

7 Vietnam, the Third Indochina War and the meltdown of Asian internationalism

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Introduction

No one could have imagined in January 1950, when Beijing and Moscow recognised the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and its revolutionary mission in Indochina, that these countries would come to blows once Communist victories emerged in all of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia in 1975. Asian internationalism was at its zenith in early 1950. Stalin, Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and Ho Chi Minh were all in Moscow. Stalin had conceded he had been wrong about Mao Zedong's revolution. Stalin was now convinced of the favourable revolutionary possibilities in Asia, so much so that he transferred revolutionary leadership in Asia to Mao Zedong. The latter was now in charge of assisting the Vietnamese and Korean revolutions. As for Ho Chi Minh, he succeeded in dispelling Soviet doubts about the sincerity of his internationalist faith. To reassure Chinese and Soviet doubters, the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) undertook land reform and set to building Communist parties and revolutionary governments for Laos and Cambodia, part of their pre-Second World War Indochinese internationalist task. If Chinese leaders justified in large part their break with Vietnam in 1979 in opposition to Hanoi's domination of Indochina, Beijing leaders have evoked pre-colonial "History" to forget conveniently that they had supported Vietnam's revolutionary Indochinese model well into the 1950s, along internationalist lines. Internationalist geographical constructions, like their colonial opposites, had clearly taken on a life of their own in Chinese and Vietnamese minds since the early 1920s.

For many writing about the Third Indochina War – not least of all the Chinese, Vietnamese and Khmer hyper-nationalists of the 1980s – the break among Asian Communists marked the victory of "History", "Tradition" and "timeless security concerns" over ideology and internationalism. Deng Xiaoping was recast as a Ming-minded expansionist determined to take all of Southeast Asia, while Le Duc Tho became the "red" reincarnation of Minh Mang and his early-nineteenth-century attempt to swallow Cambodia whole into the Dai Nam Empire, the precursor of the Communist Indochinese Federation. When it came to Cambodia and Laos, the only way they could

survive in the post-colonial and post-Vietnam War period was by returning to the past to re-establish their “neutrality” between Thailand and Vietnam. Most powerful of all, of course, were the timeless oppositions between the Chinese and the Vietnamese on the one hand and the Vietnamese and the Khmers on the other. One has only to consult the scores of “white”, “black” and “truth about” books churned out by the Chinese, Vietnamese, Lao and Khmer Communist nationalists in the late 1970s and 1980s to get a feel for how “History” and “Tradition” were used to legitimate the politics and breaks of the present. It is hard not to agree that, once the French “colonialists” and American “imperialists” had left the region by 1975, deep-seated, pre-colonial historical forces resurfaced with force to realign intra-regional Asian relations in “traditional” ways.

While I would in no way whatsoever want to underestimate the importance of “History” and “Tradition” for understanding present-day regional relations, such arguments, like nationalist historiographies that minimise the French colonial period as a brief *parenthèse*, do not allow for modifications in regional relations and mutual perceptions based on changing historical conditions, the entry, adoption and adaptation of new ideological faiths, and new patterns of revolutionary Asian relations developed to respond to the historical challenges posed by Western and Japanese domination of much of Asia, not to mention the ever-present question of “modernity”. Much went on in the region. Inside French Indochina, Vietnamese and Cambodians continued to engage each other. Indeed, budding Khmer and Vietnamese nationalists constructed nationalist discourses in relation to one another in a number of heated debates that occurred during the colonial period. If the Vietnamese used the overseas Chinese to carve out a definition of the needed nationalist “Other”, many Khmers latched on to Vietnamese in Cambodia and the idea of Indochina in order to define what they were and were not. Defining the “Other” was an important nationalist construction that occurred during the colonial period.¹

If foreign domination helped focus the nationalist idea in Vietnam and China, communism also brought Vietnamese, Chinese and other anti-colonialists into a larger revolutionary family and offered a new way of viewing colonialism, modernisation and international and intra-Asian relations. While it is admittedly difficult to take internationalism seriously since the Chinese and Vietnamese went to war in 1979 and since European Communist states came tumbling down about a decade later, it would be equally wrong to assume that ideology, like colonialism, did not impact upon how Asian nationalists viewed each other, the surrounding region and the world. There is perhaps more to Vietnamese Communist faith in Indochina than security and historical designs on Indochina. And it is perhaps worth reminding ourselves that if there is a “special relationship” (*quan he dac biet*) in the history of Asian communism it is probably the one between Chinese and Vietnamese Communists, not the one renewed in 2002 between Lao and Vietnamese Communists. Not only was communism able to hook up well with nationalism in Vietnam

and China (unlike in Eastern Europe and Western Indochina), but Chinese and Vietnamese Communists also had remarkably close relations in each other's emerging parties, nation-states and armies. While deep-seated historical forces count, the states that came to power in Vietnam and China in the 1940s were not exactly the same as those that had existed under the Qing or the Nguyen.

If the Sino-Soviet dispute had long sowed dissension in the Communist movement, with Beijing and Moscow coming chillingly close to nuclear war in 1969, the Chinese and Vietnamese, thanks in no small part to Ho Chi Minh, had been able to keep their special relationship in Asia on a fairly even track. However, Indochinese internationalism was under fierce nationalist pressure from the Khmer Rouge. Before 1975, the latter had launched an increasingly fierce attack on the Indochinese model, through which the Vietnamese viewed their national security, and which also shaped their vision of the region and even of themselves. The Khmer Rouge's contesting of the Indochinese model contributed dangerously to the deterioration of the Sino-Vietnamese special relationship. Worried that the Soviets would establish themselves in Indochina by way of Vietnam, the Chinese found it harder to trust the Vietnamese in Southeast Asia. The Vietnamese, cautious of Chinese support of the increasingly hostile Khmer Rouge, doubted Beijing's intentions on their western flank. By 1977, Beijing and Hanoi found themselves competing for Southeast Asia at an international and regional level, with the Khmer Rouge being perhaps the worst possible obstacle imaginable to keeping the Sino-Vietnamese revolutionary relationship on course. The Khmer Rouge, nobodies in the wider Communist family, brought the internationalist house down when they provoked the Vietnamese into throwing them out of Cambodia.

This chapter focuses on this meltdown of revolutionary Asian internationalism and how this can shed new light on our understanding of the Third Indochina War from a regional perspective. I divide my reflection into three parts. The first part serves as a historical overview of the emergence of internationalism in the region and how Chinese and Vietnamese Communists worked together for their respective revolutions as well as the Indochinese one. I argue that ideology counted and it played an important role in how Vietnamese and Chinese Communist leaders would view the region and their relations with one another. The remaining two parts focus on the breakdown of two pillars of Asian internationalism, the Indochinese one and the Sino-Vietnamese relationship. The second part uses Vietnamese and Khmer Rouge sources to show that the Khmer Rouge had already undermined Indochinese internationalism before the Second Indochina War had even ended; however, the Vietnamese continued to believe that things would work themselves out in internationalist ways. They were woefully wrong. The third part uses new documents on meetings among Chinese, Thai and Khmer Rouge leaders to give a concrete example of how the deterioration of the special internationalist relationship between Chinese and Vietnamese Communists led to a major

reorientation in Southeast Asian relations, in particular between Communist China and anti-Communist Thailand. Not only would no more dominoes fall, but the Communist Chinese would do their best to stabilise the dominoes by trying to dismantle the Indochinese bloc they had themselves helped to build. But rather than forcing the past to fit the present, it might be more interesting to track Asian internationalism over the *longue durée* first.

I. Building revolutionary internationalism in Asia

Vietnamese internationalism and Asia

Western and Japanese colonialism had a major historical impact on how the “colonised” would come to view the region and its future. The French creation of a colonial state called “Indochina” from 1887 spelled the end of the formerly independent state of Vietnam. The Nguyen monarchy was hobbled and its army dismantled in favour of a colonial one. The French ran its diplomacy, not the Vietnamese. For those Vietnamese who continued to believe in an independent Vietnam, the most militant were forced to go abroad to keep it alive or risk imprisonment, marginalisation or worse. Effective French *Sûreté* repression pushed this imaginary Vietnamese nation and the handful of nationalists backing it deep into Asia. Nearby independent Asian states – Thailand, Japan and China – became crucial refuges. Meiji rulers had shown that an Asian state could modernise in Western ways, without having to be colonised directly by a foreign “civiliser”, implicitly undermining Western colonial justifications for creating and running colonial states across the region. The Japanese military defeat of the Russians in 1905 was thus a turning point in Asian anticolonialism. Chinese, Korean, Indian and Vietnamese nationalists flocked to Japan, convinced that independent Meiji Japan held the key to building a modern nation-state and an Asian future free of direct Western domination. Phan Boi Chau, the most famous Vietnamese anticolonialist at this time, began sending Vietnamese youths to Japan to study modern ideas and military science as part of his “Go East” (*Dong Du*) movement.

We now know that Meiji support of Asian anticolonialism would turn out to be a hollow promise. Following a series of Japanese decisions to expel Chinese, Korean and Vietnamese nationalists, Tokyo embarked on its own imperial ambitions in Asia that would end in defeat only in August 1945. Nevertheless, these early Asian connections in Japan were important in that they brought Chinese, Korean and Vietnamese intellectuals together as part of a wider mental attempt to make sense out of Western colonial domination, the loss of their states, and how to go about reversing this painful state of events. They exchanged ideas and publications, and reflected together for one of the first times ever on the common threat posed by European domination. While nationalist priorities certainly dominated outlooks and inter-Asian anticolonialist actions were anything but coordinated, this wider Asian view

of the region, its past and its possible future marked a small, but important, shift in Asian views of the region and the world. Following their expulsion from Japan, numerous Asian anticolonialists relocated to southern China where the Chinese Republican Revolution of 1911 soon opened up new possibilities.

The Russian October Revolution of 1917 and the emergence of communism as the state ideology of the Soviet Union built on this and would have an even greater impact on the minds of many Asian anticolonialist nationalists. For one thing, communism now existed in an independent state. Second, communism, based on the credo of Marxism-Leninism, provided a seemingly coherent explanation for European imperial domination and offered a way out of the Darwinian one-way street of subjugation for the semi- and fully colonised of Asia. Lenin's theses on colonialism explained how the expansion of European capitalism had led to their exploitation and the domination of large parts of the world. Marx offered a historical and economic analysis that promised modernisation and an eventual world revolution based on class struggle. Whatever its contradictions, Marxism-Leninism extolled proletarian internationalism as a modern identity extending beyond national and racial borders. Moreover, Marxism-Leninism offered an internationalist outlook that sought to integrate the Asian anticolonialist cause into a wider, world revolutionary movement based in Moscow and claiming historical continuity with the French Revolution, and opposition to capitalist and colonial domination. All alone in the colonial desert, internationalism offered a ray of hope in Asia, something that was in great demand in China and Vietnam after the First World War. Lastly, communism also provided a powerful organisational weapon for nationalists, especially when it came to fighting long wars against superior Western and Japanese armies.

Moscow seemed to make good on all this, when Lenin founded the Comintern (Internationalist Communist) in 1919 to promote and support revolutionary parties across the globe. Disappointed by revolutionary failure in war-torn Germany, European Communist advisors soon landed in southern China to build communism in the "East". With important Comintern aid, the Chinese Communist Party came to life in 1921 in Shanghai, while the "Vietnamese Communist Party" was born in early 1930 in another southern Chinese port city, Hong Kong. Ho Chi Minh, the father of this nationalist party, was simultaneously an early member of this wider internationalist Communist movement (though not the most important).² A few months later, following internal criticism for Ho's deviationist nationalist tendencies, the Vietnamese Party was renamed the "Indochinese Communist Party" in order to conform to Comintern orders that Communist parties in European colonies correspond to the colonial states they were opposing – Indonesia and not Java, Indochina and not Vietnam. The Indochinese colonial entity carved out by the French in 1887 thus delimited the internationalist responsibility of Vietnamese Communists, and not the narrower nationalist one patriotic Vietnamese anticolonialists had been imagining to that point.

Sino-Vietnamese special relations in Asia

If there is a special relationship in the history of Asian communism, it is the one linking Vietnamese Communists to their Chinese counterparts. Ho Chi Minh had already met Zhou Enlai in France after the First World War. Both of them returned to southern China via Moscow as part of the Comintern's shift to building revolution in China rather than in Germany. Indeed, this special Sino-Vietnamese relationship took off in the 1920s, when Ho Chi Minh and his disciples set to grafting communism on to the pre-existing Vietnamese anticolonial organisations in southern China. Thanks to the First United Front between the CCP and the GMD (1923–1927), Ho was able to form the Youth League in Canton in 1925. In the midst of the patriotic fervour inside Vietnam and thanks to French repression of student strikes at this time, Ho recruited young nationalists from inside the country and placed them within Chinese revolutionary organisations, most importantly the Whampoa Politico-Military Academy in Canton. There, young Vietnamese studied, in Chinese, Western military science imported from the Soviet Union, as well as nationalist and revolutionary ideas flowing through both the CCP and the GMD. Young Vietnamese revolutionaries listened to lectures by Zhou Enlai, Zhu De and Peng Pai. Some 200 young Vietnamese were formed in Whampoa classrooms and military academies between late 1924 and 1927.

Fascinating Sino-Vietnamese revolutionary overlaps occurred (which both Hanoi and Beijing have sought to conceal until recently). A young Vietnamese named Nguyen Son, for example, studied in Whampoa, made the Long March with Mao Zedong, and became a ranking member of the CCP Central Committee and a general in the Chinese Red Army. He served as a general in Vietnam after 1945, commanding the defence of War Zone IV. He also trained the DRV's first military cadres and diffused Maoist ideas on the military, revolutionary culture and Communist rectification long before Maoist ideas flowed into northern Vietnam from 1950. Le Thiet Hung was another Whampoa graduate, an officer in the GMD army and a mole for the CCP in Chiang Kaishek's General Staff. In the early 1940s, he returned to Vietnam to build the national army and to serve as director of the national military academy. Ho Chi Minh himself sealed the special ties between Vietnamese and Chinese Communists, symbolised by his relationship with Zhou Enlai from the 1920s in France.

Internationalist collaboration was easiest during the phase of opposition to “foreign colonialists” and their “lackeys”. However, as long as international Communists taking over new nation-states after the Second World War did not split ideologically or compete with each other internationally, the resurfacing of “traditional” and “historical” forces did not necessarily mean the end of internationalist collaboration. Mao Zedong's support of Korean and Vietnamese Communists in 1950 was motivated to a remarkable extent by ideology, by a real belief that it was China's internationalist duty to help

the Korean Communists (with whom the Chinese had also long collaborated). National security most certainly counted,³ but recent scholarship has also shown that ideology played an important role in Communist decision-making on foreign affairs and visions of the region and the world.⁴ This was true in Vietnam. Thanks to Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, Ho Chi Minh and the ICP were able to gain the support of the international Communist movement in 1950. Mao and Zhou explained to a suspicious Stalin that, while Ho was a nationalist, he was also a good internationalist and a sincere Communist who had to be supported. Without the confidence of the Chinese in early 1950, Ho Chi Minh and his party may well have been sidelined by the Soviets, written off by Stalin as a potentially dangerous Asian Tito.

The Vietnamese were greatly relieved to have Chinese internationalist support during the war against the French. The Chinese provided important military aid and training, vital to the Vietnamese defeat of the French. They also sent political advisors to remould the Vietnamese state, economy and agricultural system in Communist ways. And they shared the internationalist long-term goal of pushing the revolution deeper into Southeast Asia via the Indochinese internationalist model. While Vietnamese hyper-nationalists caught up in the events of 1979 were keen to push Chinese perfidy back to the Geneva Accords in 1954, accusing them of selling out Vietnamese interests, they conveniently forgot that the US was ready to intervene directly in Indochina. The idea of fighting the Americans in 1954–1955 must have troubled Vietnamese as much as Chinese strategists, not to mention their populations wearied by years of violence.⁵

Relations would change in the 1960s, as the Cultural Revolution and Maoist visions of permanent revolutionary struggle ran up against important and extremely complex geostrategic differences in Vietnam in the war against the US. Nonetheless, the Chinese continued to supply massive amounts of military and economic aid, as well as sending over 300,000 military support troops into northern Vietnam, allowing Vietnamese soldiers to focus on fighting the US in southern Vietnam. Internationalism suffered a serious blow, of course, with the Sino-Soviet split, which brought Beijing and Moscow to the brink of nuclear war in 1969. While Ho Chi Minh tried to negotiate the rift, the damage had been done.⁶ By 1975, Beijing's leaders feared that the revolutionary mantle Stalin had handed to Mao in 1950 was being revoked and that Moscow would try to fill in the regional vacuum left by the US withdrawal from Indochina and years of Cultural Revolution and instability in China. Indeed, in the early 1970s the Soviets were trying to improve relations with Hanoi in order to push their influence further into Southeast Asia at the American and Chinese expense.⁷ As long as Chinese and Vietnamese revolutionary interests remained on an even keel, a deterioration of the Sino-Soviet split into a Sino-Vietnamese break could be avoided. But if relations broke down between Beijing and Hanoi, then Beijing would “revoke” Vietnam's Indochinese internationalist licence just as the Soviets had tried to do to the Chinese in Asia.

What no one saw coming was Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge and a full-on nationalist attack on the Vietnamese internationalist conception of Indochina and Vietnam's right to run it. If Hanoi well understood the intricacies of remaining neutral between Beijing and Moscow, the Khmer Rouge rejection of the Indochinese model – indeed of all things Vietnamese – caught Vietnamese Communists off guard. While they certainly had received signs of a potential Khmer–Vietnamese rift, they did not take them seriously, thinking things would work themselves out once the Americans were defeated or once they could regain control over the Khmer revolution. And the breakdown of Vietnamese–Cambodian relations, coupled with hostile Vietnamese actions towards the *huaqiao* (overseas Chinese), rendered it increasingly difficult for the Vietnamese and Chinese to continue to view Southeast Asia and Indochina in internationalist terms. They began to compete for the region.

The fragility of the Indochinese internationalist model

Vietnamese Communists were thus in a unique position in that their internationalist mission charged them with bringing communism to all of Indochina – not just to the nation-state of Vietnam. Moreover, if many Vietnamese nationalists believed in internationalism and their Indochinese mission, hardly any Lao or Khmer did before the mid-1950s. There were few, if any, Khmer or Lao running pre-Second World War revolutionary networks between Moscow, Paris and Guangdong. Many early Lao and Khmer nationalists first looked to pre-existing religious networks running to Thailand, where they studied in Buddhist institutes of higher learning. Others, like Son Ngoc Thanh in Cambodia, played important roles in Buddhist institutes created by the French to shut down this threatening link to Thailand. When the Vietnamese created the Indochinese Communist Party in 1930, there were no Lao or Khmer members. There were, however, overseas Chinese who held high-ranking places in the Central Committee in southern Vietnam in the early 1930s. There was never a Lao version of Nguyen Son commanding Vietnamese revolutionaries in southern Vietnam.

Until the end of the Second World War, the Vietnamese were largely alone in their bid to spread the revolutionary word in western Indochina, relying almost entirely on Vietnamese émigrés to build their bases along the Mekong. After the outbreak of the Chinese civil war in 1927 and the shift in Comintern policy towards proletarian internationalism as opposed to working with bourgeois nationalists, Chinese and Vietnamese internationalists, including Ho Chi Minh, relied upon overseas Chinese (*huaqiao* or *hoa kieu*) and Vietnamese expatriates (*Viet kieu*) in Southeast Asia to introduce communism in Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Malaya. The Vietnamese and the Chinese were involved in the grafting of communism to mainly Chinese and Vietnamese labourers working in rubber plantations and mines across peninsular Southeast Asia, not to the “indigenous” peoples themselves. This was a new vision of the region.

Immediately after the Second World War, the Vietnamese continued to dominate revolutionary, military and diplomatic affairs in and for western Indochina. While they did their utmost to keep the internationalist flame alive in Laos and Cambodia, it flickered at best as the DRV struggled to survive against the French Expeditionary Corps. The Chinese victory of October 1949 changed all this. In exchange for re-entry into the internationalist fold, Vietnamese Communists had to show their real internationalist colours. This occurred in 1951, when the ICP was brought out of the shadows and renamed the Vietnamese Workers' Party, linked publicly to the internationalist world and obligated to adopt Communist policies. Land reform was one of them. The intensification of the Indochinese internationalist model was the other. As the French moved to transform their Indochinese federation into the Associated States of Indochina, Vietnamese Communists countered by forming national resistance governments in Laos and Cambodia. In 1951 the Vietnamese created the Khmer People's Revolutionary Party, and a Lao party in 1955. What is important here is that the Vietnamese were the moving force behind the creation of national revolutionary parties in and for Laos and Cambodia, and they were doing so with the full backing of the Chinese and Soviets. Security was also a part of it. Unlike the Chinese and the Vietnamese versions, however, communism in Laos and Cambodia lacked a nationalist basis at its start. The Vietnamese hoped to "indigenise" communism as they went along.

Vietnamese Communists carried on; they believed in their "internationalist duty" (*nhiệm vụ quốc tế*) of the Indochinese kind. They believed in their right and their revolutionary mission there. This impacted on how they saw the region, Indochina, and their revolutionary role in it. New primary and Vietnamese Communist secondary sources leave no doubt as to the extraordinary role Vietnamese Communists played in exporting communism to western Indochina, building organisations there and often running, de facto, Party, government and military affairs. The Vietnamese set up powerful and highly secret *Ban Cán Sự* (Party Affairs Committees), staffed by Vietnamese and Chinese (in Cambodia), to run revolutionary affairs in all of Laos and Cambodia. The Vietnamese created armies, police services and economic structures, in short revolutionary state structures based on the Sino-Vietnamese model.

Some authors have accused the Vietnamese of replicating pre-colonial imperialist designs on Vietnam and Cambodia. Such impulses existed. But this is insufficient as an explanation. New documentation makes it clear that, for both Chinese and Vietnamese Communists, ideology counted. And just as the Chinese felt it was their "duty" to assist the Koreans and the Vietnamese against the French and the Americans, so too did the Vietnamese consider it their international obligation to bring communism to Laos and to Cambodia. However, whereas the Chinese found long-standing contacts, friendships and like-minded Communists in Vietnam and Korea, the Vietnamese found no such favourable terrain in the Theravada or ethnically non-Viet upland parts

of French Indochina. Nevertheless, the Vietnamese were determined to apply their internationalist model as a legitimate task and to gain acceptance into the wider internationalist family. The Vietnamese missionary faith and the lack of pre-existing Communist structures and leaders in Laos and Cambodia saw the Vietnamese Communists play the major role in the revolutionary movements in these countries, something which Vietnamese Communist nationalists would have never allowed the Chinese to do in Vietnam.⁸

In the early 1950s, Vietnamese Communists made no effort to conceal the fact that they saw themselves on the Indochinese cutting edge of world revolution in Southeast Asia. The ICP put it that way in 1950, and there was not necessarily a difference on this point between the Chinese and the Vietnamese. Chinese and especially Vietnamese revolutionary visions of Southeast Asia would be mitigated during the war against the Americans. The increased US military presence in southern Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand was certainly a part of this process. But the Geneva Accords dealt the harshest blow to the Cambodian segment of the Indochinese revolution, by relocating Vietnamese and Khmer cadres to northern Vietnam. Sihanouk's decision to adopt a policy of benign neutrality, allowing Vietnamese Communists to run arms down the Ho Chi Minh and through Sihanoukville, further compromised the Vietnamese Indochinese model. Rather than supporting Khmer revolutionaries against Sihanouk, the Vietnamese put the revolution on hold and kept their Khmer leaders in Hanoi, waiting for the propitious moment.

Theoretically, however, Vietnamese Communists continued to see themselves as in charge of the Indochinese revolution. On 18 July 1954, as the ink dried on the Geneva Accords, the General Secretary of the VWP, Truong Chinh, laid out four Vietnamese tasks for Laos and Cambodia: the formation of revolutionary parties for the Lao and Khmer working classes; the strengthening and expansion of their national fronts; the build-up of their political and military forces; and the training of cadres.⁹ From 21 March to June 1955, Lao and Vietnamese cadres met to form the Lao People's Party. Shortly thereafter, on 10 August 1955, the VWP formed its own Lao and Cambodian Central Committee, with Le Duc Tho at its head and Nguyen Thanh Son (former director of the powerful Cambodian *Ban Can Su*) serving as his deputy. This special party committee for Indochina was charged to "study and keep an eye on the situations in Laos and Cambodia and to make suggestions to the Central Committee regarding policies and plans". It trained cadres in Laos and Cambodia, and those who had been regrouped to northern Vietnam or the Lao provinces of Phongsaly and Sam Neua. It was also directed to "build good relationships with the people and the governments of the Lao kingdom and Cambodia".¹⁰ In contrast to the situation in Cambodia, in Laos the Vietnamese continued to play an overwhelming role in building up and, more often than is admitted, directing military, economic, governmental and party affairs.¹¹

The relocation of Khmer revolutionaries to northern Vietnam, Prince

Sihanouk's leaning towards Hanoi and the NLF sides, and the post-Geneva weakness of internationalism in Cambodia allowed for a group of Khmer Communists to fill the gap and create a fiercely nationalist Communist party, as Ben Kiernan has shown.¹² It had no roots in the Asian revolutionary networks the Chinese and Vietnamese had constructed and navigated since the 1920s. Badly out of touch, Vietnamese Communists had little, if any, organisational control or capacity to influence the emergence of what was, in many ways, a new Khmer party (even though the Lao Dong Party's Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN) was located in Phnom Penh between 1956 and 1959).¹³ All of this allowed Pol Pot to begin building a different Khmer party, independent of the Indochina revolutionary model, networks and cadres the Vietnamese had formed.

II. Khmer revolutionary nationalism and cracks in Indochinese internationalism

The absence of Indochinese Communism in Cambodia

Following the open break between the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese in the late 1970s, Vietnamese researchers went back to the past to try to understand what had gone wrong. Some Vietnamese claimed that fissures were apparent from the outset. Already in France, certain Vietnamese argue, the Khmer Rouge core had broken with the ICP, determined to form a separate Cambodian Communist party independent of the Vietnamese one created in 1951. The Vietnamese cite a Khmer representative of the French-based group as saying: "We consider the creation of the Cambodian Communist cell in France as a great political event in the modern history of Cambodia." According to the Vietnamese, by underscoring their links to the French Communist Party (PCF) in France, these returning Khmer sought to demonstrate their independence *vis-à-vis* the Vietnamese.¹⁴ Perhaps, but we should be careful not to accept uncritically Vietnamese claims that a break was in the making from the beginning. While I have not been able to consult the recently opened French Communist Party archives, I doubt French Communists paid much attention to Ieng Sary and Pol Pot in the early 1950s. Moreover, if news of Khmer study trips to Yugoslavia in the early 1950s reached Stalinist-minded PCF minders, I doubt that Pol Pot and his colleagues would have found any support in French Communist circles, let alone Chinese or Soviet ones. Whatever their differences, Khmer Communists returning to Indochina from France in the early 1950s needed the Vietnamese, though they were probably shocked to learn of the overwhelming role played by the Vietnamese in Cambodian revolutionary affairs. And even membership in the PCF would not have been sufficient to gain entry into the all-powerful Cambodian *Ban Can Su*. Only trusted ICP allies such as Tou Samouth, Sieu Heng and Son Ngoc Minh could pass through such doors.

The secret decision taken in the 1960s to change the Khmer party's name

to the “Cambodian Communist Party” (CPK) was, however, a clear sign that Khmer Rouge leaders led by Pol Pot sought to de-link Khmer communism from its Indochinese revolutionary networks along national lines. While this name change was kept secret from the Vietnamese and Khmers relocated to northern Vietnam, it coincided with the rise of Pol Pot within the Khmer Party at the expense of remaining “Indochinese-trained” revolutionaries. The 1960 political programme, penned in large part by Pol Pot, downplayed the importance of the Indochinese roots of Khmer communism. It was Cambodian. It was independent. It was nationalist. Mention of the Party Affairs Committees and, above all, a special place for the ICP were missing.

The CPK was also very much on its own, except for periodic contacts with the Vietnamese in southern Indochina and Hanoi, in contrast to the Vietnamese relationship to the Pathet Lao.¹⁵ Mao may have remembered who Kaysone and Nouhak were in Laos, but he had no clue before 1965 who Saloth Sar was. According to an internal Khmer document, obtained by the Vietnamese, between 1955 and 1960 the Khmer Party had relations with only the VWP.¹⁶ It was only in 1965, thanks to Vietnamese channels, that Pol Pot travelled to China for the first time. Pol Pot’s trip to China in 1965 and return in early 1966 allowed the CPK to discuss with Vietnamese and Chinese cadres the revolutionary situation and the new 1960 political programme. Following Pol Pot’s return in 1966, the CPK produced documents regretting the Sino-Soviet split and underscoring that it was important to struggle resolutely against “modern revisionism”. The CPK called nonetheless for unity within the internationalist movement in the fight against the Americans and supported revolutionary movements in Southeast Asia: in southern Vietnam, Laos and Thailand. As the Vietnamese noted in the early 1980s, the Khmer line coincided with the VWP’s ninth resolution and the CPK was still supporting and linked to the Indochinese model and in opposition to Tito.¹⁷

Throughout the 1960s, Pol Pot’s foreign policy was more or less in line with that of Vietnam, in particular in terms of the Party’s evaluation of the contradictions within the internationalist Communist movement and the options for resolving them. In 1984, however, Pol Pot told a Chinese journalist that, during his meetings with the Vietnamese in 1965, the divisive point was over the independence of the Cambodian party in relation to the larger Indochinese revolution. Pol Pot claims that, in spite of fifteen meetings, he rejected Le Duan’s argument that the Lao and Cambodian revolutions, because of their weakness, should wait until Vietnam’s victory over the US, when Hanoi would then liberate Cambodia and Laos as part of the wider Indochinese revolution.¹⁸ And Pol Pot was acutely aware of the fact that the Vietnamese remained the major revolutionary and military power with which his party had to work, at least until it took power.¹⁹

Writing later and looking for evidence of Chinese perfidy, the Vietnamese claimed that during Pol Pot’s visit to Beijing the Chinese had urged the CPK to adopt a more radical and armed line against the Americans, contrary to the Vietnamese line calling for a provisional truce with Sihanouk.²⁰

According to the Vietnamese, the CPK revealed a new revolutionary line in a September 1966 document entitled “The Party’s Foreign Policy (A Draft)”. In this document, the Khmer Rouge came down on the side of Mao Zedong against the revisionist USSR, “in solidarity with the international Communist and worker movement in order to defend authentic Marxism-Leninism”.²¹ In October 1966, another document, entitled “The Point of View and Position of the Party on the Situation of the World Today”, approved an armed line and “revolutionary war”, and opposed all “peace negotiations”. Unlike the Vietnamese Workers’ Party, the CPK backed the Chinese against the Soviets and applauded Mao Zedong as an “authentic” Marxist-Leninist and praised the Great Cultural Revolution. However, like the Vietnamese, the CPK called for unity within the international Communist movement and continued to support the Vietnamese struggle against the Americans as part of the larger world revolution.

The little-known Cambodian party was thrilled to find at least some sympathy in the tumultuous China of 1965 for their armed line in Cambodia. Pol Pot’s voyage to China must have opened up new visions of the world, the region and Cambodia’s revolutionary future. Reflecting later, Pol Pot told a representative of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) that his 1965 trip was the first time he had been abroad: “We didn’t obtain much, but we were reassured to have made friends in the world and on the inside we were reassured to have Chinese friends who would bring us strategic, political and spiritual aid.”²² In 1967, the Executive Committee of the CPK’s Central Committee sent a letter, dated 6 October 1967, to its Chinese counterpart to express its gratitude. In it, a certain Pout Peam (almost certainly Pol Pot²³) praised the Great Cultural Revolution as a model to follow. He revealed that the ideological position of the CPK was on the right track, that of an armed revolutionary line demonstrated by the Samlaut “uprising”. According to this document, the CCP was credited with having approved the revolutionary line of the CPK, something which the VWP had most certainly not done.²⁴

Prelude to the Indochinese meltdown? The quest for power, 1970–1975

Until 1970, there is little evidence of aggressive or irreparable breaks between the Vietnamese and Khmer Communists. If the Khmer Rouge leadership counted on breaking with the Vietnamese and the Indochinese model, then they held their cards very closely. The overthrow of Sihanouk in early 1970 was, however, a turning point in Khmer–Vietnamese Communist relations. The rapid deterioration of relations between the two sides made it clear that the Cambodian segment of the Indochinese revolution was badly out of sync.

The overthrow of Sihanouk in March 1970 was important for several reasons. For one, if Pol Pot and his acolytes had secretly harboured anti-Vietnamese sentiments or feared Vietnamese competition for the revolutionary high ground in Cambodia, then they must have shuddered at the idea of being overwhelmed by Vietnamese military and revolutionary power. Shortly

after taking power, Lon Nol shut the port of Sihanoukville to Hanoi and the COSVN and gave a green light to a dangerous joint American–Republic of Vietnam overland attack on eastern Cambodia, in a wider American bid to destroy Vietnamese sanctuaries and to cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail. On 29 April 1970, the US sent combined South Vietnamese–American troops into Cambodia. In 1971, ARVN troops tried to sever the Ho Chi Minh Trail in southern Laos. Hanoi lost no time in reacting to this very dangerous development. Not only did the North Vietnamese army respond ferociously to these attempts, but they threw their weight behind Khmer revolutionary action. On 27 March 1970, COSVN ordered the rapid and strong build-up of armed revolutionary forces in Cambodia.²⁵ On 19 and 30 June, COSVN reiterated similar orders. For one of the first times since 1953–1954, Indochina had indeed become a battlefield in Vietnamese eyes.²⁶ The Khmer Rouge was not in Hanoi’s league when it came to military power, sophistication and organisation.

In contrast to the Pathet Lao, the Khmer Rouge opposed the Vietnamese desire to aid them directly. A real fissure was in the making. With the war now spilling over into Cambodia, the VWP saw no contradiction in returning pre-1954 Khmer revolutionaries to Cambodia to fight the final showdown for all of revolutionary Indochina. Still politically small and militarily weak, the Khmer Rouge did not necessarily see it this way. These “Hanoi-trained” Khmer were seen as real competitors, threats to the CPK’s quest for power. Worse, the Vietnamese and the Khmer Rouge did not know each other well when the Vietnamese threw their full weight behind a fragile Khmer Rouge Communist organisation. With their sights on winning the war, Vietnamese leaders on the ground (especially in the COSVN) did not have time to pay attention to these emerging breaks. Moreover, Sihanouk had now rallied clearly to the anti-American cause, backed by both Hanoi and Beijing. The Khmer Rouge could be sidelined diplomatically. On 23 March 1970, the Front uni national du Kampuchéa (FUNK) took form publicly. On 5 April 1970, Zhou Enlai announced publicly that China would support Prince Sihanouk and FUNK and break relations with the newly formed Republic of Cambodia. Moscow, at loggerheads with Beijing at this time, was caught off guard. Instead of supporting Sihanouk (in contrast to combined Sino-Soviet support of Souvanna Phouma in a similar situation a decade earlier in Laos), the USSR maintained diplomatic relations with Lon Nol’s government until 1975, something which the Khmer Rouge would not forget. While Sihanouk was useful in terms of legitimising the Khmer Rouge struggle, Pol Pot and Ieng Sary understood the risks of being eclipsed by the meteoric prince, especially since he had support in very high places in Beijing and Hanoi and could even attract the Americans if a diplomatic solution could be accepted by all sides (see p. 000). Thanks to Chinese support, on 24–25 April 1970 a “Summit of the Peoples of Indochina” was held in Canton. On 5 May, Sihanouk declared the constitution of the *Gouvernement royal d’union nationale du Kampuchéa* (GRUNK). In 1970, the Khmer Rouge

was forced out of its isolation. And decisions made by *both* the Chinese and the Vietnamese in their negotiations with the Americans would have a direct impact on the Khmer Rouge revolution and their capacity to take power.

Recently published Vietnamese sources confirm that the 1970 coup triggered breaks in relations between Vietnamese and Khmer Rouge Communists. Vo Chi Cong, a high-ranking Communist active in Cambodia during both Indochina wars, reveals this in a short passage in his memoirs. Cong explains that, following the overthrow of Sihanouk, Le Duan cabled him in southern Vietnam concerning the VWP's decision to begin aiding the Khmer Rouge at once.²⁷ Vo Chi Cong cabled Ieng Sary, then in charge of northeastern Cambodia, on the Vietnamese politburo's decision to send troops into northeastern Cambodia. Because the Khmer Rouge lacked a strong army, Cong told him, the Vietnamese would help the Khmer Rouge liberate northeastern Cambodia militarily. Significantly, Ieng Sary refused the Vietnamese request to send troops into Cambodia. The Khmer Rouge would only accept arms, not direct intervention. Vo Chi Cong was under orders from the VWP's Central Committee to send in troops; the strategic stakes were enormous for the war for southern Vietnam. Another cable from Le Duan made this clear. Following consultations with the VWP's top advisor to Laos and politburo member, Chu Huy Man, Vo Chi Cong sent two regiments into northeastern Cambodia. Many more troops followed. Within a few days, Cong says, the Vietnamese troops had "liberated" northeastern Cambodia.²⁸ Cong assured Ieng Sary that once the situation had improved the Vietnamese troops would be withdrawn. Interestingly, Vo Chi Cong knew Ieng Sary "from earlier times". In fact, in the 1960s the COSVN had assigned him to work as an advisor to the fledgling Khmer Rouge, then located near COSVN headquarters. Cong recalled that relations were even friendly during that period (*luc do thai do ho rat tot doi voi ta*). The 1970 coup and the entry of thousands of Vietnamese troops into Cambodia clearly changed that. Vo Chi Cong says that ranking Vietnamese leaders began to wonder for the first time whether the Khmer Rouge had begun "to fear" something.²⁹

Vo Chi Cong's mention of early contacts between COSVN and the Khmer Rouge raises the possibility that the Vietnamese were not entirely in the dark. What is harder to tell is whether the politburo or COSVN were receiving solid information from their intelligence services and cadres and whether they could do much about it anyway, given the geostrategic circumstances. In July of 1970, Le Duan told Pham Hung that, though there had been some inevitable differences of opinion between the two parties, thanks to "authentic internationalism and attitude" it was possible to build a deep level of solidarity between the two Communist sides.³⁰ And yet Le Duan must have known from the reports of Vo Chi Cong and others that "authentic internationalism" was in trouble in Cambodia. For the time being, Vietnamese leaders hoped that things would work themselves out. But privately they must have known that this would be different from Laos.

Indeed, Vietnamese–Cambodian relations worsened remarkably as the

Khmer Rouge sought to exploit the widening of the war in order to take power, but to *distance* themselves simultaneously from the Vietnamese, who they feared would re-establish control over the CPK. The coup of April 1970 brought to light for perhaps the first time the Khmer Rouge's distrust of the Vietnamese and their military power. In September 1970, shortly after the Vietnamese actions discussed above, the CPK called for increased autonomy and independence in the party's line. In 1972 and 1973, Khmer Rouge leaders apparently used the new nationalist name, the "Communist Party of Kampuchea", in their correspondence, cadre training sessions, propaganda campaigns and rectification programmes for the Khmer revolutionaries returning from Vietnam. According to an internal party document, dated August 1973, the CPK dropped the sentence saying that the "Cambodian party had the task of leading the working class and the Cambodian people in the struggle to defend peace in Indochina, Southeast Asia and the world". It was changed to read that the Cambodian revolution was in "close alliance with the Marxist-Leninist parties in the world and with the world revolution based on a spirit of equality, mutual respect of sovereignty and independence". The Vietnamese claimed by the early 1970s that these words, "equality, mutual respect, independence and sovereignty", appeared on telegrams they received from the CPK, indicating increased hostility towards the Vietnamese.³¹

What is certain is that the nationalisation of Cambodian communism led to violent incidents between the two sides long before the war against the Americans had finished. Between 1970 and 1975, according to internal Vietnamese figures, the Khmer Rouge provoked 174 armed military incidents that cost the lives of 600 cadres and soldiers. While this was a small fraction in terms of the total number of Vietnamese lost in Cambodia during the American war, 250,000, it meant that Indochinese internationalism and Vietnamese-Cambodian collaboration were in trouble.³² From 1972, Khmer troops robbed Vietnamese munitions depots and attacked Vietnamese troops and cadres on mission. The Khmer Rouge, according to the Vietnamese, organised anti-Vietnamese demonstrations designed to "drive out the Vietnamese soldiers from Cambodia". The Vietnamese claim that from this point the CPK began spreading such virulent propaganda as the ancient claim that the Vietnamese used Cambodian heads to serve tea. Internal Khmer Rouge documents confirm that Pol Pot's soldiers had begun attacking Vietnamese arms depots and engaged in violent incidents with Vietnamese Communist soldiers along the border, a precursor of things to come once both movements came to power.³³ Another study claims that the CPK approved the "anti-Vietnamese idea" for the first time in a party resolution adopted by a meeting of the Permanent Central Committee in September 1970.³⁴ The CPK began to spread anti-Vietnamese slogans among the population, announcing that the Vietnamese "were uninvited guests" and that they "wanted to grab" Khmer lands.³⁵ The resurgence of the anti-Vietnamese brand of Khmer nationalism in the CPK reinforced the breakdown of "internationalist" relations between these two parties from 1970.

The Khmer Rouge was most hostile to the returning Vietnamese-trained Khmers, convinced that the Vietnamese would use them to reassert the Indochinese model and thereby sideline or control the CPK. After the Geneva Accords of 1954, 189 Khmer revolutionaries had been relocated to the North and another 322 joined them in the following years. They studied and worked in Vietnamese bases and schools. Some were incorporated into the VWP and others were placed in Khmer Party cells in northern Vietnam. Twenty-three of them studied in China for four to six years. They were indeed the Cambodian segment of the Indochinese revolution, trained much as the Lao had been in Vietnamese military and party schools. After the *coup d'état* of 1970, of the 520 Khmer Communist members in northern Vietnam, all but fifty-seven returned to Cambodia after March 1970. However, most of them were assassinated by the Khmer Rouge before 1975.³⁶

Behind the smiling faces of the Khmer Rouge and their assurances of internationalist solidarity, things were bad on the ground. And COSVN must have known it. In late 1970, according to Vietnamese documents, Pol Pot met with members of the Central Committee of COSVN. According to the Vietnamese, he did his best to find faults in Vietnamese cadres and soldiers working in Cambodia and for his revolution. His main critique concerned the organisation of the General Staff in Cambodia. When he returned to Cambodia, he dissolved military and political organisms the Vietnamese had put in place and asked the Vietnamese to turn over all organisations in which Khmer were involved. It should be recalled that the Vietnamese advisory groups in Laos since the late 1950s had concentrated on military questions, building up the Pathet Lao party, administration, army and general staff in particular. It is hard to imagine Kaysone dissolving the VWP's Group 100 or 959 in eastern Laos.³⁷

This period saw the CPK try to implement what Grant Evans and Kevin Rowley have called "perfect sovereignty", that is to impose Khmer Rouge state authority scrupulously over all the areas they controlled. If the Vietnamese could travel back and forth between Laos and Vietnam within the context of internationalism, they ran into severe attempts by the Khmer Rouge to create sovereign state authority before even taking control of a Cambodian nation-state territorially. Khmer Communists insisted that Vietnamese troops adhere strictly to Khmer Rouge nationalist laws in the territories in which they operated (paradoxically secured by the Vietnamese). Documents from CPK Region 23, for example, issued a directive that laid down the national limits of Vietnamese-Cambodian collaboration: "The region proposes to all the districts not to consent to the Vietnamese units . . . the right to enter and bivouac in a permanent way as they want to do or in an undisciplined way as before. Because this leads to very complicated problems."³⁸ Vietnamese had to buy food and goods via CPK state purchasing outlets. Their contacts with Khmer villages were to be controlled by CPK authorities. They had to pay foreign taxes on what they purchased (a kind of VAT).

In 1974, following the withdrawal of most Vietnamese troops from Cambodia, Khmer nationalisation continued and so did the hard line. On 14 December 1974, the Region 23 permanent committee announced that, in order to protect the reputation and security of the Cambodian revolution, the Vietnamese who had taken refuge in Cambodia as well as those already living in Cambodia were to leave Cambodia shortly. They were to be left their last harvest and then expelled without “causing too many problems”.³⁹

The difference between Vietnamese activities in Laos and Cambodia could not have been starker: there was no “Indochinese” internationalist bond between the CPK and the Vietnamese. Things were particularly tense in 1973, so much so that orders were given to cadres working at the border with Vietnam to re-establish friendly relations with the Vietnamese. In a revealing formula, Khmer cadres were ordered not to be “too nationalistic or too internationalist”. The Vietnamese were to be authorised to buy from the villagers in order to eat. If they broke the law, they were to be stopped but not by violent means but through the law.⁴⁰ But a paranoid Khmer Rouge vision of perfect sovereignty persisted. In March 1975, for example, the Vietnamese delivered badly needed Chinese trucks to the Khmer Rouge in Stung Treng. However, when the two sides went about signing the papers for the transfer of the goods, the Khmer rear services agent insisted that the Vietnamese spell out that the trucks had been donated by China to Cambodia, not by the Vietnamese. The incident was only solved in favour of the Vietnamese after an apparently heated debate.⁴¹

The Khmer Rouge had clearly developed a radical nationalist communism that was incompatible mentally with the internationalist model being imagined in Vietnamese heads. While it would be exaggerated to argue that the two were already on a collision course, it is quite clear that they were imagining post-war regional relations in very different ways. Thinking of their work with the Pathet Lao since the 1950s, Vietnamese Communists were often convinced that they had the best of revolutionary intentions in their limited dealings with the Khmer Rouge. However, the reality of Vietnamese power and their belief in the legitimacy of the wider Indochinese revolution only exacerbated relations with an increasingly paranoid and, in my view, internally fragile Cambodian party, with no real army of which to speak. Unaware of it at the time, Vietnamese Communists had little common ground on which to build post-war relations, other than smiling assurances of solidarity. The internationalist looking glass through which the Vietnamese continued to view Indochina distorted dangerously their understanding of the Cambodian party.⁴² If the Pathet Lao relied on Vietnamese power to come to power in 1975, the Khmer Rouge wanted to get there alone or at least first, whatever the contradictions.

The Paris Peace Accords and Khmer rejection of Indochinese solidarity

The Khmer Rouge fear of being overwhelmed by Vietnamese military power in 1970 was the first blow to Vietnamese–Cambodian Communist relations.

The second was a diplomatic one. It came to a critical mass in the weeks before and after the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in 1973. The Vietnamese agreed to sign the Accords with the Americans in order to find a negotiated settlement to the war. While Kissinger would not sign separate accords with the Lao and the Khmer, it was understood that Hanoi would obtain the needed agreement from the Pathet Lao and the Khmer Rouge with their non-Communist opponents as part of the larger diplomatic effort to end the war in all of Indochina. Unsurprisingly, the Pathet Lao, always closely subordinated to Vietnamese decision-making, followed suit. The Khmer Rouge did not. There would be no cease-fire and no negotiations with Lon Nol. The CPK would take power by the force of arms. Not only did they fear a deal being done behind their backs by the Vietnamese, but they felt that a peaceful solution would sideline them for ever in favour of someone like Sihanouk, supported by the Chinese, the Vietnamese and even the Americans and French.

It was during negotiations with Ieng Sary in Hanoi in late 1972 and early 1973 that ranking Vietnamese leaders in Hanoi must have understood that something had gone badly awry in Cambodia. Le Duan explained to Ieng Sary, the representative of the CPK's Central Committee, why the Vietnamese needed the Khmers to sign on with them, insisting that the revolutions in Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia were intricately and inextricably linked. Ieng Sary smiled gently, no doubt nodded in agreement, and promised that he would take all this into consideration and report it back to the CPK Central Committee. Reflecting later on this meeting, the Vietnamese insisted that they had incorrectly believed Ieng Sary, thinking that the CPK would fall into line.⁴³ A few days later, in a meeting with Pham Van Dong, Ieng Sary hummed and hawed, extolling the importance of Vietnamese support for the Khmers, but ducking Pham Van Dong's question: "Why do you still hesitate in your country?"⁴⁴ The Vietnamese began to realise that the Khmer Rouge were going to fight to the end with or without Hanoi's backing or blessing. On 6 February 1973, Ieng Sary met with Le Duc Tho and explained that he still had no instructions on this question from his party, other than an order saying that, if the Vietnamese said anything to Kissinger about Cambodia, then he was to report back immediately to Cambodia. Le Duc Tho tried to assure Ieng Sary that Hanoi was not cutting a deal behind the CPK's back, adding that Vietnam would help the Khmer Rouge even if it meant "violating" the Paris Accord Le Duc Tho had just signed.⁴⁵ On 21 February 1973, the Lao groups signed an *Accord sur le rétablissement de la paix et la réalisation de la concorde nationale au Laos*. On 26 February, the *acte final* of the Paris Accords was signed. It said nothing about Cambodia.

Interestingly, the question of the Paris Peace Accords revealed that there was a clear divergence of views between the Vietnamese and the Khmers and that the Vietnamese were unable to influence CPK. The question was so serious that the Vietnamese politburo and Le Duc Tho in particular urged Ieng Sary to bring Pol Pot out of Cambodia to meet with the Vietnamese and

the Chinese on the need to develop a “fighting and negotiating line”. Ieng Sary told his Vietnamese counterpart that Zhou Enlai had agreed that the time was not yet ripe for diplomacy. While it is clear that the Chinese and Vietnamese lines were not, in reality, that far apart, Le Duc Tho understood that the Khmer Rouge did not trust the Vietnamese:

LDT: The experience of the last dozen years in which the big countries have forced the small countries to follow the wishes of the big countries. Therefore, we carry out works which relate to our friends only when our friends agree to that; if not, we won't do it.

IS: To be honest with you, we do not suspect you of anything.⁴⁶

In April 1973, Ieng Sary informed Le Duan that Pol Pot himself was grateful for Vietnamese assistance over the years, but health reasons prevented him from leaving the country. Significantly, Ieng Sary conceded that “a complete agreement between the two parties has not been achieved” on this matter. Ieng Sary concluded that the relations between the two parties were still closely connected and they would help each other “for the interest of each country, the interest between the two countries and the common interest of Indochina and Southeast Asia”.⁴⁷ However, Ieng Sary informed Le Duc Tho that the CPK would continue the fight. There would be no negotiations.⁴⁸

Fear of the Vietnamese was not the only reason explaining the Khmer Rouge's refusal to negotiate. Ieng Sary was also worried about American and Chinese overtures to Sihanouk, who was in Beijing. The prince remained the only Khmer figure who could cut a national deal, with the support of many, and thereby sideline the Khmer Rouge for ever. The Vietnamese obviously had no problems working with Sihanouk. Nor did Zhou Enlai. Both organised Sihanouk's journey down the Ho Chi Minh Trail to Cambodia in March 1973. As Ieng Sary hinted:

Comrade Zhou Enlai just told us that maybe when Kissinger goes to China, he will raise the Cambodian problem, but the Chinese will also not discuss this issue with them [the United States]. Until now, nothing indicates that Kissinger wants to meet with Sihanouk. But when he arrives in China, if he asks for a special meeting [with Sihanouk], China will be in a difficult position, because if they do not allow the meeting, Sihanouk will be sad; if they do, it will not bring any advantage.⁴⁹

Internal Khmer Rouge documents confirm that, right after the signing of the Paris Peace Accords, the Khmer Rouge had issued internal documents pointing out that Kissinger's visit to China and Vietnam would, among other things, try to establish contact with Sihanouk. “Until now Sihanouk's position has been one of unity, but he nevertheless has some tendencies which are

unstable. We will block these and continue to win him over to our side.” It is worth noting that Presidents Ford and Giscard d’Estaing had called for a political solution to the Cambodian problem, relying on Prince Sihanouk. This is exactly what the Khmer Rouge feared. In this document, the Khmer Rouge stated their policy clearly: “Our position is not to follow the policy of negotiations or diplomatic activities . . . so as not to let our forces be divided on the military front.”⁵⁰

What needs to be underscored here, I think, is that the Chinese were not supporting the Khmer Rouge against the Vietnamese between 1965 and 1973, and perhaps not until early 1975. The Chinese and Vietnamese negotiating positions, contrary to what the Khmers would say later, were not that different in 1973. Ieng Sary himself told Le Duc Tho that China wanted to serve as an intermediary to negotiate a compromise solution between FUNK and the Lon Nol regime in order to solve the Cambodian problem. The Chinese idea, Ieng Sary could tell Le Duc Tho, was to form a new government and bring back Sihanouk and Penn Nouth. The Khmer Rouge had opposed it in their talks with Zhou Enlai. Ieng Sary explained that the Chinese had conceded that, “if Cambodia is decided to fight to the end, then China will be in agreement”.⁵¹ That is what Le Duc Tho had also conceded to Ieng Sary.

Khmer sweet-talking followed the Communist victories of April 1975 in southern Indochina. During a visit to Vietnam from 11 to 14 June 1975, Pol Pot expressed his thanks to the Vietnamese for their transportation efforts for the Khmer Rouge during the war, and the arms which had allowed for the general offensive of 17 April 1975. As he confided to the Vietnamese: “The great friendly solidarity among the Parties and people of Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos . . . is a determining factor in all the preceding victories as well as a decisive factor in the future victories of our three parties and peoples.”⁵²

Pol Pot was lying. In August 1977, Pol Pot met for a long discussion with a high-ranking member of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), Khamtan.⁵³ During this meeting with a fellow Maoist, Pol Pot went on at great length about his vision of the past and relations with the Vietnamese. He explained that the supporters of the Indochina-wide revolution believe that there is “only one Party, one country and one people – whereas ‘other comrades are not in agreement’”.⁵⁴ Pol Pot explained that, for him, being an internationalist meant having good relations with the Vietnamese, the Lao *and* the Thais. He rejected the idea that “Indochina” was a special revolutionary unit. Nationalism, he implicitly said, was most important. Pol Pot insisted on the party’s own forces, autonomy and independence. The Vietnamese, according to Pol Pot, “were not happy about our political position when it came to foreign affairs, which is to have very close relations of solidarity with the Vietnamese, Lao and Thais. For the Vietnamese position is to have close relations of solidarity among the Vietnamese, the Lao and the Cambodians only, whereas the Cambodians think of a fourth country [Thailand].”⁵⁵

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For Pol Pot and others in his close entourage, tearing down the Indochinese internationalist model was an obsession, if not a defining point for their paranoid revolutionary nationalism. No one, least of all the Vietnamese, suspected that the incidents of the 1970–1975 period would give way to vicious border attacks once communism came to all of Indochina. The Khmer Rouge’s rejection of Indochinese internationalism and insistence on perfect sovereignty were important factors in melting down Sino-Vietnamese special relations in a dangerous international context. The fallout was vicious and the geopolitical impact was massive. The breakdown in the 1950 alliance between the Vietnamese and the Chinese in Southeast Asia led to a bitter opposition between the two, with the Vietnamese defending their role in Indochina in the name of “authentic” internationalism and the Chinese arraying ASEAN against Vietnamese “hegemony” in the region.

III. Sino-Thai–Khmer Rouge relations and the meltdown of Asian internationalism

In the third and last part of this reflection, I would like to turn to the “total” meltdown of Asian internationalism, marked by the violent breakdown of Chinese and Vietnamese “special relations” in Asia in early 1979. Nowhere is this breakdown and reversal in Communist international relations better seen than in the early, high-level meetings between Chinese, Thai and Khmer Rouge leaders to discuss how they would block Vietnam’s occupation of Cambodia and creation on 9 January of a new Khmer revolutionary government. The Chinese, convinced that the Soviet Union was using Vietnam to increase its presence on China’s southern flank, refused to accept Vietnamese domination of Cambodia. The Chinese in particular were determined to support the bloody Khmer Rouge in order to pressure Vietnam out of Cambodia.

During their reign, as we have seen, the Khmer Rouge saw themselves as the cutting edge of “true” Communist revolution in Southeast Asia. Increasingly hostile to all that was Vietnamese and bent on radical revolution, Pol Pot defined “authentic” as Maoist and in opposition to all that was “revisionist”, above all the Soviet Union and their “lackey” in Southeast Asia, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The Khmer Rouge saw themselves as the natural leaders of Maoist parties in Southeast Asia against the Vietnamese. In meetings with high-ranking Chinese officials in Beijing on 29 September 1977, Pol Pot explained this to his Chinese listeners, though putting the accent on anti-revisionism instead of radical Maoism. Keen on maintaining Chinese support, he described the Vietnamese as “a constant threat” to Southeast Asia in general and to Cambodian security in particular. Only by developing a truly revolutionary Southeast Asia could the Vietnamese be stopped. Pol Pot explained that his party was united with its Burmese, Thai, Indonesian and Malayan counterparts, “though relations were still complex”. He announced that he would bring together the revolutionary forces in Southeast Asia in

opposition to the Vietnamese. Pol Pot conceded that Chinese support “in the north” had allowed him to rethink the region in this way.⁵⁶

The next day, 30 September 1977, Hua Guofeng, then prime minister of the People’s Republic of China (1976–1980) and head of the CCP (1976–1981), presented the Chinese view. He saluted the Khmer Rouge victory, explained that the Gang of Four had been arrested, and noted that Sino-Vietnamese relations had deteriorated because of the “hand of the USSR” and the “connivance” between the USSR and Vietnam. If Pol Pot had been worried by the fall of the Gang of Four, he would have been reassured by the Chinese president’s admission that Sino-Vietnamese relations were very troubled. However, the break was not complete. Hua Guofeng informed Pol Pot that Beijing had learned from the Vietnamese that the latter felt the Khmers were “destroying friendly relations” over the border issue; nonetheless, Hanoi was still keen on solving problems peacefully and diplomatically. While Hua was not sure whether the Vietnamese were sincere or not, the Chinese explained that they wanted a peaceful solution. As Hua told Pol Pot:

We do not want the problems between Vietnam and Cambodia to get worse. We want the two parties to find a solution by diplomatic means in a spirit of mutual comprehension and concessions. However, we are in agreement with Pol Pot that the resolution of the problem via negotiations is not simple. One must be very vigilant with the Vietnamese, not only in diplomatic terms but even more when it comes to defending the leadership brain, which is the most important problem.⁵⁷

Concerning Pol Pot’s vision of Southeast Asia, Hua said that the Chinese would help when needed; but it is not clear from the minutes of their meeting whether the Chinese leader approved Pol Pot’s revolutionary view of Southeast Asia. The Chinese side explained rather that the world was no longer divided into two blocs, but into three: the Soviet Union, the Capitalists and the Third World (it was understood that the latter was led by the Chinese). The Chinese said that a Third World War was possible, because of the imperialist Americans and “in particular” the Soviet “revisionists” who were spoiling for a fight. The Chinese explained that they were preparing for war and were trying to gather together those opposed to the Soviets. What worried the Chinese, however, was that Vietnam had become the avant-garde for the Soviet Union in Indochina, controlling Laos and charged with bringing Cambodia to heel.⁵⁸ In July 1977, the Vietnamese had signed a special treaty with the Lao.

However, Pol Pot’s revolutionary view of Southeast Asia and his politics of complete national sovereignty had provoked problems not only with the Vietnamese, but also with the Thais. The Khmer Rouge had initiated violent border incidents along the Thai border on the one hand and they supported the CPT against the Thai government. Indeed, in 1977, the CPK almost provoked the Thais into a border war. Only in early 1978, as the border war

with Vietnam heated up, did Democratic Kampuchea improve its relations with Bangkok. In a long meeting between the Thai foreign minister Upadit Panchaiyankun and Ieng Sary on 31 January 1978, the Thai foreign minister exposed a wide range of divisive problems. In particular, he underscored the seriousness of the border incidents, warning Ieng Sary that they had to stop or else relations would take a serious turn for the worse. The foreign minister warned that inside the Thai government there was real hostility towards Democratic Kampuchea because of these violent incidents. As with the Vietnamese, Ieng Sary denied the government had been behind these incidents, writing it down to insubordinate officials or “traitor” Khmers working along the border in collaboration with CIA agents. Before parting, however, Ieng Sary guaranteed that efforts would be made to stop the border incidents.⁵⁹ Presumably, the Khmer Rouge understood the need to have peace on their western flank in order to concentrate on the Vietnamese in the east.

In the end, it was on the eastern border where the incidents provoked a Vietnamese decision to oust the Khmer Rouge, occupy the country and form a new revolutionary government. While I do not think the Vietnamese Communists intervened in late 1978 to save the Khmer people from genocide (they were well aware of the CPK’s policies before 1978), there is no doubt that they put an end to the CPK’s butchery when other countries did nothing. Worried by a combined Soviet thrust into Southeast Asia and a Vietnamese domination of all of Indochina, the Chinese Communists turned, with astonishing alacrity, to building an alliance with the Thais, a former Cold War enemy, to contain, indeed push back, the Indochinese Communist dominoes. The Sino-Vietnamese special relationship was dead. The Vietnamese and Chinese Communists were now supporting two rival blocs in Southeast Asia: the Chinese joined ranks with the Thais, the front-line state of ASEAN, and the US in opposition to the Indochinese Communist bloc run by the Vietnamese and backed by the Soviets.

A series of meetings between the Chinese and the Khmer Rouge in January and February 1979 leave no doubt as to the fascinating reorientation this war caused in Southeast Asian regional relations. On 13 January 1979, days after the Vietnamese installed a new Khmer revolutionary government in Phnom Penh, Deng Xiaoping, the real leader in China now, met with Ieng Sary in Beijing to discuss what had to be done.⁶⁰ Deng opened his remarks by underlining the good news: ASEAN had opposed the Vietnamese invasion and the overthrow of the government of Democratic Kampuchea. ASEAN, he explained, considered this to be a threat to regional peace and security, announcing that Cambodia (even Democratic Kampuchea) had the right to determine its own destiny without the presence of a foreign army.⁶¹ Deng was “thrilled” by the ASEAN reaction. This was a favourable development for building up broader regional support for Beijing’s anti-Vietnamese policy, essential to isolating Hanoi diplomatically and denying any sort of legitimacy to the Hanoi-installed Khmer government under Heng Samrin. Deng told

Ieng Sary that pressure would be exerted on ASEAN so that its leaders did not recognise the new “puppet” government in Cambodia. With this favourable regional context in mind, Deng informed Ieng Sary that China was behind Democratic Kampuchea and its people. Indeed, Beijing kept its embassy operational somewhere along the Thai–Cambodian border, though its size was reduced greatly.

Non-Communist Southeast Asian support against the Vietnamese, however, meant that the CPK had to terminate all support of revolutionary parties in the region, in particular the CPT and the Malayan Communist Party. The Chinese had already informed these two parties that they were now on their own. This decision was communicated to the Thai government and no doubt the Malaysian one. The idea, he said, was to “favour the struggle of the Cambodian people”. In particular, he added, if the Khmer Rouge wanted to continue receiving arms from China, then they would need official Thai support to transport weapons, medicines and other products to Khmer Rouge border zones. The Vietnamese navy had already taken all of Cambodia’s ports.

Deng Xiaoping wanted to keep the Khmer Rouge alive at all costs. He knew perfectly well that the Khmer Rouge would never defeat the Vietnamese, much less oust them from Cambodia. His goal was to bog down the Vietnamese by transforming the Khmer Rouge into a guerrilla movement and by creating a wide-based national front capable of hiding the crimes of the Khmer Rouge and legitimising an anti-Vietnamese resistance at the regional and international levels. The Khmer Rouge had to take up guerrilla warfare for the long haul. If they could do that, Deng said, then this “would progressively weaken the Vietnamese”.⁶² Deng also instructed Ieng Sary to create a united front with Prince Sihanouk at its head. This, he insisted, “would influence a certain number of people (who are fairly numerous)” and “allow for solidarity with numerous people abroad in order to isolate the puppet organisation” in Phnom Penh. Winning the support of Sihanouk was particularly important for Deng’s plan to isolate the Vietnamese internationally and legitimise any anti-Vietnamese Khmer resistance front. He told Ieng Sary bluntly that Sihanouk could garner more “popular support” than they could, which was obviously true inside Cambodia and outside, as the crimes of the Khmer Rouge became increasingly known and publicised across the world.⁶³ Deng Xiaoping informed Ieng Sary that the Khmer Rouge should accept Sihanouk and that, if he agreed, they should name him head of state, with Pol Pot as prime minister though still in charge of the defence portfolio and the army. The Chinese told Ieng Sary to report these instructions to the CPK Central Committee, emphasising above all the importance of winning over Sihanouk. As Deng stressed, “if we succeed in doing this, then it will favour very much the struggle in the country”.

If you judge this measure to be a good one, then we will help. Do not say anything to Sihanouk, because it is not sure he would accept [to be head

of state]. If we bring this question before world opinion, then it will bring about changes. The battle on the world scene will have a new look. If we succeed in it, this will favour very nicely the struggle in the country.⁶⁴

However, the crimes of the Khmer Rouge, something which Deng euphemised eerily, would not make it easy to win over Sihanouk. On 15 January 1979, Ieng Sary met with Huang Hua, who reported that at 1 a.m. on the morning of the 14th two American officials had contacted the Chinese representative at the UN in New York to inform him that Sihanouk had approached the Americans in a bid to obtain political asylum. This was exactly what Deng did not want. In his letter to the Chinese, Sihanouk expressed his gratitude for everything the Chinese had done for Cambodia. The prince promised that he would not let his asylum in the US hurt Cambodia and tarnish its relations with China. Huang Hua told his representative in New York, Chen Shen, to keep this matter totally secret and to keep Sihanouk on board at all costs. The prince had to continue the struggle against the Vietnamese occupation in the Security Council of the United Nations. Intensive overtures to Sihanouk followed. The Chinese promised Sihanouk that he could take up permanent residence in Beijing, with full freedom to enter and the leave the country as he pleased. The government would take care of everything. In exchange, he would lend his support to the anti-Vietnamese struggle. At this crucial time, the Chinese told him, he had to reflect very carefully and calculate the risks rather than taking the easy way out.⁶⁵

In meetings with Ieng Sary on 15 January, President Hua Guofeng repeated that it was vital to get Sihanouk on board, essential to a diplomatic victory against the Vietnamese. Ieng Sary made the remarkable mistake of criticising Sihanouk in front of the Chinese, saying that his “positions are not stable”. He implored the Chinese “to harden him ideologically and watch over this [question]”.⁶⁶ Hua reminded Ieng Sary curtly that, having won victory in 1975, the Khmer Rouge had “treated him badly, something which had angered him [the prince]. He had struggled with you against the US and his struggle at a high international level while you were in the forest [and this] was to your advantage. But you treated him badly afterwards.” Hua castigated the Khmer Communists for their harsh treatment of the prince. Speaking of Sihanouk, Hua said: “when the wolf is before us, there is no need to worry about the fox”. In no way whatsoever was the Khmer Rouge to act so that Sihanouk turned against them. Hua reminded Ieng Sary that the prince would be vital to gaining support for them in the UN and in the international community, while isolating Moscow and Hanoi.⁶⁷

Second, on the ground, the Khmer Rouge would adopt guerrilla warfare in order to tie down the Vietnamese in an expensive war, while a united front led by Sihanouk would isolate Vietnam diplomatically. The best way to fight the Vietnamese, he said, was to win over the support of the people (something which the Khmer Rouge had botched horribly) and “slander the [Heng Samrin] puppet government as the lackey of the Vietnamese” (something

which the Khmer Rouge had no trouble doing). Hua put Beijing's policy goal bluntly: "The Cambodian occupation will cost them [the Vietnamese] dearly. . . . At the international level, the Vietnamese are very isolated. They have difficulties in obtaining foreign aid. They can only rely on the USSR for arms mainly. While the Soviets can help them in arms, they cannot solve their problems of daily life and poverty of millions."⁶⁸

The third part of Chinese policy in Southeast Asia was, of course, Thailand. Without Thai support or acquiescence, the Chinese project would have never flown.

On 15 January 1979, Ieng Sary met with Hua Guofeng, Deng Xiaoping and Han Nianlong, and a number of other Chinese leaders. Deng Xiaoping explained that he had returned from a highly secret trip to Thailand where he had met with prime minister Kriangsak Chamanand to discuss the Cambodian problem. The Chinese delegation led by Deng landed at a secret military base in Thailand to avoid detection by the eyes and ears of the Soviet embassy. Deng met Kriangsak in the company of Han Nianlong and an interpreter.⁶⁹ Apparently the meeting did not last long. It did, however, lay the foundations for a combined Chinese–Southeast Asian bloc against the Vietnamese in Indochina. First, Deng Xiaoping asked Kriangsak to use his prestige in ASEAN so that these non-Communist regional states would not recognise the Vietnamese-installed government in Cambodia. On this question, however, Kriangsak did not give a clear answer. According to Deng, the Thai leader merely said that "currently we do not recognise them". The Chinese delegation asked him what the Thai tack would be in the future. Kriangsak did not reply, according to Deng Xiaoping.⁷⁰ Kriangsak's lack of confidence in the Chinese plan was troubling, as Hua Guofeng had confided to Ieng Sary a few days earlier. Kriangsak had even politely warned the Chinese that they should be very "careful" on the Cambodian problem; "if not, you will lose face before the entire world".

Second, Deng informed Kriangsak that the Chinese were going to support Democratic Kampuchea "to the end", stressing that this support was aimed entirely against the Vietnamese aggression in Indochina. The Chinese assured Kriangsak that they had carefully calculated their policy on Cambodia and world reaction. Kriangsak insisted that the Khmer Rouge end their support of the Communist Party of Thailand as sine qua non for any sort of Thai support. As noted, the Chinese had already transmitted this message to the leaders of Democratic Kampuchea. Ieng Sary said that this would be done. The Chinese made it clear to Ieng Sary that this was from now on a Thai "internal affair", not an internationalist one.⁷¹ Deng Xiaoping told Kriangsak that Ieng Sary was in Beijing and that he would like to transit Thailand in order to return to Khmer Rouge zones (the Vietnamese controlled the coast). He asked Kriangsak to meet with Sary "to discuss or negotiate directly the problems of your two countries". Kriangsak responded that "M. Ieng Sary can come. I'll do all I can to get him back through." Kriangsak said, however, that he would not meet with Ieng Sary once he arrived in

Thailand because Thailand had declared itself “neutral”. If Ieng Sary needed to contact Kriangsak, it would have to be done by the intermediary of the Chinese embassy in Thailand (or Chatichai Choonhavan as other documents reveal).

Deng turned next to how the Thai and the Chinese would support Democratic Kampuchea. What will the nature of the collaboration be, Deng asked? Kriangsak pointed out that it was no longer possible to run arms through Kompong Som as the Chinese had done before. Kriangsak suggested three things. The Chinese could supply the Khmer Rouge by sending arms to Koh Kong, a Cambodian island close to the Thai border, and then transport them to Khmer Rouge zones by small boats. The Chinese would use foreign flags to deliver these arms by the maritime and coastal route. Kriangsak suggested that they use secret landing points in Pursat province, west of Koh Kong, and in southern Battambang province, near the Kravanh mountains. Kriangsak insisted that the Khmer Rouge would have to defend this mountainous area in order to receive Chinese aid. The Chinese would send large boats flying foreign flags, with arms and merchandise camouflaged as commercial non-military goods. The Thai army would unload them and then the Chinese would parachute them by plane into northern Cambodia. The third measure was that the Thais would buy oil from China. When the oil was transported to Thailand, the Chinese would secretly stock arms in the boat as well. When it arrived in Thailand the Thai army would unload it and hide it away in hangars until it could be transported by truck from Bangkok to Cambodia.⁷² According to Deng Xiaoping, the Chinese approved all three of these measures.

If Kriangsak had reservations about safeguarding Thai neutrality in public, it would appear that privately he was ready to march with the Chinese plan to prop up the Khmer Rouge in opposition to the Vietnamese occupation of Indochina. Without access to internal Thai sources, it is extremely difficult to gauge Thai thinking on this matter. It was undoubtedly more complicated than these documents suggest. What comes through in these Chinese documents, however, is that Kriangsak was wary of the Khmer Rouge, their earlier hostility towards Thailand, their support of the CPT, and possibly the dangers the Thais ran in supporting a regime that had so much blood on its hands. Kriangsak said that the Thais preferred to work with the anti-Communist In Tam and Lon Nol forces, leaving the Khmer Rouge to the Chinese. Deng, however, argued for a joint Thai-Chinese bid to unify all the factions into a resistance front against the Vietnamese, though it is not clear what the Thai response was. According to Deng Xiaoping, the fact that Kriangsak doubted showed that he did not have complete confidence. Kriangsak rejected Ieng Sary’s disingenuous request that Thailand and Democratic Kampuchea form a military alliance, as well as a secret or open alliance with the ASEAN countries. Kriangsak said no to an open alliance and, when asked about a secret arrangement, he did not answer Deng Xiaoping.⁷³

In another meeting, Hua Guofeng told Ieng Sary in clear terms that, like Sihanouk, the Thais were not happy with the Khmer Rouge. What counted and what they had to exploit in order to win over the Thais was the fact that the Thais could not let Vietnam occupy all of Cambodia, so that their “frontiers touched”. The Chinese were nonetheless annoyed that the Thais refused to go public with their support of Democratic Kampuchea. Hua had to accept this reality, for he had no other choice if he wanted to keep the Khmer Rouge alive. All contacts and weapons transfers through Thailand would thus remain top secret.⁷⁴ As Han Nianlong put it:

The most important problem is to maintain links to Thailand based on a common matter: oppose Annam. When it comes to the Annamese occupation of Cambodia and its threat to Thailand, the Thai support Cambodia [Democratic Kampuchea]. They say they are neutral, but it is only officially so. In reality they intend to aid Cambodia [Democratic Kampuchea].⁷⁵

Whatever the Thai hesitations in early 1979, Bangkok and Beijing had agreed privately to support the Khmer Rouge as part of a wider bid to isolate and wear down the Vietnamese. In so doing, Chinese Communists would now help push back the Indochinese dominoes, or at least the Cambodian one. On 20 January 1979, the Chinese vice premier, Chen Muhua, informed Ieng Sary that they would provide start-up funds of 5 million US dollars.

The people and the government of the People’s Republic of China are honoured to inform you that, in response to the request made by the Cambodian government, the People’s Republic of China is agreed to provide you an aid in cash of 5 million dollars (without having to be reimbursed) to support energetically the Cambodian people in their bid to obtain total victory in the war against Vietnam, in the defence of the country and also to reinforce to an even higher degree the revolutionary and friendly fighting relations between the Chinese and Cambodian peoples.

Ieng Sary was in Beijing and agreed that very day.⁷⁶

Together with winning the support of Sihanouk and the Thais, the supply of arms was another vital element for the survival of the Khmer Rouge. Han Nianlong explained to Ieng Sary that a Chinese trader operating in Thailand named Ai Chan had already agreed to sell arms to the Khmer Rouge, apparently financed by the Chinese from the start. The Chinese told Ieng Sary that, if the Khmer Rouge carefully followed Kriangsak’s instructions, buying arms would not be difficult in Thailand. Nianlong informed Ieng Sary that the Chinese would send military aid to the Khmer Rouge via Thailand. It would be camouflaged as commercial products. If Kriangsak adopted a policy of neutrality in public, in private the army was heavily involved in transferring

Chinese arms to the Khmer Rouge from the coast and Bangkok to feeder points in Ubon Ratchathani where it was funnelled to the Khmer Rouge near Preah Vihear. As the Chinese said, “By confiding these arms to Kriangsak, Kriangsak must simultaneously assume his responsibilities.”

Conclusion

Asian internationalism was most certainly dead in early 1979. The Vietnamese and Chinese were now in open competition for the moral and strategic high ground in Southeast Asia, the Chinese in association with ASEAN and the Vietnamese in Indochina. If Chinese propaganda accused the Vietnamese of ingratitude and historic hegemony, the Vietnamese countered by claiming to be “real Marxist-Leninists”. No internationalist leader in Moscow in early 1950 could have imagined such a meltdown in Asian internationalism along a Sino-Vietnamese fault-line. Rather than working with the Vietnamese for the communisation of former French Indochina, the Chinese were now determined to contain Soviet-backed communism to Vietnam, or to Laos at the most. A wider range of complicated international, regional and local factors went into the making of the Third Indochina War, as chapters in this volume make clear. What is striking, however, is the degree to which the meltdown in Asian internationalism was triggered by Khmer Communists who were virtual unknowns in the Communist world well into the 1960s. From 1970, there were definite signs that the Khmer Rouge’s policy of “perfect sovereignty” would have an anti-Indochinese and thus anti-Vietnamese line. It is not clear that the Vietnamese leadership or their intelligence services understood the implications of all this at the time, especially in the context of the wider Sino-Soviet rivalry. They surely did not suspect that the Khmer Rouge leaders could possibly tip the balance against Hanoi and bring down the Indochinese house and Asian internationalism.

Notes

- 1 Christopher E. Goscha, “Beyond the ‘Colonizer’–‘Colonized’: Three Intra-Asian Debates in French Colonial Indochina”, in Anne Hanson and Judy Ledgerwood (eds), *Songs at the Edge of the Forest: Essays in Honor of David Chandler* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, forthcoming).
- 2 Sophie Quinn-Judge, “Nguyen Ai Quoc, the Comintern, and the Vietnamese Communist Movement (1919–1941)”, Ph.D. thesis, London, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2001.
- 3 Chinese leaders were keen on establishing favourable strategic conditions on their southern flank in Taiwan, Korea and Indochina.
- 4 Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950–1975* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), and Chen Jian, *Mao’s China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).
- 5 Nguyen Khac Huynh, *Viet Nam va The Gioi trong The Ky XX [Vietnam and the World in the 20th Century]* (Hanoi: Tu Sach Ngoai Giao, 2002), p. 19.
- 6 Yang Kuisong, “The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969: From Zhenbao Island

- to Sino-American Rapprochement”, *Cold War History*, 1, 1 (August 2000): 21–52.
- 7 Ilya V. Gaiduk has recently shown that the Soviets did indeed count on exploiting the US withdrawal from Indochina and an imminent Vietnamese Communist victory in order to spread their influence into Laos, into Cambodia and, if possible, further into mainland Southeast Asia. See Ilya V. Gaiduk, “The Soviet Union Faces the Vietnam War”, in Maurice Vaïsse and Christopher E. Goscha (eds), *Europe et la guerre du Vietnam (1963–1973)* (Paris: Bruylant, 2003). In a Soviet Embassy memorandum from Hanoi of 1971, one can read: “now, when the VWP has been strengthened on the way to independence, when the Party course is developing, in general (though still slowly) in a favourable direction for us, when the DRV has become the leading force in the struggle of the peoples of Indochina, we will possess comparatively more possibilities for establishing our policy in this region. It is not excluded that Indochina may become for us the key to the whole of Southeast Asia. In addition, in that region there is nobody, so far, we could lean on, except the DRV.”
 - 8 Ben Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power: A History of Communism in Kampuchea, 1930–1975* (London: Verso, 1985), and on the Vietnamese side see my “Le contexte asiatique de la guerre franco-vietnamienne: Réseaux, relations et économie”, Ph.D. dissertation, Paris, EPHE, La Sorbonne, 2000, Indochina section and conclusion.
 - 9 “Indochina is One Battlefield (Collection of Materials about the Relationships between the Three Indochinese Countries in the Anti-American and Saving-the-Country Cause)” (Hanoi: Thu Vien Quan Doi Nhan Dan, 1981), translated from Vietnamese by Cam Zinoman and with the financial support of the CWIHP, Washington, DC, to appear in the *CWIHP Bulletin* in 2006.
 - 10 “Indochina is One Battlefield”.
 - 11 Christopher E. Goscha, “Vietnam and the World Outside: The Case of Vietnamese Communist Advisors in Laos (1948–1962)”, Singapore, 3rd ICAS Conference, 19–22 August 2003.
 - 12 Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*.
 - 13 *Tong ket Cong tac Hau Can Chien Truong Nam bo-Cuc Nam Trung Bo (B2) trong Khang Chien chong My* [Concluding the Support Mission to the Southern and South-Central (B2) Theatres] (Hanoi: Tong Cuc Hau Can, 1986, Luu Hanh Noi Bo), pp. 16, 21 (note 1), 129 (note 1), 152.
 - 14 “Tim hieu ve dang Campuchia, Du Thao” [Investigating the Nature of the Cambodian Party (draft)] (Hanoi: Thu Vien Quan Doi, sao luc, 1981), p. 32. Nguyen Thanh Son is undoubtedly the author of this long internal study.
 - 15 Goscha, “The Case of Vietnamese Communist Advisors in Laos (1948–1962)”.
 - 16 “Quan diem, duong loi chinh sach doi ngoai cua Dang Cong San Campuchia” [Foreign Policy Outlook and Line of the Cambodian CP] (Hanoi: Thu Vien Quan Doi, circa 1977), p. 4. One Vietnamese study reveals that, until 1960, the VWP apparently continued to operate its *Ban Can Su* for Cambodia, but it must have been minimal. Documents from this organism’s archives would provide one of the clearest ideas of the state of relations between the VWP and the CPK.
 - 17 “Quan diem, duong loi chinh sach doi ngoai cua Dang Cong San Campuchia”, pp. 8–9.
 - 18 “Extracts from Pol Pot’s Interview with a Chinese Journalist in 1984”. My thanks to Philip Short for sharing an English translation of this interview. Pol Pot claimed that he met Ho Chi Minh three times and was twice invited to a banquet by Ho Chi Minh.
 - 19 “Tim hieu ve dang Campuchia, Du Thao”, p. 40.
 - 20 “Quan diem, duong loi chinh sach doi ngoai cua Dang Cong San Campuchia”,

- p. 10. The CCP is cited as having told Pol Pot they had to “from this point take on American imperialism”.
- 21 “Quan diem, duong loi chinh sach doi ngoai cua Dang Cong San Campuchia”, cited on p. 11.
 - 22 “Pol Pot gioi thieu kinh nghiem cua Campuchia voi Kham Tan, Tong Bi Thu Dang Cong San Thai” [Pol Pot Explains Cambodia’s Experience to Kham Tan, General Secretary of the Thai CP] (Toa Dam 8/1977), sao luc, 1980, Cuc 100 Bo Quoc Phong, p. 101.
 - 23 My thanks to Ben Kiernan, Chen Jian and Philip Short on this point.
 - 24 “Ban dich thu cua thuong vu ban chap hanh trung uong Dang Campuchia gui Ban Chap hanh Trung Uong Dang Cong San Trung Quoc”, [Translation of a Letter from the Standing Committee of the Cambodian CP’s Central Committee to the CC of the Chinese CP], dated 6 October 1967, signed Pout Peam. This letter was apparently delivered to the Chinese chargé d’affaires on 18 December 1967, apparently in Hanoi.
 - 25 “Thuong vu Trung Uong Cuc nhan dinh ve cuoc dao chinh o Campuchia va chu trung cua ta” [Judgment of the CC Standing Committee on the Coup in Cambodia and Our Position], in *Lich Su Bien Nien Xu Uy Nam Bo va Trung Uong Cuc Mien Nam (1954–1975)* [Chronological History of the Southern Regional Committee and the Central Office for South Vietnam] (Hanoi, Nha Xuat Ban Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 2002), pp. 771–772. This document’s title may have been added by the editors.
 - 26 “Bo Chinh Tri Ban Chap Hanh Trung Uong ra Nghi Quyet ‘Ve tinh hình moi tren ban dao Dong Duong va nhien vu cua chung ta’ ” [Politburo Resolution on “the New Situation in Indochina and Our Duty”], in *Lich Su Bien Nien*, p. 789, and “Thu cua dong chi Le Duan gui Trung Uong Cuc, dong chi Pham Hung, dong chi Hoang Van Thai” [Letter from Comrade Le Duan to COSVN, Comrade Pham Hung, Comrade Hoang Van Thai’], in *Lich Su Bien Nien*, pp. 791–792.
 - 27 Vo Chi Cong, *Tren Nhung Chang Duong Cach Mang (Hoi Ky)* [On the Paths of the Revolution, Memoirs] (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 2001), pp. 247–248.
 - 28 This was in many ways a replay of the spring 1954 Vietnamese invasion of north-eastern Cambodia, in which Vo Chi Cong was involved. For a remarkably frank and well-documented Vietnamese account of their military role in Cambodia, see Bo Quoc Phong [Ministry of National Defence], Vien Lich Su Quan Su Viet Nam [Commission of Military History of Vietnam], *Lich su Khang Chien chong My Cuu Nuoc, 1954–1975: Tap VI, Thang My tren Chien Truong Ba Nuoc Dong Duong* [History of the Anti-American, National Salvation Resistance, 1954–1975: vol. VI, Victory over the US on the Battlefield of the Three Indochinese Nations] (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Chinh Tri Quoc Gia, 2003), pp. 221–227. According to this source, by mid-1970 the Vietnamese had played a key role in creating six new armed battalions for Cambodian revolutionary forces.
 - 29 Vo Chi Cong, *Tren Nhung Chang Duong*, pp. 247–248.
 - 30 “Thu cua dong chi Le Duan gui dong chi Pham Hung va Trung Uong Cuc Mien Nam”, dated July 1970, in *Lich Su Bien Nien*, p. 803.
 - 31 “Quan diem, duong loi chinh sach doi ngoai cua Dang Cong San Campuchia”, p. 22.
 - 32 Le Quang Ba, “So luoc tinh hình Campuchia” [Outline of the Situation in Cambodia] (Hanoi: Thu Vien Quan Doi, sao luc, 1981).
 - 33 No. 24/72, Directives: Le comité de la zone orientale aux comités de tous les niveaux et les unités de libération qui se cantonnent et qui participent à la lutte sur le territoire cambodgien”, dated 18 January 1973, Comité de la zone, président Phuong, in “Mot so chi thi cua vung 23 va quan khu dong tu nam

- 1973–1977” [Directives from Region 23 and the Eastern Military Zone 1973–1977] (Hanoi: Thu Vien Quan Doi, sao luc, 1980), translated from Vietnamese.
- 34 “Tim hieu ve dang Campuchia, Du Thao”, p. 44.
- 35 Le Quang Ba, “So luoc tinh hinh Campuchia”.
- 36 “Bai cua dong chi Nguyen Huu Tai, chuyen gia B68” [Article by Comrade Nguyen Huu Tai, Expert from B68], Phnom Penh, 15 May 1980, Thu Vien Quan Doi.
- 37 Goscha, “The Case of Vietnamese Communist Advisors in Laos (1948–1962)”.
- 38 Directive no. 82/73, “Au sujet des unités de l’armée vietnamienne installées dans les régions libérées”, dated 16 November 1973, Comité de la région 23, signed Comrade Savat.
- 39 Le Front populaire de Solidarité cambodgienne, Zone est, Région 23, no. 206, “Les avis de la direction pour application”, Comité permanent du Parti de la région 23, dated 14 December 1974, au nom du Comité permanent de la région 23, signed Comrade Keo Son. French translation of the Vietnamese captured document.
- 40 Comité permanent de la Zone est, 18 August 1973, no. 23/73, document recopié selon le P.V. du 27 août 1973, section du parti du district, signed Comrade Sarin. French translation of the Vietnamese captured document.
- 41 *Lich Su Su Doan O To 571, Du Thao* [*The History of Automobile Division 571, draft*] Hanoi, Ban Khoa Hoc-Tong Cuc Hau Can, 1983, luu hanh trong quan doi, pp. 111–112.
- 42 The breakdown of the Indochinese revolutionary model along Cambodian nationalist lines might be compared to the “over-internationalisation” of the Vietnamese role in Laos.
- 43 “Meeting between Ieng Sary and Comrade Le Duan on 26 January 1973”, in *Excerpts from Some Minutes of the Meetings between Ieng Sary, a Representative of the Cambodian Communist Party’s Central Committee, and Several Leaders of our Party’s Central Committee*. English translation from the Vietnamese original.
- 44 “Meeting between Ieng Sary and Brother To on 31 January 1973”, in *Excerpts from Some Minutes of the Meetings*.
- 45 “Meeting between Ieng Sary and Brother Tho on 6 February 1973”, in *Excerpts from Some Minutes of the Meetings*.
- 46 “Meeting between Ieng Sary and Brother Tho on 11 February 1973”, in *Excerpts from Some Minutes of the Meetings*.
- 47 “Meeting between Comrade Le Duan and Ieng Sary on 8 April 1973”, in *Excerpts from Some Minutes of the Meetings*.
- 48 “Meetings between Ieng Sary and Brother Le Duc Tho in July and August 1973”, in *Excerpts from Some Minutes of the Meetings*.
- 49 “Meeting between Ieng Sary and Brother Tho on 11 February 1973”, in *Excerpts from Some Minutes of the Meetings*.
- 50 Le Front populaire de solidarité cambodgienne, Zone est, Région 23, Directive de 870, signed 870 Committee, 2 February 1973. Also see Directives provisoires, Comité permanent de la région 23, 29 March 1973, signed Mon Saroeun. French translation of the Vietnamese captured documents.
- 51 “Quan diem, duong loi chinh sach doi ngoai cua Dang Cong San Campuchia”, p. 40.
- 52 Le Quang Ba, “So luoc tinh hinh Campuchia”.
- 53 Probably Phayom Juulaanon.
- 54 “Pol Pot gioi thieu kinh nghiem cua Campuchia voi Kham Tan Tong Bi thu Dang Cong San Thai (Toa dam 8/1977)”, sao luc, 1980, Cuc 100 Bo Quoc Phong, p. 1.
- 55 “Pol Pot gioi thieu kinh nghiem cua Campuchia”, p. 2.

- 56 Pol Pot's speech in "Bien ban cuoc hoi dam Campuchia va Trung Quoc ngay 29.9.1977" [Minutes of Kampuchea-PRC Talks, 29 September 1977], pp. 2M-3M.
- 57 In "Bien ban cuoc hoi dam Campuchia va Trung Quoc ngay 29.9.1977", pp. 4-5M.
- 58 In "Bien ban cuoc hoi dam Campuchia va Trung Quoc ngay 29.9.1977", pp. 6M-7M.
- 59 "Cuoc hoi dam giua Ieng Xari va Bo truong ngoai giao Thai Lan Upadit Pachari Yangkun 3.1.1978" [Talks between Ieng Sary and Thai Foreign Minister Upadit Panchaiyangkun 3 January 1978], in *Tap chi Cong san*, sao luc, 1980.
- 60 "Ieng Sary travaille avec le camarade Deng Xiaoping", 13 January 1979, p. 5, in "Tuyen tap thu tu dien tinh giua Campuchia dan chu voi nha cam quyen Trung Quoc va Thai Lan sau ngay giai phong 7.1.1979" (Hanoi: Thu Vien Quan Doi, sao luc, 1984). I rely on the Vietnamese translations of these early 1979 meetings among the Thais, the Chinese and the Khmer Rouge. While I do not know how the Vietnamese obtained these documents, the Chinese did not contest the authenticity of extracts which the Vietnamese released in the wake of the outbreak of the Third Indochina War. See *The Chinese Ruler's Crimes against Kampuchea* (Phnom Penh: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of Kampuchea), cited by Nayan Chanda, *Les frères ennemis* (Paris: Presses du CNRS, 1987), p. 359 (note 49), pp. 286-287.
- 61 "Ieng Sary travaille avec le camarade Deng Xiaoping", 13 January 1979, p. 5. French translation of the Vietnamese captured documents.
- 62 "Ieng Sary travaille avec le camarade Deng Xiaoping", 13 January 1979, p. 5.
- 63 "Ieng Sary travaille avec le camarade Deng Xiaoping", 13 January 1979, pp. 8-9.
- 64 "Ieng Sary travaille avec le camarade Deng Xiaoping", 13 January 1979, p. 9.
- 65 "Ieng Sary travaille avec le camarade Huang Hua", 15 January 1979, pp. 14-15, in "Tuyen tap thu tu dien tinh giua Campuchia dan chu voi nha cam quyen Trung Quoc va Thai Lan sau ngay giai phong 7.1.1979" (Hanoi: Thu Vien Quan Doi, sao luc, 1984).
- 66 "Ieng Sary travaille avec le président Hua Guofeng, le camarade Canh Tieu [probably Kang Sheng], Han Nianlong et quelques autres dirigeants chinois", 15 January 1979, p. 34, in "Tuyen tap thu tu dien tinh giua Campuchia dan chu voi nha cam quyen Trung Quoc va Thai Lan sau ngay giai phong 7.1.1979" (Hanoi: Thu Vien Quan Doi, sao luc, 1984).
- 67 "Ieng Sary travaille avec le président Hua Guofeng, le camarade Canh Tieu, Han Nianlong et quelques autres dirigeants chinois", 15 January 1979, p. 34.
- 68 "Ieng Sary travaille avec le président Hua Guofeng, le camarade Canh Tieu, Han Nianlong et quelques autres dirigeants chinois", 15 January 1979, p. 34.
- 69 "Ieng Sary travaille avec le président Hua Guofeng, le camarade Canh Tieu, Han Nianlong et quelques autres dirigeants chinois", 15 January 1979, p. 30. See also Chanda, *Les frères ennemis*, pp. 286-287.
- 70 "Ieng Sary travaille avec le président Hua Guofeng, le camarade Canh Tieu, Han Nianlong et quelques autres dirigeants chinois", 15 January 1979, p. 26.
- 71 "Ieng Sary travaille avec le président Hua Guofeng, le camarade Canh Tieu, Han Nianlong et quelques autres dirigeants chinois", 15 January 1979, p. 30. On the CPT, Hua said that "it's not that we do not support their struggle, but we have to take the wider situation into consideration".
- 72 "Ieng Sary travaille avec le président Hua Guofeng, le camarade Canh Tieu, Han Nianlong et quelques autres dirigeants chinois", 15 January 1979, p. 33.
- 73 "Ieng Sary travaille avec le président Hua Guofeng, le camarade Canh Tieu, Han Nianlong et quelques autres dirigeants chinois", 15 January 1979, pp. 33-34.
- 74 "Ieng Sary travaille avec le président Hua Guofeng, le camarade Canh Tieu, Han Nianlong et quelques autres dirigeants chinois", 15 January 1979, p. 40.

- 75 “Ieng Sary travaille avec le président Hua Guofeng, le camarade Canh Tieu, Han Nianlong et quelques autres dirigeants chinois”, 15 January 1979.
- 76 “Lettre au camarade Ieng Sary, Vice Premier Ministre du gouvernement du Cambodge Democratique”, signed Chen Muhua, dated 20 January 1979, and Ieng Sary’s acceptance, dated 20 January 1979, in “Tuyen tap thu tu dien tinh giua Campuchia dan chu voi nha cam quyen Trung Quoc va Thai Lan sau ngay giai phong 7.1.1979” (Hanoi: Thu Vien Quan Doi, sao luc, 1984).