

Moscow-Beijing 'regional matters' overshadow Cambodian peace talks

by Linda de Hoyos

"We are able to survive thanks to the People's Republic of China," stated Prince Sihanouk, then head of state of Cambodia, on Dec. 31, 1963, on the eve of escalations that led to full-scale American involvement in the Vietnam War. "I do not know whether the P.R.C. loves us. I know that for its own interests at present the P.R.C. must protect us. As for the future, I do not know." However, Sihanouk continued, if the Americans "were on good terms with the P.R.C., we would be dead. . . . I concede again that after the disappearance of the United States from our region and the victory of the Communist camp, I myself and the People's Socialist Community [of Cambodia] that I have created would inevitably disappear from the scene."

Sihanouk's assessment of the dependency of his nation's existence on the whims and balances of power among super-powers in the region was, of course, correct. The overthrow of Sihanouk seven years later was one of the first fruits of Henry Kissinger's "China card" policy that led inexorably to the coming to power of the Chinese-backed Khmer Rouge in Cambodia in April 1975. Cambodia was the price exacted for the Kissinger China card, with the results the world knows: the four-year regime of the Khmer Rouge, in which the ultra-Maoists, trained at the Paris Sorbonne, perpetrated auto-cannibalism against the Cambodian people, with upwards of 3 million dead; the invasion of Cambodia by Vietnam in 1979 and the subsequent occupation by 140,000 Vietnamese troops; and the nine years of warfare between the Vietnamese and the Khmer Rouge guerrillas along the Thai-Cambodian border.

Now, 25 years after his prognosis for Cambodia's future, Prince Sihanouk has begun negotiations with Hun Sen, prime minister of the Vietnamese-backed government in Cambodia, in an attempt to end the Indochina conflict, and restore some modicum of political existence to Cambodia. Their Paris meetings in December and January, with two more in coming months, occurred at the prompting of the Soviet Union. Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Ivan Rogachev, applauding the meetings in a Jan. 12 press conference in Moscow, declared, "Cambodian affairs must be settled by the Cambodians themselves. This is a very important principle." However, Prince Sihanouk had a more realistic assessment of Cambodians' power when he emerged from the second meeting. Responding to Hun Sen's proposal to "eliminate

the Khmer Rouge military forces," Sihanouk was quoted by his son Prince Ranariddh as saying: "I'm not going to play such a game, and China would never agree. It's up to Vietnam on the one hand and China on the other to reach an agreement."

This statement reflects Sihanouk's appreciation of the fact that Cambodia continues to serve as the key pawn in the Sino-Soviet imperial game in the Asian theater. That the meetings have occurred and the international press is rife with talk about a "regional settlement" over Cambodia, is not for any reason intrinsic to Cambodia, Vietnam, or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). If it had been left to them, the Cambodian problem would have been solved long ago. Instead, the negotiations hinge on the imperial designs of the Soviet Union in the region, and secondarily China's. Although U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Asian and Pacific Affairs Gaston Sigur in Bangkok Jan. 19 hailed the "signs of movement" toward a political settlement for Cambodia, the United States is increasingly irrelevant, as would be indicated by Sihanouk's 1963 analysis.

Moscow's game

Although efforts were made over the summer among Vietnam, India, Japan, France, and Indonesia, to begin negotiations among the Vietnamese-backed Cambodian government and the three members of the anti-Vietnam coalition—Sihanouk, Son Sann, and the Khmer Rouge—little progress was made until the Soviet Union began its probes for a Moscow-Beijing summit.

On Nov. 28, Radio Moscow announced that Mikhail Gorbachov, in a meeting with Zambian President Kenneth Kaunda, had expressed his willingness to meet with Chinese leader Deng Xiao-ping "anywhere, anytime," but that the meeting must be held "without pre-conditions." The reply came on Dec. 4: "My proposal does contain a precondition," said Deng, "that the Soviet Union must urge Vietnam to pull out" of Cambodia.

In a Dec. 28 interview with the Chinese magazine *Liaowang*, Gorbachov presented his summit call again as an invitation to Beijing to play a role in a triangular superpower agreement for global rule. Moscow's improved relations with Washington since his early-December summit with Reagan are not to the detriment of Beijing, Gorbachov affirmed. "The

new political thinking that we have embraced rejects the old simplistic rule—that good relations with someone are necessarily to the detriment of others. . . . Political dialogue is being established. A Soviet-Chinese summit meeting could become in our view its logical development. . . . The U.S.S.R. and the United States are called sometimes superpowers, but we are far from the thought that everything in the world, including East-West relations, depends only on Moscow and Washington. We count on cooperation with the People's Republic of China, whose policy means a lot in world affairs."

Beijing, however, does not appear to be taken in by such offers. Unlike Washington's rush to give the store away and sign the treasonous INF treaty, Beijing is exacting a price from Moscow. Beijing, it would appear, recognizes that Moscow's proffers of a role for China in "superpower" global politics, is, in fact, a demand that Beijing kowtow to Moscow's Vladivostok Doctrine, put forward by Mikhail Gorbachov in 1986, and acknowledge Russia as an "Asian power" with its own imperial rights in the region.

Intricate maneuvers

For Moscow, as a "regional settlement" in Afghanistan might be a price for another summit with President Reagan, a "regional settlement" for Cambodia is the price being exacted by Beijing for a summit. As in Afghanistan, the Cambodians were induced to put forward a "policy of national reconciliation" in September, announced by then-Cambodian Foreign Minister Kong Kom from Moscow. To underscore the point, in December, Moscow's Afghan puppet Najibullah visited all the Indochina countries, emitting praise for the "program of reconciliation." But neither program has been successful.

Moscow's repeated calls for a summit since late November provided the impetus for the Sino-Soviet diplomatic maneuvers on the Cambodia issue:

- On Dec. 2, Sihanouk and Hun Sen met for the first time in Paris. The meeting had been initiated with a Nov. 19 letter from Hun Sen to the Cambodian prince, which contained an offer for Sihanouk to return to Cambodia in some official capacity. Go-betweens for the meeting, reported the Nov. 19 *Bangkok Post*, included Austria, Romania, France, the Palestine Liberation Organization, Algeria, and India.

The two emerged with a joint communiqué calling for the Khmer Rouge and Son Sann to join the negotiations; a political resolution to the Cambodian conflict; negotiations for the creation of an independent, sovereign and non-aligned country; and an international conference to guarantee Cambodia's independence. Sihanouk rejected Hun Sen's offer of a post in Phnom Penh, stating, "I would rather die in Beijing or Pyongyang than be a puppet President in Phnom Penh, a stooge of Hanoi."

Immediately after the meeting, Hun Sen flew to Moscow for consultations.

- On Dec. 1, Laos and China issued a public agreement

to restore friendly relations, after a week of negotiations held in Beijing. It should be noted that, according to Southeast Asian analysts, the Soviet Union has taken over nearly full control of Laos, rather than Vietnam.

- On Dec. 10, Sihanouk abruptly canceled the follow-up meeting with Hun Sen, scheduled to be held in Pyongyang, calling Hun Sen "a lackey of Vietnam." He placed new conditions on talks, namely an official undertaking by Vietnam to withdraw its troops from Cambodia as soon as a non-socialist, non-communist, and genuinely non-aligned, four-party government were formed.

- At this point, the Soviets rushed to the Indochinese countries. On Dec. 19, Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Boris Chaplin arrived in Laos and hailed Laotian and Vietnamese efforts to turn Asia into a "nuclear-free zone." On Dec. 20, Soviet KGB chief Viktor Chebrikov left Moscow to visit Laos and Vietnam.

- On Dec. 22, Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach sped to Moscow to discuss "urgent international issues, particularly the situation in Southeast Asia and around the Kampuchean issue," said Hanoi's news agency.

- On Jan. 4, Sihanouk conceded to a new round of talks with Hun Sen, but declared that "I will not sign, at the end of the negotiations, any joint communiqué without concrete progress toward a breakthrough of an equitable solution to the problem of Cambodia"—notably to include the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops. Dismissing the first meeting with Hun Sen as "only useful to give false hope to Cambodians," Sihanouk nevertheless said that the negotiations are "the last chance of saving our people and the Khmer homeland." A week later, Sihanouk went to Beijing.

- For its part, on Jan. 13, Vietnam announced that might be willing to withdraw its troops from Cambodia as early as the end of 1988, instead of its previous deadline, the end of 1990. Thai sources noted, however, that the Vietnamese are in the process of handing over bigger combat roles to Phnom Penh's own army, and had withdrawn its own troops from some areas.

- As Sihanouk and Hun Sen met in Paris for their second round, Beijing and Hanoi together announced that they had reached an agreement to improve relations and to conclude a cease-fire along the Sino-Vietnamese border, reported the Japanese daily *Yomiuri Shimbun* Jan. 20. The agreement was worked out in Hanoi between Chinese ambassador Li Shichun and Vietnamese Foreign Minister Thach.

However, these concessions from Vietnam did not succeed in gaining their objective: an agreement from China to demobilize the Khmer Rouge, as Hun Sen demanded of Sihanouk in Paris Jan. 21. For its own imperial reasons, there is little chance that China will let go of the Khmer Rouge, the strongest guerrilla force which has succeeded in the last year in penetrating deep into Cambodian territory. To the contrary, corroborated reports from Thailand are that China is building the Khmer Rouge into a "regular army" with "auxiliary"—that is, Chinese—forces.