

2014

# H-Diplo

## H-Diplo Roundtable Review

[h-diplo.org/roundtables](http://h-diplo.org/roundtables)

Volume XV, No. 39 (2014)

23 June 2014

*Roundtable Editors:* Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse

*Roundtable and Web Production Editor:* George Fujii

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux

Introduction by Kenton Clymer

**ANG Cheng Guan. *Singapore, ASEAN and the Cambodian Conflict 1978-1991*.** Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2013. ISBN: 978-9971-69-704-4 (paperback, \$36.00, S\$38.00).

Stable URL: <http://h-diplo.org/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-XV-39.pdf>

### Contents

---

Introduction by Kenton Clymer, Northern Illinois University .....	2
Review by Termsak Chalermpanupap, Visiting Research Fellow, ASEAN Studies Centre, ISEAS, Singapore .....	6
Review by Harish C. Mehta, McMaster University .....	8
Review by Sophie Quinn-Judge, Temple University .....	14
Review by Carlyle A. Thayer, The University of New South Wales, Canberra .....	17
Author's Response by Ang Cheng Guan, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore .....	23

© 2014 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

**Introduction by Kenton Clymer, Northern Illinois University**

---

Singapore's role in the Cambodian imbroglio from 1978 to 1991 has not been totally ignored, but until now it had not received any in-depth scholarly attention. Thus, for example, MacAlister Brown and Joseph J. Zasloff's standard work, *Cambodia Confounds the Peacemakers 1979-1998*, mentions Singapore only twice, with no index listing of Lee Kuan Yew. Kenneth Conboy's excellent recent work, *The Cambodia Wars: Clashing Armies and CIA Covert Operations*, has no index mention of Singapore and gives Lee Kuan Yew only limited attention.<sup>1</sup>

All the reviewers correctly observe that this lack of attention is now happily at an end: Ang Chen Guan has produced a book on the role of ASEAN and Singapore in the Cambodian matter that will surely be the definitive diplomatic account for some time to come. As Harish C. Mehta puts it, *Singapore, ASEAN and the Cambodian Conflict 1978-1991* "is the first scholarly contribution to this neglected topic." Termsak Chalermpanupap observes that Ang did a "a marvelous job in bringing to light the crucial active role of Singapore in the Cambodian Conflict," while Carlyle A. Thayer writes that "Ang Chen Guan has written a powerfully persuasive account of the political-diplomatic role of Singapore both within ASEAN and the international community in seeking a comprehensive political settlement to the conflict in Cambodia."

The reviewers all agree that Ang's work stands out because his writing is based on the unprecedented use of Singaporean government records, his use of many oral histories, and his interviews with those who were directly involved. Thus Chalermpanupap writes, "his unique access to the confidential archival records of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Singapore enables him to authoritatively explain key developments in the twelve years of the conflict, albeit on the basis of Singapore's assessment. His interviews with key Singaporean government figures who took part in dealing with the conflict helps readers of the book gain additional insights into Singapore's thinking, from opposing the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia on Christmas Day of 1978 until the comprehensive settlement in 1991." The result is that we now know with more certainty that Singapore's diplomacy was vigorous, important, and often successful. It led the way in condemning the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia; organizing resistance to Vietnam's alleged client state [the People's Republic of Kampuchea, (PRK)]; helping forge the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK); lobbying successfully to have Democratic Kampuchea, and its subsequent incarnation the Khmer Rouge-dominated CGDK, represent Cambodia at the United Nations; and playing an important, though not dominant, role in the peace negotiations.

But there is some concern that Ang's vision is too narrow. As Sophie Quinn-Judge puts it, Ang "sticks closely" to his sources, thus perhaps implying that, if previous authors have

---

<sup>1</sup> MacAlister Brown and Joseph J. Zasloff, *Cambodia Confounds the Peacemakers 1979-1998* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998). Kenneth Conboy, *The Cambodian Wars: Clashing Armies and CIA Covert Operations* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2013).

unfairly ignored Singapore, Ang's work may overstate the island nation's importance. Mehta also suggests that a broader view would have strengthened the book. As he comments about one specific matter, "it would be helpful if a more detailed discussion was included on the Singapore/ASEAN perspective of the process by which Malaysia, Philippines, Brunei, Europe, Australia and New Zealand began to prefer Hun Sen, and why the United States, Britain, and France accepted that it was not practical to replace the entire PRK structure."

Larger questions involve Singapore's general response to the Khmer Rouge and Vietnam's invasion. Once the Khmer Rouge took over, everyone agrees that they instituted one of the most brutal regimes in recent history – call it genocide, auto-genocide, or horrific human rights abuses. Over two million people, out of a population of perhaps seven million, perished. Was this a matter of concern to Singapore? As Thayer asks, "did Singapore have an accurate intelligence appreciation of what life was like under Khmer Rouge rule and if so were there no debates within policy-making circles about how Singapore, ASEAN and/or the international community should respond to a regime that conducted mass murder, bordering on genocide of selected groups, on a daily basis?" Or as Quinn-Judge observes, Ang "mostly ignores humanitarian issues."

Similarly, reviewers suggest that Ang should have investigated more fully why Vietnam invaded Cambodia in the first place. Prior to the invasion, Vietnam had put up with numerous Khmer Rouge attacks across the border, attacks that killed thousands of Vietnamese. Of this, Thayer writes, "did the Singapore intelligence community have an accurate appreciation of the scale, scope and intensity of armed Khmer Rouge attacks on Vietnam's southwestern provinces, particularly in 1977-1978 and Vietnam's punitive response? Ang's account passes over these developments lightly." How would other countries have responded to such attacks? Thayer points out that "Vietnam's intervention in Cambodia could be justified under international law on three grounds: self-defence, the rescue of its nationals, and humanitarian intervention." And Mehta observes of the Vietnamese invasion, "many non-aligned nations . . . viewed it not as an invasion but an act of liberation of the Cambodian people from the genocidal regime."

But Singapore's stated reason for opposing the Vietnamese was legalistic: "the principle involved was that no foreign military intervention should be allowed to overthrow a legally constituted regime" (5). Ang does not question Singapore's assertion. But was Democratic Kampuchea "a legally constituted regime?" It had come to power through a violent revolution, and the Khmer Rouge's penchant for brutality was known well before they fought their way into Phnom Penh. Why is that "a legally constituted regime?"

The overthrow of "a legally constituted regime" was, nevertheless at the heart of Singapore's justification for its unwillingness to recognize the new People's Republic of Kampuchea that the Vietnamese installed. Yet over time the PRK had at least as much claim to legitimacy as had Democratic Kampuchea. As Thayer points out, "the PRK met most of the criteria for diplomatic recognition: it had a national administrative structure with an identifiable capital in Phnom Penh, it controlled the vast majority of the people, its domestic sovereignty was widely recognized within the country, and its sovereignty had a

degree of international recognition (the Soviet Union and its allies, Vietnam, Laos and India).” Nor did the Coalition Government of Kampuchea, established by Vietnam’s opponents, have much claim to legitimacy. It was “a virtual government with little claim to sovereignty other than recognition by the international community.”

In sum, while all of the reviewers admire *Singapore, ASEAN and the Cambodian Conflict 1978-1991* for the depth of research and the unquestioned advance of scholarship in this confusing and difficult landscape, some of them suggest that Ang's vision was too narrow and that he was not as skeptical or critical of Singapore as he might have been. Nevertheless, all agree that anyone interested in the Cambodian conflict will need to consult this important book.

### Participants:

**Ang Cheng Guan** is presently Head of Graduate Studies at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore. He is the author of *Vietnamese Communist Relations with China and the Second Indo-China Conflict, 1956-1962* (Jefferson : MacFarland, 1997, reprinted in paperback, 2012), *The Vietnam War from the Other Side: The Vietnamese Communists' Perspective* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002, paperback 2006), its sequel, *Ending the Vietnam War: The Vietnamese Communists' Perspective* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004, paperback 2006); *Southeast Asia and the Vietnam War* (London: Routledge, 2010, hardback, paperback and e-book); *Lee Kuan Yew's Strategic Thought* (London: Routledge, 2013, hardback, softback and e-book) and *Singapore, ASEAN and the Cambodia Conflict, 1979-1991* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013). He has published in edited volumes as well as in journals including *Asian Survey*, *Journal of Contemporary History*, *War and Society*, *War in History*, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, *Security Dialogue*, *Southeast Asia Research*, *Cold War History*, *Asian Security* and the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*. He is currently working on two book projects: (a) *Southeast Asia and the Cold War, 1945-1991: An International History* and its sequel (b) *Southeast Asia and the Post-Cold War: The First Thirty Years*.

**Kenton Clymer** is Distinguished Research Professor in the Department of History at Northern Illinois University where he teaches courses in the history of American Foreign Relations with a particular focus on Southeast Asia. He received his Ph.D. at the University of Michigan. He is the author of six books, three of which concern American relations with Cambodia. He is currently completing a history of United States relations with Burma/Myanmar since World War II.

**Termsak Chalermpanupap** recently retired from the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta after nearly twenty years of service in the political and security field of ASEAN cooperation. He is now a Visiting Research Fellow working on political and security affairs at the ASEAN Studies Centre, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore. He has a BA in Political Science from Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand and a MA and Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of New Orleans.

**Sophie Quinn-Judge** worked as a volunteer for the American Friends Service Committee in Southeast Asia, and as a free-lance journalist in Moscow before receiving her Ph.D. from SOAS, University of London. She is the author of *Ho Chi Minh: The Missing Years* and the co-editor with O. Arne Westad of *The Third Indochina War: Conflict between China, Vietnam and Cambodia*. She is an Associate Professor of History at Temple University.

**Harish C. Mehta** (Ph.D., McMaster University, 2009) has taught Southeast Asian History, the Vietnam Wars, Human Rights in History, U.S. Foreign Relations, and Global History at University of Toronto, Trent University, and McMaster. His articles on Vietnam have appeared in *Diplomatic History*, *The Historian*, and *Peace & Change*, and his articles and book chapters on Cambodia/Vietnam have appeared in *Globalisation: Australian-Asian Perspectives*; *Media Asia*; *Southeast Asian Affairs 1996*, and *Regional Outlook: Southeast Asia 1998-99*. A new edition of his book *Strongman: The Extraordinary Life of Hun Sen, From Pagoda Boy to Prime Minister of Cambodia* (co-author Julie Mehta) was published in 2013.

**Carlyle A. Thayer** is Emeritus Professor, The University of New South Wales at the Australian Defence Force Academy in Canberra. He was educated at Brown (A.B. in Political Science, 1967) and holds an M.A. degree from Yale (Southeast Asian Studies, 1971) and a PhD from The Australian National University (International Relations, 1977). Thayer first visited Cambodia in 1981 and returned regularly in the 1980s; he was a United Nations accredited observer for the May 1993 elections. Thayer is the author of over 450 academic publications including: Viberto Selochan and Carlyle A. Thayer, eds., *Bringing Democracy to Cambodia: Peacekeeping and Elections* (Canberra: Regime Change and Regime Maintenance in Asia and the Pacific Project, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University and Australian Defence Studies Centre, 1996); Ramesh Thakur and Carlyle A. Thayer, eds., *A Crisis of Expectations: UN Peacekeeping in the 1990s*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995); *Beyond Indochina*, Adelphi Paper 297 (London: Oxford University Press for the International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1995), and Ramesh Thakur and Carlyle A. Thayer, *Soviet Relations with India and Vietnam* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1992).

Review by Termsak Chalermplanupap, Visiting Research Fellow, ASEAN Studies Centre, ISEAS, Singapore

---

**A**ng Cheng Guan, does a marvelous job in bringing to light the crucial active role of Singapore in the Cambodian Conflict. His unique access to the confidential archival records of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Singapore enables him to authoritatively explain key developments in the twelve years of the conflict, albeit on the basis of Singapore's assessment. His interviews with key Singaporean government figures who took part in dealing with the conflict helps readers of the book gain additional insights into Singapore's thinking, from opposing the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia on Christmas Day of 1978 until the comprehensive settlement in 1991.

From the book, it is clear that essentially Singapore had to ensure the sanctity of the rule of law and non-use of force in overthrowing a neighbour's government. This is directly relevant to Singapore's own political survival amid larger neighbours. Moreover, if Vietnam had succeeded in dominating Cambodia by force, then Thailand could have been the next 'domino' to fall and the rest of Southeast Asia, including Singapore, might have come under increased communist threat.

The book also reveals, to my surprise, that most of the lobbying efforts in the UN to defend the Cambodian seat (for the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK)), instead of it going to the pro-Vietnam Heng Samrin regime in Phnom Penh, the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) or being kept empty) were done mostly by Singapore. The book also confirms the open secret that Singapore took part in providing covert military assistance to the two non-communist Cambodian factions in the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) [the Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF) of Son Sann, and the National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative Cambodia (NFUNCINPEC) of Prince Sihanouk].

A bigger surprise in the book is the revelation that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was not that united after all – even though the Cambodian Conflict was the first regional security crisis it had to face as a group. Brunei and the Philippines were rather indifferent, though they could support ASEAN in general. Indonesia, according to the book, tended to be more accommodating to Vietnam (partly because of Indonesian distrust of China). However, President Suharto is shown to be quite mindful of the need to ensure unity in ASEAN. The much-celebrated JIM process (Jakarta Informal Meetings in 1988 and 1989) engineered by Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas, according to the book, didn't really achieve anything of substance. (152) Malaysia could be persuaded to support Singapore and ASEAN although Malaysia also wanted to play its own role. Thailand clearly sided with China in opposing the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia.

Not surprisingly, ASEAN succeeded in only defending the Cambodian seat for the CGDK. What actually led to the comprehensive settlement in Cambodia in the 1991 Paris Peace Accords were the normalization of relations between China and the Soviet Union,



and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union, which ended Soviet military aid to Vietnam. Without these two historic developments, the conflict might have dragged on for another decade.

The U.S., meanwhile, was rather reluctant to get involved, because of the political hangover from the Vietnam War. During the Carter Administration (1977-1981), the U.S. was actually at least “two steps behind ASEAN” although most in ASEAN would prefer having the U.S. “side by side ASEAN.” (76) Nevertheless, the U.S. woke up during the Bush Administration to accept some role as one of the Permanent Five Members in the UN Security Council (P5). With the support of the P5, the Paris peace conferences could be held under the co-chairmanship of France and Indonesia.

The book is rich in historical details and interesting anecdotes. One of my favourites is a revelation of Bilahari Kausikan (at that time a mid-level MFA official) about Singapore’s strategy to make sure that the International Conference on Cambodia, convened in Paris from 30 July – 30 August 1989, did not arrive at a premature settlement by crafting Singapore’s opening statement “to get everyone in a wrong state of mind.” (128) Another amusing one is how Professor Tommy Koh (as Singapore’s Permanent Representative to the UN) could take the floor and make a lengthy speech – without repeating himself – to play for time while his officials frantically searched the UN lounges and corridors for delegates from friendly countries who could vote for the ASEAN resolution on Cambodia.

Undoubtedly, the author convincingly shows that Singapore succeeded in playing its role. On the other hand, Indonesia and Thailand as well as all four Cambodian factions may find some of the revelations less than palatable. If that is the case, then they can also open their archives and let outsiders examine their confidential documents and internal reports about the conflict. It is time to unlock more of the secrets.

In sum, the book is an invaluable contribution to our better understanding of the Cambodian Conflict. It is also an important testimony of how Singapore can and did sometimes punch above its weight in a regional crisis.

Review by Harish C. Mehta, McMaster University

---

Ang Cheng Guan's study of the diplomacy conducted by Singapore and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to resolve the Cambodian Civil War (1978 to 1991) is the first scholarly contribution to this neglected topic. Ang, an accomplished Singaporean academic, was given unprecedented access to the archival records of the Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), as well as personal interviews with senior Singapore diplomats. For these reasons, the book is exceptional.

This reviewer has had the benefit of observing Singapore/ASEAN diplomacy from close quarters. Based in Singapore from 1987-2003 as senior Indochina correspondent with the *Business Times* (Straits Times Group), I regularly attended briefings by Singapore diplomats. They explained why they supported the Non Communist Resistance (NCR) armed forces of Prince Norodom Sihanouk and former Prime Minister Son Sann, and they clarified the Singapore position at the UN, and intra-ASEAN politics underlying the informal talks at Jakarta between the Cambodian factions. I also reported the crisis from the Cambodian perspective, interviewing more than forty Cambodian politicians, which resulted in my recent biography of Prime Minister Hun Sen which uses U.S. archives to show how U.S. diplomats came full circle from initially opposing Hun Sen to accepting him as a leader who could ensure that the Khmer Rouge would not return to power.<sup>1</sup> Ang's exploration of these issues from a Singaporean/ASEAN perspective offers many new revelations and insights into the role of the principal participants in the peace process, such as China's dogged support for the genocidal Khmer Rouge, U.S. pressure on Singapore to adhere to the Chinese position on the Khmer Rouge (and the U.S. threat that Singapore's non-compliance would cause "blood on the floor"), and the sharp divide that split ASEAN down the middle, with some ASEAN states warming up to the Hun Sen regime, and others opposing it (40).

Why should Singapore/ASEAN diplomacy matter when the larger powers considered Cambodia as a nation located within their own spheres of influence? Bilahari Kausikan, a Permanent Secretary of the MFA, has aptly labelled the Cambodian crisis a "Sino-Soviet conflict in which ASEAN was but a secondary player" (3). The United States and the Soviet Union backed rival Cambodian factions at the height of the Cold War, and the long shadow of Sino-Soviet rivalry prevented resolution. Nonetheless, Singapore's diplomacy matters because this small island-nation played a dominant role in framing ASEAN's Cambodia policy, and in projecting a tough anti-Vietnam stance at various fora, such as the United Nations, the non-aligned nations' summit meetings, and the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings (CHOGM).

There are at least two historical moments that shaped Singapore's diplomacy: one is the MFA decision to support the Lon Nol regime which had ousted Sihanouk as head of state in 1970. Ang explains that the U.S.-backed Republican regime of Lon Nol took charge of the same government that Sihanouk had led, and the "change" of head of state was a "purely

---

<sup>1</sup> Harish C. Mehta and Julie B. Mehta, *Strongman: The Extraordinary Life of Hun Sen, From Pagoda Boy to Prime Minister of Cambodia* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2013).



internal affair” (8). By adopting a neutral stance, Singapore stayed out of the internal political crisis that reached a terrible crescendo in the Khmer Rouge genocide, and eventually exploded into civil war within nine years.

The second historical moment occurred when Singapore and ASEAN diplomatically challenged the Vietnamese ‘invasion’ of Cambodia in 1979 which overthrew the Khmer Rouge and installed in power the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) regime led by Heng Samrin. At this stage, Singapore could no longer afford to remain neutral. Many non-aligned nations, however, viewed it not as an invasion but an act of liberation of the Cambodian people from the genocidal regime. Ang explains that the rationale for the new relationship between Singapore and Democratic Kampuchea (formal name of the Khmer Rouge) was to encourage Cambodia’s independence from Vietnamese influence (9).

The Cambodian crisis was not just an ordinary issue to Singapore, it was an existential question. In the words of MFA Permanent Secretary, S.R. Nathan (who later became president of Singapore), “the principle involved was that no foreign military intervention should be allowed to overthrow a legally constituted regime,” and that “if this principle was violated, it would create a dangerous precedent” with foreign forces entering Thailand and setting up a regime under a local Thai communist party (5). Nathan was warning of a possible domino effect.

Ang deftly traces the early initiatives of Singapore diplomacy, pointing out that Singapore Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam initiated a special ASEAN foreign ministers’ meeting in Bangkok in January 1979, soon after Vietnamese forces had toppled the Khmer Rouge (20). Ang demonstrates Singapore’s fair-mindedness: Based on its opposition to outside powers intervening in Southeast Asia, Singapore also opposed the Chinese attack on Vietnam in February 1979 to “teach Vietnam a lesson” for its destruction of the Khmer Rouge regime (21).

ASEAN denounced the Khmer Rouge genocide, yet it cynically chose to support the Khmer Rouge because it was the only Cambodian entity capable of fighting the Vietnamese army in Cambodia. Singapore continued recognizing Democratic Kampuchea diplomatically, but it did not wish to see the return of the Pol Pot regime because of its genocidal record (24). This meant that its leaders would support Democratic Kampuchea as the holder of the UN seat because if the Pol Pot regime was denied diplomatic backing, there was the danger of losing the Cambodian seat to the PRK.

Ang makes clear that Singapore’s Cambodia diplomacy was shaped by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, whose friendship with Prince Norodom Sihanouk defined the relationship between the two countries (7-8). Concerned about the lack of credibility of the Khmer Rouge, Prime Minister Lee told the Thais in September 1980 that Khmer Rouge leader “Khieu Samphan must eventually be replaced as he was too closely identified with Pol Pot, and both Sihanouk and Son Sann must get to centre-stage within a year,” and when that happened Hanoi would be forced to change its policy (36). Acutely aware of China’s unstinting support for Pol Pot, Lee, on a visit to Beijing in November 1980, told Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping that in order for ASEAN diplomacy at the UN to be credible, ASEAN

must not be seen to be restoring Pol Pot to Cambodia (36). Deng responded that China was unwilling to withdraw support to the Khmer Rouge because it was the only military force capable of fighting the Vietnamese. Deng was, however, willing to promote an alliance of anti-Vietnamese forces, including Cambodia's non-communist groups.

The author, to his credit, has probed an enervating rift within ASEAN that Vietnam capitalized upon. Initially, while Thailand accommodated the Chinese position on Cambodia, three other ASEAN countries, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines, did not want ASEAN to succumb to Chinese pressure. Ang's narrative is layered with florid language the diplomats used: In July 1981, the acting Chinese Foreign Minister told Singapore Foreign Minister S. Dhanabalan "in a very stern accusatory tone" that "he knew what Singapore was up to [at the International Conference on Kampuchea, the ICK, in New York in July that year]. Dhanabalan recalls: "He implied that we were engaged in a secret conspiracy to shape the sentiment at the conference against the return of the overthrown regime" (38-39).

Ang reveals the "infamous" behavior of the United States which became "etched in the minds of MFA officers who were involved in the Cambodian issue" (39). U.S. Secretary of State for East Asia and the Pacific, John Holdridge, warned Dhanabalan that Singapore should not do anything which might upset the Chinese. Holdridge "threatened" Dhanabalan that he would "go over my head and take the matter up with Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew" (39). Veteran MFA diplomat Kishore Mahbubani declared that he was "really astounded" by the battle with the United States. Other MFA officials recalled Holdridge telling Dhanabalan that if Singapore did not compromise there would be "blood on the floor" (40). Singapore Ambassador Tommy Koh explained that during the Cold War China was of greater strategic importance to the United States than ASEAN.

Another edifying disclosure is that Prime Minister Lee had initially refused to have anything to do with Prince Sihanouk after the Prince had allied himself to the Khmer Rouge following the *coup d'état* that removed him from power in 1970. But in December 1979, Lee once again placed the highest hopes on Sihanouk and extended an invitation to Sihanouk to visit Singapore (49). Ang reveals that Lee, then, promoted Sihanouk to other ASEAN countries, none of which was keen to host him. To this end, Lee advised the Prince to visit other ASEAN countries as well. It turns out that it was Lee "who convinced" the Thais and Indonesians to accept Sihanouk as the potential head of a third Cambodian force, the NCR (51).

When necessary, Singapore officials used hardball tactics against the Khmer Rouge in order to force them into joining a proposed Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK), grouping Sihanouk, Son Sann, and the Khmer Rouge. Rajaratnam threatened Khmer Rouge leader Ieng Sary that if his party did not cooperate and join the CGDK, then ASEAN and Singapore would recognize the PRK regime. Sary "caved in," and the CGDK was formed in Kuala Lumpur in June 1982 (56-57). Rajaratnam scolded Sary that Khmer Rouge atrocities were many times worse than Adolf Hitler's crimes. Owing to these concerns, Singapore gave military aid to the NCR, but not to the Khmer Rouge.

Ang graphically demonstrates that the CGDK was hardly a picture of unity, despite the best efforts of Singapore diplomats to portray it as cohesive for purposes of constructing a united front against Vietnam and the PRK. Realizing that it was not winning the battle of diplomacy, Hanoi now turned its strategy to allowing the CGDK to implode (61-62).

Singapore diplomacy attempted to maintain a balance of regional power because ASEAN interests would be hurt if Vietnam emerged a loser and China dominated Indochina (66). The best solution was to have Vietnam withdraw from Cambodia while preserving its integrity, and also to satisfy China's concerns. Yet, it became obvious in the annual dry season offensive of December 1983 that Vietnam did not aim to totally destroy the Khmer Rouge, as Hanoi needed them in order to justify its own presence in Cambodia (68).

The CGDK's credibility was damaged when Vietnamese forces gained control of the Khmer Rouge stronghold of Phnom Malai in the 1984-85 dry season fighting (87). ASEAN foreign ministers met in February 1985 to renew their support for the NCR in order to face the increasing military superiority of Vietnamese/PRK forces (88).

ASEAN was realistic about holding peace talks, and therefore it did not ask Vietnam to withdraw its troops before talks could be held (90). Rajaratnam did not want ASEAN to "corner" the Vietnamese, but to instead offer them "an honourable and hopeful way out" (91). In 1984, among ASEAN countries, Indonesia was the most sympathetic towards Vietnam (75).

Ang explains why ASEAN policy had begun to unravel. ASEAN's insistence on the CGDK not holding direct talks with the Heng Samrin regime had begun to irritate Sihanouk, who had agreed to meet PRK Prime Minister Hun Sen in France in November-December 1987. Sihanouk was displeased with Singapore's efforts to thwart his attempts to seek a political solution (102). He believed ASEAN was "too hardline" with the bottom line determined by the Thais (103). So when Sihanouk and Hun Sen met that year, ASEAN had no choice but to accept the new reality as well. In effect, ASEAN policy was failing because the PRK had established its legitimacy, Vietnam was let off the hook, and the CGDK was sidelined (103).

Elaborating the split within ASEAN, Ang demonstrates that Thailand and Indonesia jockeyed to dominate policymaking, and both countries forged closer links with Vietnam, while Singapore and Malaysia stayed firm in their opposition to Hanoi and the PRK (renamed State of Cambodia in 1989). Bilahari recalled that he had received instructions from his ministry that the Jakarta Informal Talks in Bogor in July 1988 "must not succeed prematurely" (108), implying that it was not acceptable to have an agreement that left the Hun Sen regime in power, without a verifiable withdrawal of Vietnamese forces. At the talks, Vietnam tried to exploit the differences between Indonesia and Thailand. Indonesia bent over backwards to please Hanoi as Jakarta regarded the talks as an opportunity to raise its global profile (110). Sihanouk criticized ASEAN: he thought the Indonesians were too accommodating of Vietnam, and the Thais too close to the Khmer Rouge (111). ASEAN unity was hurt by rivalry between Thai Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan, who wanted closer economic ties with the Hun Sen regime on the one hand, and the Indonesian foreign ministry on the other hand, for control of Indochina policy. In January 1989, Chatichai

invited Hun Sen to visit Bangkok, representing a major departure from established ASEAN policy to isolate his regime (119).

Indonesia and Singapore symbolized the two extremes of ASEAN policy: Indonesia worked towards an internal settlement that would leave Hun Sen in power, while Singapore promoted a four-party government among the Cambodian factions (121). Not only did Indonesia believe that Hun Sen was the most credible candidate for leadership and was essential to prevent the return of the Khmer Rouge, but Jakarta also wanted real power to reside with Hun Sen under titular leadership of Sihanouk (123).

ASEAN's control of the Cambodian conflict loosened when the issue was taken over by the International Conference on Cambodia (ICC) hosted by France in 1989. Signaling that ASEAN's policy had reached its limits, President François Mitterrand now clearly supported Hun Sen (125).

Once again, Bilahari revealed that he had received clear instructions from his superiors to ensure that the ICC did not reach a premature settlement (128). In its clash with Indonesia, Singapore argued that Hun Sen was not a purely internal party (130). Sihanouk had, however, temporarily accepted Hun Sen's control of the country within a four-party government, till he could appoint his own officials, but Singapore opposed this proposal. At this time Australia demonstrated sympathy for Vietnam, and declared that it could not disregard the Hun Sen regime beyond 1990 (136, 142).

Ang shows, step by step, the gradual undoing of ASEAN policy. A Singapore MFA report on the 44<sup>th</sup> UN General Assembly debate in 1989 cautioned ASEAN that its confrontation with Vietnam at the UN was out of sync with the times, and that "the ASEAN resolution on Cambodia is in danger of being perceived as an anachronism" (143). The MFA now concluded that if Singapore maintained "a hardline position, Singapore risks being isolated," and if Singapore did not modify its strategy "an unpalatable agreement could be forced on us at a reconvened ICC." It added: "Singapore would then be perceived as having suffered a diplomatic defeat" (145). When the UN Permanent Five took over the Cambodian issue in 1990, ASEAN and Singapore decisively lost control of it (147).

For the purpose of this roundtable, an elaboration of the following questions would be helpful, provided the relevant MFA documents are available: The Lee Kuan Yew-Norodom Sihanouk friendship defined the bilateral Singapore-Cambodia relationship, representing a personal link between two influential leaders of Southeast Asia that separately steered their countries out of colonial tutelage, and went on to create a national identity for their people. For these reasons, the author could have included summaries of their conversations over the years which would clarify where they agreed or disagreed on national and global issues. The author discusses the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge regime in chapter two, but he does not present the Singapore/ASEAN explanation of why Vietnam intervened with military force.

Ang cites a post-mortem report on the ICK by Tommy Koh, in which Koh notes that Washington did not support ASEAN at the conference. Koh, then, declares: "The most

damning comment [in the report] was reserved for Japan for being double-faced and ‘betraying’ ASEAN” (41). The narrative, however, does not explain how and why Japan had “betrayed” ASEAN at the ICK. It would be helpful if a more detailed discussion was included on the Singapore/ASEAN perspective of the process by which Malaysia, Philippines, Brunei, Europe, Australia and New Zealand began to prefer Hun Sen, and why the United States, Britain, and France accepted that it was not practical to replace the entire PRK structure (149).

The cover of the book visually represents Singapore’s diplomacy with the principal actor in Cambodian Cold War politics, Prince Norodom Sihanouk. In this rare photograph, MFA Permanent Secretary S.R. Nathan appears to explain a point of diplomatic strategy and Sihanouk listens attentively and with concern. Ang’s historical narrative -- laden with high diplomatic tension, colourful language, and secret meetings -- takes the Sihanouk saga up to 1991, just a couple of years short of Sihanouk’s crowning as the King of Cambodia, albeit a powerless one. I hope this book will have a sequel pick up the story of Singapore/ASEAN diplomacy with the Hun Sen regime in 1991 and take it to the present.

Ang Cheng Guan's account of Singapore's role in the resolution of the Cambodia conflict, based on his access to Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) archives, sticks closely to its source material. The story of the protracted negotiations aimed at ending Vietnam's occupation and removing its client government, the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), is presented with chronological precision, mainly from Singapore's point of view. I approached this reading as a necessary academic chore, but before long found myself engrossed in the unfolding events of those final years of the Cold War. This may be because I lived through these years in Singapore, Bangkok and Moscow, as someone concerned mainly with humanitarian issues. But I should also disclose my sympathy for Vietnam's plight. At the time I was unable to fathom the cynicism of the United States government in its continued refusal to call for the disarming of the Khmer Rouge. It seemed that if the Western powers had offered diplomatic recognition and security guarantees to Vietnam, the occupation could have ended more speedily. After all, the Vietnamese had removed from power a brutal regime, one that most observers now admit had carried out genocide and/or crimes against humanity. What I had not grasped in 1979 or 1985 was that China and the U.S. were happy to see Vietnam bogged down in an expensive occupation, one that brought it economic isolation and a badly tarnished reputation. Ang's book makes this point clear.

Learning what the disciplined Singaporean diplomats were saying in their internal dispatches has given me a deeper appreciation of their insight. They reveal some striking disagreements with U.S. policy: when the Chinese delegation to a July 1981 conference on the Cambodia crisis refused the ASEAN suggestion that all the Khmer resistance groups be disarmed, the US delegation refused to support the Southeast Asians, "putting its strategic alliance with China ahead of its relations with ASEAN" (39). Ang writes that "Singapore saw this inflexible Chinese position as evidence of Beijing not wanting an early solution, and that it was more interested in a protracted conflict to 'bleed' Vietnam" (38). Kishore Mahbubani, a young diplomat at the time, claimed that, "we were totally shocked and absolutely astonished when the U.S. supported China against ASEAN. It did so for geopolitical reasons. The US was so keen to get China to join it in its battle against the Soviet Union that it sacrificed all its moral principles of human rights and told ASEAN to back down in the fight against China" (39-40).

Singapore basically buckled under and spent the next nine years working to maintain a unified ASEAN position on the conflict, keeping up the pressure on Vietnam to withdraw its troops, in exchange for very little in the way of reassurance that the Khmer Rouge would not return to power. The annual vote on the Cambodian seat at the United Nations was a major focus of Singapore's lobbying, which was successful year after year, as Ang points out (35). By 1981, however, this vote in favor of Pol Pot's Democratic Kampuchea was becoming a hard sell, and without the creation of a Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK), including a group led by a former Prime Minister, Son Sann, and another loyal to Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the non-communist countries would have deserted the anti-Vietnam voting bloc.



Once the CGDK was formally established in 1982, Singapore opened a secret supply line of weapons to the non-communist groups, by 1989 furnishing \$60 million U.S. worth, including anti-tank weapons, assault rifles and some surface-to-air missiles (59). The details of this program are still classified. The U.S. offered four million dollars of non-lethal aid to the non-communists, as the CIA informed Lee Kuan Yew in 1982; the bulk of the weapons for both the Khmers Rouges and the non-communist resistance came from China, however. Notes of a 1982 conversation between Sihanouk and Lee Kuan Yew reveal Lee's belief that if the Vietnamese withdrew, the client government of Heng Samrin would fall; Heng Samrin "was nothing," he said (58-9). It was essential to create a countervailing Cambodia force against the K.R., in both the military and diplomatic arenas.

By mid-1985 the optimism regarding the fighting potential of the non-communist resistance was fading, after a successful Vietnamese dry season offensive "ended the fiction of a Democratic Kampuchean territory," Ang explains, quoting Nayan Chanda (87). A November 1985 position paper by the MFA conceded that "the real danger exists that the Cambodian issue, which has fostered ASEAN cohesion since 1979, may become the issue which leads to cracks in ASEAN's unity" (94). By April 1986 Lee was admitting that far from disappearing, Heng Samrin would now have a place in any future coalition government (95).

From this point the story widens to include the rapid changes taking place in Sino-Soviet, as well as Soviet-U.S. relations. Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev's July 1986 Vladivostok speech declared the USSR's readiness to cooperate in solving the Cambodia problem. The thawing international climate encouraged ASEAN members in Indonesia and Malaysia to open independent contacts with Vietnam, and in Indonesia's case, to express more openly its desire to prevent a stronger Chinese role in Southeast Asia. By 1987, Sihanouk's patience with ASEAN initiatives was wearing thin, as he believed that differences between the harder-line Thais and the Indonesians were hampering ASEAN's effectiveness. The Prince was by then making plans to meet the PRK Foreign Minister Hun Sen in France, a meeting that resulted in a 4-point agreement that, in Singapore's view, "incorporated all the main elements of the Vietnamese proposals" (103). Still, Sihanouk needed Chinese support and thus could not abandon or go around the established negotiating framework. ASEAN forged ahead with the 'Jakarta Informal Meeting,' actually held in Bogor in July 1988, which brought all the parties to the conflict together. By this point Sihanouk and the Vietnamese had convinced ASEAN that the return of the Khmer Rouge must be prevented; this was necessary "to deny Vietnam a pretext for re-colonizing Cambodia," in Sihanouk's view (108).

Once the Vietnamese completed their troop withdrawal in September 1989, the final political solution was within reach. Yet it was not until the late summer of 1991 that all the pieces of the UN-sponsored solution won the approval of all the parties. Ang's careful chronology of ensuing events brings clarity to the rapidly evolving situation. Sino-Soviet détente, formalized by their 1989 summit, enabled the UN's Permanent Five members of the Security Council to oversee the final arrangements, taking the agenda for Cambodia out of ASEAN's hands. (168). Significantly, as the UN role in Cambodia was being designed (a

UN Transitional Authority for Cambodia or UNTAC would oversee elections) Vietnam was moving out of the Soviet orbit into a renewed friendship with China. At the Vietnamese 7<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in June 1991, as Ang points out, the long-time Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach was removed from his post (154). Although Ang does not mention this, it is worth noting that the new communist party head, Do Muoi, was a surviving member of the old guard of Maoist leaders, ready to take on the mantle of a pro-Chinese reformer, without getting involved in any of the political liberalization associated with Gorbachev. In late August, the failed coup that eventually destroyed the Soviet Union occurred in Moscow. In September, China and Vietnam announced that they would normalize relations. So the long-sought solution to the Cambodian impasse came about as the geopolitical situation in Southeast Asia was shifting in China's favor. The resulting peace was one that was dependent on Chinese goodwill, which eventually came to favor the leader who emerged from the dust of the peace settlement, Hun Sen.

Ang Chen Guan's book covers only one part of the Cambodia conflict, the ASEAN role in finding a solution, and mostly ignores humanitarian issues. Yet it seems particularly important to recall this history today. In fact, the book seems to have been written with the present very much in mind. The power shifts in Southeast Asia that settled into place in those years, 1978-1991, have grown stronger in recent times, as China's role in the region edges towards dominance. Although Ang's book emphasizes Singapore's and ASEAN's successful diplomacy, he points out in his conclusion that "the resolution of the Cambodia problem was also the pinnacle of ASEAN's triumph. After Cambodia, ASEAN has to address the question of its post-Cold War *raison-d'être*" (168). Today ASEAN is divided by differences over China's claim to the South China Sea, and how to respond. Yet ASEAN is the only regional grouping that has any experience in multilateral consensus building. If it fails to find a united position on this challenge, especially the need for a legally binding code of conduct in the South China Sea, it may quickly fade into irrelevance.

Ang Cheng Guan's *Singapore, ASEAN and the Cambodia Conflict 1979-1991* is the first comprehensive overview of the diplomatic and political role of Singapore and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) during the thirteen-year long Cambodian conflict. It is based on unparalleled access to the files of Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs relating to the Cambodian issue. In addition, Ang interviewed eleven key senior Singaporean diplomats and, as well, consulted the Oral History Archives of senior ASEAN statesmen who were involved in the diplomacy of this period.

Ang has also consulted documentary collections, databases, memoirs, and first-hand accounts of a wide variety of regional government officials and academic analysts. In particular, he consulted the memoirs or recollections of two non-ASEAN foreign ministers active at this time, China's Qian Qichen and Indonesia's Ali Alatas, as well as the translated official memoirs of Cambodia's Prince/King Norodom Sihanouk. Finally, Ang consulted a wide variety of the extant scholarly literature by drawing on books, book chapters, and journal articles written by academic specialists and professional journalists such as Nayan Chanda.

Ang dates the Cambodian conflict from 1979, when Vietnamese military forces seized Cambodia's capital Phnom Penh and advanced to the Thai-Cambodian border, to October 1991, when the International Conference on Cambodia meeting in Paris reached a comprehensive settlement of the Cambodian conflict.

Ang presents his analysis in 6 chapters. The first chapter provides an overview of the geo-strategic setting from 1975, when communist forces seized power across Indochina in Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos, until the eve of Vietnam's intervention in late 1978.

The second chapter recounts Singapore's indispensable role in marshaling ASEAN behind a political-diplomatic strategy designed to bring about the withdrawal of Vietnamese military forces from Cambodia and the restoration of Cambodia's sovereignty. ASEAN's strategy was commonly referred to at the time as "beef and teeth."<sup>1</sup> The term "beef" referred to building up the non-communist anti-Vietnamese military forces so they could carry out resistance to Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia from within the country. A second objective was to build-up the non-communist resistance (NCR) so it would eclipse the Khmer Rouge as the main resistance force.

The term "teeth" referred to diplomatic efforts at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), at summit meetings of the Non-Aligned Movement, the International Conference on Cambodia, and other multilateral fora, to deny diplomatic recognition to Vietnam's presumed client state, the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), and to ensure that the

---

<sup>1</sup> Carlyle A. Thayer, "ASEAN and Indochina: The Dialogue," in Alison Broinowski, ed., *ASEAN Into the 1990s* (London: Macmillan, 1990), 151.

UN seat was held by the deposed government of Democratic Kampuchea, otherwise known as the Khmer Rouge.

The “beef and teeth” strategy involved forging a coalition of the three main anti-Vietnamese Cambodian groups – the Khmer Rouge, the Khmer People’s National Liberation Front (KPNLF) and the royalist forces loyal to Prince Sihanouk. This was accomplished in 1982 when these groups were brought together in what was called the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK). In reality it was neither a coalition, a government, or democratic.

Ang’s account of the military struggle between the anti-Vietnamese resistance forces and Vietnam and its PRK ally is generally limited to brief references to dry season offensives (62, 68, 76, 78, 87 and 100). Ang’s analysis could have been strengthened by noting that the Vietnamese military and the PRK had secure control over Cambodia’s heartland – the heavily populated and economically productive provinces in the east and southeast, as well as the capital of Phnom Penh and other major towns. Vietnamese strategy contained the resistance forces to the sparsely populated western provinces and to isolated skirmishes along the western shores of the Tonle Sap. At no time between 1979 and 1991 did the Khmer Rouge or the NCR seriously threaten this control. It was never Vietnam’s intention to physically destroy the Khmer Rouge as a military force. If there was a stalemate on the battlefield, it favoured Vietnam and the PRK (68 and 167).

Ang does not take issue with tendentious assessments by Singaporean officials that Vietnam’s aim was to occupy Cambodia indefinitely. In fact, Vietnam initiated a series of unilateral troop withdrawals beginning in 1982. After September 1989 it no longer had formed military units in Cambodia. ASEAN may wish to take credit for pressuring Vietnam to withdraw, but the leaders in Hanoi determined the pace of their withdrawal. All Vietnamese military forces were out of Cambodia two years before the International Conference on Cambodia convened in Paris. The regime that Vietnam set up and supported in 1979 remains in place today under much the same leadership.

Chapter 3 recounts the efforts of Singapore and other ASEAN members to secure diplomatic recognition for the CGDK from the international community. Before Singapore could accomplish this objective, it first had to overcome differences within ASEAN. Next, Singapore had to convince the KPNLF’s Son Sann and Prince Sihanouk to overcome their long-standing rivalry and work together. Finally, Singapore had to convince these two leaders to form a united front with Pol Pot, the leader of the Khmer Rouge. Once the CGDK was established, Singapore shouldered the task of soliciting material support for the NCR from the United States and other external powers. A balance sheet of Singapore’s accomplishments indicates a very mixed result.

Chapter 4 analyses the complex political-military developments from 1982 until July 1988 when the first significant steps were taken to end the Cambodian conflict through negotiations. This took the form of independent initiatives by Malaysia and Indonesia to bring the protagonists together, as well as Sihanouk’s unilateral decision to meet with Hun Sen, the PRK deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister. Malaysia suggested “proximity

talks” in April 1985 (88). Indonesia first suggested hosting an informal “cocktail party” in late 1985 (91-92). This proposal eventually led to the convening of the first Jakarta Informal Meeting (JIM) of the main protagonists in July 1988 (109). This was a period when Sino-Soviet relations were in flux as they moved from enmity towards rapprochement.

Chapter 5 carries the analysis of political and diplomatic developments forward to cover the period from the second JIM in February 1989 to the convening of the Paris International Conference on Cambodia in July-August 1989. By this time the United States began to pursue its own independent policy.

Chapter 6 discusses the outcome of the Paris International Conference on Cambodia that reached agreement on a comprehensive political settlement of the Cambodia conflict. At this time the role of Singapore and ASEAN had been eclipsed by the permanent members of the UN Security Council or Perm 5. Ang summarizes his findings in a brief concluding chapter. Singapore concluded that now was the time to develop working bilateral relations with Vietnam.

*Singapore, ASEAN and the Cambodian Conflict* raises five substantive questions.

First, what was Singapore’s assessment of internal developments in Democratic Kampuchea from 1975-78? Ang’s account stresses that Singaporean leaders based their opposition to Vietnam’s intervention in Cambodia on the sanctity of international law, especially “the principle... that no foreign military intervention should be allowed to overthrow a legally constituted government” (5 and 159).

In Ang’s account of Singaporean diplomacy the odiousness of the Khmer Rouge and their record of mass murder (genocide is a highly tendentious but widely used term<sup>2</sup>) was considered the lesser evil than Vietnam’s military intervention. Ang notes that Singapore did not support the return of the Khmer Rouge regime to power due to its “barbarous record” but nonetheless supported its credentials and its seat in the United Nations from 1979 until 1982 (24).

At the same time Singapore also did not want to reward Vietnamese aggression by seating its presumed client state, the PRK. The PRK met most of the criteria for diplomatic recognition: it had a national administrative structure with an identifiable capital in Phnom Penh, it controlled the vast majority of the people, its domestic sovereignty was widely recognized within the country, and its sovereignty had a degree of international recognition (the Soviet Union and its allies, Vietnam, Laos and India). In contrast, the CGDK was a virtual government with little claim to sovereignty other than recognition by the international community. As Ang notes, the problem of the Khmer Rouge’s return to power

---

<sup>2</sup> Bed Kiernan, ed., *Genocide and Democracy in Cambodia: The Khmer Rouge, the United Nations and the International Community*, Monograph Series No. 41, New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, Yale Center for International and Area Studies, Orville H. Schell, Jr. Center for International Human Rights and Yale University Law School, 1993.

became a major diplomatic issue after the CGDK was established (110 and 112).

Did Singapore have an accurate intelligence appreciation of what life was like under Khmer Rouge rule and if so were there no debates within policy-making circles about how Singapore, ASEAN and/or the international community should respond to a regime that conducted mass murder, bordering on genocide of selected groups, on a daily basis?

Second, how informed were Singapore policy-makers about relations between Democratic Kampuchea and Vietnam in the period from 1976-1977? Specifically, did the Singapore intelligence community have an accurate appreciation of the scale, scope and intensity of armed Khmer Rouge attacks on Vietnam's southwestern provinces, particularly in 1977-1978 and Vietnam's punitive response? Ang's account passes over these developments lightly.

One Australian international lawyer has argued that Vietnam's intervention in Cambodia could be justified under international law on three grounds: self-defence, the rescue of its nationals, and humanitarian intervention.<sup>3</sup>

Ang recounts that when Vietnam's premier, Pham Van Dong, visited Southeast Asia in September 1978 he pledged that Vietnam would not use force against any country, including Democratic Kampuchea (14). Two months later Vietnam invaded Cambodia and Dong's remarks were viewed as duplicitous. Did Premier Dong really make this unequivocal pledge, especially including Democratic Kampuchea? Singapore and presumably other ASEAN states were aware that Vietnam had already been drawn into a border war with Democratic Kampuchea at the time Premier Dong visited the region. Vietnam, in fact, had already intervened in a neighbouring state in response to Khmer Rouge attacks on its soil. Perhaps Dong's pledge was more nuanced, Vietnam would not intervene in the affairs of other regional states.

Third, Ang's account of senior Singaporean leaders' view of the Vietnamese leadership comes across as rather flat and uni-dimensional (97). Hanoi's leaders are characterized as old, rigid, and filled with hubris. On what basis did the Singaporean leaders reach this appreciation? This author has not been able to find a source to document Lee Kuan Yew's claim, quoted by Ang, that the Vietnamese referred to themselves as the "Prussians of East Asia" (11). It should be recalled it was this aged and rigid leadership that began toying with market reforms when they adopted the policy of *doi moi* or renovation in December 1986 at the Fourth National Congress of the Vietnam Communist Party (106).

Fourth, Ang's account repeatedly makes reference to Vietnam's economic difficulties with the inference that Singapore's leaders believed these difficulties were the result of ASEAN's policy of economic sanctions and the costs of Vietnam's military intervention in Cambodia (108). What was the analytic basis for these judgments? It could be argued that ASEAN's

---

<sup>3</sup> Gary Klintworth, *Vietnam's Intervention in Cambodia in International Law* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1989).



economic sanctions represented opportunity costs. Vietnam, after all, was firmly wedded to the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance. The financial and material costs of military intervention were by and large borne by the Soviet Union (71, 97-99). The Soviet Union increased its aid to Vietnam for each of its Five-Year Plans from 1976-1980 until 1986-1990.<sup>4</sup> Economic specialists argue that the main cause of Vietnam's economic difficulties lay in its neo-Stalinist central planning system that just collapsed under its own contradictions.<sup>5</sup>

Fifth, Ang's account is primarily focused on the diplomatic role of Singapore, other members of ASEAN, China and the United States.<sup>6</sup> Australia's role and diplomatic initiatives are mentioned in passing. References to Australia invariably mention that it was sympathetic to Vietnam (136, 142, 144-146). Yet Australia was ASEAN's first dialogue partner and the coalition government of Malcolm Fraser (1975- March 1983) cut aid to Vietnam in response to its intervention in Cambodia and supported ASEAN's general diplomatic stance. It was only with the election of the Labor Government<sup>7</sup> under Prime Minister Bob Hawke (1983-1991) and his Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Bill Hayden (1983-1988) that Australia parted company with ASEAN. Australia played a constructive role in seeking a peaceful negotiated settlement of the Cambodian conflict under Foreign Minister Gareth Evans (1988-1996). The question that arises is why was more coverage not given to ASEAN-Australia relations in the diplomacy of the Cambodian conflict?

Two minor points

Ang argues, "[t]his narrative will show that UN support for the ASEAN policy on Cambodia increased year by year" (31). Did ASEAN obtain ever-increased majorities at the UN General Assembly? According to data collected by the author several years ago (see Table 1), ASEAN increased the majority in support of its UNGA resolution every year after 1979 except at the thirty-eighth UNGA session in 1983 when it remained the same as the previous year. Ang merely notes that "[t]he ASEAN Resolution was once again adopted by the UNGA" (p. 67). The point here is a minor correction to Ang's narrative, he is correct in his assessment of the general trend.

---

<sup>4</sup> Ramesh Thakur and Carlyle A. Thayer, *Soviet Relations with India and Vietnam* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1992), Table 6.1, p. 198.

<sup>5</sup> Stefan de Vylder and Adam Fforde, *Vietnam: An Economy in Transition* (Stockholm: Swedish International Development Authority, 1988), pp. 59-72 and Adam Fforde and Stefan de Vylder, *From Plan to Market: The Economic Transition in Vietnam* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), pp. 56-69.

<sup>6</sup> Curiously Richard H. Solomon's account of the U.S. diplomatic role is missing from the bibliography, see Richard Solomon, *Exiting Indochina: U.S. Leadership of the Cambodian Settlement & Normalization with Vietnam* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2000). Solomon was Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs from 1989-1992 (p. 146).

<sup>7</sup> Ang erroneously refers to the Labour Party; its official name is Australian Labor Party (American spelling)

Table 1  
 Voting Record for ASEAN's Annual Resolution in the UN General Assembly,  
 1979-1989

Year	UNGA Session	For ASEAN Resolution	Against	Abstain
1979	34 <sup>th</sup>	91	21	29
1980	35 <sup>th</sup>	97	23	22
1981	36 <sup>th</sup>	100	25	19
1982	37 <sup>th</sup>	105	23	20
1983	38 <sup>th</sup>	105	23	19
1984	39 <sup>th</sup>	110	22	18
1985	40 <sup>th</sup>	114	21	16
1986	41 <sup>st</sup>	115	21	13
1987	42 <sup>nd</sup>	117	21	16
1988	43 <sup>rd</sup>	122	19	13
1989	44 <sup>th</sup>	124	17	12

The five questions posed above notwithstanding, Ang Chen Guan has written a powerfully persuasive account of the political-diplomatic role of Singapore both within ASEAN and the international community in seeking a comprehensive political settlement to the conflict in Cambodia. Ang sheds new light on the foreign policies of Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, China and the United States in addition to the crucial leadership role of Norodom Sihanouk.

The publication of *Singapore, ASEAN and the Cambodian Conflict* solidifies Ang's reputation as one of the most prominent historians researching and writing on the politics and diplomacy of contemporary Southeast Asia. His book should serve to prompt diplomatic historians in Thailand, Indonesia and elsewhere in the region to petition their governments for access to foreign ministry files so the full account can be written of the diplomacy that brought an end to the Conflict in Cambodia.

Author's Response by Ang Cheng Guan, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore

---

I wish to thank all the reviewers for taking time to read my book and for their comments. In the course of my own learning journey on the Indochina Wars, Southeast Asia, and the Cold War up to the present era, I have benefitted from all their writings, especially that of Professor Carlyle Thayer. Unfortunately, I could not benefit from Professor Mehta's up-dated biography of Hun Sen (also published in 2013)<sup>1</sup> when writing this book. I also wish to thank Professor Kenton Clymer for his concise and lucid introduction. I very much look forward to reading his forthcoming book on U.S.-Myanmar relations.

I am happy that all the reviewers feel that the book contributes to the historiography of the Third Indochina War. I am thankful for the opportunity to have written this book because it is very challenging to be a diplomatic historian of Southeast Asia given the difficulties of access to the relevant archival documents. Furthermore, this opportunity gave me an 'entry' into the post-1975 period which I saw as a natural progression of my research interest and writing on the Cold War International history of Southeast Asia.

The four reviewers have identified a number of weaknesses or shortcomings of the book with which I generally agree. In fact, I am very cognizant of them. I will briefly address the points they raised below. But first, I wish to explain the origins of this book. This study began as a commissioned classified case-history of Singapore's role in the 'Cambodian imbroglio from 1978-1991.' It was initially meant only for the 'internal consumption' of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. From what I understand, the purpose was for the education of a younger generation of Foreign Service officers. For this reason, I was given unprecedented (but in my view not comprehensive) access to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs documents pertaining to the Cambodia issue and a number of senior Foreign Service officials, some of them already retired, were thus willing to talk to me about their roles during those years. What motivated me to take on this project, despite the fact that it might never have been read by anyone else outside the Foreign Service establishment, was that I would be able to glean some insights into how Singapore's foreign policy was made during the Cold War years and the thinking of the political leadership. This, in my view, was well worth the effort. An additional enticement was that the authorities did say that they might allow (but did not guarantee) a 'sanitised' version to be published. It was my good fortune that sometime after the manuscript was completed, thanks to the enlightened then-Permanent Secretary, I was given the green-light to publish it with almost no redaction of the original text, other than the file numbers. For the published version, I tried to keep as close to the original as

---

<sup>1</sup> Harish C. Mehta and Julie B. Mehta, *Strongman: The Extraordinary Life of Hun Sen, from Pagoda boy to Prime Minister of Cambodia* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2013).

possible as that was the version approved for publication. I added in the key secondary literature and also addressed the suggestions raised by the independent academic referees selected by the New Zealand University Press. Being an 'old-school' historian, I eschewed inserting my own views into the narrative which led some of the reviewers to note that I was not sufficiently sceptical or critical of the Singapore perspective.

I think the above account would explain the "narrow vision" of the book and the comment that I may have "overstated the island nations' importance" because I stuck too closely to my sources. It is essentially (and inevitably) an account based on the perspective of the Singapore leadership (particularly that of then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew) and Foreign Service officers. I do agree that a "broader view" would have made the book better, for example one that included the Japanese and Australian dimension. I share Dr. Chalermphanupap's as well as Professor Thayer's hope that this book will encourage other historians from the other ASEAN countries to contribute their own accounts of what happened during those years and revive an academic conversation on this subject.

As for Professor Sophie Quinn-Judge's observation that the book "mostly ignores humanitarian issues", it is true that there was hardly any reference to genocide in the documents I have seen. This did not mean that Singapore leaders were oblivious or overlooked the crimes committed by the Khmer Rouge. The Singapore solution to the genocide committed by the Khmer Rouge was to form a coalition government. As Lee Kuan Yew explained in 1981, by forming a coalition and receiving ASEAN support, both Sihanouk and Son Sann's forces could offer the Kampuchean people alternative leadership to Pol Pot or Heng Samrin. Although a Democratic Kampuchean coalition government would help the Khmer Rouge gain international acceptability, in the longer term, it would increase the likelihood of the non-communist forces returning to Kampuchea through free elections and a political settlement that was acceptable to both Vietnam and China, and diminish the chances of the Khmer Rouge returning to power by force. Lee emphasised that ASEAN would not be a party to any plan to restore the Khmer Rouge to power by force and against the will of the Cambodian people.<sup>2</sup>

One of the consequences of the Kampuchean problem was the outflow of refugees to the non-communist Southeast Asian countries. The international media criticised Singapore for turning away refugees. Lee's retort is worth quoting. He said, "It is impossible to be detached when faced with human tragedy. After the first shock, my mind tells me that if I accept one boatload, I will have to accept a hundred, then a thousand...Then as a government we decided we had to say no more whatever our personal feelings were. Our density of population is such that we cannot absorb these refugees without serious social dislocation. So we either grow callouses or we

---

<sup>2</sup> Ang Cheng Guan, *Lee Kuan Yew's Strategic Thought* (London: Routledge, 2013), 56.

will die of bleeding hearts”.<sup>3</sup>

On the issue of ‘Intelligence’ and whether Singapore had an accurate intelligence appreciation of what life was like under the Khmer Rouge rule, I am not able to say for certain as I was not given access to the Intelligence files which reside in another Ministry. My sense is that Kampuchea was not a high security priority for Singapore before the invasion. There was little in the Foreign Ministry files which describe what was happening in Kampuchea pre-1979 except for a comment made by the Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam that nobody knew what was actually going on in the country. Although both countries established diplomatic relations in May 1976, Singapore did not send an ambassador to Phnom Penh. Commenting on a Singapore trade and economic delegation visit to Democratic Kampuchea in May 1978, Lee described the Kampuchean leadership as “insane and perhaps could not be helped” and that “it was impossible to deal with them”.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, Professor Thayer also suggests that I should have investigated more fully why Vietnam invaded Kampuchea in the first place. Perhaps I should have. I did think of doing so but in the end decided to leave this big subject for another project that I am working on because whatever the reasons for Vietnam’s invasion, Singapore would have rejected them. It is a very hard-headed and consistent position that Singapore has taken and still takes primarily because of its small size. In the recent case of Russia’s annexation of Crimea, the Singapore Foreign Ministry declared that “Singapore opposes the annexation of any country or territory as it contravenes international law. Singapore also objects to any unprovoked invasion of a sovereign country under any pretext”.<sup>5</sup> This was the same attitude Singapore adopted with regards to the Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea in December 1978.

---

<sup>3</sup> Ang Cheng Guan, *Lee Kuan Yew’s Strategic Thought* (London: Routledge, 2013), 52.

<sup>4</sup> Ang Cheng Guan, *Singapore, ASEAN and the Cambodian Conflict 1978-1991* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013), 10

<sup>5</sup>

[http://www.mfa.gov.sg/content/mfa/media\\_centre/press\\_room/pr/2014/201403/press\\_20130321.html](http://www.mfa.gov.sg/content/mfa/media_centre/press_room/pr/2014/201403/press_20130321.html)