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ABN # 65 648 097 123



## **Background Brief**

### **Vietnam's Intervention in Cambodia, 1978-89 September 27, 2019**

We request your assessment of the historical relationship between Vietnam and Cambodia from 1979-89.

Q1. Vietnam's volunteer army was on duty to help in Cambodia from late 1978 until September 26, 1989. There is a debate over whether this was a "righteous act." What is your assessment of Vietnamese volunteers serving in Vietnam?

ANSWER: After the Khmer Rouge took power in Phnom Penh on 15 April 1975 they commenced to attack Vietnamese islands in the Gulf of Thailand and the following year they initiated cross border raids into Vietnam. Despite diplomatic efforts to reach agreement on the border, the Khmer Rouge increased the frequency and intensity of their attacks committing horrible atrocities against Vietnamese villagers.

In September-October 1977 Vietnam conducted counter-attacks aimed at punishing the Khmer Rouge for their actions. The Khmer Rouge persisted, however.

In May 1978 there was an internal revolt in eastern Cambodia against Khmer Rouge rule. It was crushed and many Cambodians sought sanctuary in Vietnam including Hun Sen. These forces were grouped in the Kampuchea United Front for National Salvation.

Vietnam's decision to intervene in Cambodia was made for two reasons. First, Vietnam was exercising the right of self-defence to counter aggression. Second, Vietnam was responding to calls for assistance from the Khmer people and the Kampuchean National United Front for National Salvation to overthrow the Khmer Rouge regime.

Vietnam's actions in self-defence were fully justified in international law. Vietnam also undertook to protect the Khmer people from a murderous regime. While not yet established in international law, the United Nations later came to accept the "responsibility to protect" as a legal obligation by the international community.

Q2. Why did Vietnam remain in Cambodia after 1979?

ANSWER: Khmer Rouge rule resulted in the estimated death of 2 million persons. The country was devastated in terms of education, health facilities, infrastructure and the loss of trained personnel. Vietnam intervened in December 1978 and liberated Phnom Penh in January 1979. If Vietnam had withdrawn the Khmer Rouge would have returned to power and conducted revenge on the populace. The Khmer Rouge undoubtedly would have continued to attack Vietnam.

Vietnamese military forces and advisers remained in Cambodia for nearly a decade in order to assist the Cambodian people restore their country so they could resume a normal life. Vietnam also assisted in building up a political system and a military force that could resist the return of the Khmer Rouge.

Vietnam achieved notable success in Cambodia especially when compared to the United States in South Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Q3. Vietnam's actions have been characterized as an invasion of Cambodia. Is this because Vietnam's propaganda justifying its actions was not good?

ANSWER: Vietnam is very sensitive to the use of the term invasion as it could imply that Vietnam's action was an act of aggression and therefore illegal under international law.

The word invasion also has many non-legal meanings such as assault, incursion, raid, offensive, etc. Consider world media coverage on the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of D-Day to mark Allied landings on the coast of France. These landings were described as the Allied invasion of France or an invasion to liberate Europe from Nazi rule. At the same time, Vietnam and Singapore were involved in a "war of words" over Prime Minister's Lee Hsien-loong's statement that Vietnam invaded Cambodia.

It should be recalled that Premier Pham Van Dong toured Southeast Asia in September and October 1978 and pledged that Vietnam would not use force against its neighbours. When Vietnam intervened in Cambodia in December 1978 many Southeast Asian leaders felt Vietnam had violated Dong's pledge. But in fact, Vietnam had been involved in a border war with the Khmer Rouge for several years.

Vietnam's intervention took place at the height of the Cold War. Regional states, like Thailand and Singapore had no empathy for Vietnam. In their view Vietnam's intervention in Cambodia out-weighed the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge regime and Vietnam's right of self-defence.

When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in December 1979 anti-communist hysteria reached new heights. In the charged atmosphere of the Cold War Vietnam faced enormous difficulties in justifying its case. First, Vietnam exchanged fraternal greetings with the Khmer Rouge regime even as they were fighting. After Vietnam's intervention, its ambassador at the United Nations was quoted as telling ASEAN diplomats that the outcry against Vietnam "would be over in a week." This steered Singapore to bring an annual resolution to the UN General Assembly opposing Vietnam.

ASEAN then backed a Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) to oppose Vietnam and the People's Republic of Kampuchea. ASEAN hoped the non-communist elements of the CGDK, the Sihanouk forces and the Khmer People's National Liberation Front, would win over anti-Vietnamese Khmer nationalists. However, at China's insistence, the Khmer Rouge remained the centre-piece of the CGDK.

Unfortunately for Vietnam, its efforts to expose the crimes against humanity of the Khmer Rouge fell on deaf ears until the conflict in Cambodia was brought to an end in October 1991.

The narrative put forward by Singapore's Prime Minister in May was a distorted one. He argues that ASEAN diplomatic unity won the day and forced Vietnam to withdraw from Cambodia thus setting the scene for Vietnam to join ASEAN.

Consider the following counter-factual: what would Southeast Asia be like today if Vietnam had not intervened in Cambodia? The Khmer Rouge regime, backed by China, would have remained in power. Mainland Southeast Asia would have been destabilized. Vietnam would have had to fight a continual border war with the Khmer Rouge. The conditions for *doi moi* would not have been ripe. ASEAN would not have been able to expand its membership.

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Suggested citation: Carlyle A. Thayer, "Vietnam's Intervention in Cambodia, 1978-89," *Thayer Consultancy Background Brief*, September 27, 2019. All background briefs are posted on Scribd.com (search for Thayer). To remove yourself from the mailing list type, UNSUBSCRIBE in the Subject heading and hit the Reply key.

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