

Will Kampuchea be next Afghanistan?

by Linda de Hoyos

The visit of Thailand Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda to the Soviet Union May 18 has provided the occasion for the Soviet Union and Vietnam to launch new initiatives in solving the Kampuchea conflict. As stated by Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Rogachev during his late April tour of ASEAN capitals, Moscow is looking to make Kampuchea the "next Afghanistan"—the next point of settlement in the New Yalta deals with the West.

On May 26, on the eve of the U.S.-Soviet summit, Vietnam announced that it will withdraw 50,000 troops from Kampuchea by the end of 1988, following its withdrawal last month of some 20,000 troops. During this spring, 25,000 troops, half the contingent, were also withdrawn from Laos. Vietnam has promised that all 120,000 Vietnamese troops will leave Kampuchea by 1990.

The Vietnamese announcement, Thailand believes, was prompted by the discussions between Thai Prime Minister Prem and Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachov in Moscow. The Soviets made a point of informing Prem, by then in Budapest, of the discussion before the news was released to the world press.

Simultaneous with Hanoi's announcement of troop withdrawal, Vietnamese deputy foreign minister Tran Quang reported that Vietnam is ready to participate in a "cocktail party" with all factions of Kampuchea, including the Vietnamese-backed Heng Samrin government in Phnom Penh and the three Khmer factions under Prince Sihanouk, Son Sann, and the Khmer Rouge. ASEAN will also participate in the "cocktail party," projected to be held in Jakarta, Indonesia in July. From the Khmer side, only Sihanouk has so far agreed to attend.

Key to the ASEAN door

The Soviets have chosen to pivot their concessions on the Kampuchea conflict around the visit of Thailand's Prem to Moscow, in order to shift the game to their own advantage. For Moscow, the concern is not a resolution of the Kampuchean conflict *per se*, but inducing Western capitals to believe in the chimera of Gorbachov's global *glasnost*. Additionally, in the case of Kampuchea, Moscow has everything to gain by making concessions: an open door to the rich economies of non-communist Southeast Asia.

In April, Soviet Deputy Prime Minister Rogachev answered demands from Bangkok that the Soviets pressure

Vietnam to pull out of Kampuchea, with the laughable retort that "Vietnam is a sovereign country." During his visit to the Kremlin, Prem delivered his reply: Soviet-Vietnamese military withdrawal and cooperation in finding a settlement to Kampuchea are the absolute prerequisites to ASEAN's opening its diplomatic and trade doors to Moscow. If the Soviet Union plays a constructive role in bringing about a settlement in Kampuchea, "it would earn the gratitude of all states in Southeast Asia as well as a positive attitude of ASEAN toward it," Prem told Soviet Prime Minister Nikolai Ryzhkov.

Although the Southeast Asian countries would like to turn the region into a "zone of peace"—that is, the plan for a nuclear-free Southeast Asia as Moscow desires—Prem said this has been "obstructed" by the Kampuchean conflict. "Real peace," the Thai prime minister said, can only be achieved when Kampuchea becomes independent, neutral, and poses no threat to its neighbors. As reported by the May 18 *Bangkok Post*, Prem told the Soviets: If the U.S.S.R. could facilitate such a settlement, all the countries in the Southeast Asian region would recognize it as a power with which ASEAN would like to cooperate much more closely.

"We told the Soviets," reported Thai permanent secretary Kasemaamosorn, "that there are excellent opportunities for further cooperation between the Soviet Union and the countries of the Southeast Asian region, should the Kampuchean problem be solved."

Prem is reportedly "very pleased" with Vietnam's announcement of withdrawal.

The silent partner

Shortly after the announcement of Vietnam's new withdrawal plan, Rogachev said Moscow is "hoping" the move will have created the conditions for direct talks between Vietnam and China on "normalizing" their relations. The statement points to the secondary target of Moscow's initiatives: China. But, if the Soviets are anxious to settle the Kampuchean conflict to gain entry into ASEAN, China, the sponsor and supplier of the Khmer Rouge of Pol Pot, is just as anxious to see that such a settlement never comes to pass, leaving Beijing the freer field in ASEAN.

Hence, while the Soviets and Vietnam have been moving toward concessions, China has been expanding its operations into Kampuchea through the Khmer Rouge. In 1984-85, a Vietnamese offensive cleaned out major Khmer Rouge bases along the western border of Kampuchea with Thailand. Since then, the Khmer Rouge have moved into the countryside of Kampuchea, organizing peasants against the Vietnamese, who have been a perceived enemy of Kampuchea for more than a thousand years. As one Khmer Rouge told a reporter: "In front of the Vietnamese Army, the Cambodian soldier might be very good. But behind the Vietnamese backs, they are all Khmer."

The strategy has met with significant success. On May 19, the Phnom Penh government of Heng Samrin convened

an unprecedented national congress to discuss ways to win what authorities call a "life or death" struggle against guerrilla infiltration of villages and communes. Guerrillas, the report came through the *Bangkok Nation*, were conducting psychological warfare along the Thai border area "with impunity." On May 10, the Khmer Rouge radio claimed that guerrillas had smashed the Vietnamese administrative network in more than 4,000 villages and 200 communes during the dry season that ended in April. Although the report is probably exaggerated, the presence of the Khmer Rouge in the interior of Kampuchea is real.

At the same time, there have been consistent reports from Bangkok that Beijing is arming the Khmer Rouge with better-quality weapons in the process of transforming the guerrillas into a regular army. According to Khmer claims, guerrillas have killed 11,000 Vietnamese soldiers in the last period. Sources on the ground believe the number is one-third that total, but the number reflects Khmer success in the field.

According to reports in the *Bangkok Post*, the Khmer Rouge held a conference last July to lay plans to take over Kampuchea once the war is over—that is, once the Vietnamese withdraw. The Khmer Rouge—who slaughtered hundreds of thousands of Kampuchean during their 1975-79 reign—believe they currently enjoy the support of 50% of the Khmer population. There are also reports, from Phnom Penh and Bangkok, that the Khmer Rouge have planted their own "secret agents" throughout the Phnom Penh government in anticipation of Vietnam's final withdrawal.

The disarmament and political elimination of the Khmer Rouge is a precondition set by Vietnam for a settlement to the Kampuchean problem. On May 28, both Vietnam and the Phnom Penh government issued an international call for guarantees that the Khmer Rouge will not return to power. "The most important issue here is what to do to guarantee the non-return of Pol Pot and the non-recurrence of the genocidal tragedy in Kampuchea," an official Radio Hanoi commentary said. "Public opinion demands that China, the United States, and ASEAN countries assume responsibility for guaranteeing the non-return of Pol Pot." In a more panicked tone, Phnom Penh radio called the presence of the Khmer Rouge in the country "a very dangerous obstacle" to settlement. "It is imperative to absolutely eliminate this obstacle at a time when more than half the Vietnamese troops have already been withdrawn."

Vietnam has already received a preliminary answer. Thai Foreign Minister Siddhi Savestila protested that "the Khmer Rouge is one of the Kampuchean factions, and they have the right to be involved in the affairs of Kampuchea." In other words, despite the fact that Thailand in particular views the conflict as a national security threat and despite Soviet concessions, ASEAN has not lost sight of the fact, that China is a major power in the region. That presence means that making Kampuchea "the next Afghanistan" will not be so easy.

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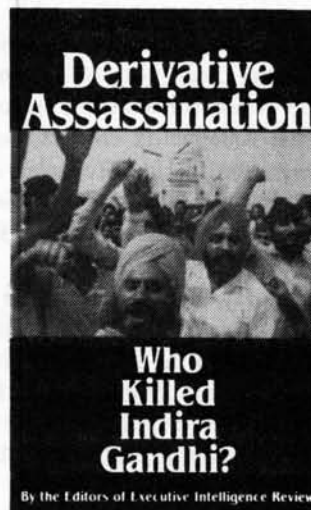
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