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Author(s)	Ang Cheng Guan
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Vietnam–Cambodia relations from the Paris Peace Conference (1991) to membership of ASEAN

Ang Cheng Guan

This paper traces Vietnam–Cambodia relations from the Paris Peace Conference in 1991 to 1999. It shows that Vietnam and Cambodia have been unable to resolve their differences over land and sea borders, and over the ethnic Vietnamese refugees residing in Cambodia. The Cambodians’ deep distrust of the Vietnamese and the unstable political situation in Cambodia were major obstacles. Some progress has been made towards settling their differences since 1998. Vietnam was the strongest supporter of Cambodia’s admission into ASEAN at the sixth ASEAN summit in December 1998. Cambodia became the tenth member of ASEAN in April 1999. The paper also looks at the role of China and the implications of Cambodia’s membership in ASEAN for its relations with China.

‘The Mekong river may run dry, the Truong Son mountains may erode, but the Kampuchea–Vietnam friendship will never change.’ (Heng Samrin)

‘The deadly conflict is with the yuon enemy and its puppet. Yuon invade and commit genocidal acts against Khmer. You are entitled to kill yuon, you are not wrong.’ (Nuon Chea)

The sixth ASEAN summit

The sixth ASEAN summit is an appropriate starting-point to reflect on Vietnam–Cambodia relations since 1991. The summit was held in Hanoi on 15–16 December 1998, amidst the already seventeen-month-long Asian financial crisis. One consequence of the crisis for ASEAN was that it raised questions about the effectiveness of the association by major powers outside the region. In the words of Singapore’s Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong: ‘Our immediate priority is, therefore, to demonstrate convincingly that we are seriously coming to grips with our present

economic problems', a view shared by the other eight ASEAN members.¹ As such, the summit was to show to the world ASEAN's unity and resolve in overcoming the financial crisis, both as individual countries and as a group. As Prime Minister Goh added: 'Let us have no illusions about where we stand if the Hanoi Summit does not live up to international expectations'.² The Hanoi Action Plan (HPA)³ was to be a testimony to and demonstration of ASEAN's continued relevance. However, it was almost overshadowed by the issue of Cambodia's admission into ASEAN.

Cambodia would have been admitted into ASEAN on 23 July 1997, during the ASEAN thirtieth ministerial meeting in Kuala Lumpur, if not for the dispute between its then two co-premiers, Ranariddh and Hun Sen, which led to the ousting of the former in early July 1997. Cambodia lost its seat in the United Nations as a result. Because of the political uncertainty in Cambodia at the time, on 10 July 1997 ASEAN decided to postpone indefinitely its admission. A general election was subsequently held in July 1998, and in early December, a new coalition government was established in Cambodia. Cambodia regained its seat in the United Nations and reapplied for admission into ASEAN. Thus about two weeks before the sixth ASEAN summit, amidst more pressing issues brought about by the financial crisis, the nine members had to consider whether finally to admit Cambodia as the tenth and last member of the regional grouping. We do not know the full details of the deliberations of the foreign ministers who met on 12 December 1998 and the subsequent meetings of the heads of state. However, the leaders were candid in admitting that there were disagreements over the timing of Cambodia's admission into ASEAN.

Vietnam's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, Nguyen Manh Cam, at a press briefing after the meeting of the ASEAN foreign ministers on 12 December 1998, reiterated Vietnam's preference for the immediate admission of Cambodia into ASEAN. He disclosed that the

¹ 'Top priority in Asean: boost confidence', *The Straits Times*, 16 December 1998.

² Ibid.

³ For the full text of the Hanoi Action Plan, see the *Summary of World Broadcasts* (henceforth *SWB*), FE/3413/S1/1-9. The action plan is divided into ten categories – strengthen macroeconomic and financial co-operation; enhance greater economic integration; promote science and technology development and develop information technology infrastructure; protect human resource development; protect the environment and promote sustainable development; strengthen regional peace and security; enhance ASEAN's role as an effective force of peace, justice, and moderation in the Asia-Pacific region and in the world; promote ASEAN awareness and its standing in the international community; and improve ASEAN's structures and mechanisms.

majority of the foreign ministers shared that view. Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines had made public statements expressing their reservations.⁴ As ASEAN operates on the principle of consensus, and as there was no agreement among the foreign ministers, it was decided that the heads of state would reconsider the issue.⁵ Until the afternoon of 14 December, the impression given was that there was still no agreement.⁶ But, apparently, at an informal dinner on that same evening, the heads of state decided to admit Cambodia but to announce the fact only after the summit. The leaders also agreed to hold the official ceremony marking its admission a fortnight to a month later in Hanoi. President Habibie, who was scheduled to meet Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen after the informal dinner, was mandated to relay the news to him.⁷ In his speech at the opening of the summit the next day, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad hailed Phan Van Khai for his 'skilful arrangement for Cambodia to be admitted in a special ceremony to be held in Hanoi soon'.⁸ Cambodian radio reported the ASEAN decision on 15 December. According to the report, Hun Sen welcomed the decision by ASEAN. It added that Thailand, Singapore, and the Philippines objected to the quick inclusion of Cambodia as a member, whereas the other six countries were happy with the decision.⁹ The admission of Cambodia was confirmed by a Vietnamese Foreign Ministry statement of 16 December.¹⁰ Cambodia eventually became the tenth member of ASEAN on 30 April 1999.

Of the countries which supported Cambodia's immediate admission into ASEAN, Vietnam was the most enthusiastic and vocal. The Cambodian flag was hoisted alongside those of the ASEAN countries outside Ba Dinh Hall, the venue of the summit, even when a decision regarding Cambodia's admission into ASEAN had not been made. The Vietnamese also continued to rally behind the Cambodians, despite the failure

⁴ 'Cambodia in Asean: Yes, but when', *The Straits Times*, 10 December 1998.

⁵ Voice of Vietnam, 13 December 1998, *SWB*, FE/3411/S1/2.

⁶ 'PM urges Asean action plan', *The Straits Times*, 15 December 1998; *Kompas*, 15 December 1998, *SWB*, FE/3411/S1/3.

⁷ *Kompas*, 15 December 1998, *SWB*, FE/3411/S1/3. For another account of the sequence of events, see Michael Vatikiotis, 'Awkward admission', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 24 December 1998, p. 17.

⁸ Vietnam TV, 15 December 1998, *SWB*, FE/3411/S1/1.

⁹ National Voice of Cambodia, 15 December 1998, *SWB*, FE/3412/S1/6.

¹⁰ Voice of Vietnam, 16 December 1998, *SWB*, FE/3413/S1/9–10; 'Leaders express hope for unified Cambodia', *The Straits Times*, 17 December 1998. For Habibie's confirmation of Cambodia's admission, see Radio Republic of Indonesia, 17 December 1998, *SWB*, FE/3413/S1/10.

of the foreign ministers to reach a consensus. And, in the 14 December issue of *Vietnam News*, the headline read, 'Cambodia suited for ASEAN, says Hun Sen'.¹¹

The strong Vietnamese support has led at least two observers to resurrect the idea of the 'Indochina Federation'. Lee Kim Chew, chief regional correspondent of *The Straits Times* wrote that: 'Push[ed] too hard, Vietnam will arouse suspicions that it is reviving its old dream, strange though it may sound, of leading a *de facto* Indochina Federation with Cambodia and Laos, this time within the Asean fold'.¹² In the view of *Yomiuri Shimbun* correspondent Hiroaki Hayashida, 'what can be seen is Vietnam's continued awareness of its leadership of what was once known as the Indochinese Union – a relic of the French colonial era'.¹³

This paper discusses the relations between Vietnam and Cambodia from the signing of the Paris Peace Conference in October 1991 to the present. It explains Vietnam's strong support for Cambodia's admission into ASEAN at the sixth ASEAN summit in December 1998, as well as analysing the role of China in the evolution of Vietnam–Cambodia relations.

Withdrawal from Cambodia

Since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, one can identify two key periods in Vietnam–Cambodia relations. The first is from the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in December 1978 to October 1991, when 'finally Vietnam became successful in uniting the three countries [Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos] into a formal alliance system'.¹⁴ The second period is the current one, which began with the Paris Peace Agreement of October 1991.

The signing of the Paris Peace Agreement on 23 October 1991 formally ended almost twelve years of Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia that began in December 1978. Over the last decade, the causes, consequences, and implications of Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia have

¹¹ 'Flag of Cambodia joins rest of Asean', *The Straits Times*, 12 December 1998. Also see interview with Jonathan Birchall of the *Financial Times* (from Hanoi) on BBC London: East Asia today, 14 December 1998.

¹² 'Asean shows it means business', *The Straits Times*, 18 December 1998.

¹³ 'Vietnam's bluster at ASEAN falls flat amid need for new political direction', *Daily Yomiuri*, 30 December 1998, <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/newse/1230in21.htm>

¹⁴ Ishtiaq Hossain, 'Controversy over the IndoChina Federation question', *BIIS Journal*, 9 (4), 1998, p. 437.

been much discussed and have spawned a substantial body of writing. This paper does not intend to go over the same ground. It is, however, worth noting that Hanoi relinquished its occupation of Cambodia very reluctantly. As a consequence of its actions in December 1978, Vietnam became an international pariah state. For the following twelve years, Hanoi had to endure an economic embargo led by the United States, and was denied all assistance from international financial institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank. Through this whole period, Hanoi, which became a member of COMECON on 29 June 1978, depended almost wholly on the assistance of the Soviet bloc countries, and particularly the former Soviet Union. Meanwhile, the free-market economies of the non-communist states were gradually becoming more integrated as the world became more globalized. In the mid-1980s, Vietnam was one of the world's twenty poorest countries. The promise of the Vietnamese Communist Party made in 1976 that in ten years each family would own a radio, a refrigerator, and a television set could not be fulfilled.

This was clearly an unsustainable situation, and as early as 1984 Hanoi was searching for a way out. It was obvious that to save itself, Vietnam had no alternative but to extricate itself from Cambodia. The difficult problem was how to ensure that an independent Cambodia would continue to serve Vietnam's interests, particularly its security concerns. This was the issue with which the Vietnamese leadership had to grapple in the latter half of the 1980s. We are not privy to the policy debates on Cambodia within the Vietnamese leadership but the options, if there were any, were fast disappearing. Mikhail Gorbachev's speech at Vladivostok on 28 July 1986 signalled the change in Moscow's attitude towards the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia. Vietnam apparently began withdrawing her troops from Cambodia in January 1989, and nine months later, on 26 September, the Vietnamese officially announced that the withdrawal exercise had been completed. As the withdrawal was not independently monitored, there were doubts over the veracity of the Vietnamese claim. On 10 November 1989, the Berlin Wall fell. In 1990, it is evident that Moscow was neither able nor prepared to continue bankrolling the Vietnamese. Despite Moscow's attitude, the military withdrawal, and the end of communism in Eastern Europe, Hanoi was still reluctant to relinquish political control over Cambodia.

Nguyen Van Linh's failure to obtain further Russian support during his visit to Moscow in May 1991 and the abortive coup in Moscow (19–21 August 1991) served as a reality check for the Vietnamese. Hanoi

had no alternative but to withdraw completely from Cambodia. An agreement was finally reached on 23 October 1991 at the Paris International Conference on Cambodia. By the end of 1991, it was generally accepted that Vietnamese troops were no longer stationed in Cambodia. China, which had insisted on Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia as a prerequisite for the re-establishment of Sino-Vietnamese relations,¹⁵ normalized relations with Vietnam in November 1991.

However, Vietnam's withdrawal from Cambodia could not remove the deeply ingrained animosity, distrust, and fear of the Cambodians for its larger neighbour. To many Cambodians, the Vietnamese occupation of their country through a surrogate government was only the most recent form of a domination which had begun in the nineteenth century.

The early interim years, October 1991–May 1993

In the years since October 1991, both countries have been struggling to redefine their relationship. There are two issues which are hindering the process: one is the demarcation of land and sea borders; the other concerns the ethnic Vietnamese living in Cambodia. Both issues are complicated by continuous political uncertainties in Cambodia, which exacerbate the 'paranoia' that dominates Cambodian views of the Vietnamese.

Vietnam–Cambodia relations in the initial years were more form than substance. On 24 January 1992, at the invitation of Sihanouk, Vietnam's Foreign Minister, Nguyen Manh Cam, visited Phnom Penh. Cam was the most senior Vietnamese official to visit Cambodia since the signing of the Paris Peace Agreement in October 1991. The visit took place amidst rumours that Vietnamese troops were still in Cambodia, which Cam naturally denied. Most diplomats, independent observers, and Sihanouk himself believed Cam. At the end of the visit, both sides issued a joint communiqué respecting each other's sovereignty.¹⁶ Sihanouk also said that he planned to visit Hanoi, possibly in May 1992.¹⁷

Sihanouk did not travel to Hanoi in May but a Cambodian delegation of eight led by Prince Norodom Chakrapong, Vice-President of the

¹⁵ 'China, Vietnam to normalize relations', *Beijing Review*, 23–29 September 1991, pp. 4–5.

¹⁶ For the text of the joint communiqué, see Phnom Penh Home Service, 25 January 1992, *SWB*, FE/1288/A3/1.

¹⁷ *Reuter Library Report*, 24 January 1992; Xinhua General Oversea News Service, 26 January 1992; Phnom Penh Home Service, 27 January 1992, *SWB*, FE/1288/A3/1.

Supreme National Council, paid a five-day visit to Vietnam from 12 to 16 May 1992 to 'further consolidate and strengthen bilateral ties'. This was the first Cambodian government group to visit Vietnam since October 1991. The two sides agreed to further their co-operation in business, trade, tourism, science and technology, education, and training. The Vietnamese reiterated their pledge that they would strictly respect the Paris Peace Agreement. It was reported that Sihanouk would still be making a visit to Hanoi in 1992.¹⁸ In the event, Sihanouk did not visit Vietnam for another three years.

Post-May 1993 general election

The general election held under the auspices of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) was held in May 1993. A few months after the election, in August, the two co-prime ministers, Hun Sen and Ranariddh, visited Vietnam (as well as Thailand and Laos). The visit came in the wake of a series of victories by the coalition forces against the Khmer Rouge in north-western Cambodia who had been killing ethnic Vietnamese. It was reported that the Vietnamese laid out a lavish welcome and hailed the visit as 'marking the start of a "new era"' in the long-turbulent relations between two countries.

The two principal issues discussed during the visit were the ethnic Vietnamese refugees located on the Vietnam–Cambodia border, and the border disputes along the land frontier and in the Gulf of Thailand. The fate of the ethnic Vietnamese refugees who had fled to Vietnam because of the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge was the urgent issue. It was estimated that the Khmer Rouge had killed some one hundred since the spring. Vietnam had referred to these killings as 'genocide' and 'racist attacks'. During the visit (23–25 August 1993), the United Nations headquarters in Cambodia reported that two more ethnic Vietnamese had been killed. The refugees, who supposedly had Cambodian identity papers and who were mainly from the Tonle Sap region where they have lived for generations, were awaiting permission to return to Cambodia. The actual number is controversial. But as new laws on immigration and unemployment had not been drawn up, Phnom Penh was acutely concerned about the political and social ramifications of their return. Phnom Penh claimed that 200,000 to 500,000 'refugees'

¹⁸ *Kyodo News Service*, 12 May 1992; *Agence France Presse*, 16 May 1992.

were actually illegal immigrants. Vietnam, on the other hand, placed the number of (genuine) refugees at 100,000.

The other issue discussed was that of the territorial disputes along the Vietnam–Cambodia frontier and in the Gulf of Thailand. On 7 July 1982, the government of the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK, established in January 1979) represented by then Foreign Minister Hun Sen, signed an agreement with Hanoi, represented by the then Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach, delimiting the sea boundary between the two countries.¹⁹ A year later, on 20 July 1983, both foreign ministers concluded a treaty on principles for the settlement of their border problems. A joint committee for national border delimitation was subsequently established. On 27 December 1985, in Phnom Penh, Hun Sen and Nguyen Co Thach signed a treaty on national border delimitation, which encompassed both land and sea borders.²⁰ The agreements signed by Hun Sen and Thach were, however, not recognized by the Sihanouk-led Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK), which comprised the KPNLF, FUNCINPEC, and DK established on 22 June 1982. This was essentially a united front against the PRK, which was seen as being controlled by Vietnam. During the 23–25 August 1993 discussions, the leaders once again agreed to make every effort to resolve the issue through negotiations. The communiqué released at the end of the visit stated that both sides would set up commissions of technical experts to examine their border disputes and the issue of ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia.²¹

From the time of Nguyen Manh Cam's visit to Phnom Penh in January 1992 to Hun Sen's and Ranariddh's visit to Hanoi, the political situation in Cambodia can at best be described as being in a 'transitory state'. Until the general election of May 1993, the sovereignty, independence, and unity of Cambodia were enshrined in the Supreme National Council, which was only a pro tem body. When the two co-premiers travelled to Hanoi for talks, Cambodia was led by an interim coalition: the constitution had yet to be approved and it was not then clear whether Cambodia would have one or two prime ministers. The constitution was passed only on 21 September 1993 and Ranariddh and Hun Sen became

¹⁹ Voice of Democratic Kampuchea, 13 August 1982, *SWB*, FE/7105/A3/9.

²⁰ Vietnam News Agency, 28 December 1985, *SWB*, FE/8143/A3/1.

²¹ For details of the visit by Hun Sen and Ranariddh to Hanoi, see *Agence France Presse*, 22, 23, and 25 August 1993; *Reuters North American Wire*, 23 August 1993; *Kyodo News Service*, 24 and 25 August 1993; *Reuter Library Report*, 23 and 25 August 1993.

the first and second prime minister respectively. Sihanouk was formally reinstated as head of state.²² It was, therefore, not unexpected when Ranariddh admitted that the visit to Vietnam ‘was not very positive or profitable’ and that nothing very substantive was achieved.²³ Subsequent reports confirmed that the interim status of the individuals concerned prevented decisions on major issues.²⁴

Hanoi was clearly very anxious to resolve the two outstanding issues, particularly that of the ethnic Vietnamese refugees. In February 1994, Foreign Minister Nguyen Manh Cam paid his second visit to Phnom Penh for two days of talks. This was the first high-level meeting since the formation of the new Cambodian government of the post-UNTAC period. Cam met Norodom Sirivudh, who was then deputy Prime Minister as well as Foreign Minister, to discuss the refugee problem. The issue was not resolved. The Phnom Penh government refused to allow the ethnic Vietnamese to return until the passage of the immigration law, which was to go before the General Assembly in April.²⁵ In April, Vietnamese Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet travelled to Phnom Penh to discuss the issue again but apparently the talks were unsuccessful.²⁶ It was evident from Sihanouk’s interview with the *Far Eastern Economic Review* in May that the deep-seated suspicion of Vietnamese intentions towards Cambodia persisted.²⁷ The draft immigration bill was due to be debated by the Cambodian National Assembly in August. The Vietnamese were unhappy with the bill and proposed the formation of an expert group to study and discuss the issue.²⁸ Nevertheless, in the same month, the National Assembly passed the immigration law: it did not guarantee citizenship for ethnic Vietnamese and left vague what was to be done about the ethnic Vietnamese refugees still stranded at the border. Hanoi then asked the Phnom Penh government to postpone implementing the law until after the forthcoming visit to Vietnam of first Prime Minister Ranariddh.²⁹ In the view of the Vietnamese, the law, if implemented, could ‘adversely affect the long-standing friendship between

²² For details, see Phnom Penh AKP, 22 September 1993, Foreign Broadcast Information Service (henceforth *FBIS*), EAS-93-183.

²³ *Reuter Library Report*, 27 August 1993.

²⁴ *Reuters World Service*, 15 February 1994.

²⁵ *Reuters World Service*, 15 February 1994; *Associated Press*, 18 February 1994.

²⁶ *Associated Press*, 2 April 1994.

²⁷ ‘The centre cannot hold: Sihanouk fears for the future of his country’, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 19 May 1994, p. 20.

²⁸ *Reuters World Service*, 26 August 1994; *Associated Press*, 10 September 1994.

²⁹ *Agence France Presse*, 15 January 1995.

the two countries'. By January 1995, the immigration law was still not being implemented.

Prince Norodom Ranariddh paid a working visit to Vietnam from 15 to 17 January 1995 in an attempt to resolve the two issues of the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia and the disputed land and sea borders. The issue of navigation rights along the Mekong river had further strained relations between the two countries. The Vietnamese authorities had prevented cargoes bound for Phnom Penh from proceeding along the Mekong river beyond Hanoi. The Vietnamese charged that the ships were transporting banned goods, for example, used vehicles. Ranariddh believed that the Vietnamese action was a reaction to Cambodia's immigration law. A related issue was Vietnam's plan to build a bridge on its side of the border, which Cambodia felt was too low to allow the transit of large ships.³⁰ Ranariddh was accompanied by a delegation of 40 which included eight ministers – foreign, interior, defence, forestry, fisheries, public works, education, agriculture, and commerce. According to Ranariddh, there were many issues to discuss, but the main purpose was to improve relations, which was very necessary.³¹ The discussions reaped some modest results. Agreements were concluded on cultural and scientific exchanges, educational co-operation, agriculture, and foreign affairs. Ranariddh assured Vietnam that Phnom Penh would not carry out any mass expulsion of foreigners. Vietnam's Prime Minister, Vo Van Kiet, in turn expressed his understanding on Cambodia's immigration bill. The ethnic Vietnamese issue remained unresolved. But both sides agreed to form a group of experts to study the implementation of the immigration law and its ramifications. Regarding the border issue, it was agreed that existing borders would be respected until the problem could be discussed in detail by a joint commission. Soon after the visit, the Cambodian government announced that it was ready to let approximately 4,000 ethnic Vietnamese who had fled to Vietnam almost two decades previously to return to Cambodia. Those who had Cambodian identity papers (issued before 1970) could return as early as February 1995.³²

In August 1995, Vietnamese President Le Duc Anh paid a two-day visit to Cambodia. The most senior Vietnamese leader to visit Cambodia since premier Vo Van Kiet's visit in April 1994, Anh was the general who oversaw Vietnam's military operation in Cambodia in 1978. The

³⁰ *Kyodo News Service*, 9 January 1998.

³¹ *Agence France Presse*, 15 January 1995.

³² *ITAR-TASS*, 23 January 1995.

visit was largely symbolic: but symbolism has always had an important place in Cambodia (as in Vietnam). Anh laid wreaths at the Independence Monument and the Cambodian–Vietnam Friendship Monument, which pays homage to those who died during the invasion of December 1978. He also pledged 1,000 tons of rice for the Cambodians who were facing food shortages.³³ Both sides agreed to discuss their border differences gradually and to leave the borders as they were for the time being. It was also proposed that foreign ministerial talks take place in September to tackle the other issues, such as the height of the bridge to be built on the lower course of the Mekong river.³⁴

At the end of the visit, Foreign Minister Ung Huot announced the formation of a Vietnam–Cambodia Inter-Governmental Commission, which would meet for the first time on 9 September 1995. The Commission would look into the border issue, the bridge issue, commercial access along the Mekong, purchase of electric power from Vietnam, tourism ventures, and Vietnamese immigration and settlement in Cambodia. Ung Huot reiterated that there would be no mass expulsion of illegal foreigners despite domestic pressure to do so. He also made it known that there would be a meeting in October to try to resolve the issue of 3,600 ethnic Vietnamese who had fled Cambodia in 1993 after a series of massacres and who were currently trapped on the border.³⁵ Only after Anh's visit, did Sihanouk finally make his long delayed visit to Hanoi – from 14 to 16 December 1995 – his first since 1975.

Looking back, 1995 was one of the better years in the development of Vietnam–Cambodia relations since October 1991. It may be worth noting that it was Le Duc Anh who visited Cambodia before Sihanouk visited Vietnam, for this is particularly significant for two countries where hierarchy, size, power, and rituals are all important. Although no substantial agreements were reached in the year and outstanding issues remained hanging in the air, the seeds for an eventual resolution were at least planted. Unfortunately, the growing differences between CPP and FUNCINPEC in the following year (that culminated in the coup of July 1997) derailed the process.

The unresolved border demarcation between the two countries had always been a potential source for conflict and a convenient issue which anti-Vietnamese elements exploited. In January 1996, Vietnamese armed soldiers and farmers were alleged to have illegally entered Cambodian

³³ *Deutsche Press-Agentur*, 9 August 1995.

³⁴ *Kyodo News Service*, 8 August 1995.

³⁵ *UPI*, 9 August 1995.

territory, including the provinces of Svay Rieng, Kompong Cham, and Prey Veng, to build houses and cultivate farmland. The violations were said to have begun on 27 December 1995 in Svay Rieng, which Vietnam denied. Both Ung Huot and co-Interior Minister Sar Kheng met Tran Huy Chuong, Vietnam's ambassador to Cambodia, and all were committed to a peaceful solution to the border dispute. In January 1996, Sar Kheng paid a working visit to Hanoi for talks. On 24 January, a Cambodian newspaper printed an article that argued that the Khmer Empire had shrunk to a 'barely visible dot on the world map'. It cited a statement by Sihanouk in 1992 that Cambodia had lost from ten to forty kilometres of territory to Vietnam. The writer then asked where the border now lay and whether 'Cambodian land will become Vietnamese land and Cambodians will be turned into one of Vietnam's minority groups'.³⁶

Not all Cambodians took this view. In February, the chief of police in Cambodia's Kandal Province, which had a 29 kilometre common border with Vietnam's An Giang province, was reported to have said that there was no border problem with Vietnam, and that the latter provided water to Cambodia for farming. As for the areas where the border was unclear, the authorities in both provinces had considered them as 'white zones', off limits to both sides. He also made the point that more contact between local authorities at district, communal, and provincial levels could solve and avert problems.³⁷

Ranariddh, who has a penchant for evoking the Vietnam threat, was reported to have warned of the possible use of force if talks failed to resolve the border dispute. Hanoi retorted that if his reported remarks were true, they would not be in the interest of friendly ties and would be likely to damage relations.³⁸ It is significant that Second Prime Minister and chairman of the Council of Ministers Hun Sen did not share Ranariddh's sentiments. At a meeting of the Council of Ministers to discuss the Cambodia-Vietnam boundary issue on 7 February, peace, friendship, and co-operation were stressed.³⁹ As co-Minister of Interior Sar Kheng remarked, the border dispute was tied to domestic politics.

In March, Vietnamese communist party leader Do Muoi and Ranariddh had the opportunity to discuss the border issue when they both attended the sixth Party Congress of the LPRP in Vientiane.⁴⁰ Soon after, in April,

³⁶ *IBRU Boundary and Security Bulletin*, Spring 1996, p. 37.

³⁷ *IBRU Boundary and Security Bulletin*, Spring 1996, p. 38.

³⁸ *Reuters North American Wire*, 16 March 1996.

³⁹ *IBRU Boundary and Security Bulletin*, Spring 1996, p. 38.

⁴⁰ *Xinhua News Agency*, 18 March 1996.

Vo Van Kiet led a 16-member delegation – which included the foreign minister, deputy ministers of interior, commerce, transport, and planning and investment – to Phnom Penh for a day of talks in an effort to resolve the border dispute. According to the communiqué issued at the end of the visit, the two sides agreed to settle the border issue without resorting to the use of force. It was also decided that local authorities should address border issues first, and that, if they failed, the issue could then be referred to provincial authorities, and finally to the related ministries.⁴¹ They also agreed to hold a working group meeting of experts, possibly in the last week of April. On the subject of the ethnic Vietnamese residing in Cambodia, both sides agreed to convene a third meeting of the working group at the earliest possible date. It was also proposed that a consular agreement be signed as soon as possible. Both sides also affirmed their determination to strengthen bilateral relations by taking concrete measures to boost co-operation in finance, transportation and communications, agriculture, forestry, education, and security. Finally, Vietnam also welcomed Cambodia's intention to join ASEAN and expressed a willingness to help Cambodia in its application.⁴²

On 17 May 1996, it was reported that more ethnic Vietnamese were being killed. Gunmen apparently attacked a floating village on the edge of Tonle Sap and killed 17, of whom 14 were Vietnamese. Hanoi lodged a formal protest. The border experts from both countries met for the first time in Ho Chi Minh City from 20 to 23 May. We do not have the details, except that the negotiations proceeded in a 'friendly and frank' manner, and that it was agreed that the next meeting would be held in Phnom Penh.

The rivalry between the two Cambodian co-premiers and their parties intensified as the election drew closer. The ethnic Vietnamese always had to bear the consequences whenever the political struggles in Phnom Penh intensified. During the 1993 United Nations-sponsored election, one of the key themes of FUNCINPEC's campaign was that voting for the CPP would mean keeping Cambodia beholden to the hated Vietnamese and would further impoverish the country. The Khmer Rouge (and at the time FUNCINPEC as well) continued to propagate the image of Hun Sen and the CPP as the 'Vietnamese-installed regime', long after the 1989 Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia. In 1996–97 Ranariddh was again courting the staunchly anti-Vietnamese Khmer

⁴¹ *Associated Press*, 8 April 1996; *Agence France Presse*, 10 April 1996; *Xinhua News Agency*, 10 April 1996.

⁴² *Xinhua News Agency*, 11 April 1996.

Rouge. For example, in early June 1997, an unidentified attacker bombed a memorial to the Vietnamese war dead in Sihanoukville. Two days later, Ranariddh added fuel to the fire when he remarked that the Cambodia–Vietnam friendship monument in central Phnom Penh had been standing there too long and that if he were to win next year's election, he would have it removed.

Meanwhile, the second Vietnam–Cambodia Inter-Governmental Co-operation Commission convened in Phnom Penh from 26 to 28 February 1997, attended by Vietnam's foreign minister, Nguyen Manh Cam. The commission announced that agreements on trade, road and water transportation, and information co-operation would soon be signed, and that discussions on other matters would continue.⁴³ But the critical issues were still unresolved.

The China factor

This is an appropriate point to turn our attention to the China factor in Vietnam–Cambodia relations and the July 1997 crisis. Like Vietnam–China relations, Cambodia–China relations had also been improving since the withdrawal of Vietnamese forces in 1989. China was becoming an increasingly major player in Cambodia. In April 1996, General Zhang Wannian, Chief of the General Staff Department, People's Liberation Army (PLA), visited Cambodia. China granted one million dollars in non-lethal aid to Cambodia and was considering providing training assistance to the Cambodian coalition government.⁴⁴ According to a December 1997 report in the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, China was the second largest Asian aid donor to Cambodia, next to Japan. Many of the most prominent investors in Phnom Penh were from mainland China. The Chinese had also been providing military assistance to Hun Sen in his fight against the Khmer Rouge.⁴⁵ According to one source, it was Zhang who conveyed Beijing's invitation to Hun Sen to visit China. Beijing was apparently miffed by Ranariddh's contacts with Taipei, which included discussion on a possible direct air link between Phnom Penh and Taipei, and the opening of a consular office in Phnom Penh.⁴⁶ Beijing

⁴³ Voice of Vietnam external service, 1 March 1977, *SWB*, FE/2857/B/1.

⁴⁴ *Phnom Penh Post*, 23 August–5 September 1996, *FBIS*, EAS-96-167.

⁴⁵ 'Dancing with the Dragon', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 11 December 1997, pp. 26–27.

⁴⁶ *Phnom Penh Post* in English, 19 December 1997 to 1 January 1998, *FBIS*, EAS-97-363.

could have decided that in view of Sihanouk's age and poor health, it was prudent to cultivate Hun Sen.

Both CPP and FUNCINPEC were also courting Beijing. In mid-June 1996, Loy Simchheang, secretary-general of FUNCINPEC, met then Prime Minister Li Peng in Beijing.⁴⁷ During Vietnam's eighth Party Congress, on 1 July 1996 in Hanoi, Wen Jiabao (acting leader of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee delegation, alternate member of the Politburo, and secretary of the CCP Central Committee secretariat) held separate talks with Chea Sim (chairman of the CPP and Chairman of Cambodia's National Assembly) and Chhim Seakleng (leader of the FUNCINPEC delegation).⁴⁸ About a fortnight later, on 12 July 1996, it was announced that Hun Sen had been invited to visit China from 18 to 22 July 1996. There was no elaboration as to the purpose of the visit, except that it was part of a friendship programme between the two countries. According to Hun Sen, the trip to China had been planned well in advance.⁴⁹

It is worth noting that the Chinese announced the visit shortly after Sihanouk left Beijing for Cambodia. When the news was announced, Hun Sen and Ranariddh were in Tokyo attending a 'consultative group' meeting on financial aid to Cambodia for 1996 and 1997.⁵⁰ In China, Hun Sen met Chinese President Jiang Zemin and Premier Li Peng, and toured Zhuhai, which is one of China's special economic zones in Guangdong Province, as well as Shenzhen.⁵¹ Coincidentally, a senior Vietnamese military delegation led by Chief of General Staff Pham Van Tra was also in Beijing during this time.⁵² There is no report of a meeting between the Vietnamese and Cambodians.

The July 1997 crisis/coup

The well-known rivalry between the two co-premiers culminated in the ousting of first Prime Minister Ranariddh on 5 July 1997. The immediate sequence of events leading to the 'crisis' or 'coup' (depending on one's point of view) remains controversial. But it is common knowledge that prior to the crisis/coup, both sides had been actively making

⁴⁷ Reaksmei Kampuchea, 10–11 July 1996, *FBIS*, EAS-96-137.

⁴⁸ China Radio International, 2 July 1996, *SWB*, FE/2656/B/3.

⁴⁹ Reaksmei Kampuchea, 20 July 1996, *FBIS*, EAS-96-141.

⁵⁰ Reaksmei Kampuchea, 14 July 1996, *FBIS*, EAS-96-137.

⁵¹ For Hun Sen's visit to China, see *SWB*, FE/2668/B/3; *SWB*, FE/2669/G/1; *SWB*, FE/2670/G/1; *SWB*, FE/2673/G/3.

⁵² See Xinhua News Agency, 19 July 1996, *SWB*, FE/2670/G/1.

separate deals with factions of the Khmer Rouge, the objective being to bolster their respective strengths. The Hun Sen or CPP version of the July crisis is fully explained in the *White paper – background on the July 1997 crisis: Prince Ranariddh's strategy of provocation* and in *Crisis in July – report on the armed insurrection: its origins, history and aftermath*.⁵³ This version, not surprisingly, puts the blame squarely on Ranariddh's camp, basically arguing that Ranariddh provoked the crisis while Hun Sen and his family were vacationing in Vietnam (1–7 July 1997).

There is, however, an alternative construction of the events. A report dated 27 July 1997 said that Kun Kim, first deputy governor of Kandal Province and special envoy of Hun Sen, led a CPP delegation on a secret visit to Vietnam. According to the report, the delegation left at 0800 (local time) for O Ya Dav District and from there to Vietnam at noon. The purpose of the visit was unknown.⁵⁴ The Khmer Rouge had spread news of an imminent coup by Hun Sen since 30 June 1997.⁵⁵ Khmer Rouge radio also made a number of other claims. According to the Khmer Rouge, the coup was stage-managed by Vietnam, and Hun Sen travelled to Vietnam the week before the coup for instructions.⁵⁶ It was also said that Vietnam had sent 2,700 troops into Cambodia's eastern Kratie Province between the time of the coup and the morning of 13 July.⁵⁷

It is not possible to confirm the accusations made by the Khmer Rouge that Vietnam masterminded the coup. According to AFP and Reuter reports of 5 July 1997, Ranariddh's departure for France on 5 July coincided with 'the expected end of a short holiday of Second Prime Minister Hun Sen who has not been seen in public since the end of last month'. The report added that Hun Sen's exact whereabouts were unknown but he 'was believed to have gone to Vietnam for health reasons as his Cabinet said he was "overworked and exhausted"'.⁵⁸ According to the CPP

⁵³ The documents were published on 9 July 1997 and 22 September 1997 respectively. For a discussion of the coup, see Sorpong Peou, 'Hun Sen's pre-emptive coup: causes and consequences', in *Southeast Asian Affairs 1998*. Singapore: Institute of South-east Asian Studies, 1998, pp. 86–102. As the title suggests, Sorpong Peou argues that it was Hun Sen who launched the coup, to pre-empt a Royalist-Khmer Rouge alliance which could strengthen Ranariddh's power.

⁵⁴ Sapordamean Neak Prayut, 27 February 1997, SWB, FE/2856/B/6.

⁵⁵ Radio of the Provisional Government of National Union and National Salvation of Cambodia, 30 June 1997, SWB, FE/2960/B/1.

⁵⁶ Radio of the Provisional Government of National Union and National Salvation of Cambodia, 6 July 1997, SWB, <http://ftdasia.ft.com/info-api/sh>

⁵⁷ Radio of the Provisional Government of National Union and National Salvation of Cambodia, 14 July 1997, SWB, <http://ftdasia.ft.com/info-api/sh>

⁵⁸ 'Cambodian PM leaves for France as tension escalates', *The Straits Times*, 6 July 1997.

version, Ranariddh was scheduled to leave for Paris only on 9 July, after Hun Sen had returned from his vacation on 7 July: but the former changed his plans and left on 4 July instead. A key question is whether Ranariddh had foreknowledge of the impending 'battle'.

On 7 July, a spokesman from Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that Vietnam was profoundly concerned about developments in Cambodia, and reiterated that Vietnam respected Cambodia's independence and sovereignty and would not interfere in its internal affairs. He also hoped that the lives and properties of Vietnamese in Cambodia would be protected.⁵⁹ The Cambodian ambassador to the United Nations and member of FUNCINPEC, Sisowath Sirirath, said that Vietnam was not connected with the July crisis. He added that the accusation that Vietnam was the mastermind behind the coup was for local consumption.⁶⁰

We should recall that the principle condition demanded by Beijing for normalization of relations between China and Vietnam was Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia. It is reasonable to assume that the Chinese remained sensitive to any new Vietnamese interference or involvement in Cambodian affairs. Sino–Vietnamese relations had been improving gradually since 1991 and did not appear to have been affected by the crisis. It would appear that both Vietnam and China were not unhappy with Hun Sen and that both were comfortable with the other's current relations with Cambodia.

July 1997 to the present

Ung Huot, who replaced the deposed Ranariddh as the First Prime Minister, visited Hanoi in conjunction with the seventh Francophone summit. In Hanoi, he met President Tran Duc Luong and both sides expressed pleasure 'at the fine development of the traditional friendship and neighbourly co-operation between the two countries over recent years'. President Luong reiterated Vietnam's principle of not interfering in Cambodia's internal affairs.⁶¹ On 24 March 1998, Vietnam and Cambodia signed a bilateral trade agreement in Hanoi. In April, ousted Premier Ranariddh had apparently said that Cambodia should expel all Vietnamese nationals living in Cambodia, and that he would do so if he

⁵⁹ Voice of Vietnam, 7 July 1997, *SWB*, <http://ftdasia.ft.com/info-api/sh>

⁶⁰ Voice of Vietnam external service, 11 July 1997, *SWB*, <http://ftdasia.ft.com/info-api/sh>

⁶¹ VNA, 16 November 1997, *SWB*, <http://ftdasia.ft.com/info-api/sh>

were successful in the upcoming July elections. (A Vietnamese spokesman on 23 April 1998 said that Vietnam had not received any official information on Ranariddh's statement.)

What Hun Sen and the CPP needed to do most was to convince the Cambodians that he was not a Vietnamese puppet and that the CPP was not a Vietnamese-backed organization, as claimed by the Khmer Rouge. Vietnam's Prime Minister Phan Van Khai had extended invitations on 29 April 1998 to both Cambodian premiers to visit Hanoi in order to discuss the issues of Vietnamese immigrants to Cambodia and of the land and maritime borders.⁶² A report of 10 May 1998 said that Hun Sen and Ung Huot would visit Vietnam to discuss those issues. According to Hun Sen, Cambodia would demand the return of its maritime territory through negotiations. Where there were overlapping zones, Cambodia could co-operate to do business.⁶³ His comments regarding Cambodian territory lost to both Thailand and Vietnam are worth highlighting. 'As a Cambodian leader, if I am afraid of others and dare not say what I think, I would not be any different from those leaders in the past who had caused the losses of Cambodian territory.' Referring to the agreement reached between Thailand and Vietnam on 9 August 1997 which delimited the maritime boundary between the two countries in the Gulf of Thailand, he stated that he was not afraid to speak out against both countries, which had deprived Cambodia of its maritime territory.⁶⁴ Hun Sen also revealed that the Cambodian Foreign Ministry had sent diplomatic notes to Thailand and Vietnam on 7 February 1998. His impending visits to Thailand from 6 to 7 May 1998 and to Hanoi in early June 1998 were to follow up on the issue. Meanwhile, Vietnam's Foreign Ministry spokesman said that the sea border demarcation in the Gulf of Thailand was in full compliance with international law, in particular with the 1982 Convention on the Law of the Sea. However, both Thailand and Vietnam agreed that the areas involving Cambodia could be discussed with them in the future.⁶⁵

Perhaps conscious of what others might say of his credibility in negotiating with the Vietnamese, Hun Sen did not travel to Hanoi with First Premier Ung Huot. The agreements that were eventually signed in Hanoi included a land transport accord, a memorandum of understanding on anti-drug co-operation, and a protocol on information. In preparation

⁶² Kyodo News Service, 12 May 1998, *SWB*, <http://ftdasia.ft.com/info-api/sh>

⁶³ National Voice of Cambodia, 10 May 1998, *SWB*, <http://ftdasia.ft.com/info-api/sh>

⁶⁴ Reaksmei Kampuchea, 11–12 May 1998, *FBIS*, EAS-98-135.

⁶⁵ Voice of Vietnam, 12 May 1998, *SWB*, <http://ftdasia.ft.com/info-api/sh>

was a water transport accord. As for the critical issues, both sides pledged to resolve their border problems before the end of the century. This was the first time a deadline had been imposed. In the pipeline were bilateral and trilateral (with Thailand) talks to enhance co-operation. Meanwhile, both countries would continue to honour the existing border agreements, specifically those signed in 1982.

Soon after Ung Huot's trip, the border expert group met in Phnom Penh from 16 to 20 June 1998. Var Kimhong, adviser on border issues to the two Cambodian Prime Ministers, led the Cambodian delegation, while Le Minh Nghia, senior adviser to the Vietnamese government, headed the Vietnamese delegation. According to a press release on 20 June, the two sides agreed on the general principles and means to resolve the issue, and agreed to set up a joint commission to discuss land and maritime borders. It also said that both sides would continue the consultative talks alternately in the two countries until a new treaty on border delineation and a final protocol on determining and marking the entire border were signed. Var admitted that the talks did not achieve any concrete results. Nevertheless, he felt that it was at least an important step towards improving relations.⁶⁶

Ung Huot was confident that the border problem would be resolved before the year 2000. He declined to provide details of the negotiations, except to say that there were four points related to the border settlement: both countries chose to discuss only point four, which was to solve the problem through mutual understanding and non-violence. He also intimated that several of the issues raised during the talks were agreed upon in principle.⁶⁷ It is not at all clear what was decided regarding the problem of the Vietnamese immigrants, perhaps the most sensitive and intractable of the issues. According to the First Prime Minister, the issue would be resolved 'through the immigration law, which is part of the nationality law'.⁶⁸

With the general election fast approaching, and because the issues with Vietnam were still not resolved, it is not surprising that the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia were again the targets of attack. Ung Huot admitted that anti-government groups had always raised the border issue and accused Vietnam of taking advantage of the negotiations.⁶⁹ Po

⁶⁶ National Voice of Cambodia, 22 June 1998, *SWB*, <http://ftdasia.ft.com/info-api/sh>

⁶⁷ National Radio of Cambodia, 24 June 1998, *FBIS*, EAS-98-175.

⁶⁸ National Radio of Cambodia, 4 June 1998, *FBIS*, EAS-98-155; Voice of Vietnam, 18 June 1998, *SWB*, <http://ftdasia.ft.com/info-api/sh>

⁶⁹ Reaksmei Kampuchea, 30 September 1998, *FBIS*, EAS-98-279.

Sothirak, Minister of Industry, Mines, and Energy and an MP of the Sihanoukville electoral district from the Ung Huot-led Populist Party, highlighted the security problem of Vietnamese nationals signing up for voter registration cards.⁷⁰ Speaking at the inauguration ceremony for his party office in Prey Veng Province, south-east of Phnom Penh, Ranariddh also raised the question of Vietnamese immigrants illegally registering to vote in the coming general election. Ranariddh apparently raised the issue twice during the week.⁷¹ During his campaign trail in the north-west of Cambodia, Ranariddh again said that Cambodians risked losing control of their country to Vietnamese immigrants.⁷² Sam Rainsy claimed that some 50,000 Vietnamese nationals had registered to vote. He even suggested that all border checkpoints be closed for seven days during the course of the election beginning on 26 July 1998.⁷³ On 30 August, the Vietnam–Cambodia Friendship monument was vandalized.⁷⁴

On 5 July, a Vietnamese family living in Kratie, a south-east border province of Cambodia, was killed. This was only one example of many more killings in the months to come. Vietnam's reaction was very restrained. The Vietnamese Embassy in Cambodia sent a note to the Cambodian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Co-operation as well as to the United Nations Human Rights Centre in Cambodia to investigate the killing. It was not until 7 September 1998 that the Cambodian Foreign Ministry released a statement deploring the killings of ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia. The Vietnamese ambassador to Cambodia Tran Huy Chuong criticized the opposition parties for inciting racial discrimination in Cambodia.⁷⁵

The CPP won the 1998 general election. Despite accusations from the opposition parties of illegalities, coercion, and fraud, the result was confirmed by the National Election Committee, the Constitution Council, and the Judges' Council of Cambodia. Most importantly, the election was recognized as fair and democratic by the international committee which audited the election,⁷⁶ a verdict accepted by Vietnam as well as China in one of its rare comments on Cambodia.⁷⁷ The Cambodian

⁷⁰ Reaksmei Kampuchea, 28 May 1998, *FBIS*, EAS-98-154.

⁷¹ Voice of Vietnam external service, 9 June 1998, *SWB*, <http://ftdasia.ft.com/info-api/sh>

⁷² Hong Kong AFP, 9 July 1998, *FBIS*, EAS-98-190.

⁷³ Chakkraval, 20–21 July 1998, *SWB*, <http://ftdasia.ft.com/info-api/sh>

⁷⁴ VNA, 21 September 1998, *SWB*, FE/3339/B/2.

⁷⁵ National Voice of Cambodia, 17 September, *SWB*, FE/3336/B/4.

⁷⁶ VNA, 9 September 1998, *SWB*, <http://ftdasia.ft.com/info-api/sh>

⁷⁷ National Voice of Cambodia, 16 September 1998, *SWB*, FE/3336/B/4.

political parties managed to agree on the new government only at the end of November 1998, just in time for the sixth ASEAN summit.

Conclusion

Since its withdrawal from Cambodia, Vietnam has been trying to resolve its remaining outstanding differences with that country, of which there are essentially two – the land and sea border issue, and the ethnic Vietnamese refugees issue. The deep distrust of the Cambodians for the Vietnamese, which is a consequence of long historical tensions and of the unsettled political situation within Cambodia, have made it almost impossible for the issues to be resolved. There are, however, indications that some progress has been made recently. As noted above, in June 1998, for the first time, it was announced that both sides would settle their border differences by the year 2000. The Vietnam–Cambodia Joint Border Commission met in Ho Chi Minh City in March 1999 and again in Phnom Penh in August 1999. However, there has been no significant breakthrough so far. This series of meetings is modelled on the Sino–Vietnamese meetings. It is worth noting that both Beijing and Hanoi are also committed to resolving their differences by 2000. The 2000 deadline was reiterated when Ranariddh, now Chairman of the Cambodian National Assembly, visited Hanoi in May 1999. According to Ranariddh, the dispute between the two countries over territorial waters was ‘the most difficult to resolve’ because of Vietnam’s and Thailand’s 1997 agreement to divide the oil and gas reserves in the disputed areas between them.⁷⁸ The ethnic Vietnamese refugees issue is even more complicated and a resolution is nowhere near.

Perception is a major hurdle. Compared to Ranariddh, Hun Sen has been more amenable to a quick settlement of the outstanding issues with the Vietnamese. But those who oppose him and his party paint him, rightly and wrongly, as a Vietnamese lackey, and therefore any settlement he makes with Hanoi is seen as unacceptable. Hun Sen is very sensitive to the accusation that he is a Vietnamese puppet. He realizes that both his credibility and position in Cambodia demand that he distance himself from Vietnam as much as possible. But he cannot dissociate himself from his past. The opposition continues to exploit this. Hun Sen’s close ties with Vietnam are well known but presumably that does

⁷⁸ For details of Ranariddh’s visit to Vietnam, see *SWB*, FE/3542/B/2-3; *SWB*, FE/3534/B/6; and *SWB*, FE/3552/B/1. For the joint communiqué issued at the end of the visit, see *SWB*, FE/3551/B/5-6.

not necessarily mean that he cannot also be a loyal Cambodian. On the other hand, Vietnam is more comfortable with Hun Sen than with Ranariddh, because Hanoi sees a better chance of improving relations with Phnom Penh with the former in power. But what Vietnam prefers is always seen as being bad for Cambodia. There lies the problem. Therefore, for Vietnam–Cambodia relations to improve, both Hun Sen and Hanoi must strive to change their image – not an easy task given the historical baggage.

It is a fact that from 1978 to 1991, Vietnam subsumed Cambodia into its alliance system. Vietnamese leaders have also treated their Cambodian counterparts with condescension.⁷⁹ But it is worth noting that all along there had been differences within the Hanoi leadership regarding Vietnam's invasion and subsequent occupation of Cambodia. From the mid-1980s, for various reasons, those who had opposed the invasion and occupation gradually gained ground. This does not mean that Cambodia is now no longer of importance to Vietnam. For example, in May 1998, it was reported that some Cambodians in Kok Kong Province were abetting the Free Vietnam Revolutionary Group seeking to overthrow the Hanoi government.⁸⁰ In August 1999, there were again reports of anti-Vietnam activities operating from Cambodia. Experience has taught the Vietnamese that Cambodia (and Laos) will always be of strategic significance. Hanoi has always been candid about this fact. As Deputy Foreign Minister Vu Khoan noted, as a close neighbour of Cambodia, it was understandable that Vietnam paid attention to current developments there. However, Vietnam's policy and principles on Cambodia were very clear – Vietnam would not now interfere in Cambodia's internal affairs. He added that Vietnam wanted to see a peaceful, stable, and prosperous Cambodia as part of ASEAN.⁸¹ Prime Minister Phan Van Khai at a recent meeting in Hanoi with journalists affirmed the importance of 'friendly and co-operative' relations with Cambodia (and Laos) and Vietnam's hope of having peaceful and friendly relations with its neighbours.⁸² The visit to Vietnam by Ranariddh in May 1999 and Le Kha Phieu's visit to Cambodia in June 1999 are indications that both countries are making efforts to improve relations. During Phieu's visit, both sides once again stated their determination to resolve their border

⁷⁹ Bui Tin, *Following Ho Chi Minh: memoirs of a North Vietnamese colonel*. London: Hurst and Co., 1995, pp. 125–31.

⁸⁰ *Bangkok Post*, 4 May 1998, FBIS, EAS-98-124.

⁸¹ VNA, 30 August 1997, SWB, <http://ftdasia.ft.com/info-api/sh>

⁸² Voice of Vietnam, 2 January 1999, SWB, FE/3427/B/8.

differences through peaceful negotiation by the end of 2000. After a long hiatus, the Vietnam–Cambodia Inter-Governmental Commission, which was last convened in February 1997, met for the third time during Phieu's visit.⁸³

The general consensus among Vietnamese today, although not publicly stated, is that their strategy with regard to Cambodia in the 1970s and 1980s has failed badly. Present Vietnam–Cambodia relations can be compared to those in the period before the Lon Nol coup, when Sihanouk was running the country. Then, as today, Vietnam saw a peaceful, independent, united, and non-aligned Cambodia as best for its own security. Today, like Sihanouk then, Hun Sen has successfully cultivated the Chinese. While it is difficult to support this observation with hard evidence, Beijing could have calculated that between Hun Sen and Ranariddh, they prefer dealing with the former. In a conversation with Malcolm MacDonald in May 1962, Sihanouk stated that he was most concerned about the South Vietnamese and the Thais, and that 'if push came to shove', he would resort to Chinese assistance – which would mean the end of Cambodia's policy of nonalignment.⁸⁴ We do not have records of the conversations between Hun Sen and the many Chinese officials he has met: but there is one incident that is perhaps worth citing – a recent episode regarding Taiwanese toxic waste dumped in Sihanoukville. It was reported that Hun Sen, while in Beijing, met Chinese officials to ask for their assistance in shipping the toxic waste back to Taiwan, on the grounds that Taiwan was a province of China.⁸⁵ One wonders what the Chinese could realistically have done but what Hun Sen said must have been music to their ears. Recent reports indicate that China–Cambodia relations are improving rapidly. Hun Sen was reported to have visited Beijing in February 1999 and secured low interest commercial loans as well as aid grants from the Chinese. Defence ministers of both countries met at the end of March 1999 in Beijing, and a large Chinese trade delegation led by the Chinese Deputy Minister of Foreign Trade and Economic Co-operation visited Cambodia in April 1999. China has also been very forthcoming in its assistance to help the

⁸³ See the Vietnam–Cambodia joint communiqué, Voice of Vietnam, 10 June 1999, SWB, FE/3559/B1–2.

⁸⁴ Public Record Office (London), FO 371/166667, DU 1022/5, 6 June 1962, Notes on conversation with Prince Sihanouk about Cambodia's attitude to present-day South East Asian problems.

⁸⁵ 'Cambodia town on rampage over toxic waste', *The Straits Times*, 21 December 1998.

Cambodians kick-start their economy.⁸⁶ It is worth noting that Ranariddh has also begun to cultivate Beijing more assiduously.⁸⁷ In an exclusive interview with Xinhua on 16 June 1999 before a week-long visit to China, he was effusive in his praise for China and its importance to Cambodia.⁸⁸ According to a commentary in the Cambodian newspaper *Moneakseka Khmer*, both China and Japan were seeking political influence in Cambodia through the use of aid and China had seen an opportunity to restore its strategic position and influence in Cambodia.⁸⁹

Finally, while Vietnam's blatant efforts to get Cambodia into ASEAN at the last summit might have irritated certain ASEAN members, they should be seen as reflecting Hanoi's determination to resolve its problems with Cambodia. It bears noting that when ASEAN decided to postpone indefinitely the admission of Cambodia after the July 1997 coup/crisis, Vietnam did not object.⁹⁰ With Cambodia as the tenth ASEAN member, ASEAN's norms might prevail over the unpredictability of Cambodian domestic politics. Many difficult problems remain unresolved. Just a cursory survey of the recent Cambodian print media throws up many reports of supposed Vietnamese involvement in illegal logging in the outer Cambodian provinces, border encroachments by Vietnam, and creeping Vietnamese jurisdiction of Cambodian territories. In March 1999 (and this was after the election) there were a number of grenade attacks by 'anti-ethnic Vietnamese terrorists' on Vietnamese living in Phnom Penh. Even if these bilateral problems cannot be fully resolved, they can be better managed – as with the many differences between ASEAN members. The prospects are favourable if three conditions are fulfilled. One, Hun Sen manages to run the country.⁹¹ Since Hun Sen became Prime Minister, new agreements on water transport, tourism, education, and energy co-operation have been signed with Vietnam.⁹² Two, the Khmer Rouge (which is particularly anti-Vietnamese) does not recover its strength. And last, but not least, Sino-Vietnamese relations continue on an even keel.

⁸⁶ For information on both visits, see Xinhua News Agency, 31 March 1999, *SWB*, FE/3499/G/4; and Xinhua News Agency, 22 April 1999, *SWB*, FE/3517/B/1.

⁸⁷ See 'Ranariddh to woo Chinese investors', *Business Times*, 18 June 1999.

⁸⁸ Xinhua News Agency, 16 June 1999, *SWB*, FE/3564/B/1.

⁸⁹ *Moneakseka Khmer*, 23 March 1999, *SWB*, FE/3496/B/1.

⁹⁰ Kyodo News Service, 12 July 1997, *SWB*, FE/2970/B/4.

⁹¹ See Hun Sen's government platform in *SWB*, FE/3403/B/1-8. Also see National Voice of Cambodia, 19 June 1999, *SWB*, FE/3558/B/1.

⁹² Phnom Penh National Radio, 13 December 1998, *FBIS*, EAS-98-347.