

# American Wars, French Borders

Thailand's Acrimonious Adjacency to Cambodia

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# Contents

<b>Part 1</b>	<b>3</b>
Royalists under Communist patronage . . . . .	3
Communism under American patronage . . . . .	4
Peace means war by other means . . . . .	5
<b>Part 2</b>	<b>9</b>
Lingering armies on porous borders . . . . .	11
War or peace? Cui bono? . . . . .	12
<b>References</b>	<b>14</b>

# Part 1

The end-games to two tremendous historical conflicts in Cambodia have lately gained the sporadic notice of the international press: the small-scale war on the Thai-Khmer border, and the legal proceedings against a number of former Communist leaders. In the reporting, some historical facts have been repeated out of context, with distortive results. In the first of two articles Eisel Mazard argues that the intersecting causes of these two conflicts are to be found in American support for Cambodian Communism without which neither the history nor the present can be understood.

## Royalists under Communist patronage

The timeline of American support for the forces that became infamous under the unofficial name of the ‘Khmer Rouge’ is one of the least known matters of fact in Asia’s history. I was spurred to research the matter more thoroughly due to the lack of any firm date stated in the new introduction to Vickery, 1999 – a text that I found too vague in alluding to the advent of this US policy decision (p. vii, cf. 308).

The precise answer is not a secret, and never has been. Many of the prevalent misconceptions seem to have no source other than Shawcross, 1979, a book that attempts to foist moral responsibility for the Khmer Rouge onto China (op. cit., 387).

On the contrary, the origin of one of history’s strangest alliances is to be found in another, perhaps even stranger: China supported King Sihanouk consistently from the mid-1950s forward, to the exclusion of any support or sympathy for the Khmer Rouge. The latter remained without Chinese patronage until they joined forces with Sihanouk, following the *coup d’etat* of 1970.

Sihanouk’s relationship with Beijing did not formally originate in the misalliances of the Geneva agreements of 1954, but seems to have emerged soon thereafter. The strong personal friendship between Sihanouk and both Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai dates from 1955-6 (Basu, 1987, p. 17).

The mutual respect these leaders held for one another would endure for decades. As early as 1956, Sihanouk’s interest in drawing ‘neutral’ (Royalist) Cambodia ever closer to China was explicitly stated in terms of an alliance against Vietnamese encroachment upon the smaller country.

China’s apprehension of an independent and Soviet-aligned Vietnam (some 20 years before this was to eventuate) can only be understood in the context of the over-arching

Sino-Soviet hostility that dominated foreign policy in that era. Mao's own son had recently died in Korea because the Soviets did not provide expected aerial support in combat (to deter American bombing); the possibility of a pan-Communist alliance had died with him. The Korean War demonstrated that Soviet priorities were in Eastern Europe, looking West.

By contrast, the priority that Mao placed on his support for Sihanouk was demonstrated in 1966 when China refused to receive Cambodian refugees (including members of parliament) fleeing the latest wave of brutal repression against leftists. Given the recent memory of the 1963 massacre of some 90% of Cambodian People's Party members, this refusal must have been keenly felt (Basu, 1987, p. 11).

The Cambodian Communists did learn from the experience: the only way they would gain Chinese support was to subordinate themselves to Royalist leadership, and this is precisely what they did in 1970. At that late date the PRC first began to support the Khmer Rouge, but only as a subsidiary part of the 'government in exile' allied against the dictatorship of Lon Nol, led by Sihanouk, and based in Beijing.

## Communism under American patronage

Lon Nol's ejection of Sihanouk is often casually reported to have been a CIA plot; this begins to seem less likely when we consider that the Soviets actively tried to court Lon Nol's favour following his takeover and that the US was already negotiating with China to 'betray' him in 1971. In a career marred by lies, it is possible that Nixon was stating the truth when he protested that 'Lon Nol's coup came as a complete surprise to us. We neither encouraged it nor knew about it in advance' (Nixon, 1985, 117). In any case, neither the US nor China were pleased with the results.

1971 seems to be the first year when an explicit anti-Vietnamese policy is attested by extant Khmer Rouge materials (Bizot, 2004, 113; Vickery, 1999, 215). Despite underlying ethnic tensions, such a policy would not make much sense before they had gained Chinese patronage, which came with an anti-Vietnamese agenda as its necessary proviso.

In the same year, Henry Kissinger arrived in China to negotiate an alliance largely defined by the two countries' common hostility toward the North Vietnamese. This entailed the immediate withdrawal of US troops from Taiwan and the eventual inclusion of the PRC in the UN.

The stipulation that the Americans would support the Khmer Rouge was sealed in mid-June of 1973 (finalising the negotiations initiated in 1971), two years before 'the fall of Phnom Penh' to Communist troops in '75, and six years before the Vietnamese invasion to drive them out. The latter is often falsely stated as the justification for American support for Cambodian Communism (e.g., Kiernan, 1996, 384-5). Nixon

himself was evidently proud of this pact, leaving the historical record without any ambiguity:

*“Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai also wanted to prevent a North Vietnamese victory in Indochina. China wanted closer relations with the United States to counter increasing hostility from the Soviet Union. Therefore, it was directly contrary to Peking’s interests for Moscow’s clients in Hanoi... to achieve hegemony in Indochina... We had the elements necessary to strike a deal. We had significant influence over Lon Nol. China could pull the strings of the Cambodian Communists. Sihanouk... the nominal head of the opposition forces, would listen to Zhou’s council. We soon put together a plan ...Sihanouk and Khmer Rouge forces would settle the war in exchange for an end to our bombing”.*

Source: (Nixon, 1985, 176-7)

The one aspect of Nixon’s summary that seems disingenuous is the suggestion that his offer to end the bombing was somehow crucial to securing the subordination of the Khmer Rouge to Sihanouk’s ‘nominal’ leadership. During these negotiations, Nixon was already in violation of the Congressional Order of Jan. 2nd, 1973 to end all military operations in Indochina (excepting withdrawal) inspiring another, more explicit bill (passed the same June) to stop all funds for bombing of any kind, effective August 15th.

## **Peace means war by other means**

Although he hardly tells his own story in such terms, Nixon had been negotiating from a position of weakness. Congress had even refused to fund his proposed ‘enforcement’ of the Paris peace accords (with \$1.45 billion in overt military aid, plus something like 1973’s total of \$2.27 billion of supposed non-military aid to South Vietnam) and he was left with no choice but to withdraw in defeat, or else continue the war by other means (Nixon, 165-6; 186; 188).

In effect, both would transpire. The alliance with China allowed America’s war to continue through other channels, though almost all of the decision-makers who sealed the pact died or fell from power soon thereafter. Nixon resigned in ‘74, while both Mao and Zhou died in ‘76. The preparations for the proxy war they agreed upon continued without them, but the importance of these personal relationships remained evident in all that ensued.

The last attempt at averting a Sino-Vietnamese war over the control of Cambodia was negotiated by Zhou Enlai’s widow; on her return from Phnom Penh in 1978, Beijing declared Cambodia the victim of Vietnamese aggression. (Basu, 53-4) This remained



their justification for supporting Pol Pot's troops on the ground through to the 1990s. (Zhu, 1990, 426-442) Sihanouk continued living like a king under Beijing's patronage despite the categorical change in political circumstances, likely because of the halo he retained from his personal relations with Mao (certainly not on the basis of his ability to command or control the Khmer Rouge).

China had portentously occupied the Paracel Islands in January, 1974. In preparation for the war to come, large-scale purges of (perceived) pro-Vietnamese elements within the Khmer Rouge were well underway in 1975. There were armed confrontations on both the Sino-Vietnamese border and the Khmer-Viet border in 1978, prior to the declaration of the 'Salvation Front' (KUFNS) to liberate Cambodia from Pol Pot's rule in December of the same year.

China's large-scale invasion of Vietnam might originally have been planned in support of a Cambodian resistance that had, astoundingly, already collapsed a month before. Nobody could have expected the Vietnamese victory to follow as rapidly as it did, but the widespread starvation and atrocities that have since made the Khmer Rouge infamous also eroded domestic support for their side and decimated their capacity to sustain a war. Basu observes that the invasion that did eventuate (February 17th, 1979) served to protest against (or deter) Heng Samrin's signing of the Friendship Treaty (on February 18th) that clearly aligned Cambodia's new government with Vietnam (Basu, 77).

As Vietnam's victory was already *fait accompli*, it must have been something of an embarrassment that the conference to assemble all of China and America's allies (79 nations in total) to declare their unanimous support for Pol Pot could not be organised until July, 1981 (Zhu, 1990, 426-442).

By this time, what the UN was alleging to be Cambodia's 'legitimate government' was a scattered guerilla army with a tenuous connection to the deposed king speechifying in Beijing, but already legendary for their brutality and sheer numbers of civilian casualties.

The diplomatic difficulty of directly referring to Pol Pot as America's ally was evaded with the creation of a new acronym in 1982: 'CGDK' would thenceforth serve as the polite code-word for bankrolling and arming the Khmer Rouge.





## Part 2



From the moment the French imposed their boundaries on the Thai- Khmer border in the 19th century the region has been in dispute. later, the border became a fault line in the Cold War. In the first of two articles on this southeast Asian hotspot Eisel Mazard examined American support for Cambodian Communism and its influence on two decades of conflict. In this concluding essay, mazard suggests that ideas of a ‘greater Thailand’ and military interests in maintaining low-level hostilities on the border are some of the reasons behind Thailand’s latest aggression against Cambodia.

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Thailand’s support for Sino-American policy resulted in an infamous game of international aid, arms-trading, and atrocities along its Cambodian border for roughly 20 years. This came to public attention with the televised documentaries of John Pilger (e.g., Cambodia: The Betrayal, 1990) showing that there was blood on the hands of many UN agencies and American allies (such as West Germany and the UK) and that these unnecessary evils were being carried out in support of the notorious Pol Pot himself.

As with so many Cambodian tragedies, the Thai border was the easiest part of the story to capture on film. The refugee camps proved to be important sources of ‘secret’

information, yet the Thai perspective on the very existence of the border has been lost in much of the moralising and agonising that this subject inspires.

Perhaps because we are habituated to ‘post-colonial’ recriminations, Western observers tend to refer all question of the Thai-Khmer border to the French aggression of 1893, if the history is mentioned at all. This was the prelude to an Anglo-French accord in 1896, ending the long-simmering possibility of a war between empires over control of mainland southeast Asia, followed by more comprehensive settlements between Thailand and France in 1902 and 1907.

Aside from vague regrets about the imperialist enterprise as a whole, entailing that borders established in that period may be ‘unfair’ in principle, one newspaper column after another seems to express a postured disbelief that anyone could even regard the border as a subject of dispute. The Thai nationalists’ perspective is precluded on the simplistic grounds that such matters transpired over a century ago and that the UN, with its presumably unimpeachable moral authority, has already spoken. Beyond the odious fact that the UN did so much to discredit itself on that same border, this approach omits most of the truth, along with some important fictions.

The argument for a ‘greater Thailand’ does not rely on the complaint the Thais have suffered as a weak power, with borders imposed upon them by the French in the 19th century. They can also appeal to the fact that they defeated the French and dispensed with those borders in the 20th century.

The victory of 1941 was of monumental importance to the Thais themselves, even if overlooked overseas, and has served to justify a bellicose border policy before and since. one direct result was the Thai disavowal of the separate existence of Laos and Cambodia at the newly-formed united Nations at the close of World War Two. The UN convened the Franco-Siamese Conciliation Commission to settle the question of Thailand’s eastern frontier in 1947, and the Thais mustered all available evidence to support the theory that their borders included all of Laos and a large part of Cambodia (Ngaosyvathn, 1985). a significant part of the Thai population was convinced, although the UN Commission was not.

Sivaram, 1941, is an example of primary-source Thai propaganda composed in English. Already at this early date the border issue was broached in terms of the nationalist myth of Suvannabhumi, evoking the illusion of a longstanding unity of Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos, prior to French intervention. What this means is that the claim in contention here is not one temple nor one mountain pass: the Thais do not merely consider themselves entitled to Preah Vihear, but certainly to Angkor Wat, and their briefly-held province of Battambang in-between.

Suvannabhumi is not just the name of Bangkok’s new airport: it is a fiction loosely inspired by the findings of James Prinsep in 1837 and, contrary to what is now widely believed in Thailand, the legend of this imaginary empire is no more ancient than that date. Suvannabhumi is one of many modern pseudo-histories that sprang up across Buddhist Asia, making creative use of the first translations of the inscriptions of Ashoka. Bangkok’s brand new ‘National discovery museum Institute’ (NdmI) credits

Prince Damrong as the first to venture this fable, and, unfortunately, the exhibits reprise it for a contemporary audience.

At any rate, it was rather bold diplomacy for Thailand to lay claim to their neighbour states in 1947, as Thailand had just been defeated in the process of annexing the Shan states and only withdrew their forces of occupation from three Cambodian provinces in '46. Conversely, we may say that Thailand's eastward expansion was of renewed importance as their designs on the western frontier seemed forever lost with the end of Japanese rule over Burma.

This Thai tradition of 'false Irredentist-ism' has also justified territorial claims extending beyond Shan state to Southern Yunnan with wild theories of a lost homeland projected back along this path, by stages, all the way to the Altai mountains of Mongolia. In the 20th century, racist narratives of such lost empires were both influential and popular. apart from written history and required curricula, Thailand is home to what could objectively be called a fascist tradition of the performing arts and broadcast media (e.g., Luang Wichitwathakan's fine arts department).

While it may be self-evident to any outsider (even UNESCO officials) that the 'native people' surrounding the Preah Vihear temple on both sides of the border are ethnically Cambodian, and that everything about the monument itself is historically Cambodian, these mere facts do not contradict the assumptions of the Thai nationalists. for them, Cambodia's separate existence is an accident of history, created by French intervention. Their claims are thus posed as irredentist, though based purely on ideology.

## **Lingering armies on porous borders**

The prospect of annexing Burmese territory ended with the Japanese occupation, but dreams of northward expansion were kept alive by the expectation of invading Yunnan for decades thereafter. The us maintained a mercenary army comprised of former KmT troops on Thai soil, adventitiously gathering together the marooned veterans of the war against the Japanese (who were unable to retreat to Taiwan from Thailand or Burma). These lingering armies were intended to serve as a bulwark in a possible war with the PrC, but proved instead to be pawns in the opium trade and ensuing hostilities against Laos. Nixon's alliance with the PrC ended the possibility of northward expansion forever, but propelled Thailand toward the outright invasion of Laos in the 1980s (first in 1984, then on a larger scale in 1987-8) and set the stage for its current incursions into Cambodia.

Apart from the overall pattern of Thailand's army serving as its permanent government (interspersed with ephemeral periods of parliamentary democracy) the country's rural periphery is regularly home to military autonomy of another kind. Whether in forestry policy, opium eradication, or border patrols, Thailand has a fantastic history

of special military units operating as authorities unto themselves, and then developing many features of a small state. such secret armies' self-funding activities tend to entail the direct control of small civilian populations. an excellent new study (Thibault, 2009) sheds light on the latter, important factor. The Thai military units controlling the Khmer border actively delayed the return of tribes and villages (officially deemed Cambodian refugees) who had been employed in a range of paramilitary and smuggling operations, along with homestead farming, as residents of a borderland where the Thai military were the sole authority.

Of course, the big money in this game came from directing the material support for Pol Pot, flowing in from America and its allies, often through border camps bearing the regalia of the UN and WfP, amounting to tens and hundreds of millions per annum. although a glimpse of that game reached the world through the films of John Pilger, its gradual end was not until 1999, when the Thai army was still trying to hold on to the populations who had effectively become 'citizens' (or serfs?) of their small duchies along the border.

## War or peace? Cui bono?

Thailand's acts of war against Cambodia have not come about by accident: a highly professional army, with decades of experience along a disputed border, has made a series of clear moves to re-arm the frontier, scarcely ten years after the death of Pol Pot. The motives are not difficult to understand, if we can begin by recognising that these are strategic decisions – though certainly made by authorities other than Thailand's elected parliament. That parliament has had a somewhat intermittent existence over the past three years, but even if this had not been the case, there is no reason to suppose they would have initiated this war any more than they initiated the invasion of Laos in 1987-8. The latter is an important precedent, in principle disputing the same 'French' border, and UN decisions were as impotent in averting that dispute as they have been in this one.

Like America, Thailand has an elected government that lags behind the foreign-policy initiative of a largely unseen political class, closer to the military than the common man. however, there can be little doubt that an invasion of Cambodia would be a popular war in Thailand, as the invasion of Laos was before. The imperative for a 'greater Thailand' denoted by Suvannabhumi antedates the ad hoc alliances of the cold war, and will endure long after the hysteria of anti-Communism has faded. even without a single victory, the perpetuation of low-level hostilities against Thailand's neighbours benefits a military that has become accustomed to profiting from such occupations, and can provide a pretext to either pre-empt or dissolve an already weakened parliament at any time.

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