

Summary Report
Cambodia between Vietnam and China
Past and Present

Organized by
The Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace (CICP)
On 28th July 2014 at CICP Office in Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Context and Overview

On 28th July 2014, the Cambodia Institute for Cooperation and Peace (CICP) hosted a public lecture about “Cambodia between Vietnam and China – Past and Present” at its home office in Phnom Penh. 60 representatives from various diplomatic corps, civil society, academic scholars, professors, media and students attended this lecture.

After the countries of Indochina became independent, the emerging situation in divided Vietnam drew Cambodia gradually into a conflict it could hardly avoid. Pushed by China, Indochinese communists charged for power and imported their struggle to Cambodian territory. Competing groups in Cambodia allied themselves with foreign powers. The 1970 overthrow of Sihanouk plunged the country into a downward spin. The situation worsened when China and Vietnam engaged in conflict that turned Cambodians into pawns and their territory into a battlefield between 1975 and 1991. Only when Vietnam and China reconciled differences, the situation for Cambodia could finally improve.

Summary of the dialogue

H.E. Ambassador Pou Sothirak, Executive Director of the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace (CICP), made the opening remarks. He first emphasized that on 24th June 1967, when Cambodia and Vietnam first established diplomatic relations, the two countries understood that each other needed cooperation, mutual respect and understanding in order to boost social and economic development. Since then, the bilateral relations have been very fluctuating and are still now unsettled with regards to the South China Sea Conflict.

Bernd Schaefer, Senior Scholar with the Woodrow Wilson International Center’s Cold War International History Project (CWIHP) and Professorial Lecturer at George Washington University, both in Washington D.C., United States, started his lecture by describing the situation in Cambodia at the end of the 60s, with the first bilateral relations between Cambodia and China on one side, and Cambodia and the Viet Cong on the other.

In 1970, Prince Sihanouk was removed from power after a Coup d’état by the Lon Nol regime, which was a “major issue” for Vietnam. Lon Nol quickly implemented several steps, leading both China and its eastern neighbor to support the Communists. While the Khmer Rouge were doing the fighting, Prince Sihanouk was Head of the Government in Exile.

Bernd Schaefer then insisted on the decisive shift in Chinese diplomacy with Cambodia in 1975 – China has to use Cambodia as a balance against the growing Vietnamese influence, at a time where the clash between China and the USSR was becoming fiercer. From then on, China replaced Vietnam and started arming the Khmer Rouge.

Following the 1977/1978 border clash between Vietnam and Democratic Kampuchea, Vietnam had two plans to change the regime:

- ‘Overthrow from within’ using Cambodian anti-Pol Pot forces

- 'Intervention from outside' (as a last resort).

After the 1979 intervention, China coordinated the anti-Vietnamese insurgency from the Thai side of the border for several years. No military solution was possible. The only possible solution was change brought from the international scene which eventually happened from 1986 onwards in USSR and in Vietnam.

Resulting from this and the Tian an men events in 1989, China and Vietnam realized that they needed cooperation to subsist. The Chinese government therefore removed its UN support for the Democratic Kampuchea government. Cambodia finally regained complete territorial authority and integrity after more than 10 years of acute foreign influence.

According to Bernd Schaefer, it almost seems to be like a rule: Both Vietnam and China prefer a Cambodian government sharing their respective interests. When Vietnam and China act in accordance, Cambodia has barely any leverage; when Vietnam and China are in severe conflict with each other, Cambodian divisions will be exploited and the country suffers; when, like today, Vietnam and China are mere competitors, Cambodia gains in sovereignty but has to walk a very fine line in relation to both.

Bernd Schaefer concluded his presentation saying that if Cambodia places all its eggs in one basket, they will ultimately break. Cambodia needs as many baskets as possible - large, medium, and small.

H.E Ambassador Pou Sothirak asked the first question – Why did Prince Sihanouk chose China for setting up its Government in Exile? Bernd Schaefer noted that when the Prince Sihanouk was removed from power, he was on a visit in Moscow and Beijing was his next step. Furthermore, Prince Sihanouk knew China was going to support the Khmer Rouges and therefore decided that the only way to be part of the Chinese strategy was to come to China. On the other side, China apparently offered a lot to Prince Sihanouk to have him as the figurehead of the Government in Exile. Indian Ambassador to the Kingdom of Cambodia H.E. Dinesh K. Patnaik also reminded all of us that Prince Sihanouk and Chairman Mao were very close, almost like friends.

Mr. Cheng Hongbo, Chief of Political Section at the Chinese Embassy, continued with three clarifications. First, what has happened in Cambodia was not only the consequences of the power game between China and Vietnam. Second, China wants Cambodian to be independent. And third, History is important but current Chinese diplomacy with Cambodia is different than what it used to be.

When one of the participant asked why the USA helped the Khmer Rouge, H.E Ambassador Pou Sothirak clarified any confusion noting that the USA did not help the Khmer Rouge, but instead supported the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) where the Khmer Rouge were one of the three political factions.

Due to time limitations and the number of participants, only a few issues were addressed during the discussion session. H.E. Amb. Pou Sothirak closed the public lecture by thanking Dr. Bernd Schaefer and the audience for the excellent presentation and the lively discussion. He also mentioned that CICP will host another public lecture on “Promoting the responsibility to protect in ASEAN: What role for Cambodia?” on 6 August 2014 and a national conference on “ASEAN Community 2015 and Beyond: Cambodia’s Stage of Preparedness and Challenges” on 21-22 August 2014 at InterContinental hotel. The public lecture ended at 11:50am.