt by Phnom Penh to control its local cadres. Although Cambodia, unlike Laos and Vietnam, had not made any critical comments regarding the 1976 coup in Thailand, its willingness to pursue a dialogue with the new anti-communist administration in Bangkok obviously vanished. From the CPK's point of view, the increasing numbers of border incidents were instigated by the encroachment of the Thai armed forces on the Cambodian border as well as by the Thai-backed Cambodian guerilla forces.⁹²

It would be wrong, however, to assume that the Thai side only resorted to military measures to solve the conflict, and abandoned diplomatic effort. Naturally, the new right-wing administration did not want to simultaneously open up all battlefronts. It may rather have wanted to concentrate on mobilizing military resources for the suppression of domestic communist insurgents, whose popular bases and military power rapidly expanded after several thousand students and intellectuals had fled to join the CPT following the October 1976 coup. The Thai authorities often complained that the Cambodian government in Phnom Penh did not respond to their approaches.⁹³ Soon after fighting broke out at Ban Hat Lek in Klong Yai District of Trat Province, the Thai liaison officials at the Aranyaprathet-Poipet border began talks with their Cambodian counterparts.⁹⁴ The Thai side also proposed to set up a joint investigation team to inspect the scene of the border clash at Ban Hat Lek.⁹⁵ The Thai foreign ministry made several attempts to hold high-level talks with Cambodia. However, the contacts were unable to reach beyond Poipet. The lack of dialogue between the two sides thus intensified the resort to force to solve the border conflicts. Thai villagers in the border areas received weapons and military training from the armed forces to protect themselves.⁹⁶ The border security officers were authorized to use violent retaliation against Khmer Rouge intrusions, while more patrols and armed reinforcement units were established.⁹⁷

By the time the high-level negotiations between the two sides were held, the Thanin administration was about to be gone. Apparently with the Chinese influence, Pol Pot for the first time publicly referred to the border conflict with Thailand. He told the New China News agency while in Beijing that the border disputes with Thailand would soon be "problems of the past". On 12 October 1977, Uppadit finally met DK Foreign Minister Ieng Sary at the United Nation headquarter in New York. The two agreed to end confrontation and work together for peace. Uppadit also held separate, friendly talks with Vietnam's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Nyuyen Duy Trinh and Laos' Deputy Prime Minister Phoun Sipaseut.⁹⁸

⁹¹ Michael Vickery, *Cambodia: 1975-1982*. Boston, South End Press, Second impression, 1985, p. 101.

⁹² *Bangkok Post*, 4 Feb 1977; 15 Feb 1977; 20 Feb 1977; *FBIS-AP*, 11 Nov 1977, pp. H1-2.

⁹³ *Bangkok World*, 2 Dec 1976; *Bangkok Post*, 6 Dec 1976; *FBIS-AP*, 3 Jan 1977, p. J1; *Ban Muang*, 5 Jan 1977; *Nation Review*, 2 Jun 1977.

⁹⁴ *Bangkok Post*, 26 Nov 1976.

⁹⁵ *Nation Review*, 28 Nov 1976.

⁹⁶ *FBIS-AP*, 17 Feb 1977, p. J1.

⁹⁷ *Bangkok Post*, 3 May 1977; *FBIS-AP*, 20 May 1977, p. J1.

⁹⁸ *Bangkok Post*, 20 October 1977.

It did not take long time to prove that the ultra-right policy was a failure. The Thanin administration had turned the country into a state of civil war. News of the CPT's expanding sabotage activities in rural areas and of border clashes with Cambodia as well as Laos gained daily headlines. The government's suppressive policy actually helped strengthen the CPT's popular base. Even members of the royal family became targets of communist attacks, as shown in the downing of a helicopter killing the queen's secretary and a bomb explosion near the king while he was on a visit to the south. The deteriorating situation caused frustration among the Thai armed forces. The first attempt to overthrow the Thanin government took place in March 1977 when General Chalad Hiranyasiri led an unsuccessful coup. Chalad was executed on Thanin's order. But the Thanin government was unable to escape its fate when a group of Thai military Young Turks asked the 1976 coup leader General Sa-ngat Chaloyu and the Supreme Commander General Kriangsak Chomanan to oust Thanin on 20 October 1977. Kriangsak was later appointed as the new Prime Minister.⁹⁹

Dialogue between Thailand and Democratic Kampuchea moved forward soon after the Thanin government was overthrown. In the meantime, the conflict between the Khmer Rouge and Vietnam was intensified. Relations between Thailand and the Khmer Rouge thus entered a new era, as we shall see in the following chapter.

Conclusion

The early relations between Thailand and Democratic Kampuchea reflected the ups and downs of the struggle among various political groups in Thailand for political and ideological hegemony. Generally, it could be said that from the perception of the Thai elite, Thailand in 1975 was left to stand alone surrounded by communist neighbors. The post-October 1973 civilian administrations thus had to search for alternatives to survive the domino effect. They needed to establish ties with the Khmer Rouge regime, despite their distrust of their neighbors. The contradictory attitude was thus revealed in Thailand's secret support for the Cambodian right-wing forces along the border. The move toward rapprochement was suspended when the Thai ultra-rightwing groups saw the open political system as a threat to the country's very foundations. The ultra-anti-communist attitude by the Thanin administration and its military supporters however placed Thai people in more dangerous situation. Casualties from wars with both the Thai communist movement and the Khmer Rouge on the Thai-Cambodia border were much higher than ever.

⁹⁹ Morell and Chai-anan, *op.cit.*, p. 278.

II.

Alliance with the Khmer Rouge

The new Thai administration of General Kriangsak Chomanan quickly took a new foreign policy direction, dealing with the communist neighbors in a more subtle way. The Kriangsak government offered a gesture of friendship to communist Indochina in order to seek a balance of power with Vietnam, whose domination in Laos and Cambodia, Bangkok believed, was growing. However, ties between Bangkok and its communist neighbor remained fragile. Border clashes continued until the Pol Pot regime was overthrown by Vietnamese forces in early January 1979, and a pro-Vietnamese Phnom Penh government of Heng Samrin was established. The Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia had effectively changed relations between Thailand and the Khmer Rouge, transforming the latter from an enemy into an ally.

Despite its repetitive claim of neutrality, Bangkok became involved in the Cambodian conflict from the beginning. Its role was indeed significant to the diplomatic and military position of the guerilla forces of Pol Pot, as well as to the other two Cambodian opposition forces led by Prince Sihanouk and Son Sann. Although the atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge were widely known, the Thai government's policy of backing them received strong support from various political groups in Thailand.

This chapter will look at the transformation of the relationship between Thailand and the Khmer Rouge after General Kriangsak became prime minister. I will also examine Bangkok's role in the conflict between the Pol Pot group and Vietnam, its implications, and the justification the Thais provided in defending their backing of the genocidal Pol Pot group throughout the 1980s.

Kriangsak's rapprochement

The new Prime Minister, General Kriangsak, had already expressed his intention to improve ties with three Indochinese states when he was supreme commander. He had suggested that the Thanin government provide humanitarian assistance to Laos and Cambodia to relieve their economic hardship. A show of good will, Kriangsak said, would change their unfriendly attitudes toward Thailand.¹⁰⁰ Soon after the political change in October 1977, the Thai foreign ministry announced its new policy, stressing the need to improve ties with the three Indochina countries and to seek methods of achieving that goal.¹⁰¹ The new administration pursued Uppadit's initial talks with Vietnam in New York on 12 October 1977 by proposing to Hanoi to hold talks in Bangkok. It was also important for Hanoi to improve ties with Bangkok because of its growing difficulties with China and the Khmer Rouge, as well as the need for national

¹⁰⁰ *Bangkok Post*, 9 Oct 1977.

¹⁰¹ *FBIS-AP*, 26 Oct 1977, p. J2

reconstruction.¹⁰² A joint communique between Thailand and Vietnamese to take immediate steps toward normalizing relations was then agreed on 2 December.¹⁰³ A degree of normalcy in Thai-Vietnamese relations was therefore achieved during the Kriangsak government.

With respect to Cambodia, a few days after the coup in Thailand, the DK government made a cautious conciliatory statement to Thailand's new military junta. It referred to the cordial meeting between Thai Foreign Minister Uppadit, who continued as the foreign minister in the Kriangsak government, and Ieng Sary in New York on 12 October.¹⁰⁴ Two weeks later, Phnom Penh sent a message via its radio station to Bangkok, that it wanted to hold talks with Thailand to resolve the border disputes. Kriangsak responded favorably to Phnom Penh's call.¹⁰⁵ In late January 1978, the Thai government revealed a plan to reopen the whole border with Laos and Cambodia allowing a resumption of border trade and the flow of essential consumer goods to its neighbors.¹⁰⁶ Uppadit then made a visit to Phnom Penh at the end of January 1978. The visit was aimed to end border skirmishing and to resume of trade and diplomatic relations. Uppadit also brought along a letter from Kriangsak to Pol Pot, expressing Thailand's desire for friendship with Cambodia.¹⁰⁷

It should be noted that although both Cambodia and Thailand had expressed their intention to revitalize ties, they failed to restore peace on their border. On 1-2 November 1977, Khmer Rouge soldiers reportedly crossed over to attack several Thai villages in Aranyaprathet. In mid-December, over two hundred of the joint Khmer Rouge-Angkar Siem forces launched attacks against two Thai border villages in Prachinburi Province, killing sixteen people, including eight children and three women.¹⁰⁸ In late January 1978, two villages in Prachinburi Province and an outpost in Sangkha district of Surin Province were raided by Khmer Rouge forces.¹⁰⁹ The Thai authorities, nevertheless, tried to show restraint toward Cambodia. General Sa-ngat Chaloyu, who was previously known as preferring strong retaliation against Cambodia, blamed local Khmer Rouge cadres for the November border violence, not the Cambodian government in Phnom Penh. A similar comment was made by Kriangsak regarding the mid-December incident.¹¹⁰

However, what was more interesting was that after almost one year of Phnom Penh's silent response to the Thanin government's approach to solve the border conflict, we began to see the Khmer Rouge leaders' enthusiastic move toward a cordial dialogue with Thailand. Diplomatic relations between the two countries improved remarkably. In mid-July 1978, Thailand hosted an official visit by Sary to Bangkok, where he was granted an hour-long audience with King Bhumiphol and Crown Princess Sirindhorn. The two countries agreed to start a new era of friendship, with ambassadorial exchanges, trade delegations, technical and scientific information exchange and telegraphic

¹⁰² Sarasin Viraphol, "Thailand's Perspectives on Its Rivalry with Vietnam," in W. Turley (ed.), *Confrontation Or Coexistence: The Future of ASEAN-Vietnam Relations*, p. 20.

¹⁰³ *FBIS-AP*, 14 Nov 1977, p. J3; 2 Dec 1977, p. J1.

¹⁰⁴ *Bangkok Post*, 25 October 1977.

¹⁰⁵ *FBIS-AP*, 11 Nov 1977, pp. H1-2; 14 Nov 1977, p. J3.

¹⁰⁶ *Bangkok Post*, 26 Jan 1978.

¹⁰⁷ *Bangkok Post*, 31 Jan 1978.

¹⁰⁸ *Bangkok Post*, 5 Nov 1977; 17 Dec 1977.

¹⁰⁹ *Bangkok Post*, 25 Jan 1978; 29 Jan 1978.

¹¹⁰ *Bangkok Post*, 5 Nov 1977; *FBIS-AP*, 19 Dec 1977, pp. J7-8.

communication. During his visit, Sary told the Thai press that Hanoi had instigated several coup attempts in Cambodia. He also denied charges that the DK government had committed any atrocities against its people.¹¹¹

DK's closer move toward Thailand was apparently a result of the intensifying conflict on its eastern border with Vietnam as well as China's advice to the Pol Pot regime to seek an alliance with its western neighbor. Though by early 1977, DK had launched acts of war against all three of its neighbors, the border with Vietnam saw the most serious violence, particularly after March 1977. DK's war with Vietnam aimed to take back Kampuchea Krom, territory lost in the Mekong Delta to Vietnam since the late seventeenth century. On 30 April and 19 May 1977, the Khmer Rouge attacks on Vietnamese army posts and border villages in An Giang province alone killed 222 Vietnamese civilians. Chau Doc was also shelled on May 17. Around the same time, hundreds of ethnic Khmer and Vietnamese in Ke Mea were killed by Khmer Rouge shells.¹¹² With a green light from the Chinese,¹¹³ the eastern frontier of Cambodia was experiencing a rapid escalation of the Khmer Rouge raids particularly from September 1977. Over a thousand civilians on the border of Tay Ninh Province were killed or wounded in continuous attacks between late September and late November. At the end of 1977, Cambodia then suspended diplomatic relations with Vietnam. DK was also attempting to instigate an armed uprising by the Khmer Krom minority against the Vietnamese government. Perhaps confident of backing from China, the CPK Center in Phnom Penh rejected Hanoi's calls for negotiations to settle the disputes. In February, Hanoi proposed a mutual pullback of five kilometers on either side of the border, and international supervision of the border.¹¹⁴ Hanoi also sent copies of its proposal to the Non-aligned Movement and the United Nations. In March 1978, Vietnam brought its proposal to the UN Security Council, but was blocked by China.¹¹⁵ Cambodian forces continued their military incursions across the border, which in June 1978 forced several hundred thousands of Vietnamese living near on the border to seek refuge elsewhere in Vietnam.¹¹⁶ The DK appeal for genocide against Vietnam's population became more straightforward. Internal purges against the Khmer Rouge cadres in the eastern zone, which had close contact with Vietnam, struck deep. Thousands of Khmer Krom people in Vietnam were forcibly evacuated to Cambodia.¹¹⁷

Hanoi tried to tell the world of DK atrocities against their people and to strengthen ties with its neighbor. They were, however, unable to secure much sympathy. Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Van Dong went to Bangkok in mid-1978 informing Thailand about the Khmer Rouge continuous aggression against Vietnam. He assured the Thai government that Vietnam was no longer supporting the Thai communist movement. The Vietnamese premier also urged the Thai authorities to be cautious of the Chinese role in supporting the Khmer Rouge. Vietnam proposed to Thai Foreign Minister

¹¹¹ *Bangkok Post*, 15 July 1978; 16 July 1978; 18 July 1978.

¹¹² Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79*, pp. 357-359.

¹¹³ Michael Hass, *Genocide By Proxy: Cambodian Pawn on a Superpower Chessboard*, New York, Praeger, 1991, p. 23.

¹¹⁴ Kiernan, *op.cit.*, pp. 357-366, 386-388.

¹¹⁵ Haas, *op.cit.*, p. 24.

¹¹⁶ Kiernan, *op.cit.*, pp. 389.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 392-427.

Uppadit a Thai-Vietnamese non-aggression pact to deter China, but his proposal was turned down by Thailand, saying the two countries share no common border.¹¹⁸ In fact, the Thai authorities had closely followed the border conflict between Cambodia and Vietnam, but they chose to stay quiet on the matter.¹¹⁹ Despite the known fact that DK was battling on all its three fronts, the Thai intelligence agency concluded that the conflict between Hanoi and Phnom Penh was caused by Vietnam's goal of establishing an Indochina Federation.¹²⁰ This effectively took the DK side in the conflict.

Finally, Hanoi, together with DK dissident forces, the United Front for the National Salvation of Kampuchea, decided to launch a massive invasion of Cambodia on 25 December 1978. Within two weeks Phnom Penh fell to the Vietnamese troops. The Hanoi-backed People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) led by Heng Samrin was proclaimed on 8 January 1979.

Forming an alliance

Despite claiming the detrimental effects on Thailand, Thai authorities reiterated that Thailand was not a party and was neutral in the conflict between various Cambodian factions and Vietnam. Thailand's neutrality was, however, greatly undermined by its own practice from the beginning of the conflict. Prince Sihanouk revealed that the Chinese Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs, Han Nianlong, had told him about the Thai attitude in early 1979, that "to the outside world the Thais say they are neutral but they are not neutral. In fact, the Thais are with Pol Pot."¹²¹

Soon after the Vietnamese-Heng Samrin forces drove some 50,000 Khmer Rouge forces in retreat to the Thai-Cambodian border, the Kriangsak government announced that Thailand still recognized the Pol Pot regime as the sole and legitimate government of Cambodia. Thai authorities assured the Khmer Rouge leaders that they were welcome to pass through Thailand to any destination they wished.¹²² In return, the genocidal forces' clandestine Voice of Democratic Kampuchea radio, praised Bangkok for its friendship and support for DK.¹²³

In order to pacify the Thai outcry of a Vietnamese threat to Thai national security, in June 1979 Vietnamese Minister of State in charge of foreign affairs Nguyen Co Thach again proposed to Kriangsak a non-aggression pact between Vietnam and Thailand. But Kriangsak turned down the offer. According to Thach, the Thai prime minister told him: "Between our two countries, there is no threat of aggression, and between our two countries there is no common border. There is no need to sign a non-aggression pact." The Thai refusal of a peace pact by led Thach to believe that Bangkok was afraid that Beijing would consider the pact as being against China.¹²⁴

The Cambodian conflict was no longer bilateral between Vietnam and Cambodia or Thailand and Vietnam, after it was brought to the attention of the Association of

¹¹⁸ Haas, *op.cit.*, p. 90

¹¹⁹ *Bangkok Post*, 5 Jan 1978.

¹²⁰ *Bangkok Post*, 16 Jan 1978.

¹²¹ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 27 April 1979, p. 10.

¹²² *Nation Review*, 8 Sept 1979.

¹²³ *FBIS-AP*, 22 Oct 1979, pp. H.3-4.

¹²⁴ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 6 July 1979, p. 19.

Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and of United Nations forums. Thailand sought to internationalize the conflict and to gain international support for its policy to denounce the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia and violation of Thailand's territorial sovereignty. ASEAN became a legitimate regional body, through which Thai officials advanced all their major initiatives on the Cambodian conflict, at the United Nations. Although Indonesia and Malaysia did not entirely share the view of Thailand and Singapore that Vietnam was the greatest threat to regional security, and were suspicious of China's expansive role in the region, differences among them were put aside. In the name of ASEAN, Thailand's policies received greater attention and credibility than representation by Thailand alone or in concert with its great power patrons, the U.S. and China, since Thailand had been perceived by its neighbors as an imperialist forefront. ASEAN was also a channel for Thailand to gain support from other influential organizations such as the European Economic Community, the Commonwealth, and the Organization of Islamic Conference.¹²⁵

Ties between Thailand and China had developed significantly since the Cambodian conflict had started. Cooperation between these two countries on the Cambodian problem was most essential for the existence of the Khmer Rouge and later its allied non-Communist forces led by Prince Sihanouk and former Prime Minister Son Sann. China acted as a sponsor while Thailand served as a land bridge for the delivery of Chinese arms and strategic goods to the three resistance forces on the Thai-Cambodian border. Thai officials saw China as a crucial factor in a strategy to contain the influence of Vietnam and the Soviet Union, China's number one enemy, in Southeast Asia. Though there was suspicion among some Thai academics, most Thai officials believed China would maintain its friendship with Thailand and other ASEAN states. On the other hand, Thai officials tended to disregard Indonesia and Malaysia's concern over Chinese expansion in the region. The close relationship with China not only provided Thailand a guarantee of Chinese military protection against possible Vietnamese attack as shown in China's "lesson" war on Vietnam's northern border, but Thailand also benefited from China's pledge to cease supporting the Maoist Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). In return for Thailand becoming a conduit between the Cambodian resistance forces and Chinese arms supply, the Chinese government subsequently shut off the CPT broadcasting station in southern China and cut off strategic supplies to the CPT, whose guerilla warfare in rural Thailand was therefore significantly affected.¹²⁶ Moreover, the Thai army also enjoyed free Chinese weapons as the Chinese agreed to let the Thai army retain a portion of the arms shipments. Later, the Chinese provided the Thai army technology to co-produce weapons, part of which had to be given to the Khmer Rouge.¹²⁷

Washington was Bangkok's most important Western ally in the Cambodian issue. Since the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, the Thai armed forces had enjoyed growing military assistance and cooperation from the U.S., which had dropped since the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam in 1975.¹²⁸ While publicly condemning Khmer Rouge

¹²⁵ Muthiah Alagappa, *The National Security of Developing States: Lessons from Thailand*, Massachusetts, Auburn House Publishing Company, 1987, pp. 100-101.

¹²⁶ Surachart Bamrungsuk, *Thailand's Security Policy Since the Invasion of Kampuchea*, Claremont, The Keck Center for International Strategic Studies, 1988, p. 14.

¹²⁷ Nayan Chanda, *Brother Enemy: The War After the War*, San Diego, Harchourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986, p. 381.

¹²⁸ Alagappa, *op.cit.*, pp. 107-108.

brutalities, Washington still led the Western nations in support of the DK seat in the United Nations. The U.S. saw the Khmer Rouge as indispensable, the only efficient military force fighting the Vietnamese. Washington helped pressure Prince Sihanouk, who had earlier harshly condemned the genocidal Khmer Rouge rule and might have preferred to cooperate with the Heng Samrin regime, to follow China's policy and worked with the Khmer Rouge. Sihanouk told the press that U.S. Ambassador in Beijing Leonard Woodcock said to him in late 1979: "What do you want? We do not like the Khmer Rouge, but they are the only credible fighting force in the field".¹²⁹

It should be noted that while the Thai army played a major role in the border security and refugee issues, Thai diplomacy on the Cambodian conflict in the 1980s was virtually left entirely in the hands of the Thai foreign ministry under Foreign Minister Air Chief Marshal Siddhi Savetsila. Siddhi served as a foreign minister of Thailand between February 1980 and August 1990 under the three successive governments of General Kriangsak Chomanan (October 1977-March 1980), General Prem Tinsulanon (March 1980-August 1988), and Major General Chatichai Choonhavan (August 1988-February 1991). Before that he had been an officer in the Royal Thai Air Force until 1975 and as Secretary General of the National Security Council in 1975-1980. For a decade, Thailand's foreign policy, which was characterized by staunch opposition to Vietnam and Heng Samrin regime, support for the Khmer Rouge, and close relationships with China and the United States, locked the Cambodian conflict in stalemate.

Through their collective efforts, Thailand, ASEAN, China, and the United States succeeded in leading most of the world to throw support behind the guerilla Pol Pot group, whose representative was allowed to occupy Cambodia's seat in the United States up until 1992. The denial of diplomatic recognition to the Vietnamese-backed Heng Samrin regime aimed to deprive it of internal and external legitimacy, thus obstructing an easy passage for the new regime to reconstruct its war-torn country as well as Vietnamese military consolidation in Cambodia.¹³⁰

Facing moral difficulty in backing the genocidal regime of Pol Pot as well as a risk of withdrawal of support by some countries for the DK seat in the United Nations, Bangkok took a leading role in a campaign to form a "coalition government" of three rival Cambodian resistance groups: the Khmer Rouge, Funcinpec headed by Sihanouk, and the Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF) led by Son Sann. One of the priority missions of Foreign Minister Siddhi Savetsila, under the leadership of Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanon who took power in 1980, was to bring these three Cambodian factions into a coalition. With support from Beijing and Washington, Bangkok finally succeeded in pressuring these former rival Cambodian factions to join the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) in 1982, if they wished to continue receiving aid. Even Prince Sihanouk, who once blamed the brutal Khmer Rouge for killing millions of Cambodians and warned those supporting the regime of the risk of placing Cambodian lives in danger again, finally brought his faction to join the Khmer Rouge.¹³¹ He told the world that his patron China had pressured him to join the Khmer

¹²⁹ *The Southeast Asia Record*, 22-28 Feb 1980; See also *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 18 Apr 1980, pp. 8-12.

¹³⁰ Alagappa, *op.cit.*, pp. 94-95; Eva Mysliwiec, *Punishing the Poor: The International Isolation of Kampuchea*, Oxford, Oxfam, 1988.

¹³¹ Excerpt from an interview with Prince Sihanouk by Jean Leclerc du Sablon of the Paris daily *Le Matin*, reprinted in *The Southeast Asia Record*, 22-28 Feb 1980.

Rouge while the American Assistant Secretary of State Richard Holbrooke told him to do what the Chinese wanted.¹³² The CGDK became a cover for Thailand in its support for the Pol Pot group as a legitimate recipient of international aid.¹³³ Academic Khien Theeravit defended the government's policy as "assisting all the Kampuchean people who are fighting for independence and not only the Khmer Rouge."¹³⁴ There was no doubt that it assisted the Khmer Rouge.

Hanoi now pledged to withdraw its troops from Cambodia in return for two concessions: the exclusion of Pol Pot's forces from the country and an end to the new Chinese threat to Vietnam itself represented by its 1979 invasion. But Thailand, together with ASEAN, China, and the United States, demanded an unconditional withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia before any talks could begin and insisted on the inclusion of the Pol Pot group in any settlement initiative. Bangkok's refusal to hold direct talks with Vietnam and the PRK regime in order to avoid being a party in the conflict and giving indirect recognition to the PRK was an obstacle to any political solution. Thailand also claimed that the proposal for U.N.-supervised elections in Cambodia following Vietnamese withdrawal offered the "genuine justice to every concerned party".¹³⁵ The free and fair election was unexceptionable, but the idea granted the genocidal Pol Pot group the legitimacy to return to Cambodian politics and thus the possibility of turning Cambodia back to a killing field.

While some ASEAN states such as Indonesia and Malaysia often voiced support for the calls to disarm the Khmer Rouge,¹³⁶ one hardly heard such opinion from Thai officials. The Thai foreign ministry was quick to denounce Vietnam/PR insistence on the exclusion of the Khmer Rouge from peace settlement. Siddhi blamed the new Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen for the failure of the meeting with Sihanouk in France in January 1988, due to his "delaying tactics". Hun Sen's demand for a cessation of aid to the Khmer Rouge in return for a definite timetable for a total withdrawal of Vietnamese troops was characterized by Siddhi as an attempt to protract the negotiations in order to "delay the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops or to extract concessions from Prince Sihanouk in the course of the peace talks".¹³⁷

In the military arena, two days after Ieng Sary's flight to Bangkok on 11 January 1979, two senior Chinese Politburo members reportedly flew secretly to Thailand to meet Thai Prime Minister Kriangsak in order to set up a secret fund for the Pol Pot forces.¹³⁸ The Chinese always explicitly displayed their strategy on the Cambodian conflict. Foreign Minister Huang Hua announced in early 1980 China's determination to continue full arms support for the Pol Pot group.¹³⁹ Chinese arms to the Khmer Rouge, and later to other non-Communist resistance forces, were delivered to Thailand's eastern ports at

¹³² *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 27 April 1979 pp10-12; 18 April 1980, pp. 10-12.

¹³³ Alagappa, *op.cit.*, p. 92.

¹³⁴ Interview with Khien Theeravit in Institute of Asian Studies, *The Kampuchean Problem in Thai Perspective: Positions and Viewpoints held by Foreign Ministry Officials and Thai Academics*, p. 75.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹³⁶ Ben Kiernan, "The Inclusion of the Khmer Rouge in the Cambodian Peace Process: Causes and Consequences", in Kiernan (ed.), *Genocide and Democracy in Cambodia: The Khmer Rouge, the United Nations and the International Community*, New Haven, Yale University Southeast Asian Studies, 1993, pp. 195-197.

¹³⁷ *The Nation*, 24 Jan 1988.

¹³⁸ Haas, *op.cit.*, p. 33.

¹³⁹ *The London Times*, 20 Mar 1980.

Sattahip and Klong Yai districts before being shipped by the Thai army transport company to the Thai-Cambodian border. Sino-Thai businessmen and the army took care of the supply of other necessities such as food, medicine, etc.¹⁴⁰

Bangkok's military cooperation with Beijing and the Pol Pot guerilla forces were often exposed by the foreign media, but the Thai authorities simply denied the allegations that they were acting against the new regime in Phnom Penh. The Japanese news agency Kyodo reported in September 1979 that about 10,000 Pol Pot troops had gathered near the Aranyaprathet border, seeking medical supplies from Thailand.¹⁴¹ In November, the Associated Press ran a story of the Pol Pot troops' logistic bases on Thai soil and the Thai army collusion with the guerillas in military activities along the Thai-Cambodian border.¹⁴² A month later, a London-based *Sunday Times* journalist discovered the supply-line from the Thai border to the Khmer Rouge. He witnessed transportation of Chinese weapons and food to a Pol Pot base on Thai territory. Some of the weapons used by Khmer Rouge fighters were American-made and standard issue to the Thai army. The journalist claimed that the Thai armed forces also provided helicopters for the Khmer Rouge leaders from their hideout in the deep jungle to Bangkok en route to other countries.¹⁴³

To assist the Khmer Rouge to fight against Vietnam, Beijing also equipped the Khmer Serei group located on the Thai border. According to Norodom Sihanouk, the Chinese probably had to pay the guerilla group.¹⁴⁴

Thai authorities approached Cambodia's former prime minister Son Sann in Paris soon after Vietnamese-Heng Samrin forces seized Phnom Penh. Thai planners wanted an alliance between a non-communist resistance and the Khmer Rouge to oppose Vietnam. The Thai architects proposed that the Son Sann group would be able to recruit troopers among the refugees. Though the group saw the Khmer Rouge as the number one enemy and initially refused to join with the murderous group, the formation of the KPNLF under the leadership of Son Sann began. The KPNLF forces, too, received arms supplies from China.¹⁴⁵

In early 1985, after Vietnamese and Heng Samrin forces successfully captured all twenty of the Khmer Rouge and allied camps along the Thai-Cambodian border, ASEAN ministers released a joint statement in Bangkok urging for an increased military assistance to the Khmer resistance forces.¹⁴⁶ After the 1985 offensive, Hanoi dropped its demand for an end to the Chinese military threat as a pre-condition for its troop withdrawal from Cambodia, insisting only on prevention of the return of the Khmer Rouge to power. This meant the conflict could be resolved by Southeast Asian states, particularly by Thailand, which could cease to be a conduit for Chinese arms supplies to

¹⁴⁰ Chanda, *op.cit.*, p. 381.

¹⁴¹ *FBIS-AP*, 19 Oct 1979, p. J2-3.

¹⁴² *FBIS-AP*, 19 Nov 1979, p. K1.

¹⁴³ *The Sunday Times*, 9 Dec 1979.

¹⁴⁴ *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 6 May 1980.

¹⁴⁵ Justin Corfield, *A History of the Cambodian Non-communist Resistance 1975-1983*, Working paper 72, Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1991, pp. 14-21.

¹⁴⁶ *Nation Review*, 12 Feb 1985.

the Khmer Rouge. At first, ASEAN reportedly tended to agree with the idea. But it was soon dropped in the face of opposition from China and the U.S.¹⁴⁷

Thai perspectives and justification

The Thai policy of opposing the Vietnamese/ PRK government and recognizing the DK regime received strong support from the Thai media and scholars from the beginning of the Cambodian conflict.

When Vietnam's Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach visited Thailand in October 1979 and again in June 1980 he was greeted with student and worker protests.¹⁴⁸ In early August 1985, 765 Thai academics from several institutions signed a petition to protest the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia. In the letter addressed to the Vietnamese Communist Party Secretary General Le Duan and sent to the Vietnamese embassy in Bangkok, the academics called on Hanoi "to abandon its dream of establishing an Indochina Federation." They also sent a telex to the then United Nation Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar, urging the United Nations to end the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia.¹⁴⁹ No such protests were made against the Khmer Rouge on Thai support for them. This, as Thongchai Winichakul has pointed out, was the first time in Thai political history that Thai government policy was granted approval and cooperation from so many scholars. Moreover, it was the first time that even the Thai communist movement shared Thai government policy. The CPT decided to abandon one of its military bases near the Thai-Cambodian border in order to facilitate military and non-military cooperation between the Thai armed forces and the Khmer Rouge. Information and viewpoints on the conflict, either from the government, the armed forces, the media or academics, provided a similar perspective, while any different view of the minority, was neglected.¹⁵⁰ Astonishingly, reports of Thailand's clandestine aid to the notorious Pol Pot group were hardly examined.

Sometimes the views expressed by the Thai press and public were so much more aggressive than those of security officials that the Thai government had to warn the former to reduce their attacks on Vietnam in order not to further impair relations between the two countries.¹⁵¹ An editorial of the Thai-language daily, *Siang Puang Chon*, even urged the Thai government to resort to military means and stated that diplomatic measures were not sufficient to deal with the Vietnamese. The paper preferred retaliation

¹⁴⁷ For detail of China and the United States' role in blocking any possible compromise between ASEAN and Vietnam in Kiernan, "Inclusion of the Khmer Rouge," pp. 195-196.

¹⁴⁸ *FBIS-AP*, 19 Oct 1979; 27 Jun 1980, p. J5-6.

¹⁴⁹ *Bangkok Post*, 8 Aug 1985.

¹⁵⁰ Thongchai Winichakul, "Kampuchea: mayaphap kap manutsayatham" (Cambodia: myth and humanitarianism), *Warasan Thammasat*, 14, 2 (June 1985), p. 55. The only group which openly criticized the Thai government's policy toward Vietnam in the early 1980s was the so-called "Democratic Soldiers", led by former member of the Communist Party of Thailand, Prasert Sapsunthon. However, because of Prasert's communist background and his doctrine was similar to the Soviet Union one, the group's opinion did not receive much attention either from the government or the public. See Chai-anan Samudavanija, "Implications of A Prolonged Conflict on Internal Thai Politics," in William S. Turley (ed.), *Confrontation or Coexistence: The Future of ASEAN-Vietnam Relations*, 1985, pp. 83-87.

¹⁵¹ *Siang Puang Chon*, 22 Oct 1979

with force against the Vietnamese forces in Cambodia.¹⁵² In the banners carried by the Thai Buddhist-Islamic League to protest Foreign Minister Thach's visit in June 1980, the protesters insulted the Vietnamese as "a dog eater".¹⁵³

While reports on the Cambodian issue in the Thai press were basically not different from Thai official press releases, any allegation of the Thai armed forces' involvement in the Cambodian conflict often drew strong retaliation by the Thai press. In 1981, when India's Prime Minister Indira Gandhi made a statement alleging that the Thai army was helping the Cambodian resistance to fight in Cambodia, she was accused by the Thai press of serving the Soviet Union, a main supporter of Vietnam. The Thai-language newspaper *Matichon*, in an editorial, said that there was no use in trying to see a rationale behind the Indian prime minister's accusation against Thailand. "Mrs Gandhi only wants to please the Soviet Union, which is its ally", said its editorial. The paper went further to assert that Gandhi's attitude reflected "expansionist designs for the occupation of other countries as well."¹⁵⁴ Even the liberal English-language newspaper *Nation Review* said Gandhi was "the victim of disinformation spread by Moscow," while *The Bangkok Post* lashed out at the Indian premier's statement as "not only improper, but also a downright untruth."¹⁵⁵

Nation Review, which in 1982 had disagreed with Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanon's idea of giving military aid to the newly-formed CGDK, now supported ASEAN's call for arms aid and other assistance to the Cambodian resistance forces which lost several of their strongholds to the Vietnamese-PRK heavy offensive in 1985. Its editorial urged the United States in particular to provide arms to the CGDK. The reason given was: "And now, the sheer ferocity of the Vietnamese dry season offensive and her frequent incursions in strength into Thailand appear to have convinced ASEAN that some sort of military retaliation against Vietnam should coexist with the various political and diplomatic moves".¹⁵⁶

Public support of the Thai government policy needs to be understood in the light of the general perspective of the Thais on the Cambodian conflict. This perspective not only represented the importance of the matter from the point of view of the Thais, but it was accepted and reproduced again and again by Thai officials, academics and media and became a dominant theme of Thailand's position in the Cambodian issue. It therefore played a significant role in justifying the country throwing support behind the Khmer Rouge forces.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵² *Siang Puang Chon*, 19 Oct 1979. Also, see *Nation Review*, 19 Oct 1979; 23 Oct 1979; 21 Nov 1979; *Bangkok Post*, 27 Oct 1979; *Matichon*, 19 Nov 1979. And Thongchai, "Kamphucha...", *op.cit.*, note 1, p. 90.

¹⁵³ *Bangkok Post*, 27 June 1980.

¹⁵⁴ *Matichon*, 2 Oct 1981 quoted from *FBIS-AP*, 5 Oct 1981, pp. J1-3.

¹⁵⁵ *Nation Review*, 1 Oct 1981; *Bangkok Post*, 2 Oct 1981.

¹⁵⁶ *Nation Review*, 12 Feb 1985.

¹⁵⁷ The following perspective is drawn from: Institute of Asian Studies, *The Kampuchean Problem in Thai Perspective*; Sarasin Viraphol, "Thailand's Perspectives on Its Rivalry with Vietnam," in Turley (ed.), *op.cit.*, pp. 19-30; Kramol Tongdhamachart, "Thai Perspectives on the Conflict in Kampuchea," in Robert A. Scalapino and Jusuf Wanandi (eds.), *Economic, Political, and Security Issues in Southeast Asia in the 1980s*, 1982, pp. 75-81; Siddhi Savetsila, "Inside Thailand's Foreign Policy: An Interview with Air Chief Marshal Siddhi Savetsila, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Thailand," *Asian Review*, Vol. 5, 1991, pp. 32-42; Theera Nutpiam, "Vietnam kap panha kampuchea," (Vietnam and the Kampuchean Problem), *Asia Parithat*, 10:2 (May-Aug 1989), pp. 14-42.

Vietnam's long perceived intention to dominate Cambodia and Laos and to create a Hanoi-led Indochina federation, which led to the invasion of Cambodia, has been viewed by the Thais as the root of conflict. The Cambodian problem, as they saw it, started only when Vietnamese troops invaded Cambodia in late December 1978, certainly not when the Pol Pot-led DK forces launched heavy incursions into Vietnamese border villages in 1977-78. The presence of 180,000 Vietnamese forces and the establishment of the Heng Samrin regime in Cambodia posed the greatest threat to Thailand's national security. The trans-Mekong region, Cambodia and Laos, which has been considered a buffer area between Thailand and Vietnam, was now considered to have been taken away by the Vietnamese. The Thais also believed that Vietnam had a commitment to socialist revolution in other countries in the region, including to the Thai communist movement.

After the U.S. left the region, Thailand believed it had the ability to rival the Vietnamese power in Indochina. But Soviet support for Vietnam moved the balance of power in favor of Hanoi. Vietnam would not be able to expand its domination and sustain the occupation of Cambodia without Soviet support. Besides, since the Soviet Union was the rival of the United States and China, the major allies of Thailand, the Thais accused the Soviet-Vietnam alliance of having forced Thailand into the center of superpower conflict.

Though Thai authorities asserted that the Cambodian problem was a problem between Vietnam and Cambodia only, Thailand, as a peace loving country, could not abandon a righteous cause. Thailand had to protect international principle and laws, which call for respect of the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of other countries. Thus, Thailand claimed that it not only wanted to protect its national security from the aggressive Vietnamese, but also to help the Cambodian people to restore peace, sovereignty, independence and neutrality. As Khien Theeravit described the Thai role in the conflict:

The question for us as a neighbor to the "Big" Vietnam is whether we would allow the big fish (Vietnam) to swallow the small fish (Cambodia), which is now struck in the big fish's throat; whether we should stay idle and let a few leaders in Hanoi brutalize innocent Cambodians and Vietnamese; whether we should tolerate threats and shoulder the displaced people who escaped the killing by the ruthless people. I think we should not stay idle. We cannot accept it, not because we hate Vietnam, but because Cambodia's independence is our problem too. Man is not a wild animal, which tends to resort to violent means and ignore what is right or wrong. Even Vietnam itself doesn't want to be a wild animal because she is trying to be a member of the United Nations. However, Vietnam only wants to obtain rights, not the duty and obligations of the UN resolution. Therefore, we must oppose Vietnam's aggression and expose its deception and real goal.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁸ Khien Theeravit, "Kampucha kap panha kantosu kap sakden khong latthi chakkawatniyom" (Cambodia and the struggle against the remnant of imperialism), *Warasan Sangkhomsat*, 19, 4 (December 1982), p. 41.

Vietnam was viewed not only as aggressive, violating another country's sovereignty and independence, but as even worse than the Khmer Rouge regime. Khien Theeravit believed that "the dead bodies, as a consequence of the Vietnamese invasion were not less and perhaps more than those Kampuchians killed by American bombers or by the suppression of the Pol Pot clique."¹⁵⁹ Khien, however, failed to offer details of the death toll in Cambodia he believed had been caused by Vietnamese forces. Those who helped Vietnam were helping "the invader, the wrongdoer in the international laws."¹⁶⁰

To justify Thailand's backing of a murderous regime, the Thais went further to defend the Pol Pot regime as being patriotic, defending their country's independence by not bowing to Hanoi. In this view, hostility between DK and Vietnam was rooted in Cambodian suspicion of Vietnam, which historically harbored an alleged ambition of integrating Cambodia. Unlike the Lao PDR, Pol Pot's regime tried to be independent from Vietnamese domination, and that subsequently led Hanoi to decide to arbitrarily replace the Cambodian leader. The clashes on the Cambodian-Vietnamese border were interpreted as merely an excuse for Vietnam to implement its alleged plan to control the whole Indochina. The death toll caused by the Khmer Rouge escalating attacks on Vietnam's border villages in 1977-1978 was, therefore, not significant enough to be noted by Thai officials and their supporters. On the other hand, the atrocities during the DK period reported by western journalists since 1975 were dismissed as propaganda of the Vietnamese and Heng Samrin authorities.¹⁶¹ In the closed-door discussion between Thai academics and the Thai foreign ministry officials, one of the academics even supported the foreign ministry official's suspicion of the reports of Khmer Rouge brutality. The conversation went as follows:

Official: I would like to ask, however, what right we have to eliminate Pol Pot or Ieng Sary and whether the Kampuchians really "despise" Pol Pot. Probably, he is desirable to them! If they "despise" both Pol Pot and Ieng Sary, then why don't we allow the Kampuchean people to show their intention through general elections.

Academic: This is a thoughtful point. If Pol Pot is comparable to the tyrannical Idi Amin, then the Khmer Rouge guerillas of between 30,000-40,000 would have deserted him!¹⁶²

Western scholars who did not share this opinion with the Thais were discarded as people who "only see things superficially"; "it can't be helped if someone (Thai academics) prefer to listen to those foreigners rather than to the Thai opinion".¹⁶³ Some even accused foreign Cambodia experts with any sympathy for Vietnam as still "having an imperialist mind".

¹⁵⁹ Interview with Khien in Institute of Asian Studies, *The Kampuchean Problem in Thai Perspective*, p. 82.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

¹⁶¹ Khien, "Kampucha kap panha kantosu..." *op.cit.*, p. 45.

¹⁶² Institute of Asian Studies, *The Kampuchean Problem in Thai Perspective*, pp. 49-50.

¹⁶³ Interview of Khien Theeravit in *Matichon*, 8 Apr 1985 quoted in Thongchai, "Kampucha...", *op.cit.*, p. 55.

“Speaking straight forward, the imperialist mind is still with the *farang* (Westerners). If they love us, who are the Easterners, it would be similar to the way masters loved and cared for their slaves in the colonial countries.”¹⁶⁴

Vietnam's settlement proposal demanding the exclusion of the two Khmer Rouge leaders, Pol Pot and Ieng Sary, in exchange for Vietnamese recognition of the Sihanouk and San Sann factions was dismissed as Vietnam's attempt to conceal the real problem. For the Thais, the elimination of the Khmer Rouge leaders was not “a matter of principle”.¹⁶⁵

To achieve the righteous mission, the Thais claimed that Thailand was trying to resolve the Cambodian problem in a just and peaceful manner by only resorting to non-violent means via international forums. The overwhelming support of worldwide peace-loving countries for the DK seat in the United Nation proved to them that Thailand's actions were correct.

China too, which the Thais defended as their big ally, considered “a political solution” as “the only way to resolve the conflict”, and wanted to see Cambodia “a neutral and non-aligned country, although not necessarily Communist, which is congruent with both Thailand and ASEAN's policy”. However, the Thais accepted that Beijing would have been displeased if Thailand agreed with any proposal to eliminate the Pol Pot group.¹⁶⁶ As the Thai foreign ministry's permanent secretary in 1988, M.R. Kasemsamoson Kasemsri explicitly explained, that any agreeable resolution must take into account not only the interests of Vietnam and Thailand, but also those of China. “If Vietnam cannot concede to the interests of China and ASEAN, it is not in tune with reality. It is one thing to stand on principles on certain issues, but the question is how far can principles go in a world of reality.”¹⁶⁷

The claim that Thailand resorted only to just and peaceful means to solve the Cambodian conflict was probably convincing as long as the Thai transit route for China's arms supply to the forces of Pol Pot and the other two resistance factions was ignored. The allegation made by the Heng Samrin government that Thailand, in cooperation with Cambodian resistance forces had often made incursions into Cambodia was dismissed by Thai officials who spoke only of defending their territorial integrity from the aggressive Vietnamese-Heng Samrin forces.¹⁶⁸ It was also unclear what the Thai perception of Cambodia's neutrality and non-alignment was, because Thailand had long served as Washington's anti-communist base in Indochina since 1960s.

The Thais claimed that they had no intention of prolonging the conflict in order to bleed Vietnam white. But as Nayan Chanda cited one Thai military thinker, “having lost Cambodia as buffer, the best that Thailand could do was to sustain the fighting that in itself constituted a buffer.”¹⁶⁹ Thai authorities also accepted that prolonged conflict would

¹⁶⁴ Theera Nutpiam borrowed the quotation from Kukrit Pramoj who had accused the anti-Khmer Rouge American journalist as having an imperialist mind. The Cambodia expert to whom Theera referred was Michael Vickery and his *Cambodia: 1975-1982*. See Theera Nutpiam, “Vietnam kap panha kampuchha”, *op.cit.*, p. 37.

¹⁶⁵ Institute of Asian Studies, *The Kampuchean Problem in Thai Perspective*, pp. 50, 36.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁶⁷ *Bangkok Post*, 14 Jun 1988.

¹⁶⁸ *FBIS-AP*, 21 Apr 1982, p. H1;

¹⁶⁹ Chanda, *op.cit.*, p. 381.

work to the advantage of Thailand. Vietnam's shambling economy, waning Soviet economic and military support, and growing Cambodian resistance forces would eventually force Vietnam to withdraw from Cambodia. Besides, while the war penalized Vietnam, it seemed to cost Thailand little, as the Thais believed clashes between Thai and Vietnamese troops were confined to small-scale fighting in the border area. Though the Thais complained that some innocent Thai villagers were killed by Vietnam's shelling, the existence of refugee camps, which drew aid, workers and thus spending power, greatly benefited business in the Thai border provinces.¹⁷⁰ Besides, Bangkok could not ignore the fact that it was willing to serve China's known strategy of bleeding Vietnam to death. As Deng Xiaoping had stated in December 1979: "It is wise for China to force the Vietnamese to stay in Cambodia, because that way they will suffer more and more."¹⁷¹

Behind the humanitarianism

The Thais blamed Vietnam for creating trouble for million of Cambodians, who had to abandon their homeland for refuge in Thailand. The spillover of fighting between the Vietnamese/Heng Samrin forces and the Cambodian resistance forces onto Thai territory also took the lives of innocent Thais in the border areas. The Thais always claimed that their policy on the refugees was based on humanitarian principles. Despite security and socio-economic risks, Thailand could not ignore the plight of a million Cambodian refugees who sought asylum there. Thailand thus believed it should be praised for undertaking such a humanitarian mission. Thai authorities tried their best to provide security and protect refugee lives. As the Thai foreign ministry official claimed: "It would not be consistent with our established tradition to push them back and let them be killed or become victims of Vietnamese suppression."¹⁷² Thus, the Thais were playing the role of *dharma* while the aggressive Vietnamese and Heng Samrin regime were the evildoers.

Some Thai academics argued that the aid agencies mainly emphasized humanitarian objectives, but ignored the fact that the Thai government had to take into account the country's security as well. For example, while the aid agencies wanted the refugee encampments to be moved further into Thai territory so that the Khmer refugees would be saved from the fighting between the Khmer opposition and Vietnamese forces, the Thai authorities refused to do that because of security concerns. On the other hand, they protested that it was difficult for the Thai authorities to maintain full security in the refugee camps because of struggles among various Cambodian armed factions. Besides, Thai officers were unable to distinguish between civilians and soldiers.¹⁷³ When

¹⁷⁰ Chai-anan Samudavanija, "Implications of A Prolonged Conflict on Internal Thai Politics," in W. Turley, *op.cit.*, p. 87.

¹⁷¹ Kiernan, "The Inclusion of the Khmer Rouge", *op.cit.*, p. 200, citing *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 18 Dec 1979.

¹⁷² Institute of Asian Studies, *The Kampuchean Problem in Thai Perspectives*, p. 17.

¹⁷³ Supang Chantavanich "Introduction," in Supang Chantavanich and Bruce Reynolds (eds.), *Indochinese Refugees: Asylum and Resettlement*, Bangkok, Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 1988, p. 9; Phuwadol Songprasert, "The Thai Government's Policies Towards the Indochinese Refugees," in *Thailand: A First Asylum Country for Indochinese Refugees*, Bangkok, Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 1988, pp. 8-27.

problems arose from the refugee camps, the Thais believed they had been unfairly criticized because of problems created by outsiders; "that is, enemies are doing the dirty work and the Thais get all the blame."¹⁷⁴

In short, the Thais, including the academics and media, generally viewed their country's policy on the Cambodian refugee as being purely based on humanitarianism. It had nothing to do with politics and military strategy in the Cambodian question at all. The supporters of the Thai government's policy ignored the government's aim of exploiting refugees for the military and political benefit of the Cambodian resistance forces. However, extensive research and reports by foreign newsmen on the Cambodian refugee camps along the Thai-Cambodian border did show a picture in contrast to what the Thais claimed was the situation.

Soon after the Pol Pot regime's overthrow, Thailand had not been happy with the influx of the Cambodian refugees into its soil, fearing that the country had to shoulder a long and heavy burden of refugees, as it had already experienced with the Vietnamese and Laotian refugees in Thailand. The Kriangsak government considered Cambodians who fled the country after the fall of the DK not as refugees but as displaced people or illegal immigrants. The Thais therefore used tough measures to discourage Cambodians from becoming refugees in Thailand. Several hundred thousand Cambodians were forcibly repatriated back across the Cambodian border. This treatment, which caused over a thousand deaths, drew international protest. However, only the Khmer Rouge and its supporters were allowed to take refuge in the Thai soil.¹⁷⁵

In the meantime, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) were granted permission by the Vietnamese and the PRK governments to deliver aid to famine-stricken Cambodia, starting in August 1979. The aid to Phnom Penh led to protests by the Khmer Rouge leaders over this sign of international recognition of its enemy regime. The Khmer Rouge, for their part, claimed that the DK, as the legal and legitimate regime, was entitled to such aid. By then, the Kriangsak government started to reverse its policy toward Cambodian refugees. In late August, the Thai prime minister facilitated a meeting between representatives of the Khmer Rouge, ICRC and UNICEF in Bangkok, concerning aid to the Khmer Rouge.¹⁷⁶ Kriangsak announced an open door policy for Khmer refugees at the end of October 1979. Bangkok accepted to give temporary asylum to the Cambodian refugees but insisted that the international aid to go to all camps. A study by Linda Mason and Roger Brown showed that Thailand, with the support of the United States, insisted that the international aid agencies give aid to the Khmer Rouge.¹⁷⁷

For the Thais, it was important to keep the various Khmer resistance forces alive, particularly the most militant Khmer Rouge, as a buffer between the Vietnamese troops and Thailand.¹⁷⁸ The border camps became effective political, economic, and military tools for Thailand, together with China and the United States, to influence the Cambodian conflict, against the efforts of the Vietnamese and PRK governments to rebuild

¹⁷⁴ Khien Theeravit, "Conclusion," in Supang and Reynolds (eds.), *op.cit.*, pp. 398-399.

¹⁷⁵ Michael Vickery, *Cambodia, 1975-1982*, p. 31.

¹⁷⁶ Linda Mason and Roger Brown, *Rice, Rivalry, and Politics*, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1983, pp. 12-15.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, chapter 4.

¹⁷⁸ William Shawcross, *The Quality of Mercy: Cambodia, Holocaust and Modern Conscience*, Revised edition, London, Fontana/Collins, 1985, pp. 338-340.

Cambodia. The new policy eventually drew a growing number of the refugees to the Thai border. It became useful international propaganda to assert that these Khmers were fleeing Vietnam's oppression and that its client regime had failed to take control of the country's administration. Refugee camps became a magnet, drawing people with necessary skills out of Cambodia, which desperately needed them for rebuilding a destroyed society. Many of them came in part because of free food provided by aid agencies and in part because of the prospect of resettlement in third countries.¹⁷⁹ The change in Bangkok's policy thus had not much to do with humanitarian principle.

With the new open door policy, the Thai military set up the holding centers of Sa Keo and later Khao I Dang in Prachinburi Province, and now gave the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) a green light to operate the camps. Movement in these two holding centers was restricted and relatively safer than the encampments on the border since they were situated far from the border fighting. However, journalist Rod Nordland revealed in 1980 that Thai military men in Khao I Dang refugee camp were not just guarding the camp, but commanding Cambodian guerilla forces in fighting the Vietnamese. Refugees were brutally treated. The entire camp population was forced to locate land mines in the surrounding minefields without any efficient tools. Many were killed by mines.¹⁸⁰

After Khao I Dang was closed to further entry in late January 1980, the Thai government made an agreement with ICRC and UNICEF to continue their joint mission for the remaining and new Khmer refugees at the border camps.

While widespread famine was raging inside Cambodia, by early 1980 Khmer Rouge fighters and people under their control, who had been in the most critical condition after their overthrow, now appeared to be better off for food, clothing and other necessities than before. Khmer Rouge fighters were given priority for the rice internationally provided to the refugee camps in Thailand. More than 2,000 tons of food a month were reportedly supplied to Khmer Rouge villages by international relief agencies on the Thai border.¹⁸¹ Before 1985, the major Khmer Rouge encampments located near the border region of Aranyaprathet were near Nong Prue, Tap Prik, and Khao Din sub-districts. Access to the Khmer Rouge camps for relief workers was restricted, while the Thai military acted as an intermediary for food deliveries to the camps. The Khmer Rouge lived across the border in Cambodia and came to the Thai side only to pick up their food. It was estimated that around thirty percent of food delivered to the Khao Din camp went directly to the Khmer Rouge soldiers. The presence of international aid organizations was an essential cover for the provision of aid to the guerillas by the Thais and their allies.

The so-called voluntary repatriation program of Khmer refugees initiated by Thai authorities in June 1980 was also believed to help strengthen the Pol Pot army. Many refugees from the Sa Keo holding center were forced to join the Khmer Rouge forces.¹⁸² According to the Washington-based human rights group, Asia Watch Committee, in 1988, the forced recruitment of Cambodian refugees by the Khmer Rouge was

¹⁷⁹ Michael Vickery, *op.cit.*, pp. 33-35.

¹⁸⁰ *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 6 May 1980.

¹⁸¹ *The London Times*, 8 May 1980; *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 2 Nov 1979, pp. 13-15; *The Guardian*, 24 Nov 1979.

¹⁸² Mason and Brown, *op.cit.*, chapter 4.

continuing. Facing with intensive shelling from the PRK forces, some of them were driven back to the refugee camps. Some died in the shelling. Many suffered an unknown fate.¹⁸³ By 1988, access to the Khmer Rouge remained a conflicted issue between Thai authorities and the international relief agencies.¹⁸⁴

Before 1985, the encampments in Nong Samet, Mak Mun, and Nong Chan in Prachinburi Province housed various factions of the Khmer Serei. These undisciplined Khmer Serei soldiers, who were allowed by the Thai military to live among civilian refugees, behaved like bandits rather than patriotic forces fighting the Vietnamese. Some of their leaders were more concerned with self-enrichment and occupied with black-marketeering business in the camps. The UNICEF monitoring report of February 1980 indicated that 89 percent of the rice and 80 percent of the oil delivered to the Mak Mun camp never reached the refugees because of corruption on the part of its camp leader. Instead, the relief supplies were sold to Cambodians coming from within Cambodia and to residents in the camp, and possibly even back to the Thai suppliers. The abuse of aid distribution went on with the full knowledge of the Thai authorities, but they chose not to intervene.¹⁸⁵

Refugee lives were in danger not only from the spillover of battle between the resistance and the Vietnamese/PRK forces, but also from the fighting among rival Khmer Serei factions. Their China-supplied weapons were often used to threaten camp residents. But the Thai authorities refused to move refugees into the holding centers or camps further inside Thai territory. The reason lay in the fact that Thailand, China and the U.S were more concerned with supporting the Khmer Serei resistance movements. "Had refugee populations been moved into holding centers, the humanitarian pretense for feeding these resistance movements would have vanished."¹⁸⁶ Moreover, when refugees were killed by border fighting, the Thai could blame the Vietnamese-PRK forces for ruthlessly killing innocent civilians. But when Vietnam repetitively requested Thailand to move refugee camps deeper inside Thailand, Thai authorities blasted Hanoi as having no right to make such a call.¹⁸⁷

It should be noted that without access for the international relief agencies and media, there was no guarantee of safety in the camps. Relief workers were not allowed to stay in the camps after five o'clock p.m., when most refugee abuses by camp leaders and authorities happened. Media representatives were sometimes allowed into the camps, but only when the Thai authorities had prepared them for filming. Academic research on life in the camps was also entirely prohibited.

While the Thais often stressed that refugees were an economic burden to Thailand, what they did not mention was the benefit the Thai economy gained from the presence of refugees. Within seven months of the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, the border district of Aranyaprathet experienced a thriving black market trade and a property boom. Many local farmers abandoned their rice-fields to take part in the illegal cross-border trading with Cambodians. The influx of foreign aid workers to the town brought a

¹⁸³ The Asia Watch Committee, *Khmer Rouge Abuses Along the Thai-Cambodian Border*, An Asia Watch Report, 1989.

¹⁸⁴ *The Nation*, 28 Mar 1988.

¹⁸⁵ Mason and Brown, *op.cit.*, 47-55.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p. 45

¹⁸⁷ *FBIS-AP*, 29 Jan 1986, p. J2

rapid upsurge in housing demand and local employment.¹⁸⁸ Thailand's national economy also benefited from the huge budgets the international aid agencies spent on the relief efforts. Between 1979 and 1982 alone, the refugee relief operations spent US\$350 million in Thailand. From then on, the United Nations Border Relief Operation (UNBRO) spent 90 percent of its US\$36 million each year in Thailand. The UN also granted assistance to 80,000 Thai border villagers who were affected by the refugee situation.¹⁸⁹

Conclusion

The makers and supporters of Thai foreign policy on the Cambodian issue claimed that the increasing democratic environment in Thailand since 1973 allowed interest groups and intellectuals to participate in policy formulation.¹⁹⁰ But for a country such as Thailand, where national security has been the most important (hidden) agenda in both internal and foreign affairs, freedom of expression did not lead to a challenge or change of policy direction. Instead, "the discourse of national security," in the words of Thongchai Winichakul "undoubtedly a very effective paranoia put into Thai people's heads by the Thai state,"¹⁹¹ strengthened the government's position. Thus, Thai citizens were not only victims of the discourse of national security, but they were also reproducers of that ideology. Besides, the Thai armed forces, with the greatest vested interest of the concerned parties, in prolonging the conflict raised the question whether the Thai authorities indeed believed Thailand's national security to be in real danger. But this vested interest seems to have concerned the government's supporters so little that they did not want to question the integrity of the policy-makers.

However, by the end of the 1980s the Thai foreign ministry's hard-line policy began to face real challenges as it was perceived to be inefficient in resolving the prolonged conflict in Cambodia, and no longer suitable for the fast growing economy of Thailand. The attempt to break the foreign ministry's monopoly on decision-making came with a new government, under the leadership of General Chatichai Choonhavan.

¹⁸⁸ *The Southeast Asia Record*, 30 Nov-6 Dec 1979.

¹⁸⁹ Mysliwiec, *op.cit.*, pp. 108, 110.

¹⁹⁰ See "Introduction" by Khien Theeravit in Institute of Asian Studies, *The Kampuchean Problem in Thai Perspective*, p. III.

¹⁹¹ Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1994, p. 167.

III.

Doing Business with the Khmer Rouge

The Thai foreign ministry under Air Chief Marshal Siddhi Savetsila lost the support and freedom to formulate foreign policy toward Indochina under the new elected prime minister, General Chatichai Choonhavan. General Chatichai, an experienced diplomat from the Kukrit Promoj government, clearly indicated his desire to end the diplomatic impasse in the Cambodian conflict. Trade was introduced as a new diplomatic tactic to improve trust and relations between Thailand and the Indochinese states. Although this new economic approach was primarily perceived elsewhere as Thailand ceding advantages to the PRK government, the three Cambodian resistance factions, the Khmer Rouge in particular, eventually were allowed to share in the huge business profits from this trade with the Thais. In this section, I will therefore examine this shift and the effects of Thailand's foreign policy on the Cambodian issue under the Chatichai government: how the new economic approach opened a new chapter in relations between Thailand and the Khmer Rouge.

From battlefield to market place

By 1985 some Thai academics began to voice their dissatisfaction with Thai government policy, which was seen as causing a protracted war and a diplomatic stalemate. They urged the Prem government to stop backing the Khmer Rouge. Kraissak Choonhavan, whose father, Chatichai Choonhavan in 1988 became the first elected prime minister since 1976, rejected the view that Vietnam was a threat to Thailand as Vietnam was much more underdeveloped than Thailand. On the contrary, Thailand had participated in the American intervention in Vietnam as well as Laos and Cambodia for a decade. He also called for a cessation of Chinese arms supply to the Khmer Rouge group and Thailand's more flexible policy towards the Cambodian problem.¹⁹² In a July 1988 article, Sukhumbhand Paribatra also strongly criticized Thai policy:

"The Thai government, among others, takes a rather complacent attitude towards this problem, at most admitting that the Khmer Rouge issue can be tackled as a part of the political settlement or after that political settlement has been reached. This is partly due to conceptual naivety, partly to fear of antagonizing Thailand's Chinese patron, partly to continuing distrust of Vietnam and partly to the existence of bureaucratic vested interests in the Khmer Rouge connection. ...The point is that there can never be a *stable, durable and just* political solution in Kampuchea as long as the Khmer Rouge is allowed to retain its present leadership or maintain its present level of military strength."¹⁹³

¹⁹² *Asiaweek*, 21 Jun 1985, p. 90.

¹⁹³ *The Nation*, 21, 22 July 1988.

However, these critics were only a small group of academics and their criticism did not receive much attention from the Thai press. Thus, it did not have much effect on the confidence of Thai foreign policy-makers until General Chatichai took office in August 1988. He brought about a significant change in Thai foreign policy toward Cambodia and Vietnam. The shift of policy by Chatichai received both criticism and support from the public.

ACM Siddhi Savetsila was able to keep the foreign minister position because he was a leader of the Social Action party, one of the five coalition partners of Chatichai government. It was obvious from the beginning that Chatichai wished to play a major role in Thai foreign policy, instead of giving a free hand to the foreign ministry and the army. He launched new initiatives and shuttled between Bangkok and regional capitals to meet regional leaders as well as the four Cambodian faction' leaders, discussing the Cambodian peace settlement. The prime minister also appointed a group of young liberal academics and businessmen as advisers to assist him in business and foreign affairs in particular. Among them were Phansak Vinyarat, M.R. Sukhumbhand Baripatra, and Kraisaak Choonhavan. They had been known for their disagreement with the Thai foreign ministry's Indochina policy and as critics of the Khmer Rouge.

Immediately after Chatichai assumed the premier's office, he announced a new initiative to turn Indochina from a battlefield into a market place. The prime minister clarified his idea toward Indochina: "In the future, the neighboring countries such as Laos and Vietnam must be a market place, not a battlefield anymore. The same will go to the Cambodian problem as well. We want to see peace in Cambodia in order to develop the border trade."¹⁹⁴ Chatichai and his advisers explained the reason behind the new policy: Thailand's booming economy required both new markets as well as a new source of raw materials to supply Thailand's fast growing export-oriented industries. Besides, economic cooperation with other Southeast Asian states, as well as peace in the region, were essential for Thailand to deal with the emergence of trading blocs among developed countries and their growing protectionism. Therefore, Thailand, whose security, political and economic interest had been threatened by the Cambodian problem must now try to bring a comprehensive peace settlement to the protracted conflict or at least minimize the level of conflict to that of a local one. The appropriate foreign policy was therefore to develop a positive attitude and mutual trust with all Indochinese countries by way of talks at the leadership level. Moreover, peace and economic relations between ASEAN and Indochinese states would reinforce a trend toward reform in Indochina.¹⁹⁵

Rifts on Indochina policy between the Chatichai faction and the foreign ministry under Siddhi's leadership started from the very beginning of Chatichai administration. While Chatichai expressed his desire to improve ties with Indochinese neighbors by developing business relations, Siddhi reiterated his conservative stand that Thai policy on Indochina would remain basically unchanged. He asserted that before Thailand could have an open and free trade with Indochinese countries, the Cambodian problem had to

¹⁹⁴ *Sayam Rath*, 5 Aug 1988.

¹⁹⁵ See *Kham thalaeng nayobai tangprathet khong rathaban phol ek chatichai choonhavan* (Foreign Policy of the Government of General Chatichai Choonhavan), 25 Aug 1988; Chatichai Choonhavan, *Prathetai nai banyakat rawang prathet thi kamlang plienplaeng* (Thailand in the Changing International Situation), speech delivered at the Association of Political Science Faculty, Thammasat University, on 10 June 1989; "Interview with M.R. Sukhumbhand Paribatra," in *Khao phiset*, 14-20 Dec 1988, pp. 27-28; Sukhumbhand Paribatra, "Scholar Speaking" in *Naeo Na*, 15 Jan 1989, p. 7.

be resolved first. Siddhi insisted that Vietnam had to pull all its troops out of Cambodia and an agreement among superpowers on the reconstruction of Cambodia reached before Thailand would be able to do business with Vietnam and Cambodia.¹⁹⁶ Meanwhile, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew also urged the Chatichai government to stick to ASEAN's strategy of maintaining economic pressure on Vietnam.¹⁹⁷

Perhaps fearing a positive attitude toward Vietnam and the PRK regime would eventually lead to Chatichai's abandonment of Thailand's support for the three Cambodian resistance forces, Siddhi even contradicted his previous view on the Vietnamese troop withdrawal from Cambodia. In June 1988, he had said that he believed Vietnam was serious in its announced plan to withdraw 50,000 troops from Cambodia by the end of 1988, as Vietnam had already honored its promise by withdrawing part of its troop in 1987.¹⁹⁸ But in May 1989, a month after Vietnam had announced a plan to withdraw all its remaining troops from Cambodia by September 1989, Siddhi told the press that Vietnam had a "concealed condition" for pulling its troops out of Cambodia, and could send them back at Phnom Penh's request if the Khmer Rouge returned to power. He cited alleged reports of the Thai army and China that some 30,000-40,000 Vietnamese soldiers were now disguised as PRK soldiers and civilians. He therefore urged continued support for the Cambodian resistance forces, saying an end to aid would play into the hands of Hanoi and Phnom Penh. Siddhi reasoned that a quadripartite government, which included the Khmer Rouge, was the best solution because "leaving anyone in the jungle is dangerous. It is better to have them in the government than out."¹⁹⁹ He also asserted that the inclusion of the Khmer Rouge in a peace formula would give an "equal opportunity for every Cambodian who seeks to stand before the judgement of the people. To deny any Cambodian such a right would make a mockery of the call for self-determination and show contempt for the people of Cambodia." Siddhi remained firm on the inclusion of the Khmer Rouge in any peace settlement until he resigned foreign minister in September 1990. He believed "the Khmer Rouge has changed from the past policies and practices, otherwise they could not have recruited new members and continued to receive local support in their fighting."²⁰⁰

Regardless of the foreign ministry's opinion, the prime minister and his advisory team carried on their initiatives, sometimes without consulting the foreign minister. In January 1989, Chatichai extended de facto recognition to the PRK government by inviting Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen to Bangkok, saying that in the past ten years Thailand had had contact with only three Cambodian resistance groups, which had not brought much progress to the peace process. Therefore, Thailand should try to integrate the PRK government into peace talks.²⁰¹ Chatichai's maverick diplomacy, which

¹⁹⁶ *Bangkok Post*, 10 Aug 1988. The unnamed foreign ministry official urged the government to go slow on trading with Indochina until Vietnam withdraws troops from Cambodia. The official also said that Siddhi had sought Chatichai support on the issue, in *The Nation*, 26 Sep 1988.

¹⁹⁷ *The Nation*, 11 Sep 1988.

¹⁹⁸ *Bangkok Post*, 28 May 1988.

¹⁹⁹ United States, *Foreign Broadcast Information Service-East Asia* (hereafter *FBIS-EAS*), 11 May 1989, pp. 52-53.

²⁰⁰ "Inside Thailand's Foreign Policy: An Interview with Air Chief Marshal Siddhi Savetsila, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Thailand," *Asian Review*, vol. 5, 1991, p.37.

²⁰¹ *The Nation*, 7 Feb 1989.

obviously attempted to change Thailand's decade-old anti-Vietnam and anti-PRK policy thus incited heated debate on the pro's and con's of Thailand's new foreign policy.

Prasop Butsarakhom, chairman of the House committee on foreign affairs and a member of the Social Action Party, quickly blamed Chatichai's advisers for making mistakes by allowing Hun Sen to visit Bangkok. He said that the invitation had provided the Heng Samrin regime with a public relations forum and implied Thailand's recognition of "invaders".²⁰² The leading critic from Thai academic circles was Khien Theeravit, a staunch supporter of Siddhi's policy. He accused Chatichai of making a diplomatic coup which neglected the already agreed principles among the concerned parties. These were the eventual complete withdrawal of Vietnamese troops and the formation of a four-party coalition government, i.e., including the Khmer Rouge. Hun Sen's visit to Bangkok, Khien claimed, had caused a split in Thailand's national unity, a slide in national credibility, and disintegration of Thailand's friendly ties with the international community. He even blamed Chatichai's new diplomacy for having been partly "tinted by emotional humanitarian concern". According to Khien, such emotional concern was a result of a line of thought that personally identified the 1975-1979 Cambodian atrocities with Pol Pot and his clique alone, while neglecting crimes committed by Hun Sen and other PRK leaders as well as the responsibility of Cambodian political culture, the U.S. war legacy, Vietnamese involvement, and the Maoist idea of revolution.²⁰³ Slating the Chatichai team as inexperienced, Khien appeared to support the monopoly role of the foreign ministry, and asserted that the matter should be handled only by those who possessed diplomatic skills and expertise.²⁰⁴

Criticism from Thais appeared to infuriate the prime minister. He retaliated strongly, calling those who refused to negotiate with Hun Sen government, which had real control over Cambodia, "dinosaurs".²⁰⁵ Furthermore, soon after Hun Sen's visit to Bangkok, a foreign ministry official told the press that the foreign ministry had received cables from Thai ambassadors to Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei and the Philippines. The cables indicated that the five ASEAN members had expressed their disagreement with Thailand inviting the Cambodian leader to visit Bangkok. The foreign ministry source pointed out that Singapore had expressed concern that the visit had belittled the status and bargaining power of Prince Sihanouk.²⁰⁶ Moreover, Hun Sen's visit was blamed for Sihanouk's subsequent refusal to join the second Jakarta Informal Meeting (JIM).

However, Chatichai tended to believe that this criticism was in fact generated by Thais, not by other ASEAN states. Chatichai told the press that he had consulted some ASEAN leaders, namely President Suharto and the Malaysian deputy prime minister Ritthaudin, before inviting Hun Sen to visit Bangkok, and he said that they had agreed with his idea.²⁰⁷ A Government House source said that Indonesia, Brunei and Malaysia had even sent message to congratulate Chatchai for being able to convince the three Khmer resistance factions to attend the Jakarta talks. President Suharto expressed full

²⁰² *The Nation*, 28 Jan 1989.

²⁰³ *The Nation*, 31 Jan 1989. Also, "Interview with Dr. Khien Theeravit," *Sayamrath sapda vijan*" 5-11 Feb 1989, pp. 22-24; Surin Pitsuwan, "Reflections," *Bangkok Post*, 8 Feb 1989, p. 4.

²⁰⁴ *The Nation*, 28 Jan 1989.

²⁰⁵ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 23 Feb 1989, pp. 11-12.

²⁰⁶ *Bangkok Post*, 7 Feb 1989; *Thai Rath*, 7 Feb 1979.

²⁰⁷ *The Nation*, 7 Feb 1989.

support for Chatichai's Hun Sen initiative.²⁰⁸ The same source also pointed out that Jakarta officials had told him that "Indonesia knew nothing of the sources of the newspaper reports circulating in Bangkok critical of Gen. Chatichai's initiative and that in any case. ... The Indonesian official denied that Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas was upset over the Chatichai-Hun Sen meeting, and on the contrary, supported it."²⁰⁹

The prime minister's son and adviser, Kraissak, believed the conflict between the premier office and the foreign minister in fact came from the "obsolete system" and bureaucrats at the ministry who did not want to change "their old style of diplomacy". He blamed the foreign ministry for the controversies over the Hun Sen visit and for Siddhi's failure to join Chatichai in meeting U.S. President George Bush in Tokyo in late February 1989.²¹⁰ Kraissak disclosed that the ministry had withheld a crucial message from Prince Sihanouk, stating his agreement to join the JIM II meeting, for eight days before conveying it to Chatichai. The government only learned of the message after it had finalized the arrangements for Hun Sen's visit, meaning it was too late to prevent Sihanouk's withdrawal from the JIM II meeting.²¹¹

The most serious criticism of Siddhi came from his former leader, former Prime Minister M.R. Kukrit Pramoj. Although Kukrit had resigned as leader of the Social Action Party, he still commanded high respect and obedience among party members. In March 1989, Kukrit told Siddhi that if he could not adjust himself to the new policy introduced by General Chatichai, he should resign from the foreign ministry and have someone else in the Social Action Party do the job.²¹² Siddhi finally resigned the foreign ministry in September 1990, following a change of SAP leadership and a cabinet reshuffle.

Despite the criticism, the Chatichai team hosted a meeting between the three Cambodian resistance factions and Hun Sen in September 1989 in Bangkok. According to press reports, not a single foreign ministry official was present at the meeting. The September meeting was again criticized by the academic circle led by Khien. Khien believed that Thailand should let the test of strength among the Cambodian factions on the battlefield decide a new round of the Paris peace conference, which had recently failed.²¹³ Montri Danphaibun, secretary to Foreign Minister Siddhi and also member of the Social Action Party, blasted the prime minister's advisers for causing confusion among Thailand's allies about the country's policy on the Cambodian problem.²¹⁴

Chatichai and his advisers apparently did not pay much attention to the foreign ministry's growing bitterness. Part of the reason for the Chatichai team's confidence in pursuing an Indochina initiative was the support they now increasingly received from

²⁰⁸ *The Nation*, 9 Feb 1989.

²⁰⁹ *Bangkok Post*, 9 Feb 1989.

²¹⁰ During the meeting, Prime Minister Chatichai presented an aide-memoire to Bush, calling for a reassessment of various aspects of the Thai-U.S. relationship. It also asked for joint U.S.-Thai efforts to explore trade and investment opportunities in Indochina. Siddhi later told the press that he had not been consulted by Chatichai over the content of the aide-memoire. *The Nation*, 28 Feb 1989.

²¹¹ *The Nation*, 2 Mar 1989.

²¹² *The Nation*, 1 Mar 1989.

²¹³ *The Nation*, 16 Sep 1989.

²¹⁴ *Bangkok Post*, 13 Oct 1989.

Thai press, which saw little progress achieved under a decade of Siddhi's leading role.²¹⁵ Also, Chatichai's proposed business relations with neighboring countries later became attractive to the Thai business sector and press. They were so eager to see it become an economic power in the region, hoping to see it as a gateway to Indochina; the Thai baht a major currency in the Indochinese economy; and Thailand a financial center of the region.²¹⁶

In the political arena, the rapprochement between Thailand and Vietnam was credited for the Vietnamese troop withdrawal from Cambodia in September 1989 and Hun Sen's agreement to Thailand's cease-fire proposal. The Chatichai government also proposed the establishment of neutral camps to protect Cambodian refugees from the abuses by the Khmer Rouge and their allies. It was successful in bringing the four Cambodian factions to the negotiating table. Chatichai's diplomacy was thus an important basis for the Cambodian peace process which eventually led to the United Nations-sponsored election of 1993.

However, Chatichai's peace initiatives confronted obstacles from the beginning, particularly from the firm supporters of the Maoist guerilla forces, the U.S. and China. Due to a fear that Bangkok would abandon the three Cambodian resistance groups for the sake of doing business with the Phnom Penh government, Washington even threatened to withdraw U.S. trade privileges from Thailand.²¹⁷ Despite U.S. opposition, Bangkok continued to strengthen business relations with Hanoi, Phnom Penh, and Vientiane. Bangkok became a venue for business discussions between Thais and their Indochinese counterparts. In March 1989, the first shipment of a timber deal worth three million baht with the Hun Sen government arrived at the Thai coastal town of Trat.²¹⁸ Cross-border trade between Thailand and Cambodia was soon flourishing.

Searching for precious resources

The business ties between Thailand and Cambodia fostered by the Chatichai administration were initially believed to benefit Cambodia's pro-Vietnam PRK government politically and economically. However, the three Cambodian resistance factions, the Khmer Rouge in particular, did not want to let such an opportunity drift away. They were as competent as the PRK government at exploiting Cambodia's natural resources for their own uses. The Thai governments, including the Chatichai and the successive administrations of Anand Panyarachun and Chuan Leekpai, voiced no objection to such lucrative business the Thais had with any Cambodian factions.

In fact, business contacts between Thais and the KR began as early as 1981. According to the governor of Trat Province, around two thousand Thais were already digging for rubies in the Khmer Rouge-controlled area opposite Trat. They regularly

²¹⁵ See example, supporting comment by Phiraphan Phalusuk, an opposition MP in *The Nation*, 28 Jan 1989; editorials of *Naeo Na*, 1 Feb 1989; *Siam Rath*, 3 Feb 1989; *The Nation*, 11 Sep 1989.

²¹⁶ For example, see *Phuchatkan Weekly*, 29 Jun-5 July 1992, 16; *Phuchatkan Daily*, 24 Sep 1992.

²¹⁷ See Kiernan, "The Inclusion of the Khmer Rouge," pp. 194-205. Citing *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 2 Mar 1989.

²¹⁸ *The Nation*, 26 Mar 1989.

crossed into Cambodia despite a warning of possible danger. Many were killed and injured when Vietnamese troops attacked the area.²¹⁹

Prince Sihanouk's faction, Funcinpec, also wanted to be involved in the lucrative trade with the Thais. In late 1982, Funcinpec had concluded an agreement with a Thai logging company for supply of 2,000 million baht (US\$100 million)²²⁰ worth of timber. It included 650,000 cubic meters of soft wood and 350,000 of hard wood, which could feed local sawmills for up to six years. The deal was signed at a hotel in Bangkok by a representative of Amphaiphan Kankaset company and Buor Horl, the CGDK's co-minister of economic affairs and a close aide of Sihanouk.²²¹ However, the Thai government refused to open a border check-point for transporting Cambodia's timber into Thailand, for security reasons. Sihanouk also denied that he had endorsed the timber contract, stressing that the contract should have been approved by the Khmer Rouge and the KPNLF factions. But Buor Horl insisted that the Prince had in fact agreed with the contract and had only suggested he obtain approval for the project from other Funcinpec leaders.²²²

But with Chatichai's policy of turning Indochina into a trading ground, Thai officials became more helpful in facilitating the lucrative business transaction, and sometimes even allowed a breach of regulations. For example, the Chatichai cabinet acceded to logging companies' demands to be allowed to import Cambodia's timber from the areas under the control of the Khmer Rouge and KPNLF without certificates of origin.²²³ The certificates were normally essential proof that the timber was not cut on Thai soil.

It should be noted that the logging trade with Cambodia was crucial for the livelihood of Thailand's timber business, particularly after the Chatichai cabinet imposed a nationwide logging ban in 1989. Gems in Cambodia's Pailin area were also in high demand by Thailand's gems export business, as Thailand's biggest gem areas in Chanthaburi and Trat had been nearly exhausted, which had led to a shut down of many gem businesses since 1984.²²⁴ Besides, Cambodia's precious stones, mainly rubies and sapphires, were considered to have a higher quality than Thai products.

Soon after Thailand had moved to revitalize trade with the Phnom Penh regime, Thai and Cambodian merchants flocked to the newly set up black-market in the border towns of Aranyaprathet and Poipet. Khmers carried loads of spices, alcoholic beverages and forest products to the market. In return, they bought cigarettes, clothes, dried foodstuffs and kitchen utensils from Thailand. According to the Thai traders, they set up the makeshift trading post after striking a deal with the PRK border officials, while Thai officials turned a blind eye to the growing business. The Khmers also herded some 300-500 head of cattle every week from central Cambodia to sell to the Thais at about ten kilometers south of Khlong Pramhot, east of Aranyaprathet. The profits was shared between the PRK soldiers and the Khmer Rouge guerillas whom the Thai traders said seemed willing to let the trade continue. The two rival forces were also trying to draw

²¹⁹ *Matichon*, 23 Oct 1981.

²²⁰ In 1982, one dollar was equivalent to twenty baht. In 1984, the Prem government devalued the baht to twenty-five baht to one dollar.

²²¹ *The Nation Review*, 1 Nov 1982.

²²² *Bangkok Post*, 27 Nov 1982; *FBIS-AP*, 10 Dec 1982, p. H1.

²²³ *The Nation*, 29 Oct 1990.

²²⁴ *Phuchatkan Weekly*, 30 Nov-6 Dec 1992, pp. 1, 2, 19.

more traders to the areas they controlled. The Phnom Penh troops mined a similar Khmer Rouge-controlled cattle market some forty kilometers of Khlong Pramhot, killing and wounding many Khmer traders.²²⁵

In 1990, several business deals between Thai private companies and the Khmer Rouge were reached. Six Thai timber companies, one partly owned by a Chatichai cabinet minister, were trying to win contracts from the Khmer Rouge to carry out massive logging in Pailin town, south of Battambang and opposite the Thai province of Chanthaburi.²²⁶ In August 1990, the Khmer Rouge granted a group of about five hundred Thai gem traders a concession to dig for precious stones in their newly-captured stronghold of Pailin. In return for the concession, the group agreed to build a 12-kilometer road from Pailin to the Noen Phi border checkpoint in Chanthaburi Province, in order to facilitate their clandestine cross-border trade. About one hundred Thai workers with five bulldozers, sent to Cambodia for mining, also had a duty to construct the road, which had cost the group over twenty-two million baht. In addition, the group agreed to pay the Khmer Rouge an undisclosed percentage of the sales from the gems. Besides, the guerilla forces had earlier allowed a large number of Thais to dig for gems in Bo Lang and Khao Peht areas opposite Bo Rai District of Trat Province. Nearly a hundred thousand Thai and Karen workers were reportedly mining there.²²⁷

By 1992, border trade between Thais and all Cambodian factions had expanded considerably. Twenty-seven temporary checkpoints passes in seven border provinces (Ubon Ratchathani, Sisaket, Surin, Buriram, Prachinburi, Chanthaburi and Trat) were now open to facilitate the thriving border business. Of these, thirteen checkpoints were mainly used to transport logs and timber to Thailand. Between January and October 1992 alone, over 898,000 cubic meters of timber were transported from Cambodia to Thailand. Of these, 520,000 cubic meters were from deals made with the Phnom Penh government, 200,000 cubic meters were from the Khmer Rouge area, 128,000 were from the Funcinpec area, and 50,000 were from the KPNLF area. Chanthaburi Province alone received over 160,000 cubic meters of Cambodian and timber worth 638 million baht.²²⁸ Forty-eight Thai logging companies claimed that in 1992 they had invested almost fifteen thousand million baht (US\$600 million) in return for three- to five-year concessions, which involved over thirty thousand Thai workers.²²⁹ Interestingly, the state enterprise Forestry Industry Organization of Thailand was among the Thai logging companies doing business with the Khmer Rouge.²³⁰ The logging area under Khmer Rouge control covered the area opposite Thailand all the way from Prachinburi to Trat Provinces.

The Pol Pot group now also controlled most of the gem rich area in Pailin and its surrounding area. It was estimated that there were around 40,000-50,000 Thai fortune hunters working in the area. They can be categorized into three groups. The first group was individuals who needed only a spade to dig for precious stones. They paid the guerilla group 250 baht in fees per week, in return for a mining permission. They could work anywhere except the areas already granted in concessions to the second and third groups. The Khmer Rouge reportedly earned millions of baht daily from this group. The

²²⁵ *FBIS-EAS*, 29 Jun 1989, p. 64.

²²⁶ *Bangkok Post*, 30 Jun 1990.

²²⁷ *The Nation*, 12 Sep 1990.

²²⁸ *Phuchatkarn Weekly*, 30 Nov-6 Dec 1992, pp. 1, 2, 19.

²²⁹ *Thansetthakij*, 21-24 Feb 1993, pp. 1-2.

²³⁰ *Thansetthakit*, 10-12 Dec 1992, p. 18.

second group comprised minor operators who owned concessions for a small area. The Khmer Rouge received five thousand baht from each of them in return for a concession for one square wah (approximately four square meters) of land. And the last group comprised major operators, who paid the Khmer Rouge ten to twenty million baht royalty for a six-month concession for a large area, which was then divided and sub-contracted to smaller companies. The concession was renewable every three months by paying 800,000 baht each time. Around eighty companies, including their sub-contractors, were in this category. Individual hunters would sell gems in Chanthaburi and Trat, home of Thailand's biggest gem-cutting factories. The big operators usually had their own factories and export business. Price for an unburnished gem sold at the spots ranged from twenty-five to two million baht.²³¹

According to a banking official, during the boom period the volume of money in circulation in Chanthaburi's gem business alone was as high as 200-300 million baht (US\$8-12 million) a week.²³² Some claimed that the Cambodian gem trade had generated 3,000 million baht (US\$120 million) a year in revenue since 1989, when the Khmer Rouge had captured Pailin. The Thais and the Khmer Rouge usually split the profits 50-50, after paying 10 per cent of their income to the Thai military, which controls the border.²³³

Facing sanctions

Thailand's thriving logging and gem business with the Khmer Rouge was threatened when the latter refused to respect the Paris peace agreement they had signed in 1991, neither disarming their fighters nor allowing people in their area to register for the country's election in May 1993. The UN Security Council passed a resolution dated 30 November 1992 to support the decision of the Supreme National Council headed by Prince Sihanouk to impose economic sanctions against the Khmer Rouge. The SNC set a moratorium banning log exports from Cambodia from 31 December 1992. It also called on Cambodia's neighboring states to prevent the supply of petroleum products to the areas occupied by the Khmer Rouge. The SNC later announced a ban on gem exports from 28 February 1993. The decision thus obliged the Thai government to close down all border trade with Cambodia, and led Thai traders to cry foul over the United Nations sanctions. Several attempts were made to prevent a huge loss of Thai business interests.

Before the UN Security Council passed its resolution to support the SNC decision, Squadron Leader Prasong Soonsiri, foreign minister of the Chuan Leekpai government, said that Thailand would continue to allow business transactions with the Khmer Rouge as long as there was no formal ban from the SNC.²³⁴ He also defended the Khmer Rouge, by saying the Maoist group had no intention of rejecting the peace plan. Besides, he said, the Cambodian problem would not be solved even if the election was held, as long as the Cambodian factions could not genuinely reconcile themselves.²³⁵ Nor

²³¹ *Phuchatkan Weekly*, 30 Nov-6 Dec 1992, pp. 1, 2, 19; *Bangkok Post*, 19 Nov 1992.

²³² *Prachachat Turakij*, 6-9 Dec 1992, p. 42.

²³³ *The Nation*, 2 Mar 1993.

²³⁴ *The Nation*, 11 Nov 1992.

²³⁵ *The Nation*, 16 Nov 1992.

was the Thai foreign minister was happy with the UN Security Council's call for a ban of oil supplies to the Khmer Rouge-controlled area. He told the chief of UN Transitional Authority of Cambodia (UNTAC), Yasushi Akashi, that it was "not a military measure and should not be taken as an economic measure". Prasong asserted that the ban would hurt the people and result in the Khmer Rouge taking a tougher stance in retaliation. Besides, he added, the difficulties would force people to rise up to help the Khmer Rouge.²³⁶

Interestingly, as soon as the story that the UN was considering endorsing the economic sanctions against the Khmer Rouge first came out, some Thai officials and businessmen continued to foster a plan to expand border trade with Cambodia. Chanthaburi's governor announced that he would soon open a new temporary check-point at Pong Namron district, and called for more investment to expand the Pong Namron market in order to serve the new trading channel. The Chanthaburi Business Association called upon the governor to implement the plan as soon as possible. They believed that if the UN eventually acted, they could thus have more bargaining power with the United Nations.²³⁷

Deputy Secretary-General of the foreign ministry Saroj Chavanavirat said that Thailand and some Asian countries believed the United Nations should not impose severe punishments, such as sanctions or military measures, on the Khmer Rouge.²³⁸ The opposition parties, several members of which had been involved in the border trade with Cambodia, particularly in the logging business, moved to put pressure on the Chuan Leekpai government not to abide to the UN decision. They set an urgent agenda for the parliamentary meeting in order to lobby the government that the closure of Thai-Cambodian check-points would cause serious damages to Thai traders and workers.²³⁹ Thai border traders urged Foreign Minister Prasong Soonsiri to play a bigger role in persuading the Khmer Rouge to join the peace process. They even pledged to assist the foreign minister in talks with the Khmer Rouge because, they said, "we have traded with the Khmer Rouge for a long time and can understand them."²⁴⁰ A group of 48 logging companies and major gem mining companies asked the Chuan government to allow them to continue their business at the Cambodian border until their concessions ended in next three to five years. They argued that they had not yet received any profit from the almost fifteen billion baht (US\$600 million) investment they had made.²⁴¹

The owner of a Sahawannapruk sawmill in Surin Province accused the UN and UNTAC, which pushed for the Thai-Cambodian border closure, of trying to paint the Khmer Rouge as an evil. He argued that the guerrillas refused to disarm because their demands had been rejected by the international organization. "It was unfortunate that that the Khmer Rouge leaders did not try to defend themselves against the accusation," said the Thai businessman. He blamed the blockade for lack of humanitarian concern since it would seriously hurt the Khmer Rouge's children, who relied on supplies of food and

²³⁶ *FBIS-EAS*, 30 Nov 1992.

²³⁷ *Phuchatkan Daily*, 12 Nov 1992.

²³⁸ *Phuchatkan Daily*, 13 Nov 1992.

²³⁹ *Phuchatkan Daily*, 13 Nov 1992.

²⁴⁰ *Bangkok Post*, 17 Nov 1992.

²⁴¹ The figure seems very high. It is possible that these companies exaggerated their claim so that their appeals would receive more public sympathy and the government's help. See *Prachachat Turakij*, 22-25 Nov 1992, p. 43; *Thansetthakit*, 21-24 Feb 1993, pp.1-2.

Facing such pressure from business groups, the Thai foreign ministry and army officials tried many ways to minimize the losses of Thai traders. The foreign ministry attempted to seek a grace period from the SNC and UNTAC, to allow Thai timber merchants to haul logs from Cambodia.²⁵⁶ But these negotiations were unsuccessful. Later, the Thai National Security Council's Secretary-General, General Charan Kunlavanich, accused UNTAC of being unfair to Thai loggers by allowing the Japanese to ship Cambodia's logs via Cambodian ports.²⁵⁷ Deputy Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan said Thailand would not tolerate it if UNTAC did so.²⁵⁸ Later, in April 1993, General Chaovalit Yongchaiyuth, then the Interior Minister, wished to mobilize his popularity in the Northeast region. He tried to press the Chuan cabinet to reopen the temporary checkpoints to import logs from Cambodia. But this move was later rejected by the cabinet.²⁵⁹

After the peace-keeping forces left Cambodia following the UN-sponsored 1993 election, logging and gem business between the Thais and the Khmer Rouge boomed again. In September 1993, Reuters reported that gem mining in Pailin was thriving despite the threat of the new Cambodian government's military offensive against the Khmer Rouge stronghold. More than 150 new fields had sprung up in this border region since the Khmer Rouge had relaxed profit-sharing regulations in July 1993, demanding less than half the profits from the mining.²⁶⁰ The London-based environmentalist group Global Witness said in its 1995 report: "Both the Khmer Rouge and the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces, apart from waging a war, are actively involved in the timber industry."²⁶¹ In 1997, these illegal business contacts between the Thai and the Khmer Rouge continued with the full knowledge of Thai border authorities.²⁶² In fighting with the Khmer Rouge in late 1997 in Samlaut district of Battambang, Phnom Penh troops reportedly seized from the rebels 750 million baht (US\$30 million) in cash, collected from logging concessions, from the rebels. The area was under the command of General Khe Mut and his father-in-law, the notorious butcher 'Ta Mok'.²⁶³

Pailin has been such a precious asset for the Khmer Rouge leaders that they did not want to abandon it, even those who they had decided to defect from the Pol Pot-led guerilla forces. In 1997, Ieng Sary's faction, which defected to the Cambodian government in 1996, was reportedly still making millions of dollars selling gems to Thai traders. At least 29 mining companies operated in the Pailin area. Each company was required to pay the dissident group 220,000 baht a month in return for a concession.²⁶⁴

²⁵⁶ *Maichon*, 23 Nov 1992; *Bangkok Post*, 1 Jan 1993; *Phuchatkan Daily*, 7 Jan 1993.

²⁵⁷ *Phuchatkan Daily*, 19 Feb 1993.

²⁵⁸ *Maichon*, 27 Jan 1993.

²⁵⁹ *Bangkok Post*, 28 Apr 1993.

²⁶⁰ *Bangkok Post*, 9 Sep 1993.

²⁶¹ Quoted from *Bangkok Post*, Perspective section, 19 Jan 1997.

²⁶² *Bangkok Post*, 15, 17 Jan 1997.

²⁶³ *Bangkok Post*, 11 Dec 1997.

²⁶⁴ *Bangkok Post*, 21 Jan 1997.

Conclusion

Thailand's alliance with the Khmer Rouge since 1979 provided the Thais with excellent access to Cambodia's natural resources. These two allies efficiently exploited the Thai-Cambodian border area for military, political and economic purposes. Geographically, the high security area along the Thai-Cambodian border, which is under the Thai army control, helped protect businesses from outside investigation. Politically, the consistent support for the Khmer Rouge on the part of the Thai government was a justification for Thai businessmen to trade with them as Thailand's long-time allies. They believed they were simply conducting business with a regime that was Thailand's friend. Economically, the easy and highly profitable gem and lumber businesses were a win-win situation for both sides. Militarily, the revenue derived from businesses with the Thai was very crucial for the Khmer Rouge's military survival, particularly when China began to withdraw its support after the 1993 election.

The Thais did not appear to be concerned that the illegal cross-border businesses would become another major funding source for the Khmer Rouge remnant forces to continue their civil war in Cambodia. The damage to Thailand's international reputation was not their concern either, despite the fact that the country had often been strongly criticized for supporting the murderous Khmer Rouge forces and for devastating Cambodia's natural resources.

Thai businessmen were well aware of the risks involved in the logging and gem business in Cambodia, particularly with the Maoist guerillas. The quick, high profits just made it irresistible. Yet, when trouble started, it was considered the responsibility of the government to help the businessmen. This was considered to be an issue of "national interest". However, it often happened in Thailand that those affected tended to claim that their partisan interest was part of a national interest. In this case, evidence indicates that some big Thai companies belonged to members of the Thai government's coalition partners or were financial supporters of major political parties, who play an important role in the money-based electoral politics in Thailand. The multi-million baht activities in an area highly sensitive to Thailand's national security would not have been possible without facilitation from Thai army officers, who were entirely in charge of the border area. They too appeared to shared vested interest in this military-cum-business operation.

Postscript

After their overthrow in early 1979, the Khmer Rouge soldiers came to the Thai border in severe condition. They were in a state of famine. Many had been wounded and soon died. But they soon found a new lifeline for a revival and strengthening of their forces on an old enemy's soil. The new alliance with Thailand offered the Maoist forces three main sources of income: Chinese arms supplies, aid relief supplies, and illegal business with the Thais. Without Thailand's cooperation, the guerilla forces of Pol Pot would thus have been finished by the Vietnamese-PRK forces soon after their overthrow.

National interest and principle rarely go together in international affairs. But both policy-makers and supporters of the Thai foreign policy of helping the Khmer Rouge often claimed that Thailand's role in the Cambodian conflict not only protected Thailand's national interest, but was also based on principle. To claim only a national interest would have made the policy sound too selfish. The Thais always wanted to maintain a buffer on their border. The surviving Khmer Rouge forces and refugee camps thus became a human buffer between Thailand and the Hanoi-Phnom Penh forces. The buffer zone later yielded high profits for the Thais. This was a policy that Thai authorities consistently maintained along the Thai border even though they claimed a wish to establish friendly relations with Cambodia.