Speaking in Hanoi in January, Vietnam Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach commented to U.N. Secretary General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar that "if [the Americans] can make a war here, they can easily make a peace." Clearly, all is not well between Vietnam and its ally the Soviet Union, nor with its neighbor Cambodia.

In one of history's grim ironies, Cambodia's murderous Pol Pot regime of 1975-78 has proven to be a direct cause of the vastly improved position of the U.S. and its allies in Southeast Asia today. Briefly, the immediate cause for Vietnam's entry into Cambodia was a series of border provocations instigated by Pol Pot, who had seized power in 1975 as head of the Khmer Rouge movement. Aided by 150 Chinese advisors, the Khmer Rouge systematically murdered the old class (as depicted in the current film The Killing Fields), an act only (belatedly) brought to the attention of a horrified world. Vietnam then used the border incidents to justify a full-scale invasion of its hereditary enemy, deposing Pol Pot and briefly enjoying the role of liberator. However, Vietnam quickly established a regime of its own, appointing former Khmer Rouge Heng Samrin as puppet president and supporting him with over 180,000 Vietnamese troops.

The failure of the Carter administration to come to the financial aid of the victorious Hanoi government in 1978 forced Hanoi to turn to Moscow for assistance. The Soviets swallowed the Vietnam bait and now can't cough it up. In fact, as events have unfolded, this star-crossed collaboration has done more to weaken Vietnam than thirty years of French and U.S. military efforts. The Hanoi-Moscow concord proves the adage that in international relations it is better to be lucky than logical.

The presence of the Vietnamese in Cambodia has been the stimulus for resistance. The new Pol Pot—in his search for legitimacy—claims to have abandoned communism; and with substantial Chinese aid he maintains about thirty thousand armed men operating as traditional guerrillas throughout the country. If the Vietnamese leave, Pol Pot remains the most powerful figure.

From this concern, two of Cambodia's traditional leaders—Prince Norodom Sihanouk and former Prime Minister Son Sann—have entered the political arena by sponsoring "guerrilla groups" in bases along the Thai border (an interview with Prince Sihanouk appears in the last issue of Worldview). Television coverage shows these forces to be of a garrison variety, trying to establish defensive camps for refugees from Heng Samrin and Pol Pot. With no capability to stand up to a serious Vietnamese attack, they wisely cross over into Thailand to await the rainy season before returning to the Cambodian side of the border.

Vietnam's Soviet sponsors realize that Vietnam activities in Cambodia adversely affect USSR-China relations. There can be no fundamental improvement in the relations of these two nations while the Soviets support Vietnam. Meanwhile, the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) thrive in this atmosphere, strengthened in their determination to punish Vietnam for its aggression, notably by isolating it politically and allowing it to stew in its ailing economy.

Under these circumstances, the Soviets must disengage from Vietnam: and Vietnam must at some juncture give up Cambodia. How might this come about?

First of all, Cambodia is an internationally recognized state, with membership in the United Nations. This is an important international asset. Second, the coalition government of Sihanouk, Son Sann, and Khieu Samphan (Pol Pot's man) has persisted in claiming to exercise Cambodia's sovereignty. Three events must now fall into place:

(1) Vietnamese withdrawal to its own border in exchange for a "neutral" Cambodia led by Sihanouk and Son Sann;
(2) a Chinese guarantee to disarm the Khmer Rouge and pension its leaders inside the vast reaches of China;
(3) U.S. and ASEAN agreement to respect and oversee such a compromise. Painful as the memories are, the U.S. must step back into Indochina. Foreign Minister Thach's statement attests to this need.

In this process no important Soviet interest is lost; the Soviets will eventually embrace the idea of getting out of Vietnam as the price for better relations with China. The big winner would be international decency, something in short supply. An independent Cambodia, left to restore its ancient ruins and to create a modest and secure life for its horror-ridden inhabitants, is a monument the world could look upon with pride.

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