CRISNO 284

VIETNAM INVASION OF CAMBODIA

Background:

A two-stage post-Vietnam War crisis in Indochina occurred from 24 September 1977 to 7 January 1979. The direct participants were Cambodia, Vietnam, and, on the periphery, Thailand.

Background The deep-rooted conflict between Cambodia and Vietnam derived from many sources: ethnic hatred, traditional hostility, territorial disputes, and ideological differences. In essence, the former was engaged in a persistent struggle to maintain an independent existence against the steady encroachment of the much more powerful Vietnam. In March 1970 Cambodia attempted to expel North Vietnamese and Vietcong military concentrations from its territory (see Case #237--Invasion of Cambodia). Fighting began immediately after the fall of Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh, to the Cambodian Maoist Khmer Rouge in April 1975 (see Case #258--Final North Vietnam Offensive). From that time onward the tension was exacerbated by disputes over boundaries imposed by the French colonial administration concerning some potentially oil-rich islands in the Gulf of Siam and, more importantly, threats to the survival of the diminishing Cambodian state. The conflict was intensified by the reluctance of North Vietnam's army to withdraw from acknowledged Cambodian territory after 1975.

The persistent border conflict between Cambodia and Vietnam escalated in 1977. In April Cambodian forces staged heavy raids into Vietnam, whose militia guarding the area was forced to withdraw. In May Vietnam unilaterally extended its territorial waters to 12 miles and established a 200-mile "exclusive economic zone" that encompassed islands and archipelagos outside those territorial waters. These acts directly affected islands contested by Vietnam and China (see Case #384--Spratly Islands, in 1988, in China/Vietnam PC), as well as those in dispute between Vietnam and Cambodia. A treaty of economic and defense cooperation between Vietnam and Laos in August 1977 transformed Laos into a Vietnamese client, another step in Vietnam's efforts to gain control over all of Indochina.

For Vietnam, a serious refugee problem in an economically strategic area, together with Cambodian attacks, exacerbated the tense situation. Cambodia was troubled by the continued presence of Vietnamese troops in the eastern part of its territory. Cambodia charged Vietnam with a plan to reconstitute the Union Indochinoise established by France, as well as an attempt to instigate an internal coup in Cambodia against the regime. Vietnam countered by accusing Khmer Rouge leader, Pol Pot, of plans to reconquer Saigon and the Mekong Delta, which had belonged to Cambodia 300 years earlier.

The Thai/Cambodia conflict was less acute than that between Cambodia and Vietnam. Nevertheless, uncertain borders, poor communication between Phnom Penh and its forces in the field, the lack of discipline among the Khmer Rouge troops, provocative Thai military action, smuggling operations, ideological factors, and the presence of an enormous Cambodian refugee camp in Thailand all contributed to poor relations between Cambodia and Thailand.

Summary:

The beginning of a lengthy crisis for Cambodia and Vietnam can be traced to 24 September 1977: Cambodia reported an invasion by several Vietnam divisions supported by hundreds of tanks, artillery pieces, and aircraft; and the same day Vietnam alleged that four divisions of Cambodian forces had launched attacks along the entire border of Tayninh Province where over 1,000 civilians had been killed or wounded. Vietnam's initial response was a punitive assault in December by six divisions 50 miles into Cambodia.

After inflicting a substantial defeat Vietnamese troops pulled back, with some units remaining in Cambodia to support subsequent diplomatic approaches. Cambodia moved 13 of its 17 divisions to hold the border against a renewed Vietnamese invasion. On 31 December Phnom Penh broke off diplomatic relations with Hanoi and quietly abandoned its Moscow embassy as well, thereby emphasizing the link between the Indochina dispute and the Sino/Soviet conflict. Vietnamese diplomats were ordered to leave Cambodia; and air services between the two countries were to be suspended as of 7 January 1978. A Vietnamese offer on 3 January to negotiate was rejected by Cambodia.

There were contradictory reports concerning the fighting in January. Cambodia claimed to have expelled the Vietnamese after a major victory on 6 January, while Vietnam continued to report incursions into its territory. The Vietnamese invasion was suspended in mid-January, and its forces were gradually withdrawn from Cambodia.

From the second half of January until June 1978 Vietnam's forces remained largely on the defensive repelling repeated Cambodian raids across the border. Vietnam's air force began systematic attacks against Cambodia in June 1978. After China cut off all aid to Vietnam the latter joined the Soviet bloc's economic union, COMECON, on 29 June. (Six months later it signed a Treaty of Friendship with the Soviet Union.)

In September 1978 the Khmer Rouge launched another series of raids deep into Vietnam, while the latter continued systematic incursions into Cambodia. Cambodia alleged the participation of foreign nationals--Russians and Cubans--as advisors to Vietnam's artillery companies and tank squadrons. By mid-September Vietnam's policy of minimum military reaction changed.

The Thai dimension of this international crisis emerged soon after the end of the first stage of the Cambodia/Vietnam crisis. Despite an agreement on 2 February 1978 to normalize Cambodian/Thai relations, Cambodian troops, often acting in collaboration with Thai communist guerrillas, continued to make frequent raids into Thailand. On the 9th a sharp increase in Cambodia's raids into Thai border villages triggered a crisis for Thailand. Assaults on police posts in the frontier zone and destruction of small nearby population centers took place with no serious obstacles on the part of the Thai army or its border police units. The Thai government, while opting for diplomatic measures to control Cambodia, responded on 10 April with a statement by its prime minister vowing swift and drastic retaliation. With the onset of the second stage of the Cambodia/Vietnam crisis in mid-December and a Cambodian invasion directed at the Vietnamese port of Ha Tien, the scale of incidents in Thailand was reduced, marking the end of its crisis.

The second stage of the crisis between Hanoi and Phnom Penh was initiated by Cambodia's intrusion into Vietnam on 15 December 1978. Vietnam responded with a massive and rapid strike into Cambodia on 25 December escalating the crisis for Cambodia (and the PRC--[see Case #298--Sino/Vietnam War, in 1978-79, in China/Vietnam PC]). Cambodia responded on the 31st with a request to the UN to condemn Vietnam and to demand that it cease "aggression" and that all Soviet military aid to Vietnam be stopped. The Cambodian foreign minister also requested an urgent meeting of the UN Security Council.

Vietnam's conquest of Cambodia was completed in less than a fortnight. On 7 January 1979 a puppet regime was installed in Phnom Penh terminating the crisis for Vietnam, for Cambodia--by force majeure--and the international crisis as a whole. However, it spilled over to a brief but intense military confrontation between China and Vietnam (see Case #298).

Many states were involved in this complex crisis. China and the USSR urged the parties to resolve their disputes through negotiation. At the same time substantial aid programs--the USSR to Vietnam, the PRC to Cambodia--continued throughout the crisis. North Korea sent pilots to fight alongside Cambodia--and China--in the Sino/Vietnam War. The Soviet bloc and Albania supported Vietnam. Laos, Yugoslavia, and Romania remained neutral. The divisions in the communist world were thus widened, a development for which Moscow denounced Beijing. Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Thailand condemned the Vietnam invasion of Cambodia in December 1978 and halted aid to Vietnam, as did Australia, Britain, Denmark, and Japan. The UN Security Council overruled Soviet and Czechoslovak objections and agreed to convene a formal meeting on 11 January 1979. Soviet proposals were rejected. And Prince Sihanouk was invited to address the meeting. A draft resolution was submitted on the 15th but was not adopted because of a Soviet veto.

(The Vietnam invasion of Cambodia succeeded in toppling the Pol Pot regime but failed to destroy the Khmer Rouge forces, thereby initiating a protracted guerrilla war for a decade. Under massive international pressure and internal problems Vietnam withdrew from Cambodia in 1989.)

References:

Amer 1992; An 1978; Bellows 1979; Bui Dien 1979; Galbraith 1980; Hung 1979; Jackson 1978, 1979; Kallgren 1979; Kershaw 1979; Leighton 1978a, 1978b; Pike 1978; Poole 1978; Sandler 1976; Thien 1978.

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