

CAMBODIA–VIETNAM: Special Relationship against Hostile and Unfriendly Forces

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Comprehensive Relations with a Military Pillar

Vietnam–Cambodia relations are described officially as “comprehensive”¹ and indeed have political, economic, security (military and police), cultural and other facets. Politically, there are close and tightening links between the two countries’ ruling parties, symbolized by the fact that in a speech to the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) Congress in January 2016, General Ngo Xuan Lich, about to be promoted to Minister of Defence, placed the Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) as second among the foreign political organizations with which the CPV was strengthening bilateral cooperation, behind only that of Laos.² The comradeship entails general efforts “to closely coordinate and to strengthen the exchange of information and experiences in party-building work”³ and the two sides speak of it as a “special relationship”,⁴ the formulation used to describe the relationship between Cambodia and Vietnam (and Laos and Vietnam) from 1979 to 1990.⁵ During an April 2017 visit to Phnom Penh to meet with Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen, Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc described links as flourishing, declaring that “especially in the recent years and months, Vietnam–Cambodia relations have been very much more familial, affectionate, trusting and intimate”.⁶

Within this framework, the Vietnam–Cambodia military ties embodied in the links between the Vietnam People’s Army (VPA) and Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF) are characterized as a “main pillar”.⁷ This is a realm in which the Vietnamese believe they can and should continue to have a very special place, rooted in their unique role in militarily toppling Pol Pot’s Democratic Kampuchea

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in January 1979 and directly building Cambodia's security forces for a decade thereafter.⁸ In bilateral contexts with a military flavour, Hun Sen has been prone to affirm that “without the help of Vietnam, Cambodia would absolutely not be where it is today”.⁹

Two overarching themes of VPA–RCAF cooperation are that, historically, “always at the most difficult times, there has been only Vietnam helping Cambodia”,¹⁰ and that, currently, the VPA is ready to assist the RCAF “in all circumstances”,¹¹ including at any time “when the CPP is encountering difficulties”.¹² Hun Sen has described bilateral relations like one of “lips and teeth”, with a basis in a “political relationship” between the two countries’ armed forces.¹³ In historical Asian Communist parlance, the notion of a lips and teeth relationship has referred to one of militant solidarity in wartime against a common enemy.¹⁴

Combating “Hostile” and “Unfriendly” Forces

In policy terms, current VPA–RCAF relations are pursuant to a 2014 CPV Central Military Commission policy resolution,¹⁵ according to which VPA forces combine preventing political change away from CPV rule in Vietnam itself with cooperating closely with the RCAF.¹⁶ In January 2016, the Director of Vietnam’s National Defence Academy explained that helping make Cambodia strong with regard to its domestic “political security” helps “protect the security of Vietnam.”¹⁷

This puts security force relationships at the core of Cambodia–Vietnam mutual assistance to realize the CPP–CPV objective of ensuring that what in Khmer are labelled “unfriendly forces” (កម្មលាំងអមិត្ត or កម្មលាំងអមិត្តក) ¹⁸ and what in the official Vietnamese translation are labelled “hostile forces” (*thế lực thù địch* or *lực lượng thù địch*) are unable to use the territory of one against the other.¹⁹

For the CPV, “hostile forces” include those accused of attempting to use the issues of “democracy and human rights” to form political organizations and develop civil society to promote “radical” democratic tendencies to destabilize political security, bring about “peaceful evolution” and overthrow the CPV’s monopoly leadership position.²⁰ Hostile forces’ tactics are said to include calling for a depoliticization of the VPA and public security forces by ending CPV control over them,²¹ demanding “religious freedom” for minority groups and others,²² accusing the government of failing to protect national interests,²³ and doing something to precipitate war.²⁴

In Cambodia, the phrase “unfriendly forces” has been used particularly by CPP senior security force commanders when referring to the opposition Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP) since its foundation in late 2012 through to its

November 2017 dissolution and the banishing of its 118 leading political figures from politics for five years by Cambodia’s Supreme Court.²⁵ The CNRP has been so stigmatized for allegedly refusing to give Hun Sen and the CPP their due for their services in the cause of the nation,²⁶ creating instability in the national society,²⁷ generating political turmoil via demonstrations and strikes to destroy public order and national security,²⁸ and ultimately for allegedly “colluding with foreign imperialism”, that is, the United States, to use demonstrations to make a “colour revolution” to overthrow the government. These were the contentions presented in late October 2017 as the immediate justification for a pre-emptive strike against the CNRP to prevent a national catastrophe²⁹ and they were the underlying basis for the Supreme Court decision. They had also been the grounds put forward in September 2017 in support of the arrest for alleged treason of CNRP President Kem Sokha,³⁰ replacement for the self-exiled founding party leader Sam Rainsy, who has opted since November 2015 to remain outside Cambodia to avoid his own arrest.³¹

Linked over the years to the characterization of the CNRP as an unfriendly force have been statements by Hun Sen and other Cambodian officials that the CNRP was wrongly alleging that the government had violated Cambodia’s national interests by ceding Cambodian territory to Vietnam,³² and that the CNRP was acting in such a manner as to provoke either internal class war or external war with Vietnam,³³ both of which Hun Sen has said would follow from the CNRP taking power by defeating the CPP in elections.³⁴

CNRP as Electoral Threat

Voting trends in Cambodia’s 2013 National Assembly elections and the 2017 commune elections, in which the CPP lost a considerable portion of its previous vote tallies to the CNRP, made a future CNRP election triumph appear a possibility, perhaps in the next National Assembly elections, scheduled for July 2018.³⁵

After the 2013 vote and both before and after the 2017 vote, the CPV has signalled trepidation about this prospect and its desire to have the CPP fend it off. Reporting on the CPP’s 2015 Congress, Vietnamese media revealed concerns that its vote share had “significantly decreased” in 2013 due to a decline of popular confidence in the party, and that unless it learned the lessons of this setback, its survival would be at stake.³⁶ In a November 2015 meeting with a CPP Central Committee official, the head of the CPV’s Central Office advised it to adopt “proper strategy and tactics” in order to win “bigger achievements” by successfully organizing commune and national elections.³⁷ In a December 2015 meeting with

Cambodia's Deputy Prime Minister and National Defence Minister Tea Banh in Hanoi, CPV General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong indicated that to do so, the CPP would have to exercise more disciplined leadership.³⁸ During Vietnamese President Tran Dai Quang's meeting with Hun Sen a year later, the president affirmed "a consistent policy of always supporting the CPP" and appreciated Cambodia's "steadfastness ... in not allowing any hostile force to use its territory to undermine the peace, security and stability" of Vietnam, but counselled the Prime Minister to carry out "preventative work, not allowing extremist forces to provoke national animosity or to break up or sabotage the relations of cooperation and friendship" between the two countries.³⁹

Three days after the CPP setback in the 2017 commune elections, the official CPV newspaper quoted "observers" as saying that although the results showed that the electorate supported peace, stability and development, the CPP "still had much work to do in order to realize its commitments before the voters" in the run-up to national elections.⁴⁰ The CPV manifested worries about the CPP's ability to maintain political stability and social order in Cambodia and indicated support for its efforts to do so.⁴¹ However, in early August 2017, a CPP Central Committee official told CPV counterparts that the CPP was still encountering "not a few difficulties" in the wake of the commune election and would have to confront "not a little destructive resistance from hostile forces" as the National Assembly vote approached.⁴²

Security Force Relations

It is in this context that the Vietnam–Cambodia security pillar takes on psychological and potentially operational significance as an armed alliance against political change that would bring hostile forces of unfriendly elements to power in Cambodia. At October 2015 talks between a Cambodian defence ministry secretary of state and a Vietnamese deputy defence minister, the two concurred that they faced a danger of outside powers using their "soft power" to interfere in their countries' internal affairs,⁴³ and that they needed to further strengthen defence relations to prevent this.⁴⁴ In separate talks with the Vietnamese official, Hun Sen specified that new security threats were arising due to attempts by counter-revolutionary forces to use a "colour revolution" to overthrow his government, and that therefore the militaries of both countries needed to be highly vigilant in order to defeat their dark schemes.⁴⁵

To assist in ensuring their defeat, from 2014 to 2016, Vietnam gave Cambodia at least US\$29 million in defence aid.⁴⁶ Much of the aid focuses on a direct twinning

between VPA and RCAF or Cambodian Ministry of National Defence organs and units, the better to build close military cohesion and solidarity.⁴⁷ Other VPA aid for the RCAF is devoted to construction of training facilities inside Cambodia.⁴⁸ This compliments VPA education of RCAF personnel inside Vietnam, some of which dates to as far back as 1980. Since that year, Cambodia has sent nearly 17,000 military personnel for training in Vietnam, of whom 10,230 have finished their courses since 2002.⁴⁹ In 2017, 300 more were to undergo long-term training and more than 1,000 short-term training.⁵⁰

Police-to-police relations are similarly designed to ensure their “long-term durability” and effectiveness in promptly defeating the negative activities of hostile forces.⁵¹ As with the military, this has included construction of training facilities inside Cambodia.⁵² Also in that year, it was agreed that 600 Cambodian police would go to Vietnam for study.⁵³ Some of these presumably followed in the footsteps of previous waves who had attended the People’s Security College II, from which almost 6,000 Cambodian police have graduated as of July 2015, including 2,227 since 2004.⁵⁴ A new round of police cooperation to “ensure the security of both countries” was agreed in February 2017,⁵⁵ and in a late July 2017 meeting, the Vietnamese side praised the two countries’ police forces for having coordinated and intensified their struggle to defeat “all plots of hostile forces and targets acting detrimentally to the interests and security of each country.”⁵⁶

Historical Factors

Profound historical factors have encouraged Vietnamese acceptance of the CPP’s view of the political threat posed by the CNRP. One is that Sam Rainsy, Kem Sokha and other CNRP or CNRP-affiliated figures often use the historical and still widely heard Khmer-language term *Yuon*,⁵⁷ originally the customary name applied to peoples ruled by predecessor polities of today’s Vietnam and to those polities themselves, to refer to Vietnamese today, despite the fact that official and many other Vietnamese nowadays object to it because they consider it derogatory and to have racist connotations.⁵⁸ Another factor is calls CNRP figures have made for what they present as the rightful restoration to Cambodia of historically Khmer realms in what is now southern Vietnam, or alternatively for political autonomy for ethnic Khmer areas there or at least full respect for Khmer minority human rights.⁵⁹ The historical narrative and legal argumentation on which the territorial claims rely are hotly contested in official and other Vietnamese circles,⁶⁰ as in some recent Western scholarship,⁶¹ and autonomy for Khmer areas is anathema to the Vietnamese government, which denies that it is violating Khmer minority rights.⁶²

What Vietnamese authorities see as a dangerously irredentist tendency is concretized in a history of rejection by the CNRP or CNRP-affiliated figures of the legality or at least the validity of treaties and other agreements relating to these issues made between 1979 and 2011, to the accuracy of the placement of border markers pursuant to those texts, and to the actual situation of administrative control on the ground where border markers are placed (see below). Another provocative issue is CNRP opposition to the presence among the various historical and recent Vietnamese communities in Cambodia of the many it says are illegal migrants and/or have been illegally voting in elections.⁶³ While the CPP has also been addressing what it too characterizes as in significant part an illegal immigration problem by, *inter alia*, deportations,⁶⁴ the CNRP is widely understood to be much more determined to “send all the Yuon to Vietnam”.⁶⁵

2015 Crises Previewing an Unwanted Future

Two 2015 crises previewed other things that could happen on a larger scale if the CNRP were to take power. The first was an outflow of Vietnamese Montagnard “national minorities” into Cambodia seeking recognition as refugees by a Cambodian government determination process advised by staff of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The second was dealing with CNRP challenges to the two governments’ handling of the delineation and demarcation of the Cambodia–Vietnam border.

By March 2015, Vietnamese security forces were becoming increasingly concerned about what they feared was a “situation of political turmoil in Cambodia” in the wake of the 2013 national elections. Initially, they saw these “internal disturbances” as having led negative repercussions on security and order particularly in border areas due to the flight of Montagnards claiming religious and political persecution in Vietnam. Their immediate reaction was to concentrate VPA Border Defence Forces and other security personnel to try to prevent what they deemed illegal departures.⁶⁶ They asserted these were the result of instigation by Montagnard exiles who wanted to use it as a cover for an armed separatist insurgency under the banner of a Front Uni de Lutte des Races Opprimées (FULRO)⁶⁷ or by “domestic and foreign hostile forces” generally to foment an illegal overthrow of the local CPV regime via bogus “peaceful evolution” means or simply violent unrest.⁶⁸

They also pushed to step up existing cross-border cooperation⁶⁹ between Vietnamese and Cambodian authorities and security forces against “hostile forces”.⁷⁰ This was in line with CPP policy that influxes of Montagnards are the

result of plots by “unfriendly circles” to wreck Cambodia–Vietnam relations and destroy CPV rule in Vietnam, which the two parties must prevent.⁷¹ Thus, on the Cambodian side, there was a reported deployment of almost a thousand troop reinforcements in Rattanakiri province by the end of April 2015.⁷² Cambodian soldiers told journalists that this was at the request of the Vietnamese.⁷³

In September 2015, a Vietnamese media account highlighting successes by Vietnamese border security forces in stemming the flow of Montagnard asylum seekers into Cambodia attributed these successes to the deployment of Vietnamese military reinforcements and improved Cambodian cooperation.⁷⁴ Further cooperation from this point to 2017 between Cambodia’s General Department of Immigration and Vietnamese authorities meant that among the hundreds of Montagnards who nevertheless managed to make it into Cambodia after late 2014,⁷⁵ the majority were more or less forcibly returned to Vietnam, except for those who eventually fled onwards to Thailand.⁷⁶ Those who remained in Cambodia as of October 2017 faced the same fate, even though the UNCHR judged that they had strong claims to be bona fide refugees and thus had a right to non-refoulement.⁷⁷

Direct 2015 confirmation to the CPV that the CNRP was a “hostile force” came with its increasingly activist allegations of Vietnamese violations of Cambodian sovereignty.⁷⁸ This included trips by CNRP parliamentarians to locations where they insisted this was happening, such as a part of Kampong Ro district in Svay Rieng province.⁷⁹ This dispute related to land on which Hun Sen had said in 2012 that Vietnamese had been resident on what the two governments agreed was the Cambodian side both of the frontier and of where they had placed a border marker.⁸⁰ The placement seems to have been at precisely the right spot as indicated by the French colonial-era maps that the government and CNRP alike agreed with Vietnam should divide the two sovereign territories.⁸¹ However, a map produced by authorities of the bordering Vietnamese province of Long An had included territory beyond the marker as under its administration.⁸² Vietnamese authorities admitted there was a problem of Vietnamese families cultivating land already demarcated as Cambodian.⁸³

In acting in this manner, the Vietnamese side was claiming a right to administer the area based on its interpretation of a 1995 joint press release by the two governments,⁸⁴ which the Cambodian side agreed in principle was applicable in this locality.⁸⁵ This 1995 document provides that each government can continue to exercise management in places where their nationals have been residing on the wrong side of the agreed delineation of the border, until some future date at which time all delineation and demarcation issues between the two sides have been resolved, which was not the case in 2015⁸⁶ (and is still not the case now).⁸⁷

A CNRP visit led by parliamentarians to the site on 28 June 2015 resulted in an altercation with Vietnamese villagers and security forces on the Cambodian side of a watercourse that Long An province was using as its administrative boundary.⁸⁸ Vietnam implausibly maintained the clash had occurred deep in its territory and praised Long An Border Defence Forces, local militia and farming families for having repulsed an incursion by Cambodian “extremists”. It called upon the Cambodian government to prevent further such activities.⁸⁹

Meanwhile, activist CNRP parliamentarians announced on 7 July 2015 plans to lead a large group of Cambodians back to the same place on 19 July.⁹⁰ Two days later, the then editor of the *Khmer Times* newspaper, T. Mohan, published a lengthy article citing what appeared to be government security sources as being concerned about machinations by what the article characterized as “local traitors” among politicians and the possibly imminent dispatch of CIA agents disguised among other things as reporters and students to carry out a “colour revolution” to overthrow the Cambodian government. The article maintained that to achieve this end, the plotters would not only pretend to be promoting democracy and human rights, but had already “upped ... the escalation of border tensions with Vietnam”, taking advantage of deep anti-Vietnamese sentiments among Cambodians. It suggested that the CNRP border trip of 28 June had been “intended to provoke a fight” with Vietnam as part of a scheme to ignite the colour revolution. It mentioned CNRP leaders Sam Rainsy and Kem Sokha by name and implied that there was evidence of official foreign backing for their treasonous plotting, because some in the “opposition party had openly said that they had been undergoing training in the United States and elsewhere on the various strategies of unseating an incumbent prime minister”.⁹¹ Other English-language newspapers in Cambodia have published reports characterizing Mohan as a “CPP-friendly businessman”⁹² and containing purported leaks of correspondence suggesting connections between him and RCAF military intelligence.⁹³

On 19 July, a CNRP parliamentarian-organized convoy carrying some 1,800 people left Phnom Penh for Kampong Ro, where Svay Rieng and Long An government forces had coordinated the deployment of security forces to maintain “security” and “order”.⁹⁴ The number in the group increased to as many as 2,000 because people had joined it along the route,⁹⁵ and grew further to 2,500 because villagers joined in as it neared the frontier,⁹⁶ cheering it wildly on.⁹⁷ Only about 800 went as far as the watercourse that was the Vietnamese administrative boundary, and the security forces deployed along it insisted only 100 could go on to the border marker.⁹⁸ Further advance to the border marker by any more than a few over the limit of 100 was blocked by a mixed force of Cambodian

police,⁹⁹ gendarmes and other military personnel with firearms and local para-police carrying clubs. Those allowed through were watched from a distance by armed Vietnamese¹⁰⁰ Border Defence Forces and villagers.¹⁰¹ After they returned to the watercourse, the CNRP led an exit from the area, were given a heroes' farewell as they proceeded, and then travelled by convoy back to Phnom Penh.¹⁰²

The Cambodian government immediately decried the event as part of a CNRP-led “insurrectionary”, “anarchist” and “extremist” movement.¹⁰³ A Vietnamese commentary spoke of a conspiracy by such extremists trying their best to oppose the Cambodian government and of the need to “resolutely smash the forces taking advantage of border problems” to undermine Cambodia–Vietnam friendship.¹⁰⁴

On 21 July 2015, the Phnom Penh court suddenly convicted and sentenced eleven CNRP activists to prison terms for “insurrection” in connection with a demonstration in the capital a year before that had ended in violent clashes between protesters and government para-police. Amnesty International, in calling for the convictions to be quashed, noted that several of those sent to prison had also “been involved in recent CNRP activities to raise awareness of what they allege are efforts by Viet Nam to encroach on Cambodian territory”.¹⁰⁵

Two days later, Hun Sen presided over a meeting of nearly five thousand security force commanders. He warned that CNRP parliamentarians causing serious problems on the border with Vietnam would be arrested, regardless of parliamentary immunity.¹⁰⁶ He reportedly issued instructions that commanders must prevent a “colour revolution” in Cambodia, which government-aligned media explained meant CNRP plans to spark mass demonstrations to overthrow the government.¹⁰⁷ Editorializing on the convictions the same day, T. Mohan said the acts for which they had been prosecuted “could have had dangerous consequences” for Cambodia–Vietnam relations.¹⁰⁸ The eleven remain in prison.

On 15 August 2015, Hong Sok Hour, a senator from the Sam Rainsy Party, a precursor to the CNRP, was arrested for having posted online a mistranslation of a passage in a 1979 Cambodia–Vietnam treaty wrongly suggesting that it provided for “dissolution” of the border between the two. This was characterized by Hun Sen as an act of treason, and the senator was subsequently convicted and sentenced to prison for forgery and intent to generate “serious disturbance of the security of society”.¹⁰⁹ A CPP spokesperson declared that Hong Sok Hour wanted “to lead the people to revolutionize against the legitimate government”,¹¹⁰ and a government spokesperson added that he was trying to get people to become “angry and rebel” as part of the same colour revolution plot as the eleven insurrectionists.¹¹¹

The next month, Tran Cong Truc, former head of Vietnam's Government Border Committee, published an article praising Hun Sen's “tireless efforts to

neutralize every resistant and destructive ploy to distort the border and territorial issues between the two countries used by Cambodia's opposition political forces in order to resist and destroy him, deceive the masses, and garner votes". He particularly decried the Cambodian opposition's use of "political tricks" related to border and territorial issues to gain seats in the 2013 elections. However, he said, Hun Sen had been handling "quite convincingly" what he called the "culmination" since June of CNRP's efforts to "incite social unrest", thereby stabilizing Cambodian society. He added that even if some "extremist opponents" were still "provoking extreme nationalism", the "experienced politician" Hun Sen could be relied upon to successfully run Cambodia's complex multiparty system, including via necessary "radical" measures to deal with the "scourge" of ultra-nationalism, such as prosecutions of figures like SRP Senator Hong Sok Hour.¹¹²

In follow-up articles published in early October 2015, Tran Cong Truc specified this meant that Cambodia "needed to appropriately punish troublemakers like Um Sam-an", a CNRP parliamentarian who had led expeditions to the border, but who by this time was out of Cambodia. Tran Cong Truc denounced Um Sam An and other CNRP figures as reactionary "traitorous elements" conspiring to disrupt not only Cambodia-Vietnam relations but also "causing political and social instability" in Cambodia.¹¹³

Um Sam An was arrested immediately upon his return to Cambodia in April 2016 for having previously posted on Facebook allegations that the maps being used by the Vietnamese and Cambodian governments to locate the border were inauthentic, and that the latter was guilty of a sell-out of land to Vietnam. He was convicted and sentenced to prison in October 2016 for inciting social instability and anti-Vietnamese discrimination.¹¹⁴ Like the eleven CNRP "insurrectionists", he remains in prison. (Hong Sok Hour, however, was released on 25 October 2017 by royal pardon at Hun Sen's request after the senator wrote to the Prime Minister expressing regret for disseminating what he said was an inaccurate text and praising Hun Sen's handling of border matters.)¹¹⁵

Towards Showdown with the CNRP

The 2015 handling of the Montagnard and CNRP border activism crises did not pre-emptively resolve the potentially much larger and more serious ones that could come about if the opposition were to win National Assembly elections in July 2018. Both the CPP and CPV had reasons to fear that the polls could not only end CPP political hegemony but also open the floodgates for Montagnard asylum

seekers, for CNRP border challenges and for CNRP facilitation in Cambodia of anti-CPV activities among Montagnards and also ethnic Vietnamese.

In January 2017, a Vietnamese government website published an article hailing Vietnam–Cambodia cooperation and criminal proceedings in Cambodia against Sam Rainsy, Hong Sok Hour, Um Sam An and the eleven CNRP activists. However, it expressed concern that the CNRP was nevertheless “aggressively moving into border areas” to do campaigning for elections in 2017 and 2018, and that meanwhile anti-CPV “reactionary exile organizations”, especially FULRO, might again be increasing their presence in Cambodia.¹¹⁶

Highlighting the notion of a Montagnard threat, a Cambodian government-aligned online outlet accused Sam Rainsy in February 2017 of treason, basing this on his having signed a cooperation agreement with the U.S.-based anti-CPV Montagnard Foundation that allowed this organization to operate from inside Cambodia.¹¹⁷ Hanoi has long maintained that the foundation is a terrorist organization threatening Vietnam’s national security by fomenting secessionism among Central Highlands Montagnards.¹¹⁸ Seeming to confirm Vietnamese fears, in April 2017 Sam Rainsy called for the non-refoulement of Montagnard asylum seekers, describing them as refugees facing human rights–violating punishment once back in Vietnam.¹¹⁹

As regards ethnically Vietnamese “hostile forces”, just after the commune elections, a CPP spokesperson recalled long-standing CPP allegations¹²⁰ that Sam Rainsy had once made an agreement with an anti-Communist “Free Yuon Movement” based in the United States, allowing it a presence in Cambodia.¹²¹ Earlier, the Vietnamese Ministry of Public Security had deemed Viet Tan, another U.S.-based anti-CPV movement, a “terrorist organization”, specifying it had a history of using Cambodia as a base for operations against Vietnam.¹²² Viet Tan confirmed a 2017 presence in Phnom Penh by reporting that on 2 September a member of its Central Committee who was one of four Viet Tan members then in-country had been the victim of an acid attack that it alleged was carried out by Vietnamese government security forces.¹²³

Joint RCAF-VPA concern about a possible resurgence of CNRP border activism was apparent during a March 2017 meeting in Cambodia between a VPA regional commander¹²⁴ and RCAF Commander-in-Chief Pol Saroeun, who felt it was still necessary to reassure Vietnam that “if any individual accuses the Royal Government of having ceded land to Vietnam, they will be arrested and thrown in jail”.¹²⁵

It is thus no surprise that at a Phnom Penh ceremony on 27 November 2017, a senior Cambodian defence ministry officer denounced the defeated “poisonous

schemes, plans and activities of the CNRP, which was colluding with foreigners to overthrow” the government, and Vietnam’s military attaché declared that Vietnam would continue to be Cambodia’s “comrade-in-arms”, vowing once more that the two countries would maintain their friendship regardless of what circumstances might arise in Cambodia. Government-friendly media affirmed that this signalled Vietnam’s support for the arrest of Kem Sokha, dissolution of the CNRP and related recent measures.¹²⁶ During 21 December 2017 discussions with Hun Sen about the “victorious suppression” of the purported threat of a CNRP colour revolution, Vietnam’s deputy minister of national defence reaffirmed that his country fully backed Cambodia in doing whatever it needed to do to prevent “social instability”. In line with Hun Sen’s request for strengthened bilateral opposition to any ongoing attempts at colour revolution,¹²⁷ the Vietnamese official agreed with the Cambodian defence ministry to further “intensify cooperation” during 2018.¹²⁸

Common Interests, Not Master-Supplicant

All this points to a conclusion that keeping the CNRP out of power, if necessary by eliminating it from the contest for power, is a strongly shared CPP–CPV common interest that lies at the core of their comprehensive relationship and is most concretely manifest in the relationship between their security forces. However, this and other CPP–CPV common interests do not add up to Vietnamese domination of Cambodia, as is shown, *inter alia*, by Cambodia’s refusal to toe Vietnam’s line on the South China Sea.¹²⁹

Thus, assertions like that by overseas Cambodian activist Chham Chhany that Hun Sen’s recent moves to “smash the CNRP” have been because “he wanted to please the Yuon” wrongly posit a master–supplicant relationship.¹³⁰ The reality is that the CPP has had an increasingly urgent interest in convincing the CPV that the CNRP is a one-and-the-same “unfriend” of Cambodia and a “hostile force” *vis-à-vis* Vietnam, but the CPV has needed no convincing. Thus, a more persuasive analysis of their relations comes from Merle Pribbenow, a long-term observer of Vietnam’s security forces and their relations with Cambodia: “Vietnam shares and supports Hun Sen’s view of the CNRP” and “clearly has some influence on the Cambodian government and on the Cambodian military/security apparatus”, but “does not have any meaningful level of control over Hun Sen and the CPP” nor “anything that approaches control over” its security forces.¹³¹

This reflects the fact that although Vietnam was originally able to dominate the regime it created and nurtured in Cambodia from 1979 to 1989, it lost its once almost totally decisive leverage in the late 1980s to early 1990s.¹³²

Current Cambodia–Vietnam relations are the result of an evolution away from dependency into a reasonable fit with political scientist Brantly Womack’s model of “mature asymmetry”; that is, a stable relationship “between units confident of the acknowledgment of their basic interests by the other and in which the management of the relationship is institutionalized”. Although Vietnam is in the stronger position, and the two sides do not have identical interests and perspectives on all issues, Cambodia’s autonomy is recognized and respected by Vietnam in the context of consensus on other crucial areas of common concern.¹³³ This outcome is also in line with what historian Liam Kelley has suggested the bottom-line objective of pre-colonial Vietnamese political projects and diplomacy vis-à-vis Cambodia have been: not necessarily conquest, absorption, mass colonization or mass cultural Vietnamization, but having in power there Khmer leaders who agree with their Vietnamese counterparts on who their common enemies are and who are willing and able to fight them.¹³⁴ That the CPV most definitely now has in today’s CPP Cambodia.

Notes

1. <<https://www.dap-news.com/kh/ផែនការទំនាក់ទំនង/24591.html>>; <<http://vtv.vn/vietnam-va-the-gioi/doan-dai-bieu-dang-cong-san-viet-nam-tham-chinh-thuc-campuchia-20150608181235385.html>>.
2. <<http://www.baomoi.com/Dai-hoi-Dang-XII-doi-moi-the-che-kinh-te-la-nhiem-vu-uu-tien/c/18507522.epi>>.
3. <<http://www.baomoi.com/dong-chi-truong-thi-mai-tiep-doi-dai-bieu-campuchia/c/20983552.epi>>.
4. <<http://www.baomoi.com/viet-nam-campuchia-giu-vung-tinh-huu-nghi/c/20980965.epi>>.
5. Speech by Nguyen Ho, Ho Chi Minh Domestic Service, 9 January 1979; Hoang Van Thai, “On the Special Relations of Cooperation among the Three Indochinese Nations”, *Tap Chi Cong San*, January 1982; speech by Vo Chi Cong, VNA, 30 April 1990.
6. <<http://www.qdnd.vn/qdndsite/vi-vn/61/43/quan-doi/bo-truong-bo-quoc-phong-campuchia-tham-chinh-thuc-viet-nam/392537.html>>.
7. <<http://www.qdnd.vn/qdndsite/vi-vn/61/43/quan-doi/bo-truong-bo-quoc-phong-campuchia-tham-chinh-thuc-viet-nam/392537.html>>.
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