

The Dynamics of China's Changing Policies Towards Kampuchea: A Model of Oyabun-Kobun Relationship?

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How does one study China's policies towards Kampuchea? Shince 1949, China's foreign policies towards Kampuchea represent a classical example of a case study of asymmetrical relations between a major regional power in Asia vis-a-vis a weak state whose viability as a nation-state remains problematic. Since the 19th century, history has shown us that the survival of the Kampuchean nation per se as a viable independent state is doubtful without some forms of guarantee by the external major powers, of which the most important one in contemporary international politics in Indochina is the role of China.

Taking into consideration the size of the population, the geopolitical strategic position of Kampuchea and the character of her people, Kampuchea is destined — if history repeats itself — and without some forms of external intervention by the major powers, to be either annexed by the larger and more powerful states like Thailand and Vietnam, especially as the latter had the intention to be a leading hegemonic power in Indochina with Hanoi as the center of power.

However, Hanoi cannot achieve her objective to dominate Kampuchea without China's tacit understanding and better still open endorsement. In this sense, the future of Kampuchea and her relations with China can best be explained by the model of 'Oyabun-Kobun' (leader — follower) relations. In the political science terminology, China can aptly be described

as 'patron' whereas Kampuchea is the 'client'.⁽¹⁾ This patron-client model is useful in throwing some light on the understanding of the dynamics of Sino-Kampuchean asymmetrical power relationship, especially when analysing China's motivations and behaviour towards a smaller state like Kampuchea in Indochina. Furthermore, the model can give us an insight on how Kampuchea has been struggling for centuries, i.e. since the eclipse of the Angkor empire, to preserve her basic survival.

At the theoretical level, patron-client relations connote of a relationship of unequal reciprocity between two states. As James Scott put it 'a state of higher power status (patron) uses its influence and resources to provide protection or benefits, or both, for a state of lower status (client) which for its parts, reciprocates by offering general support and assistance, including state resources, to the patron.'⁽²⁾ Thus for the patron-client relations to take place and be successful, the following three points must be observed by the states concerned: firstly, there must be a big gap between the patron and the client in terms of military power and resources, in such a way that the survival of the client state depends on the protection from the powerful patron. Secondly, the relationship between the client and the patron must be arranged in such a way that it has to satisfy the aspirations and the needs of the patron. Thirdly, the patron-client association is not based on a permanent basis is a temporary arrangement to serve the specific needs of these two states.⁽³⁾

These three prerequisites clearly came to the fore in the China - Khmer Rouge partnership from 1979 to 1989. Firstly, China was militarily much more powerful and stronger than the Khmer Rouge and therefore there was a need for China to transfer hardware and weapons to the weaker Khmer Rouge forces to help them in their bitter armed struggle against the stronger Vietnamese forces in Kampuchea. To ensure the survival of the 'client', i.e. the Khmer Rouge, China being the 'patron' went all out to launch a

carefully calculated attack in February and March 1979, engaging Vietnam in a limited six-weeks war. One of the motivations that led China to seek war with Vietnam in 1979 was to divert Vietnam's military onslaught away from the Khmer Rouge so that her client would be able to have some breathing time to recoup the losses inflicted by Hanoi's military attacks on the Khmer Rouge. Secondly, the 'patron-client' model is useful in explaining the motivations of China's foreign policy towards Kampuchea which can partially be explained as a function of the competition between two patrons, i.e. China and the USSR with regards to their competition over Indochina. Moscow, being Hanoi's patron who was supporting her client against China who in turn propped up the Khmer Rouge.⁽⁴⁾ In this sense, it can be argued that the Indochinese conflicts during the period from the 1970's to 1984, are power struggles between two patrons, i.e. Beijing and Moscow over Indochina using their respective proxies to achieve their goals. Thirdly, the patron-client model can be useful in explaining China's united front strategy as an instrument to achieve certain goals. Hence, as far as China is concerned, the patron-client is used for a limited period of time only.

During Shihanouk's reign (1955-1969) for example, China perceived him as her 'client' with the intention to use him as part of China's overall united front strategy against the US' encirclement and its anti-China policy. Hence, Kampuchea was used by China as a pawn in the counter-encirclement campaign to get herself out of the fangs of the US. Furthermore, during the 1979 to 1989 period, China perceived the Khmer Rouge as a useful 'client'. The became an instrument for China's anti-Vietnam policy in Indochina, which was in particular indirectly aimed at undercutting Moscow's inroads into Indochina. In other words, the patron-client model can be used to explain China's larger strategic-political interests vis-a-vis the Soviet Union in Indochina and indeed over the whole

of the Southeast Asian region which China perceived as being her 'natural' backyard.

However, to focus on an analysis on the patron-client model mainly from the patron's perspective is not sufficient to understand the motivations of the patron as the latter's behaviour could be a direct response to the client's conduct. In fact, China's policy towards Kampuchea from 1949 to 1969 for example, was to some extent reactive and dependent on Phnom Penh's initiatives, i.e. client centered. For a small and weaker state like Kampuchea which is being sandwiched by her traditional strong enemies, i.e. Thailand and Vietnam, Kampuchean leaders like Shihanuk and his predecessors who consider their country's weaknesses and vulnerability essentially unalterable, the margin for safety and survival is very narrow, therefore, the only viable option for Kampuchea is to seek outside help so as to ensure her survival and to achieve her national goals.⁽⁵⁾ Thus China was a logical choice as a patron, partly due to her historical benign policy towards Kampuchea⁽⁶⁾ and partly because China is large and powerful enough compared to Thailand and Vietnam, but more importantly, China is geographically close enough to render immediate assistance should such a need arise as was the case during the period from 1979 to 1988.

Hence, any analysis of the dynamics of the patron-client relations must be viewed both from the perspective of the patrons and the clients.

The focus of this paper is to examine and analyse how and why a major Asian power, i.e. China — the patron — adopts certain policies towards her client — Kampuchea — covering the period from 1949 onwards. What are the factors involved which are shaping China's policies towards Kampuchea?

It can be hypothesized that China's policies have been shaped by a combination of both internal as well as external (regional and global) factors. Factors such as historical legacies, ideology, leadership, ethnicity, the changing internal political environment of both states, the changing

regional (especially Indochina) and global environment are pertinent determinants which are shaping China's policies towards Kampuchea.

The behavioral patterns of China's policies can best be divided into following periods: 1) pre-1949; 2) 1949-1965; 3) 1966-1969; 4) 1970-1974; 5) 1975-1978; 6) 1979-1988; 7, 1989 to the present.

I Pre-1949: Deliberate Aloofness

One of the outstanding characteristics of Sino-Kampuchean relations since the 3rd century A.D. was China's disinterest in Kampuchea's destiny. From China's historical records, Kampuchea attracted the least attention from China in the entire region.⁽⁷⁾ From time to time, the tributary relationship did take place but only on an irregular and perfunctory basis and only because the Khmer Kings showed some interest in China.⁽⁸⁾ In fact, on at least two occasions (A.D. 1200 and A.D. 1374) the Chinese Imperial Court decreed that the Khmer Kings should dispense with the tributary practices due to long and harsh journey to China.⁽⁹⁾

Why did Kampuchea not occupy as an important place as Vietnam during Imperial China's reign? Firstly, Imperial China's behavior can be explained in the light of China's cultural perspective. Unlike Vietnam which was part of the belt of China's sinicized civilization, Imperial China was not interested in Kampuchea as the latter belonged to the sphere of the Indianized civilization. The fact that the Angkor Wat temples were built basically on the Indian model, is a testimony the extent of the impact India had on the Khmer culture. Thus culturally and ethnically, the Khmer nation was distinctly different from China who showed little interest in the Indian culture. Thus as Davide P. Chandler put it, 'elements of Indian culture were absorbed or chosen by the Cambodian people — and in many ways they behaved more like Indians than they did like their closest neighbours, the

Vietnamese.'⁽¹⁰⁾ Hence Imperial China perceived Kampuchea 'as a separate nation with its distinct culture and ethnic peculiarities'.⁽¹¹⁾ Therefore, unlike Vietnam, this cultural parochialism spared Kampuchea from being colonized by Imperial China. In fact, in A.D. 1414, a Kampuchean King sent a mission to China to seek China's military support against an impending invasion from Champa.⁽¹²⁾ But China ignored it. Later, during the French advancement into Indochina in the 19th century, Imperial China paid little attention to the fact of Kampuchea.

The second reason why Imperial China showed little or no interest in Kampuchea was because the latter shared no common borders with China. In fact, the two states are about 600 miles apart. From Imperial China's perspective, going to Kampuchea was like visiting an uncivilized barbarious state as the culturally arrogant mandarins from the Chinese Imperial Court had this psychologically deep-rooted notion that Beijing was the center of the earth.

Thirdly, from China's perspective, throughout history, Imperial China never perceived Kampuchea as strategically important to China and therefore never really took any threat to Kampuchea seriously, even though for example, the French declared Kampuchea a colony in 1862. Instead, China focused her attention on France's colonization of Vietnam which was regarded as strategically much more important to China. Hence any presence by an unfriendly or worse still a hostile external power along her immediate border would pose a serious security threat to China. As one analyst put it: 'the development of any trend away from the Chinese expectations or the emergence of a hostile force in Indochina can be easily perceived by Beijing as a threat to itself and could well compell China to resort to either strategical manoeuvres or balancing acts, if only to maximize her security'⁽¹³⁾ Furthermore, Vietnam has a long coastal line and therefore domination of Vietnam would enhance China's control over

the South China Sea as well as over the Indochinese region.

Finally, Imperial China was indifferent to Kampuchea as the latter never posed any serious direct challenges to China's power and authority. In fact, Kampuchea was a faithful vassal of China.

II 1949 — 1965: Low Profile Posture

From the period of 1949 until 1953, China adopted a low profile posture towards Kampuchea and accepted the fait accompli that Kampuchea was a colony of France. China's low-profile policy took place against the following background on her domestic scene: it was the time which saw the establishment of the Maoist regime in 1949 and at the external level, China had to respond to the challenges from the West (initiated by the US encirclement and her anti-Maoist policy). For all practical purposes, as long as the US was not involved in Kampuchea, China could continue to adopt a hand-off policy towards that country. Furthermore, as long as China endorsed the Indochinese Communist Party's leadership under Ho Chi Minh, over Vietnam, Laos and Kampuchea, China was contented to provide some forms of limited aid to the Viet Minh in her struggle against the French rule.⁽¹⁴⁾ More importantly, China was involved in the Korean conflict (1950-1953) and therefore could not afford to open another front against the French in Indochina.

The Geneva Conference in 1954 marked a significant shift in China's attitude toward Kampuchea as for the first time in China's diplomatic history, she was deeply concerned with the future status of Kampuchea.

Essentially during the mid-1950's, the basic fundamental goal of China was to ensure an independent and non-aligned Kampuchea. The promotion of Kampuchea as an independent and non-aligned state was in line with China's peaceful coexistence policy with the neighbouring states. This

thinking was clearly expressed by Zhou Enlai, China's Prime Minister at the Bandung Conference in 1955 in which Zhou declared 'China's acceptance of an independent but truly non-aligned Kampuchea.'⁽¹⁵⁾ This policy must be assessed in the light of China's eagerness and anxiety over the US's increasingly harsher stand on Indochina. China's main concern was to prevent the formation of a US anti-China alliance in Indochina and the establishment of military bases in Vietnam and Kampuchea.⁽¹⁶⁾ This was particularly so after the US had successfully been able to get such anti-communist states like Thailand and the Philippines to agree to establish the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) in Bangkok (1955) and to form the Manila Pact in Manila in 1954. China would then be encircled by a US security net ranging from Northeast China to Southeast Asia. In this sense, one can argue that China's policies towards Kampuchea during the period from 1955 to 1965, was to a great extent a response to the US' policy in Southeast Asia.

Thus China's policy can best be explained by using J.D. Armstrong's model of the united front doctrine which was defined as 'a limited and temporary alignment between the communist party or state and or more non-communist political units with the purpose on the communist side of confronting a common enemy and furthering the revolutionary cause'.⁽¹⁷⁾ However, it was not the intention of China to promote communism in Kampuchea as she had cooperated with a feudalistic regime, headed by Prince Shihanouk's administration (1955 to 1969). In other words, it was not Maoist ideology that motivated China's alignment with Shihanouk's ideologically feudalistic leadership as feudalism and Maoism were totally incompatible with each other.

From Beijing's perspective, Shihanouk's Kampuchea served as a useful ally to resist the security threats from the US. Hence, China's alignment with Shihanouk was mainly motivated by security considerations. As far as

Shihanouk's administration was concerned, the latter was mainly interested in using China as a bulwark against any potential security threats by Vietnam. Shihanouk would have preferred a limited diplomatic alignment with China and not to fall into the trap and adopt an outright pro-China and anti-US policy for fear of incurring the wrath of the US. Shihanouk reasoned that the adoption of all out anti-US policy was unwise as the US was the most powerful state in the world. Thus Shihanouk preferred to adopt a balancing policy between the US and China, taking advantage of their hostilities. However, as China could not get a more assertive 'anti imperialist' posture from Shihanouk, the latter failed to secure a more definite commitment on the part of China towards Kampuchea's independence vis-a-vis Vietnam.⁽¹⁸⁾

One can argue that the united front between China and Kampuchea during the period from 1958 to 1965 was a temporary marriage of convenience. From Shihanouk's perspective, his main concern was to ensure the independence and territorial integrity of the Kampuchean state. Thus his greatest worry was how to minimize both the internal (the rise of the Khmer Rouge since 1967) and the external threats (Vietnam and Thailand) as well as to steer Kampuchea away from the great power rivalries in Indochina (China vis-a-vis the US and the USSR vis-a-vis the US).

Ideologically, Shihanouk perceived Maoist communism as a real threat to Kampuchea. Initially, when he assumed power in 1955 as Head of state and government, he hoped to play a balancing act between Beijing and Washington.

Shihanouk was originally interested in SEATO,⁽¹⁹⁾ he however changed his mind after his first official visit to China in February, 1956. He became convinced that Maoist China would not pose a security threat to his regime as long as he refrained from adopting an anti-China policy as Thailand and the Philippines did.⁽²⁰⁾ By June 1956, Shihanouk clearly

tilted towards Beijing after signing his first trade agreement with China in which the latter agreed to offer US\$22.4 million in aid to Kampuchea.⁽²¹⁾ The years later, i.e. in July, 1958, both countries agreed to establish formal diplomatic relations, followed by a visit to Phnom Penh in December, 1960 by Liu Shao-Chi, China's Head of State, which institutionalized the de facto into a de jure relationship with the signing of a treaty of Friendship and Mutual Non-Agression. In December, 1963, both countries again signed a military aid agreement.

How can the shift in Shihanouk's position be explained? Gurtov argued that uncertainty over and mistrust of the US' intention was the main motif of Shihanouk's volte face.⁽²²⁾ In short, Shihanouk recognized that it would be politically more advantageous for Kampuchea to be linked with China rather than the US.

The question now to be asked is, why was China at this particular moment interested in Shihanouk? From China's perspective, there were three reasons, i.e. firstly, Shihanouk's policy of non-alignment could be used as a good example to demonstrate that China would tolerate and respect any neighbourly state in Southeast Asia which did not ally with the US. In other words, China's Kampuchean policy can be explained as a function of Kampuchea's policy towards the US. If Kampuchea was friendly with the US as Shihanouk attempted to be from 1954 to 1955, then China was less friendly towards him. However, when Shihanouk decided to distance himself from the US since 1958 onwards (as happened when the US' aid was terminated in 1963 and diplomatic relations with the US were severed in 1965) then China decided to move closer to Kampuchea.

Secondly, Kampuchea could serve as a proof of China's desire to seek friendly relations with the Southeast Asian states based on the principle of 1) peaceful coexistence; 2) non aggression; 3) non-interference in the internal affairs of each other's states; 4) mutual respect for each other's

sovereignty, territorial integrity and 5) equality and mutual benefit.

Thirdly, Kampuchea was useful as part of China's overall united front strategy against the US in Asia.

The political consequence however of Shihanouk's decision to tilt towards China and adopt an anti-US policy from 1958 to 1965, was to plant the seed for his own self-destruction as he was ironically overthrown by his own Defence Minister, Lon Nol in March, 1970.

In short, security needs by both countries were the main reasons for fostering the entente between Kampuchea and China from the period of 1955 to 1965. China's main concern was to minimize the US threat to her southern border, whereas Kampuchea wanted to use China as a counter balance against Hanoi's ambitions in Kampuchea.

It is pertinent to argue that Shihanouk was a factor in China's overall foreign policy tilt towards Kampuchea. Hence a hypothesis can be formulated, i.e. China's Kampuchean policy was a function of Shihanouk's foreign policy. China's support for Shihanouk's call for an international conference to guarantee an independent and neutral Kampuchea fitted into China's intention to pursue a foreign policy of peaceful coexistence.

III 1966 — 1969: A Pattern of Uneasy Alignment

China Kampuchean relations have shifted from entente in 1955-1965 to a pattern of uneasy alignment from 1966 to 1969. This uneasy relationship was mainly due to the domestic developments in both states and the incongruence of their respective priorities for their internal as well as external policies.

Firstly, one of the main reasons was the spillover of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1969) onto Kampuchea's domestic scene. Shihanouk was angered when the Chinese Embassy in Phnom Penh urged Kampuchians to

overthrow the Royal government which was attacked by the 'Red Guards' as symbol of feudalism. Sino-Kampuchean relations had reached a nadir in 1967 at the height of the Cultural Revolution when Shihanouk decided to dissolve the Khmer-Chinese Friendship Association which was perceived by Shihanouk as totally 'unfriendly' as it disseminated anti-Shihanouk' propaganda.⁽²³⁾ China was indeed insensitive towards Kampuchean feelings as she informed the Royal Kampuchean government's Foreign Minister in 1967 that Beijing was in fact supporting the pro-Mao demonstrations by the Overseas Chinese⁽²⁴⁾ in Phnom Penh. Furthermore, Shihanouk was critical of China's 'dual track'⁽²⁵⁾ policy by promoting party-to-party relations with the Khmer Rouge communists but at the same time, subverting state-to-state relations.

The rise of the fanatic Khmer Rouge leftists in the 1960's built up increasing pressure towards Shihanouk's leadership by the 'rightists' headed by General Lon Nol. Thus, in March, 1970, the latter staged a military coup against Shihanouk for his inability to contain the rising threats from the increasingly more powerful Khmer Rouge communists. Hence, Shihanouk's inability to maintain a balancing act between the intense power struggle between the rightists and leftists resulted in the collapse of the Sino-Kampuchean entente. Shihanouk's appeal to China to contain Hanoi's ambition over Kampuchea, especially to sever her links with the Khmer Rouge also failed as China did not lend him a sympathetic ear. Finally, Armstrong argued that the unpredictable and ever changing personality of Shihanouk was another factor. This vacillation in Shihanouk's personality contributed partly towards the creation of an uneasy partnership between Beijing and Phnom Penh.

Was the Soviet Union a factor in contributing to Sino-Kampuchean disillusionment? China was disturbed the 'opportunistic' foreign policy postures of Shihanouk who saw the need to play the 'Russian card' against

Beijing in view of the growing conflict between the two communist giants after a decade of Alliance (1949-1959). By the beginning of 1968, there was some evidence to show that Shihanouk was flirting with the Russians who were equally keen, if not more so, to open a new front against China from her southern border. Thus in 1968, Moscow agreed to provide aid to the Kampuchean Royal Army amounting to US\$5.8 million.⁽²⁶⁾ Thereafter in 1969, a flurry of visits to Phnom Penh took place which included such prominent leaders such as Podogorny and Kosygin. By the end of the year, the presence of a Soviet destroyer Blesyashchiy provoked Beijing into perceiving the Soviet presence not only to pose a challenge to China's position in Indochina but also to be a potent threat to her southern flanks. China felt even more apprehensive in the event that Shihanouk might capitalize on the growing Sino-Soviet polemics to force China to recognize her border.⁽²⁷⁾

Finally, was the Vietnam war in the mid-1960's a factor which affected Sino-Kampuchean relations? By 1968, China sensed the unreliability of Shihanouk's commitment to China's anti-US policy as well as his commitment to China, but more importantly, because of strategic considerations, China had decided to shift her support of Shihanouk's government to the Indochinese communists (besides the North Vietnamese Communists, including the Vietcong, the Khmer Rouge, the Pathet Laos), and assist them in their struggle against the growing US war efforts from 1965 to 1968. To widen the US armed conflicts to cover not only Vietnam but also to extend it to Kampuchea and Laos was an important strategy on the part of China so as to drain further the US resources in Southeast Asia. China thus concluded that Shihanouk was secondary to China's overall important security considerations in Indochina vis-a-vis the US, her arch adversary.

IV 1970 — 1974: Anti Lon Nol Period

The downfall of Shihanouk in March, 1970 marked a new phase in China's foreign policy towards Kampuchea. Initially, she adopted an ambivalent policy, on the other hand, China intended to have some relations with Lon Nol and promised to recognize his new government if the following conditions were met: 1) permit shipments of arms through Kampuchea; 2) maintain sanctuaries for the Vietminh troops and finally assist the Vietnamese in their war propaganda.⁽²⁸⁾ At the same time however, China still wanted to keep in close touch with the deposed Shihanouk.

It was only after May, 1970 when Lon Nol refused to accept China's terms and worse still, from China's perspective, accepted Nixon's military assistance that China began to turn against Lon Nol. Thus immediately after China sensed that Lon Nol desired to seek a closer alignment with the US in May, 1970, China decided to provide armed assistance to the Kampuchean anti-Lon Nol resistance movement, headed by Shihanouk. In addition, China had also successfully obtained Hanoi's support to train the resistance forces against the Lon Nol government.

However, the US factor can also play a very important role in shaping China's policy towards Kampuchea. After Nixon's visit to China (February, 1972) for example, China began to soften her hardline attitude towards Lon Nol while at the same time scaling down her support for Shihanouk.

It is also important to note that Vietnam can also be a factor in shaping China's policy towards Kampuchea. China did not want to see Hanoi dominate Laos and Kampuchea as this would undermine China's objective of trying to create an independent and neutral Kampuchea.

Finally, Hanoi's relationship with Moscow also shaped China's policies towards Phnom Penh. During the period from 1972 to 1975, Moscow

exerted a growing influence over Indochina. Thus China was eager to Keep Kampuchea as her potential ally including Lon Nol.⁽²⁹⁾ Since 1972 therefore, China decided to scale down her attacks on Lon Nol. Thus as mentioned earlier, Moscow played a very important role in China's calculations of her strategic cum security in Indochina.

A few hypotheses can be derived at from the observations of China's foreign policies during the period from 1970 until Lon Nol's downfall in 1975. *Hypothesis one* : China's policies towards Kampuchea were a function of Lon Nol's pro-US policies. *Hypothesis two* : China's policies were a function of the US' policies towards Indochina (especially Nixon's policies towards Vietnam). Thus as mentioned earlier, China's anti-Lon Nol policies become progressively less hardline after Nixon's visit to Beijing in 1972 as well the signing of the Peace Accord in Paris in 1973 between Vietnam and the US. *Hypothesis three* : China's policies can be a function of Vietnam's policies towards Kampuchea and Vietnam's relations with the Soviet Union. On balance, internal developments in Kampuchea were not the main reasons for China's changing policies, rather Beijing was reacting to the changing regional environment and the great power rivalries in Southeast Asia.

V 1975 — 1978: Consolidation of Patron-Client Relations

The coming into power of the Khmer Rouge in April, 1975 ushered in the period of 'oyabun-kobun' relations between Beijing and Phnom Penh's new government. The symbiotic relationship between the two communist states was strengthened and rivalled that between their respective common adversaries, i.e. Hanoi and Moscow.

The new regime of Democratic Kampuchea under the ruthless leadership of the Khmer Rouge was faithfully harping the Maoist line of

'Soviet Social Imperialism' and 'anti-Imperialism'. Beijing finally found an enthusiastic client who was more than willing to echo Beijing's foreign policy line, especially vis-a-vis Hanoi. The relations between them were so close that air travel into or out of Kampuchea had to pass through Beijing.⁽³⁰⁾

In August, 1975, the Khmer Rouge leader Khieu Samphan visited Beijing. During his stay, China agreed to give US\$200 million in aid over a period of five years.⁽³¹⁾ Thereafter, a massive influx of Chinese civilians, technicians, and military advisers took place into Phnom Penh, helping Kampuchea to build up her army. Prior to his death in September, 1976, Mao Zedong went as far as to say that China fought 'shoulder to shoulder' to support Kampuchea's 'revolutionary cause'.⁽³²⁾ Moreover, China's solidarity with Kampuchea was clearly highlighted by Chinese Premier Hua Guofeng who, in August, 1977, gave unequivocal support to the visiting Kampuchean delegation to Beijing emphasizing that China would 'always stand with Kampuchea' in its 'just struggle against imperialism and hegemonism.'⁽³³⁾

China's strong verbal endorsement of Kampuchea during the period of 1975 to 1978 and immediately thereafter did not emanate from her natural love of a regime which was condemned by the civilized world for her mass massacres, nor was the desire on the part of Beijing motivated by ideological solidarity, but this symbiotic patron-client relationship must be assessed in the light of the growing Sino-Vietnamese hostilities over their territorial (land and sea) disputes, the conflicts over Indochina and the triangle relationship between Moscow, Beijing and Hanoi, etc.⁽³⁴⁾

Nonetheless, China's behaviour during the period from 1975 to 1978 showed that (from 1975 until May, 1978) China adopted a cautious policy towards the Khmer Rouge. While supporting the latter, China also kept her options open by endorsing Shihanouk's faction.

Initially, China's policies were directed towards upholding the

principles of peaceful coexistence. While Vietnam was a traditional enemy of the Khmer Rouge, China would have preferred Phnom Penh and Hanoi to patch up their differences amicably and without China's intervention. Why did China initially adopt a cautious policy towards Kampuchea? There were four possible explanations: firstly, the most important was China wanted to embark upon rehabilitating her economy, especially after Deng Xiaoping's rise to power following Mao's death in 1976. China's moderate leaders and the reformists saw an urgent need to catch up do away with the debilitating policies initiated by Mao who brought China's economic progress to a virtual standstill because of his suicidal chaotic policies during the Cultural Revolution. Secondly, as mentioned earlier, China sincerely upheld the principle of peaceful coexistence and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states. In fact, from 1975 up to May, 1978, China still hoped that she would not have to be a mediator between the Khmer Rouge and Hanoi and she would have been most reluctant to take on such a role. Thirdly, being a socialist state, China endorsed the principle of self-reliance. For this reason, China did not give full assistance either to the Khmer Rouge or to Vietnam during the difficult years of the Vietnam War (1968 — 1972). Fourthly, China did not want to play a high profile role as such a stand might be interpreted as seeking 'regional hegemony' in Indochina. Since Moscow repeatedly criticized her, China wanted to avoid playing into the hands of the Russian propaganda apparatus.

However, when Hanoi began to tilt towards Moscow since June, 1978, first by joining COMECON and then in November, 1978 by de jure establishing a military alliance with Moscow, China was then slowly forced, faced by these new developments, to gradually embroil herself in a difficult and entangled trilateral relationship between Hanoi and Moscow in Indochina. China thus become the 'patron' whereas the Khmer Rouge become the 'client' over the larger issue of the strategic conflicts with

Russia over southeast Asia. China could not tolerate any longer how Hanoi was willingly becoming the 'Cuba of Southeast Asia' — a tool of Moscow to embark upon a grand design of encirclement of China from her southern flanks.⁽³⁵⁾ Further-more, China's endorsement of the Khmer Rouge was also reinforced by her perception that Hanoi was seeking hegemony over Kampuchea and Laos. Thus China's volte face was therefore a reaction to Hanoi's policy towards Kampuchea — trying to thwart off Hanoi's desire to create a confederation of Indochinese states.

VI 1979 — 1988: Hardline Policy

Why did China adopt a decade of hardline policy towards Kampuchea? Firstly, the main motivation was based on strategic cum security reasons as China perceived Vietnam's invasion of Phnom Penh to be linked with Moscow's invasion of Kabul. Vietnam's actions as seen from China's perspective, could be used to serve Moscow's new Asian collective security needs. Hence, the presence of the Soviet Union's naval power in Vietnam was perceived by China as part of a larger strategic network by Moscow ranging from the Horn of Africa to Vladivostok. Therefore, the Vietnamese occupation of Kampuchea brought the Soviet Union closer to China's southern flanks. Thus a hardline policy towards Vietnam and the adoption of a counter-encirclement strategy by China was necessary so as minimize the security threats aggravated by the Vietnamese/Russian alliance. But at the same time, a positive strategy had to be adopted to get a broader support from different quarters, including the ASEAN grouping, the US, the EEC and Japan, etc. Secondly, China's hardline policy towards Vietnam and her allies in Kampuchea can be partially explained by Hanoi's policies towards China, and in particular towards Kampuchea. Thirdly, China's hardline policy can also be explained from the psychological-cultural perspective in

the sense that China had lost face because as patron she could no longer protect her client, the Khmer Rouge. Therefore, Deng's decision to teach Vietnam a lesson can best be explained as a way out to save Deng's face. Finally, can the hardline policy be explained as a function of a power struggle within the PLA or to serve China's domestic needs? It has been argued that Vietnam's hardline policy towards China and her invasion of Kampuchea was perceived by the Chinese leaders as a deliberate provocation to upset China's time-table for her modernization plans.⁶⁶ Suffice to argue that China's hardline policy towards Kampuchea was mainly initiated by the changing situation in Indochina rather than being a reaction emanating from the internal political development in China. It was mainly a response to Vietnam's occupation of Kampuchea since January, 1979 and the formation of the Hanoi-Moscow alliance since 1978. Thus on January 1979, China decided to punish Vietnam by attacking her northern flanks. This armed conflict testified to China's greatest displeasure over Vietnam's aggression in Kampuchea. This episode subsequently marked the beginning of almost a decade of China's 'bleed Vietnam white' policy.

Accordingly, a combination of various strategies ranging from direct military pressure, political propaganda and threats, diplomatic isolation of Vietnam, political cooperation with ASEAN, military assistance to the Kampuchean anti-Vietnamese resistance movement, headed by Shihanouk, were initiated so as to weaken Vietnam's position in Indochina. China also played up the fear of Hanoi and Moscow seeking 'Regional hegemony' in Southeast Asia. This was clearly seen from the remarks by China's paramount leader Deng Xiaoping during his visit to the ASEAN capitals in November, 1978. Thus Thailand has become the important ASEAN state in Deng's anti-Vietnam strategy as without the support from Bangkok, China would not have been able to ship ammunitions and arms from the ports of Sattaship and Klong Yai to the Khmer Rouge guerrillas who were

driven by the Vietnamese to the western mountainous areas inside Kampuchea. Therefore, Sino-Thai military cooperation was the logical outcome of a changing new power configuration in Indochina since 1979. Thailand could not sit idly by since her security was now being threatened by Vietnam, Thailand's arch enemy. This resulted in a marriage of convenience being forged between Beijing and Bangkok to strengthen their respective security needs.

In order to achieve China's objectives in Kampuchea, China, since the beginning of the 1980's decided not only to take an active role in forging an anti-Vietnam-Russian united front but also to assume a leading role in trying to internationalise the Kampuchean issue. This could clearly be seen from China's proposal of a five point formula in October, 1982 with a view to bringing about a solution to the Kampuchean conflict. These five points include inter alia: 1) a timetable for the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Kampuchea; 2) termination of aid from Moscow to Hanoi; 3) an end to Vietnam's anti-China policy; 4) internationally supervised free elections in Kampuchea; 5) the establishment of an independent neutral Kampuchea.³⁷

The political significance of this proposal was that China was flexible in her hardline policy as she did not insist on an immediate time frame for the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Kampuchea. China's flexible diplomacy could also be seen in October, 1986, when China endorsed the eight point proposal enunciated by the Coalition Democratic Government of Kampuchea.

The main difference between the CDGK's eight point proposal and China's five point formula was that the former wanted Vietnam and Kampuchea to sign a non-aggression pact, thus terminating the 'special relationship' between Vietnam and Kampuchea.

In any case, China welcomed any positive proposal, including emanating

those from the ASEAN quarters which could bring about a solution to the Kampuchean quagmire. In May, 1987, China openly expressed her interest to be a guarantor to a final peace settlement of the Kampuchean conflict.³⁸

It is pertinent to note that China was even willing to compromise her ideological stand with regards to the Kampuchean conflict. Thus in September, 1987, Deng told Shihanouk that China would accept a non-socialist Kampuchea as long as Shihanouk would be head of state. China was even willing to cease supporting her 'client', the Khmer Rouge. This shift was important as it marked the beginning of the collapse of the Sino-Khmer Rouge alliance.

By the end of 1988, there was evidence to indicate that a shift in China's hardline policy was in the offing. This development was mainly due to the improvement in Sino-Vietnamese relations which got under way since January, 1989 when the first official talks between Vietnam and China on how to improve relations between the two states started to take place. Thus the year 1989 marked the end of China's hardline policy towards Kampuchea as China did not insist as she used to do during the previous years on one very important condition, i.e. Vietnam must withdraw all her troops from Kampuchea before Sino-Vietnamese relations could be improved.

After ten years of occupation of Kampuchea, Vietnam finally come to the conclusion that such a policy proved to be unworkable. On September 26, 1989, Hanoi formally announced that Vietnam had completed her pull out from Kampuchea. This news was important as it removed the most important obstacle imposed by China on Vietnam. With this hurdle removed, China could now go ahead to end the Sino-Vietnamese hostilities and efforts were under way to improve their relations.

This new development enabled China to be more flexible in her policies towards Kampuchea. China agreed upon the insistence by the ASEAN states

to disband the Khmer Rouge military apparatus, a step which Beijing stubbornly refused to even consider during previous attempts by the ASEAN states. China clearly wanted to distance herself from her close association with the unpopular Khmer Rouge. At any rate, why should China be close to the Khmer Rouge since the rationale for maintaining the 'patron-client' relationship was no longer exists? Certainly, the Khmer Rouge had lost their usefulness in China's anti-Vietnam united front strategy. Hence China ended her hardline policy towards Vietnam as well as Kampuchea since 1989.

Thus it can be argued that Vietnam was a very important factor in shaping China's policies towards Kampuchea. In this sense, a hypothesis can be formulated, i.e. the extent of China's hardline or softline policies towards Kampuchea was a function of Vietnam's policies towards Kampuchea. The logic of this argument is therefore that China did not seem to have a coherent longterm plan for Kampuchea but China went through the motion of adjustments in responding to the so-called Vietnam factor as well as the latter's policies towards Indochina.

Furthermore, Gorbachev also played an important part which cannot easily be dismissed. The overall improvement in the climate between China and the Soviet Union since Gorbachev's accession to power in 1985 and the Sino-Soviet Summit in May, 1989, removed Moscow's threat to China's southern borders. Hence the overall lessening of the tensions in the relations between China and the Soviet Union and the improving regional environment in Indochina made it less necessary for China to adopt an unflexible hardline policy.

Finally, China's shift in her policies since 1989 can also partially be explained in the following context, i.e. China wanted to project a better image abroad, particularly so in the wake of the Tiananmen crisis after June, 1989. The desire to control the political dissidents within China

discouraged to some extent the undertaking of adventurous hardline policies abroad.

China faces a dilemma in her policy towards Kampuchea especially towards the Khmer Rouge. What should be China's proper role in finding a just solution to the Kampuchean conflict? What should be the proper relationship between China and the Khmer Rouge if the patron-client model is not any longer justifiable since 1989?

If China takes on an active and aggressive role, then this stand can be misinterpreted as seeking hegemonism in Indochina which may trigger off unnecessary anxieties among the ASEAN states over China's intentions towards Southeast Asia and worse still, from the ASEAN states and Vietnam's perspective, China's longterm intentions towards the South China Sea, especially in view of China's recent growing assertiveness towards that Maritime region.

VII 1989 to the present: Pragmatism

Since the beginning of 1990, pragmatism has always been the main guiding motif of China's policies towards Kampuchea. China continued to show her flexibility by trying to find a solution to end the Kampuchean quagmire. In January, 1990, for example, for the first time, China shifted her long standing backing of the Khmer Rouge to a policy whereby she started to increasingly support the UN's role in trying to work out a workable framework for Kampuchea.⁽³⁹⁾ China, together with the rest of the four permanent members of the UN Security Council endorsed the UN's 16 points principles which can lay the foundation to end the Kampuchean conflict.

To show China's support for the UN's role and her sincerity in seeking a just solution, Beijing announced in September, 1991 that China ceased

giving military assistance to the Khmer Rouge.⁽⁴⁰⁾

China's flexibility could further be seen from Beijing's willingness to play host to the meeting of the Supreme National Council (SNC) and more significantly from inviting and treating the Hun Sen government as an equal partner, a position which China adroitly refused to take on previous occasions. This volte face paved the way not only in bringing about the end of the Kampuchean conflict but also to some extent contributed to the improvement of Sino-Soviet relations which in the long term can help to promote a stable environment in Indochina. Indeed, on 11 July, 1991, Moscow Radio responded favorably towards China's flexible stance and positive attitude.⁽⁴¹⁾

China's cooperation made it easy for Kampuchea's four factions to finally agree and to sign the historic peace treaty on 23rd October, 1991. As one of the 19 nations which guaranteed the Paris Peace Accord, China responded favorably as her Foreign Ministry's spokesman, Wu Jianming told a press briefing that 'the Chinese government and people welcome this agreement and offer their congratulations on this occasion. We are ready together with the international community to contribute our share to ensuring earnest implementation of the agreement — and to the economic recovery and reconstruction of Cambodia'.⁽⁴²⁾ The Chinese spokesman also emphasized that China would respect the outcome of the general elections in Kampuchea. In short, China wants to see the emergence of a stable Kampuchean government which is popularly elected by the people.

An Assessment

What generalizations can be inferred to from the above case study of China's behaviour towards Kampuchea? Firstly, China hardly considered Kampuchea per se as an important input in her foreign policy outputs. In

fact, throughout history, due to various reasons, China deliberately ignored Kampuchea until Kampuchea as such created a problem for China. Hence, one can argue that China never had a systematic long-term plan to colonise Kampuchea. In fact, the patron-client pattern during 1979 – 1989 between China and the Khmer Rouge was more a political liability rather than an asset for China. Secondly, communist ideology has never been a major input in China's policy formulations since 1949. China's policy was mainly based on pragmatic, instrumental and functional considerations rather than on Marxist or Maoist ideological tenets. China was interested to promote state-to-state rather than party-to-party relations. Communist solidarity or ideological solidarity can be sacrificed for the sake of promoting China's strategic cumsecurity interests in Indochina. In fact, China from time to time criticised the Khmer Rouge for practising extreme primitive communism which resulted into alienating the Kampuchean people. Thirdly, China was sensitive to the security of her southern region. Her policy therefore was mainly a reaction to the regional changing environment. China did not have a coherent Kampuchean policy per se but linked it to the changing environment in Indochina, especially the great rivalries in the region. In the 1950's to the 1970's, China's policy was mainly a reaction to the US presence in Indochina. In the late 1970's and mid 1980's, it was a response to the Soviet presence in Vietnam and Vietnam's alliance with the Soviet Union. Fourthly, Vietnam can be an important factor in China's overall considerations of her policies towards Kampuchea. China's Kampuchean policy can be a function in the overall relations between China and Vietnam. When Sino-Vietnamese relations improved, China adopted a more friendly posture towards Kampuchea. However, when Sino-Vietnamese hostilities increased, China in turn adopted a more hardline policy towards Kampuchea. Therefore, China's policy towards Kampuchea was a function of Vietnam's policies towards Kampuchea. China only

reacted rather than took the initiative.

Finally, what are the prospects for China's policy in the 1990's? With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the normalization of relations between China and Vietnam, the implementation of the UN's peace plan and the achievement of China's economic growth, China is expected to shift her focus from Kampuchea and Indochina to the South China Sea, an area in dispute where claims from various parties are involved, which will demand greater attention from China. As long as Kampuchea does not create a major problem for China, she can afford to take a more accommodating posture and certainly a less hardline policy towards Kampuchea. Ultimately, as far as China is concerned, the destiny of Kampuchea must be charted by the Kampucheans themselves. China will be content with an independent Kampuchea, irrespective of her ideological outlook.

Foot notes

- (1) For a theoretical model of the 'patron-client' relationship, see for example, James C. Scott, "Patron-Client Politics and political change in Southeast Asia." *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 66 No.1 (March, 1972) pp.91-113.
- (2) *Ibid*, p.92.
- (3) See Christopher C. Snoemaker & John Spainer, *Patron-Client State Relationships: Multilateral Crisis in the Nuclear Age*, (New York: Praeger, 1984) pp.13-14.
- (4) For an argument on proxies, see *From Phnom Penh to Kabul*, (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore Government, 1979).
- (5) Robert L. Rothstein, *Alliances and Small Powers*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp.24-27.
- (6) Kampuchea has never been subjugated by China throughout history. See Chang Pao-Min, *Kampuchea between China and Vietnam*, (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1985) p.1.
- (7) Chang Pao-Min, *op. cit*, p.2. See also Li Changfu, *Zhongguo Zhimin Shi*, (A History of Chinese Emigration), (Shanghai: Shangwa Shuji,

- 1946), p.74 and 101.
- (8) Chang Pao-Min, *ibid*, p.2.
 - (9) Chang Pao-Min, *ibid*, p.3.
 - (10) David P. Chandler, *A History of Cambodia* (Boulder: Westview, 1982), p.11.
 - (11) Chang Pao-Min, *op. cit.*, p.1.
 - (12) Huang Xionghue, *Jianpuzai Zhilue*, (A Short Survey of Cambodia) (Shanghai: Zhengzhong Shuju, 1947).
 - (13) Chang Pao-Min, *op. cit.*, p.12.
 - (14) Joseph Frankel, "Soviet Policy in Southeast Asia", in Mix Beloff, ed., *Soviet Policy in the Far East: 1944-1951*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), p.226.
 - (15) Micheal Leifer, *Cambodia*, (New York: Praeger, 1967), p.74.
 - (16) A.D. Armstrong, *Revolutionary Diplomacy: China's Foreign Policy and the United Front Doctrine*, (Berkeley: University of California, 1977), p.186.
 - (17) A.D. Armstrong, *ibid*, see chapter one, p.15.
 - (18) Armstrong, *ibid*, p.192.
 - (19) Melvin Gurtov, *China and Southeast Asia — The Politics of Survival, A Study of Foreign Policy Interaction*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), pp.57-58.
 - (20) Gurtov, *ibid*, p.58.
 - (21) Gurtov, *ibid*, p.58.
 - (22) Gurtov, *ibid*, p.59 and 60.
 - (23) P.C. Pradhan, *Foreign Policy of Kampuchea*, (New Dehli: Radiant, 1985) p.126.
 - (24) Armstrong, *op. cit.* p.204.
 - (25) William Heaton, "China and Southeast Asian Communist Movements: The Decline of Dual Trach Diplomacy", *Asian Survey*, Voi. XXII, No. 2.
 - (26) Pradhan, *op. cit.*, pp.130-132.
 - (27) Gurtov, *op. cit.* p.244-247. See also Armstrong, *op. cit.* p.206.
 - (28) Armstrong, *op. cit.* p.210. See also C.K. Chen, "China and the Indochina Crises", i. G.T. Hsiao ed., *The Roles of the External Powers in the Indochina Crises*, (New York: Andronicus, Publishing Co. 1973) p.71.
 - (29) Chang Pao-Min, *op. cit.* p.29.
 - (30) John H. Esterline & Maett Esterine, *How the Dominoes Fell: Southeast Asia in Perspective*, (Lanham, M.D.: Hamilton Press, 1986), P.91.
 - (31) G. Evans and K. Rowley, *Red Brotherhood at War: Vietnam, Cambodia*

- and Laos since 1975, (London: Verso, 1990), p.138.
- (32) Chang Pao-Min, *op. cit.*, p.44.
 - (33) Chang Pao-Min, *op. cit.* p.53.
 - (34) For a detailed study see, Shee Poon Kim, "China's Indochina Policies: 1949-1989 An Assessment", in *RIAD Bulletin*, Vol. 2, March, 90. (IUJ)
 - (35) R.C. Horn, "Moscow and Peking in Post-Indochina Southeast Asia", *Asian Affairs*, September/October, 1986, p.38. See also *Renmin Ribao*, 17 April, 1977.
 - (36) Harish Kapur, *The End of Isolation: China After Mao*, (The Netherlands: M. Nijhoff Publishers, 1985), p.171.
 - (37) See Michael Haas, "The Indochina Tangle", *The Non-Aligned World* Vol.2, 1984, p.89.
 - (38) *The Straits Times*, 29.5 1988.
 - (39) *The Straits Times*, 18.1. 1990.
 - (40) *The Straits Times*, 7.9. 1991 and 6.9. 1991.
 - (41) *Foreign Broadcasting Information Services (FBIS)*-EAS-91-137, 17. 1. 1991, p.44.
 - (42) *The Straits Times*, 25.10. 1991.