STALETME IN INDOCHINA:
THE CASE FOR DEMILITARIZATION

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The current stalemate in Indochina is not a typical military standoff, in which the opposing sides are too evenly matched for either to make gains on the other. Rather, the stalemate reflects the feeling, shared by most parties involved in the conflict, that the risks of reaching a settlement are greater than the costs of continuing the confrontation. For Vietnam, the burden of supporting the Phnom Penh government it installed after it invaded Kampuchea in 1978-79 is less of a problem than the security threat Kampuchea has been in the past and might, Hanoi fears, once again become. For Thailand, the other nations of ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations), China, and the United States, the costs of continuing to support the Kampuchean resistance are outweighed by their fear that a political settlement would leave Kampuchea still under Vietnam’s thumb. In their view, if the Hanoi-backed government in Phnom Penh (the People’s Republic of Kampuchea – PRK) is the strongest of the Kampuchean contenders, and if future anti-Vietnamese gains are unlikely, then the PRK would have the edge in any negotiated resolution of the conflict, thus ensuring Vietnam’s domination over Kampuchea and the whole of Indochina.

Yet this analysis of the present situation overlooks some important con-
siderations. Not only does it underestimate the long-term costs of stalemate, it also ignores the dynamics of Kampuchean politics itself. Behind Washington's and ASEAN's willingness to accept a continuing stalemate lies a basic unexamined assumption about the way Kampuchea would probably evolve after a settlement of the current conflict. The present pattern of Vietnamese dominance and Kampuchean submission is not, as many seem to believe, destined to remain fixed. If Kampuchea ceased being the focus of regional conflict, the internal dynamics of Kampuchea would inevitably become more important than they are now, leading to a certain amount of political change. Although Vietnamese-Kampuchean relations are not likely to turn hostile, as relations between Vietnam and China did, they are nonetheless likely to evolve, probably in a way that will weaken the link between Hanoi and Phnom Penh.

Thus the key problem in limiting Vietnamese domination is not how to balance opposing forces within a coalition government, as many ASEAN and U.S. observers argue, but how to negotiate guarantees that in the future Kampuchea will not become a threat, either directly or as a proxy, to its neighbors, Vietnam and Thailand. In other words, the major issue is not the composition of a future governing coalition, but the guaranteed demilitarization of Kampuchea.

An Accepted Stalemate

The current stalemate in Kampuchea is a product of the alignment of pro-Vietnamese and anti-Vietnamese forces that resulted from the 1978–79 invasion of Kampuchea. As is well known, Vietnam invaded both to defend itself against continued Khmer Rouge attacks along the border and to preempt the buildup of the Chinese military presence in Kampuchea; it is estimated that at the time of the invasion between 5,000 and 8,000 Chinese advisors were resident there,1 and evidence suggests that Beijing was committed to a rapid increase of that number.2 At the time, relations between Thailand and Kampuchea were improving, and Hanoi felt it had to forestall the threat of a hostile, aggressive, well-supported Kampuchea.

Vietnam also invaded, it claims, for humanitarian reasons: to rescue Kampuchean refugees from the brutal rule of the Khmer Rouge. Under the leadership of Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge used genocidal tactics on ethnic minorities, on those associated with former regimes or the Vietnamese, on religious groups, on educated and skilled people, and on urban dwellers in general. One to one-and-a-half million Kampuchean civilians died between 1975 and 1978, a period so brutal that Kampuchea is now to political disaster what Ethiopia is to famine. After routing Pol Pot, Vietnam established the PRK under the leadership of Heng Samrin. Despite continued fighting between the two sides little major change has occurred in the conflict since then.

The stalemate has persisted partly because real decisions about the conflict are made not by the Kampucheans but by the regional powers, upon whom they are dependent. The PRK government in Phnom Penh, for example, has taken charge of civil programs and is increasingly involved in defense-related activities, yet it still depends heavily on aid from Vietnam, the Soviet Union, and Eastern Europe, as well as on Vietnamese military protection (there are currently an estimated 140,000 Vietnamese troops in the PRK).

The Kampuchean opposition groups are also dependent on outside powers. The 40,000 soldiers of the Khmer Rouge have been sustained by Chinese supplies shipped through Thailand. And the Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF) and the followers of Prince Norodom Sihanouk (who ruled Kampuchea from 1941 to 1970) depend on support from the countries of ASEAN and the United States as well as from China. The KPNLF, a heterogeneous and internally contentious group, whose leaders were associated with the pro-American Lon Nol government of 1970–75, has 15,000 men under arms. The Sihanoukists, with 7,000 troops, are the smallest resistance group, but they enjoy the international prestige of their leader.

In June 1982 the three groups joined to form the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK), which now holds Kampuchea's seat in the United Nations. The CGDK is an important political umbrella, unifying the prestige of Sihanouk with the military strength of the Khmer Rouge, but it is a paper coalition; for the most part, the resistance groups still conduct separate operations. Outside aid also continues to reflect these divisions: while Chinese support goes primarily to the Khmer Rouge, the United States and most of the ASEAN nations restrict their aid to the KPNLF and the Sihanoukists.

These outside powers have varying interests in the region. Vietnam and Thailand have the closest and most complex relationship to the Kampuchean problem, since Vietnam's army occupies Kampuchea, and Thailand hosts the rebel contenders on its territory. The vulnerability of their borders gives both Vietnam and Thailand a direct interest in the long-term outcome of the conflict. The Vietnamese-Kampuchean border is particularly permeable and important: Ho Chi Minh City, by far the most significant urban center in Vietnam, is only 30 miles from Kampuchea,
and Phnom Penh only 30 miles from Vietnam. Hanoi experienced serious transborder threats when the Khmer Rouge was in power, and wants to prevent such threats in the future. Furthermore, there are large numbers of ethnic Khmer in Vietnam and ethnic Vietnamese in Kampuchea, which increases Hanoi's interest in ensuring that events in Kampuchea do not get out of hand. The Thai-Kampuchean border is less vital than that between Kampuchea and Vietnam. Nevertheless, Hanoi's control over Laos and invasion of Kampuchea present Thailand with the specter of an expansionist Vietnamese empire along its entire eastern border. With this prospect in view, Thailand would rather support resistance groups on its territory and serve as the front line of the anti-Vietnamese coalition than recognize a Vietnamese-installed government in Phnom Penh.

The other regional actors—the ASEAN states (besides Thailand) and China—also play important roles in the Kampuchean problem. Because of Thailand's membership in ASEAN, as well as what ASEAN views as Vietnam's continuing violation of Kampuchean sovereignty, ASEAN generally backs Thailand's position. China has been involved in the conflict through its efforts to contain Vietnam's influence in the region, primarily by supporting the Khmer Rouge and by threatening Vietnam along its own border with China—most notably in the "lesson" of February 1979. Beijing's hostility toward Hanoi is heightened by Hanoi's alliance with Moscow, which pulls the Sino-Vietnamese conflict into the larger Sino-Soviet conflict and has (particularly in the late 1970s) stirred up Chinese fears of Soviet encirclement. Thus from Beijing's perspective, the current stalemate, which drains both Vietnamese and Soviet military resources and makes Vietnam—the original aggressor—a pariah in the eyes of the rest of the world, is preferable to a negotiated settlement that might enhance Vietnam's influence and potential strength.

The superpowers have roles in the conflict both directly and through their support for regional actors. The Soviet Union, which is involved in Kampuchea primarily because of its relationship to Vietnam, has little to gain from the Kampuchean stalemate. But its alliance with Vietnam is of considerable strategic importance, largely because of the access the Soviet Union thereby gains to the naval and air facilities at Cam Ranh Bay and Da Nang; correspondingly, Moscow is not in a position to force Vietnam to withdraw as long as Kampuchea is a potential threat to Vietnamese security. The United States, for its part, has fallen in with the ASEAN and Chinese approach toward the Kampuchean problem largely out of lingering hostility toward Vietnam and a desire to build friendly

relations with ASEAN and China. These stances contrast with those taken during the Vietnam War; now, neither superpower defines its primary position in terms of the presence of the other superpower. Though both are quite conscious of Southeast Asia's strategic importance, neither wants the region to become once again a major Cold War battlefield, and therefore neither is challenging established political alignments.

This broad acceptance of a stalemate has, as one might expect, reinforced the stalemate on the ground. Despite continued military engagements, the situation has remained essentially the same over the past eight years. Since the rapid collapse of Democratic Kampuchea in 1979, the major military resistance to Vietnam has come from the Khmer Rouge, operating on the Thai-Kampuchean border with Chinese supplies. During the 1985 dry-season offensive, the Vietnamese pushed all resistance base camps out of Kampuchean territory; since then there has been an increase in disruptive activity by small groups within the country. Overall, the military situation has gradually improved for the PRK, but this gain has been offset by an increase in international support for the resistance coalition.

Although hostility has been unceasing, there does not, on the face of it, appear to be a fundamental incompatibility of interests among the parties to the Kampuchean conflict. There are no conflicting territorial claims, and all participants have expressed their commitment to peace and compromise. Both sides have made major proposals for resolving the stalemate: According to official rhetoric, both sides would accept some sort of coalition government; both want demilitarization; both want to end the conflict; neither defines it in terms of a zero-sum game.

Of course, the specifics of the peace proposals reveal the underlying political obstacles to a settlement. The Vietnamese side emphasizes the need to disband the Khmer Rouge and to recognize the role of the PRK in negotiations and in a future coalition. The CGDK proposal would require the pullout of Vietnamese troops, the participation of the Khmer Rouge, and leading political roles for the CGDK in the coalition government. Apparent concessions have the fine print one might expect. In 1985 Vietnam and the PRK jointly announced that all Vietnamese troops would withdraw by 1990—stipulating, however, that the decision would be reconsidered if "these withdrawals are taken advantage of to undermine the peace and security of Kampuchea." Similarly, the CGDK proposal for a coalition government that would include the PRK does not provide for the demobilization of the Khmer Rouge, which Hanoi has demanded. Peace proposals, then, have so far been used primarily as a tool of conflict.

The reason for this perpetuation of the conflict lies in the conflict's very
The stalemate in Kampuchea does not arise from a situation in which fully committed opponents have exhausted themselves in the trenches, creating a temporary balance of forces. In fact, the participants are quite capable of escalating their involvement in the conflict—but there is little or no incentive to do so. If, for example, the backers of the Kampuchean resistance increased their support and encouraged a more aggressive strategy, these moves would only be countered by greater Vietnamese involvement. Furthermore, even though Vietnam's opponents express righteous indignation over its occupation of Kampuchea, they have no visceral commitment to the resistance groups. Their primary goal is not a resistance victory—which seems extremely unlikely—but to continue to exact a high price for Vietnam's occupation of Kampuchea.

Vietnam has set similar limits on its involvement. It could try to solve its Kampuchean problem by attacking Thailand; but in doing so it would be trading a smaller, well-defined security problem for a much larger, ambiguous one. So Thailand is not about to be invaded by Vietnam because of its backing for the Kampuchean resistance. Those countries that support Thailand are even less at risk.

What we see, then, is a situation in which most actors have tried to limit their commitment, their risks, and their costs. The marginally committed find that they cannot lose, and the fully committed—the Vietnamese and the Kampuchean resistance groups—find that they cannot win. Therefore, a stalemate exists.

The Risks of Continued Stalemate

The problem is that this kind of strategic stalemate tends to persist despite the relative advantages of a cooperative approach and the gradually increasing risks and costs of continued conflict. Each party generally chooses a less than optimal solution rather than agree to a compromise that might require sacrifices. No one is willing to weaken a possible future bargaining position.

Such gamesmanship overlooks the question of the long-term consequences of stalemate. Any discussion of these consequences must necessarily be speculative, but the pressures now being produced by the stalemate are already clear. Most severely affected, of course, have been the Kampucheans. The refugees and displaced persons living in the Khmer border camps tolerated by Thailand and run by resistance groups are in an extremely vulnerable position. The camps serve as a reserve for the resistance's military actions against the PRK, and act as a thin buffer between the Vietnamese army and the Thai army. The camp populations' total dependence on resistance group authorities and on the Thai military has led to numerous abuses, including widespread corruption and physical assaults. Thailand, which does not want a permanent refugee population, has signaled its displeasure at the slow pace of foreign resettlement of the refugees by the announced closing of the Khao I Dang camp earlier this year. If current trends continue, the resistance groups and the refugees in the camps—foreign-supported and on foreign soil—may become the Palestinians of Southeast Asia.

For those still living within Kampuchea, Vietnamese occupation and the accompanying international isolation have imposed a heavy burden. The continued presence of the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese army serves as a reminder of the country's nightmarish recent past, preventing any reconstruction of a forward-looking sense of nationhood. In other words, stalemate perpetuates and institutionalizes the Kampuchean tragedy. Furthermore, it requires the PRK government to operate within the limits set by Hanoi's security interests. Kampuchean sovereignty has—fort the first time, unfortunately—been severely compromised. And it may remain so after a Vietnamese withdrawal if the parties to the conflict cannot agree on a regional arrangement that would guarantee Vietnam's security.

Indefinite stalemate would seem advantageous to Vietnam, as it grants Hanoi time to consolidate its hegemony over Kampuchea. But in fact stalemate is a mixed blessing: although the direct costs of occupation are not severe, the "opportunity costs" are tremendous. For one thing, Vietnam's occupation of Kampuchea is the major obstacle to Hanoi's achieving normalization of relations with the United States and the West and a reduction of tensions with China. At present, Vietnam is isolated—excluded from major Western contacts and facing continued hostility from China and Thailand. Hanoi must break through this isolation, both politically and economically, if the country is to prosper; Western aid and trade are desperately needed. A further problem is that continued Vietnamese hegemony in Kampuchea will feed anti-Vietnamese nationalist sentiment there. As memories of the Khmer Rouge atrocities fade, the Vietnamese will become the natural target of new political forces, putting Vietnam into a posture diametrically opposed to its own revolutionary heritage. In addition, if the Vietnamese occupation outlasts Soviet support, Hanoi may find itself "sold out" by the Soviets in a global-level arrangement. Reliance on only one patron makes Hanoi vulnerable to changes in that patron's policies.

The domestic and international pressures that Thailand faces as a result...
of stalemate are not as great as those on Vietnam, but they are still considerable. The most obvious problem is that of a hostile border with clients of Vietnam. This border not only presents a military threat, it forces Bangkok to channel resources into military preparedness and increases the risk of foreign subversion in northeast Thailand. Other problems are posed by Khmer nationals now on Thai soil, including the quarter-million Khmer refugees in camps and, more threatening, the Chinese-supported army of the Khmer Rouge. At present, relations between China and Thailand are good and considerable international aid flows to the refugee camps. But if either of these situations changes, or if an agreement covering resettlement of refugees is not eventually reached, Thailand could face serious problems within its own borders. Moreover, the slow and uncertain development of greater civilian autonomy within Thai politics is threatened by the rapid increases in the military budgets and by the atmosphere of permanent crisis regarding national security.

In some ways, ASEAN has indirectly benefited from the Vietnamese invasion, as it has led to an impressive amount of international recognition for ASEAN and active cooperation among its members. But indefinite stalemate could put new destabilizing pressures on ASEAN. For one thing, ASEAN members have differing views regarding the respective dangers posed by Vietnam and by China. These policy differences are rooted in the countries' separate histories and disparate geopolitical vulnerabilities. Indonesia, for example, is interested in improving relations with Vietnam and is cautious about Chinese ambitions, while Thailand is obviously more concerned with the threat from its Vietnamese neighbors. Because of such differences, the Kampuchean issue could cease to serve as a common rallying point for ASEAN and instead could push the Association apart.

This brings up another danger ASEAN faces. As originally formulated, ASEAN's raison d'être was regional cooperation and demilitarization. Since 1979, though, ASEAN has tended to be primarily an extende opposing Vietnamese occupation of Kampuchea. Initially this was justified by the invasion's violation of the principle of national autonomy. But if the current situation ossifies, ASEAN could become an anti-Vietnamese alliance backed by the United States or China, opposing an Indochina alliance backed by the Soviet Union. This is not a desirable regional configuration.

China would seem to be a beneficiary of continued stalemate, since it has isolated and weakened Vietnam and enabled Beijing to improve relations with the rest of Southeast Asia. But in order to maintain the stalemate, China must continue to support the Khmer Rouge, a universally condemned group that no one wants in power. Furthermore, Beijing's backing of the Khmer Rouge enables it only to keep the Vietnamese in Kampuchea, not get them out. Perhaps Beijing is willing to sacrifice Kampuchea in order to isolate Vietnam and create opportunities to increase its own influence in Southeast Asia. But this could end up turning Vietnam unnecessarily into a confirmed enemy; and Chinese moves to dominate Southeast Asia will eventually invite counter-moves by regional and global powers. More secure benefits would result from regional peace and normalized Sino-Vietnamese relations.

The Soviet Union is involved in Kampuchea primarily because of the Soviet-Vietnamese alliance. But its interests in the region are not the same as Hanoi's. In fact, Vietnam's occupation of Kampuchea has become a hindrance to Mikhail Gorbachev's reorientation of Soviet foreign policy. Gorbachev's 1986 Vladivostok speech made clear the high priority he places on the general improvement of Moscow's relations with Asian countries; Vietnam's presence in Kampuchea remains a primary obstacle to greater Sino-Soviet rapprochement.

The effects of prolonged stalemate on the United States would be indirect but not insignificant. For one thing, it would confirm America's hostile isolation from Vietnam, the third largest communist country and the largest country of mainland Southeast Asia. Most Western countries already have diplomatic relations with Hanoi, but the United States has made recognition contingent on resolution of the Kampuchean situation as well as the MIA issue (the soldiers missing in action in the Indochina War and still unaccounted for). While this gives Washington a powerful bargaining chip in negotiations regarding Kampuchea, it is simply a diplomatic liability if no negotiations occur.

Prolonged stalemate would also tend to cause realignments and heightened tension in Southeast Asia. As Thailand shifts from being primarily an American client to being primarily a Chinese client, the United States loses clout; it would be in a difficult position if Thai-Chinese relations should ever sour. In general, a situation of heightened regional tension adds an international and possibly a Cold War dimension to every domestic crisis. The case of the Philippines has demonstrated that such crises tend to be problematic enough without further regional entanglements.

Viewed in light of these long-term trends, regional stalemate on the Kampuchean problem looks more like a vicious circle than a low-risk game. Stepped-up militarization increases the costs of stalemate without reducing the risks. In fact, risk increases as regional opponents try to one-up each other in the militarization contest. Moreover, prolonged tensions ineluctably attract superpower attention and involvement. Such actions as the
introduction of open U.S. military aid to the resistance are more likely
to further complicate the situation than to contribute to a solution. Gradu-
ally, Southeast Asia may come to be seen as an area where the stakes are
too high to let the regional participants work their conflicts out for themselves.

Inside Kampuchea

Despite all the costs and risks of indefinite stalemate, many on the anti-
Vietnamese side seem, as we have seen, to prefer it. Since a resistance vic-
tory is extremely unlikely, the best possible resolution would appear to be
a coalition government. And regardless of the political concessions Hanoi
may grant to end the stalemate, seven years of civil war have given the
PRK tremendous advantage over the other Kampuchean groups. The
general presumption is that this would translate into continued or even
increased Vietnamese domination over Kampuchea. This scenario—a new
Vietnamese empire—is unacceptable to Vietnam's opponents. As a result, they
refuse to recognize and make concessions to the PRK government,
which makes negotiation impossible.

This position reflects the assumption that the PRK-Vietnamese relation-
ship will not be affected by peace. Yet that assumption is highly ques-
tionable. To be sure, it may be difficult to envision a post-stalemate Kam-
puchean government that would control its own domestic affairs, steer
clear of an alliance with a much stronger neighbor or global power, and
remain unthreatened by hostile powers. But one cannot simply assume
that peace would leave the rules of the game unchanged. The shifts in
Sino-Vietnamese relations since the end of the Vietnam War—from
patronage to hostility—provide sufficient evidence that wartime depend-
cencies are renegotiated in peacetime. Thus it seems reasonable to assume
that the docility of the PRK and other Kampuchean actors toward their
patrons results more from their dependence on these patrons' military
and financial support than from an innate subservience. Kampuchean
politics would most likely respond to the changed circumstances of a post-
stalemate situation.

Any assessment of how Kampuchean politics might evolve must begin
with the fact that the current PRK government led by Heng Samrin is
necessarily a weak government. For one thing, its power base is the Viet-
namese army, which is not under its control. Therefore, its basic policy
decisions would be contingent on Vietnam whether or not they were directly
controlled by the Vietnamese. In foreign affairs, military affairs, border
administration, and logistics, PRK decision-making must be the cart, not
the cow. This subservience weakens the PRK's domestic appeal and gives
the resistance its major target for attack. A second cause of the PRK's weak-
ness is its leadership—a pastiche of survivors from all previous regimes,
plus rapidly promoted junior personnel. It is not the government of a
cohesive, experienced revolutionary party. Indeed, the PRK never men-
tioned the party in its first two years of rule because the party had been
so discredited by Pol Pot. Moreover, the PRK's domestic legitimacy rests
partly on the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge and the threat they still pose
on the border. If that threat should ever be removed, the PRK's standing
might be weakened.

In addition, there is a problem of Vietnamese immigration, and among
the Khmers there is a growing resentment of the Vietnamese military pre-

cence. But the most unpopular government measures have been the draft
and the sending of temporary work details to the border areas. These
war-related activities will increase as Khmer forces replace the Viet-
namese—a shift that will strengthen the state's coercive apparatus, and
could threaten the relatively benign nature the Heng Samrin regime now
displays.

On the other hand, as long as the PRK is not substantially threatened
by the Khmer Rouge on its border, it should tend to keep moving from
the Stalinist party-state of Democratic Kampuchea to the much milder,
pop-Stalinist state now in the making. In this regard, the PRK govern-
ment may already be gaining some legitimacy of its own. Resident for-

gn relief personnel have commented favorably on the lack of corrupt-


tion. In general, the PRK's policies have tended to be the opposite of the
leftist fanaticism it supplanted: religious tolerance, cultural restoration,
economic recovery, less governmental mobilization, and better treatment
of enemies. Although reconstruction and development have been slowed
by lack of resources and continuing security problems, accomplishments
in many areas have been remarkable. Relief workers, scholars, and vis-
itors do not confirm the accusations, made by resistance groups, of Viet-
namese colonization or attempts to Vietnamiize Khmer culture.

The overall picture, then, is much more complicated than the anti-
Vietnamese side might paint it. The atmosphere in Phnom Penh strikes
the visitor as neither normal nor oppressive, but rather disorganized, ten-

tative, and haunted by the nightmares of the past and the uncertainties
of the present. Kampuchea is still caught, as it has been for much of its
history, in a geopolitical vise between Thailand and Vietnam. Because
of their size, both make dangerous enemies: because of their enmity for
each other, they make dangerous patrons. On the other hand, the experiments of Lon Nol and the Khmer Rouge with more distant patrons—the United States and China, respectively—proved to be disastrous. The only possible resolution to the regional conflict, then, would be one that guaranteed at least a certain amount of independence and autonomy for Kampuchea. Otherwise, strife would be sure to break out again some time in the future.

Demilitarization

The same conclusion can be reached if one approaches the problem from a regional perspective. The current negotiating priorities of the anti-Vietnamese side are misplaced; too much emphasis is placed on the political questions of the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the PRK government and the composition of a post-stalemate coalition, and the issue of regional security and demilitarization is neglected. Although the regional actors may be involved in the Kampuchea problem because of their outrage at Vietnam’s invasion and their hostility to the PRK government, the only way to prevent the confirmation of Vietnamese hegemony is to address Vietnamese security concerns. These concerns, after all, are what prompted the invasion in the first place. As long as Kampuchea is threatened by anti-Vietnamese forces, Hanoi will see Vietnamese hegemony over Kampuchea as justified by overriding concerns of national security.

Thus, demands of the anti-Vietnamese side for a unilateral Vietnamese withdrawal and for a prearranged coalition government miss the key point of a settlement. Even if their demands were accepted by Vietnam, they would not lead to a desirable resolution of the conflict. A unilateral withdrawal would be more likely to confirm Vietnam’s hegemony than to deny it; for in order to withdraw Vietnam would have to be convinced that the PRK would be able to contain anti-Vietnamese forces and would itself remain a client state. Vietnamese and Kampuchean security would still be linked, and Vietnam would have to remain concerned with the Thai-Kampuchea border and with any anti-Vietnamese trends that might arise in Kampuchean politics. Moreover, a Vietnamese withdrawal would be premised on a stronger PRK; and a stronger PRK, while good for internal social order, might threaten the relative mildness of the policies Phnom Penh has so far pursued.

The proposals emphasizing a negotiated coalition that would satisfy all parties are misguided for somewhat different reasons. It would be extremely unwise to try to set up a territorial or organizational “leopard skin” arrangement, with different factions assigned specific shares of power or territory. This kind of rigid political order would undermine the government’s effectiveness, straitjacketing Kampuchean politics at a time when it would need to be highly flexible to meet the new challenges of the post-stalemate period. The result would be either an increasingly inappropriate and unworkable political structure—as can now be seen in Lebanon, for example—or conflicting claims of violations of the arrangement. Such disputes could open the way for foreign powers willing to back a particular faction or factions against other Kampuchean groups. Not only would this distort the Kampuchean political scene, it would also invite countermanipulation by other powers and in the end lead to Vietnamese military intervention.

A much more effective way to bring the Indochina conflict to a satisfactory resolution would be a demilitarization of Kampuchea. Guaranteed demilitarization would require the withdrawal from Kampuchea of all Vietnamese troops, declarations by both Thailand and Vietnam that disputes with Kampuchea would be handled through negotiation and arbitration, and assurances from other international participants that they would seek to promote a peaceful and stable Kampuchean government. Provisions of a demilitarization agreement would also cover the CGDK-LR forces: the Vietnamese military and political organization would have to be dismantled; resistance activities would have to cease; elements from all three Khmer groups, including nonaligned emigrants, would have to be assimilated into existing political, economic, and social structures; and measures would have to be taken to ensure resettlement of all Kampucheans within the country without fear of retribution. The government of Kampuchea would restrict its armed forces to a national police force and would guarantee that all Kampucheans are treated equally. Other steps might include the establishment of demilitarized border zones and international supervision and support of demilitarization.

Such a strategy would bring about the permanent removal of armed threats to Kampuchean security, as well as any threats Kampuchea might present to its neighbors. Kampuchea’s importance for Vietnamese security is a geopolitical fact of life, but with Kampuchea serving as a demilitarized buffer it could no longer threaten Vietnam. Hanoi would lose its justification for dominating Kampuchea’s foreign and domestic policy; and in fact Vietnam would have no further need to maintain a client regime in Phnom Penh as a forward line of defense. Of course, various groups in Hanoi might prefer to maintain regional hegemony regardless of the
security issue. But the only way to challenge this hegemonic strain in Vietnamese policy would be to isolate it from legitimate security concerns. While national security is not negotiable, hegemonic preferences may be.

A demilitarization solution would satisfy the security concerns of Thailand and ASEAN, since Kampuchea would become a buffer rather than an extension of Vietnam's perimeter. Not only would Thailand's short-term security picture be vastly brighter, but future problems that might arise from the presence of armed Khmer Rouge, either as a surrogate Chinese force or in their own right, could be avoided. Indonesia's and Malaysia's fears about growing Chinese influence in the region would also be eased. Furthermore, demilitarization would help resolve the Khmer refugee problem, as it would provide for resettlement inside Kampuchea.

The major benefits of demilitarization would flow to Kampuchea itself. Freed from military interference by regional powers and from possible threats by its own armed forces, Kampuchea would be able to pursue reconstruction and political redefinition. The removal of any justification for an invasion of Kampuchea would guarantee Kampuchean security. Demilitarization, therefore, would mean neither greater insecurity nor a loss of national dignity. Instead, it would create space for a sovereign, peacetime Kampuchean government that would not be subject to intimidation tactics by an outside power. Phnom Penh would have greater autonomy than any Kampuchean government has enjoyed in the past 200 years.

Certainly there would be difficulties involved in establishing and maintaining guaranteed demilitarization, but these should not be overstated. Kampuchea does not have a long history of militarism: most of its military experience has involved guerrilla warfare or border skirmishes, with weapons supplied from outside. Outside powers therefore could play a significant role in implementing demilitarization. Moreover, Kampuchea must see that, like Finland or Austria, it would only render itself vulnerable to its strong neighbors if it rearmed. Situated between rivals 10 times its size, Kampuchea can be a buffer or a battleground, but it cannot be a winner.

These considerations would affect post-stalemate relations between Phnom Penh and Hanoi. Under the terms of demilitarization outlined here, Kampuchea would certainly not remain as pro-Vietnamese as it is now, but it also would not be as anti-Vietnamese as it was under the Lon Nol and Khmer Rouge regimes. Factors tending to keep Kampuchea in close relationship with Vietnam would include gratitude for the removal of the Khmer Rouge, pro-Vietnamese people and forces left over from the occupation, the desire to be prudent in dealing with a powerful neighbor, and the opportunities for trade with Vietnam. Pulling Kampuchea away from Vietnam would be Khmer nationalism, resentment of Vietnamese occupation, the attractiveness of the West and ASEAN, and political forces and figures from the current opposition. And, at least in appearance, any peacetime government in Phnom Penh will seem to shift toward an anti-Vietnamese posture, since currently any anti-Vietnamese sentiment within the PRK is suppressed.

But such feelings, even if reinforced by whatever coalition partners the PRK might take on, would not pose a threat to Vietnam under a demilitarized regime. Kampuchean nationalism may be non-Vietnamese but it is not innately anti-Vietnamese, unless Kampuchea is threatened by Vietnam; and the future economic and political potential of Kampuchean-Vietnamese relations should encourage friendly interactions. Although Vietnam is poor, the most dynamic and modern part of its economy is Ho Chi Minh City, only 130 miles from Phnom Penh. At any rate, whatever the composition of the Kampuchean government, it can be expected to appreciate peace and to devote itself to civilian tasks of reconstruction. This has already been the thrust of PRK politics. In short, then, under the terms of guaranteed demilitarization, even a coalition government would not threaten Vietnamese security; at the same time, its members—including those now in the PRK—would be able to act with greater autonomy from Vietnamese preferences than Kampuchea has at present.

Under the terms of demilitarization described above, the most serious problems for a peacetime Kampuchean government would not be external but rather internal—the regime's stability and effectiveness. If the government collapsed and factional rivalries became virulent, internal security could deteriorate and threaten demilitarization. Yet if the regional powers remained committed to the demilitarization arrangements, and refused to arm any of the belligerents, even this kind of militarized factional struggle would not be likely to get out of hand.

All this is not to say that the issue of a coalition government is not important, but only that it is less critical to Kampuchean security than demilitarization and political reconciliation. How different factions are represented in a post-stalemate government obviously is pertinent to Kampuchean political stability. In this regard, the current PRK government is necessary but not sufficient. To its credit, it is the only Kampuchean group that has been providing civilian services to the Kampuchean population for the past seven years, and it has done a good job with meager resources: in Phnom Penh, one does not hear the rumors of foreign aid.
being siphoned off by corrupt officials that one commonly hears in the refugee camps on the Thai border. Any post-settlement solution, then, should respect the PRK’s accomplishments and utilize its personnel and organization. But with the dismantling of the Khmer Rouge—a necessary step in the demilitarization process—the PRK would lose some of its legitimacy, and at least some groups within it would feel threatened by any strains of anti-Vietnamese sentiment that might emerge in peacetime. Furthermore, the PRK government in its present form would find it somewhat awkward to adjust to an autonomous postwar foreign policy, given that the PRK was created by Vietnam and came to power behind the Vietnamese army. Thus for the purposes of domestic and international reconciliation, it would be essential to draw other groups into the government. The participation of Prince Sihanouk, broadly accepted by outside powers as a key Kampuchean leader, would be a godsend.

Given the unknowns of a peacetime situation, it is impossible to anticipate in detail the problems that might emerge. Clearly, though, demilitarization is the key issue. If the problem of Kampuchea’s external security were removed, Kampuchea would be free to find its own internal political equilibrium. In fact, guaranteed demilitarization would be more likely to facilitate Kampuchean neutrality than would a prearranged, calculated, neutral coalition that simply reflected the present stalemate. Demilitarization would allow the natural pushes and pulls of Kampuchean politics to work themselves out.

**Beyond Stalemate**

Not only would a solution of guaranteed demilitarization release Kampuchea from its current plight, it is also in the professed interests of all other parties involved in the conflict. Thailand would no longer face the specter of a de facto, 1,200 mile-long border with Vietnam—something that is of great concern to the Thai elite. Demilitarization would buffer the Thai-Vietnamese relationship on other fronts as well, and might open up new economic opportunities for Thailand with both Vietnam and Kampuchea. For its part, Vietnam would finally be able to pursue a postwar development strategy, since the resolution of the Kampuchean problem would free Hanoi from the expense of occupation, secure Vietnam’s western border, and create the basis for improved relations with the West. Vietnam would also benefit from a decrease of tensions with China and, consequently, decreased dependence on the Soviet Union. ASEAN could move from being an anti-Vietnamese entente back to its original goal of fostering a Southeast Asian zone of peace, freedom, and neutrality.

China has been and might continue to be the most recalcitrant anti-Vietnamese actor. But demilitarization has much to commend it to Beijing. First, with Kampuchea as a buffer rather than an embattled outpost of Vietnamese control, Hanoi’s power over Indochina would diminish. This has long been a goal of Chinese policy. In addition, there is the important fact that the Khmer Rouge simply cannot win. Indeed, one might wonder if Beijing would really want them to, considering the embarrassments that their victory would necessarily entail. The dismantling of the Khmer Rouge, therefore, would not mean a loss for the Chinese but rather the end of a bad bet. A better bet would be for China to continue its traditional support for Sihanouk. Flexibility on the Khmer Rouge issue could also give China leverage with both the Soviet Union and Vietnam. Not all Chinese leaders may accept these considerations; some may take bitter pleasure in watching the continued suffering of their renegade Vietnamese client. But if Beijing seriously considers its position, it may decide that a die-hard stance against an international settlement does not serve its own best interests.

A resolution of the Kampuchean problem would have mixed results for the Soviet Union, but the gains would outweigh the losses. These losses would primarily be in the Soviet-Vietnamese relationship—in the power Moscow exercises over Hanoi because of its dependence on Soviet resources. Offsetting the loss of some of the Soviet Union’s influence over Vietnam would be the chance of improving relations with China and adopting a more peaceful posture in Asia, which would enhance Soviet standing there. Even now, the Soviets are markedly less committed to Vietnamese control over Kampuchea than the Vietnamese are. If guaranteed demilitarization met Vietnam’s security needs, then Moscow might use its leverage as Vietnam’s military supply house to encourage a settlement.

Movement toward an agreement could also be promoted by Washington. In fact, the United States may be in a uniquely favorable position in this regard, because of its strong relations with China and ASEAN and because it can hold out the prospect of normalized U.S.-Vietnamese relations—something that Hanoi very much wants. As a result, Washington could take on the role of honest broker in the region. The advantages to the United States of a resolution of the Kampuchean problem would be considerable, even if not, at first glance, striking. A demilitarization solution would certainly be in harmony with America’s national commitments to
human rights and popular sovereignty. Moreover, the resolution of the major international conflict in Southeast Asia could lower the stakes in future political crises and conflicts in the region. Finally, such a solution would not only “contain” Vietnam—it would also reduce the possibility of China expanding its hegemonic interests in the region.

Making the transition from a hostile stalemate to a demilitarized peace remains a difficult problem. Unilateral gestures by the United States are essential for improving the diplomatic climate, but it seems unlikely that small improvements in the situation could simply accumulate into a solution. Nor does it seem possible that a series of bilateral agreements could of themselves guarantee demilitarization—too many parties are involved in the conflict, and no one wants to venture making the first move. So the forum in which a post-stalemate solution is negotiated must be an international conference at which all regional actors are represented. This would allow a new system of relationships to Kampuchea to emerge out of simultaneous concessions, agreements, and acknowledgments by all involved parties. At present, the regional countries seem afraid of an effective international conference, since it would mean exchanging the familiar, limited-risk situation of stalemate for unknown terrain. But indefinite stalemate simply means a Pyrrhic victory for Vietnam, continued destabilization of the region, and prolonged suffering for Kampuchea. The post-stalemate terrain may come to seem more inviting than it does now.

6 In fact, the maximum concession that China (the power behind the Khmer Rouge) is willing to make at this time is that the Khmer Rouge forces will be reduced to the level of forces of the other coalition partners. Sihanouk personally is in favor of demilitarization of Kampuchea and the presence of an international peacekeeping force, but this goes beyond the official CGDK position. See Bangkok Post, August 7, 1986.


9 Nayan Chanda has calculated the direct costs of occupation in William Harley, ed., Confrontation or Coexistence: The Future of ASEAN-Vietnam Relations (Bangkok: Institute of Security and International Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 1985).


11 The best comprehensive overview of the government and policies of the PRK from 1979 to 1985 is provided by Michael Vickery, Kampuchea: Politics, Economy and Society (London: Pinter, 1986; Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1986).

12 Ibid., p. 63.

13 The most recent details of these measures, including an extension of the military draft to five years for men between 18 and 30, are given in Murray Hiebert, “Cambodia: Guerrilla Attacks Curb Development,” Indochina Issues, No. 69 (September 1986), pp. 1–6. Hiebert gives a rather grim report on the effects of continuing security problems and Vietnamese presence on morale in Kampuchea.


15 The final point of the CGDK’s Eight Point Program is: “As for the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Kampuchea independent, united in her own territorial integrity, peaceful, neutral and nonaligned, is willing to sign with it a nonaggression and peaceful coexistence treaty and to establish economic and trade relations between the two countries forever.”
