Exiting Indochina

Exiting Indochina

U.S. Leadership of the Cambodia Settlement & Normalization of Relations with Vietnam

Richard H. Solomon

Foreword by Stanley Karnow

United States Institute of Peace Press
Washington, D.C.

United States Institute of Peace
1200 17th Street NW, Suite 200
Washington, DC 20036-3011

First published 2000

Printed in the United States of America

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Solomon, Richard H., 1937–

Exiting Indochina: U.S. leadership of the Cambodia settlement & normalization of relations with Vietnam / Richard H. Solomon; foreword by Stanley Karnow.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-929223-01-3 (alk. paper)

1. United States—Foreign relations—Cambodia. 2. Cambodia—Foreign relations—United States. 3. United States—Foreign relations—Vietnam. 4. Vietnam—Foreign relations—United States. 5. United States—Foreign relations—1945–1989. 6. Vietnamese Conflict, 1961–1975—Peace. 7. Vietnamese Conflict, 1961–1965—Cambodia. 8. Cambodia—Politics and government—1979– I. Title.

E183.8.C15 S66 2000
327.73059'09'049—dc21

00-023466

Contents

Foreword

Stanley Karnow

On July 8, 1959, I was visiting Saigon as a correspondent for *Time* magazine when communist guerrillas attacked Bien Hoa, a South Vietnamese army camp about twenty-five miles north of the city, killing two U.S. military advisers—Major Dale R. Buis and Master Sergeant Chester M. Ovnand. My report on the episode was given only a few paragraphs in the magazine; at the time it deserved no more. It seemed inconceivable to me at that juncture that I was witnessing the start of a war in which 3 million Americans would ultimately serve, or that the names of Buis and Ovnand would one day head the list of nearly 60,000 other fatalities engraved on the black marble of the poignant Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington. Nor, as I surveyed the bullet-pocked scene at Bien Hoa, could I even remotely envision that the conflict would spread, over the next sixteen years, beyond the borders of Vietnam into adjacent Cambodia and Laos, convulsing those lands and claiming the lives of at least 10 million men, women, and children, both soldiers and civilians.

Stanley Karnow, author and journalist, covered both the French and American wars in Indochina. Among his several books on Asia is the Pultizer Prize–winning study *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997).

In *Exiting Indochina*, Richard Solomon focuses on the aftermath of the Vietnam tragedy as the major powers grappled with the staggering challenge of restoring a measure of stability to the benighted Indochina region. In his position as assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, he was intimately engaged in the endeavor of negotiating a political resolution to the differences that continued to divide the parties to this enduring conflict. This book, which contains previously unpublished details of the negotiations that led to a United Nations peace plan for Cambodia and the process of normalizing U.S.-Vietnam relations, vividly describes and analyzes the obstacles that constantly thwarted and frequently appeared to propel the task toward disaster.

It was a negotiation immensely complicated by the fact that each of the participants in the process approached the enterprise with its own agenda. The Soviet Union, preoccupied by grave dilemmas at home, in the late 1980s had ceased to provide the Vietnamese with the crucial assistance it had granted them since the end of the war against the Americans and in the subsequent conflict with the Chinese. As a consequence, the Vietnamese economy was deteriorating, in large part because of the huge costs the Vietnamese had incurred in their invasion and occupation of Cambodia in late 1978—a move they had undertaken to overthrow the Khmer Rouge, whom they considered to be China's surrogate in a scheme to encircle them. The Chinese, striving to obstruct Vietnam's hopes to extend its sway over the states of former French Indochina—Laos and Cambodia—were in turn aiding the Khmer Rouge with weapons, sanctuaries, and money, primarily through Thailand. Increasingly isolated and desperate to counterbalance what it viewed as a threat to its security, the Hanoi regime was seeking to normalize its relationship with the United States. But that effort was inhibited by a potent American political lobby, which refused to countenance a U.S.-Vietnam rapprochement until Hanoi accounted for the remains of all the U.S. troops still missing in action from the war of the 1960s and 1970s.

Further compounding this diplomatic tangle, the French continued to nurture their grandiose dream of reestablishing influence in their onetime

imperial possession, while the British lacked the dynamism and the resources to play a significant role in Southeast Asia.

Despite these hurdles, the political maneuvering eventually yielded an accommodation. It partly stemmed from the desire of regional states like Australia, Indonesia, Thailand, and Japan to achieve a solution, but mainly it resulted from a secret transaction between China and Vietnam to reconcile their differences within the framework of a United Nations peace plan for Cambodia.

As Solomon notes, it was ironic that the United States, given its deep involvement in the Vietnam War, should emerge as the catalyzing power in the tortuous attempt to reach a diplomatic settlement. What made this possible, he suggests, is that the other parties judged the United States to be the most "neutral" of the major powers in the diplomacy of the early 1990s, and hence able to act as an intermediary in constructing a UN Security Council peace process. Thus America's strategy, which throughout the 1980s had focused primarily on preventing Vietnam from consolidating its influence over Cambodia, shifted to constructing an exit from Indochina for all the major powers —thus transforming the United States from a protagonist into an arbiter.

The devastating Indochina drama—from the 1950s through four subsequent decades of war, revolution, and diplomacy—is a story of grievous misperceptions and miscalculations. It originated in the period following World War II when Western leaders constructed their foreign policies on the assumption that communism was a monolithic global movement controlled by the Kremlin. The concept spawned such dogmas as the "domino theory," which maintained that the fall of one country in Indochina to communism would automatically touch off a chain reaction, causing others throughout Southeast Asia to collapse like a row of wobbly tiles. The bulk of evidence indicated, however, that this facile notion was at best an exaggeration born of fears of an expansionist Soviet Union and revolutionary China. Many communists in the Third World dutifully echoed Soviet or Chinese propaganda, but they were also

nationalists whose priorities did not always coincide with those of the Kremlin or the Forbidden City. As intelligence experts knew, some often balked at obeying Moscow's or Beijing's dictates.

The Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh was a case in point. As a youth he had been inspired by the lofty French principles of *liberté, égalité, et fraternité,* but was denied the right to practice them by the colonial power. Frustrated, he came to dedicate his life to a single purpose—winning independence for Vietnam. Persuaded that the Soviet Union would promote his crusade, Ho became a professional communist agent. Or, as he later explained, "I was motivated by nationalism rather than ideology." Essentially a pragmatist, Ho explored various routes to reaching his goal. He wrote several letters to Harry Truman requesting support, but the president, to induce the French to concede to the rearmament of West Germany, instead backed Paris's drive to reestablish its colonial administration in Vietnam. In 1950, when Ho founded his government in the jungle, he solicited and obtained recognition from Marshal Tito of Yugoslavia, who was then an apostate in the eyes of Joseph Stalin. For a brief moment, U.S. specialists mused that Ho might not be a Soviet pawn after all, but then dropped the matter. The French, with American support, fought Ho's ragtag forces for eight years and were finally vanquished at the showdown battle of Dien Bien Phu in the spring of 1954. President Eisenhower rejected an appeal from Paris to intervene to rescue the beleaguered French garrisons, having heeded the counsel of his Joint Chiefs of Staff that "Indochina is devoid of any decisive military objective," and that a commitment there would be "a serious diversion of limited U.S. capabilities."

Until that stage a local crisis, Indochina became an international responsibility in May 1954, when the big powers convened at Geneva to negotiate an armistice. The Soviet Union and China, eager to improve their ties with the West, exerted pressure on their Vietnamese comrades to compromise by acquiescing to the partition of Vietnam into northern and southern zones pending nationwide elections scheduled for 1956 to determine which side would govern the country. Ho's prestige after routing

the French was unparalleled, and his candidates would have certainly triumphed, but the election was never held. Profoundly disappointed, the traditionally chauvinistic Vietnamese would henceforth distrust foreign intrusions into their problems even more than ever. Years later, obliquely impugning his own allies, North Vietnam's prime minister, Pham Van Dong, bitterly confided to me, "We were betrayed."

Their aspirations to unify Vietnam under their control foiled, the Vietnamese communists gradually launched the struggle that would engulf the United States in the longest war of its history—and culminate in its first military defeat. It is tempting to speculate on how events would have unfolded had diplomacy of the brand pursued by Richard Solomon and his colleagues had been given a chance two generations ago. My opinion is that one of the worst catastrophes of the century might have been averted.

Preface

The long, twilight struggle of the Cold War may have ended without the dreaded nuclear Armageddon between the superpowers, but the global confrontation between the communist world and the democracies did have its hot conflicts. Many of the "small" wars of the second half of the twentieth century were conflicts in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia in which "Third World" allies of the Soviet Union and/or China on the one hand, and the United States and its allies on the other hand, played out revolutionary-nationalist struggles with support from their backers among the major powers.

Two of these surrogate conflicts of the Cold War era, in Asia, drew the United States into costly and frustrating wars that have left as much an imprint on American foreign policy as has the nuclear standoff. The Korean War, 1950–1953, ended in a stalemate between forces of the Republic of Korea and the United States and those of North Korea (Democratic People's Republic of Korea) and Chinese "volunteers"—a standoff that persists today, almost five decades after the end of all-out warfare.

The other hot war of the Cold War years in Asia was the conflict in Indochina—as the French of the colonial era called the three states of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos that abut China's southern frontier. America's "Vietnam War," which spilled over to engulf neighboring Cambodia and Laos, followed a century of French colonial domination of the area, Japanese invasion during World War II, and France's defeat by Vietnam's communist revolutionaries in 1954. Between 1955, when

American military advisers were first deployed in South Vietnam (Republic of Vietnam), and 1973, when U.S. forces withdrew under the terms of a peace agreement negotiated with North Vietnam at Paris,[1] the United States waged a drawn-out, bloody, and frustrating conflict against communist guerrilla armies. That struggle ended in defeat for the United States and its South Vietnamese ally. The war claimed more than 58,000 American lives and more than 2 million for the Vietnamese both North and South. The conflict also generated a regionwide cauldron of instability and violence as the North Vietnamese extended supply lines through Laos and Cambodia into South Vietnam, leading U.S. forces to bomb logistical targets in these countries lest they become sanctuaries for North Vietnam's forces.

Two years after the withdrawal of the American military from South Vietnam in 1973, North Vietnam's regular armies conquered all of the south; and in neighboring Cambodia, an indigenous communist revolutionary force known in the West as the Khmer Rouge (Red Khmer) overthrew the pro-U.S. government of the Republic of Cambodia. But Cambodia's travails were not yet over. The country endured fifteen more years of political violence and warfare as, first, the victorious Khmer Rouge promoted a domestic social revolution that took the lives of more than a million Khmer in a spasm of auto-genocidal killing, and then in late 1978, Vietnam invaded and occupied the country, driving the Khmer Rouge from power and establishing a friendly government. (For a discussion of the terms "Cambodia" and "Khmer," see note 5 on page 14 below.)

For Americans, the Vietnam War, our first military defeat abroad, became and persists as a symbol of the unwanted responsibilities and unacceptable costs of international leadership. The political turmoil in the United States stimulated by the Vietnam War produced a great generational divide in American politics. The rallying cry "no more Vietnams" continues to be invoked with each international conflict that threatens to

1. See Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), chapters 8 and 12; and *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982), chapter 8.

enmesh the United States in warfare abroad. The insistence of our political leaders, especially those in Congress, that any engagement be accompanied by a clearly defined "exit strategy" bespeaks the popular aversion to entrapment in drawn-out and costly conflicts.

In the fullness of time, foreign affairs analysts of another generation may come to see the Vietnam War—as with the Korean conflict—as a necessary, if costly and poorly conceived, battle in the global struggle of the Cold War. For those who lived through the searing domestic and international conflicts of that era, however, "getting out of Vietnam" in 1973 brought to most Americans the liberating lift of escaping a quagmire.

What is less evident to all but the most specialized of observers of U.S. foreign affairs is that America's final exit from the turmoils of Indochina did not occur until two decades after the last U.S. soldiers were evacuated from the roof of the American embassy in Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) on April 29, 1973. Two more phases of conflict followed the collapse of the Republic of Vietnam in 1975: the Cambodian revolution and a decade of Vietnamese occupation of that country. Only at the end of the 1980s did the impending collapse of the Soviet Union, in combination with China's persistent pressures on its former ally Vietnam, create the conditions that enabled the United States, and the other major powers, to negotiate a settlement of the Cambodia conflict, enabling them all to withdraw from the region.

This study recounts the diplomacy that brought an end to great power involvement in Indochina, a major cockpit of the Cold War struggles among the United States and its allies, the Soviet Union, and China. The author was an official of the United States government during the years 1989–92. In that capacity he participated in, first, efforts by France and Indonesia to construct a negotiated settlement of the enduring conflict in Cambodia, then an American-catalyzed effort through the United Nations Security Council to negotiate a peace process for Cambodia, and, finally, the construction of a "road map" to normalizing U.S.-Vietnam relations. The history of this diplomacy is worth recording if for no other

reason than it documents the final phase of America's decades of involvement in Indochina of the Cold War era.

Another reason for exploring this history is that it highlights the changing character of diplomacy at an important "break point" in international politics. The diplomacy of the Cambodia peace process straddles the years in which the Soviet Union collapsed. As that process reached its climax in the early 1990s, associated conflicts of the Cold War era—the Sino-Soviet confrontation and China's conflict with Vietnam over the two countries' influence in Indochina—became manageable by political processes. Thus, the diplomacy of the Cambodia settlement and U.S.-Vietnam normalization provides a window on an era in which military confrontations and war gave way, perhaps for only a brief time, to an era of political management of international conflicts. How long this era will last is an interesting, if incalculable, matter. What is assessed here is the role of the United States as one among a number of parties to a successful multilateral international mediation effort and its leadership in catalyzing a UN-managed peace process.

It was from this perspective that the author was requested to document his involvement in the diplomacy of the Cambodia peace process. That assessment was published by the United States Institute of Peace in 1999 as a vehicle for teaching and training practitioners in the skills and complexities of international mediation.[2] The present study is an exploration of the process of great power disengagement from Indochina that goes beyond the diplomacy of the Cambodia settlement to recount efforts in the early 1990s to reactivate a process of normalizing U.S.-Vietnam relations.

2. See Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson, and Pamela Aall, eds., *Herding Cats: Multiparty Mediation in a Complex World* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1999).

Acknowledgments

In preparing this retrospective history and assessment, the author had significant research support from James Rae. Over the years he also received helpful inputs from a number of colleagues regarding the history of the Indochina conflicts, the Cambodia negotiating effort, and the process of U.S.-Vietnam normalization: Morton Abramowitz, Elizabeth Becker, John Bolton, Frederick Z. Brown, Nayan Chanda, Richard Childress, Gareth Evans, Karl Jackson, Stanley Karnow, Robert Kimmit, Masaharu Kohno, Robert Manning, Claude Martin, Thomas Pickering, Steve Pieczenik, Kenneth Quinn, Brent Scowcroft, Sichan Siv, Stephen Solarz, and Paul Wolfowitz. He alone, however, is responsible for the interpretations developed in this retrospective assessment, as well for any errors of fact.

It should be added that the interpretation developed here is from an American perspective, with the objective of assessing how the United States can play a more effective role in multilateral international efforts to mediate settlements of violent conflicts. The history of these events is so complex that other observers, particularly those from other countries involved in the diplomacy of the Cambodia peace process, would almost certainly give different weights to the roles that various countries played in the process and perhaps have a different interpretation of certain events—à la Akira Kurosawa's classic 1950 film *Rashomon*.

Abbreviations

APEC	Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CGDK	Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea
CNN	Cable News Network
CPP	Cambodian People's Party
CSCA	Conference on Security and Cooperation in Asia
DK	Democratic Kampuchea
FUNCINPEC	United National Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia
JIM	Jakarta Informal Meetings
KPNLF	Khmer People's National Liberation Front
KPRP	Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party
KR	Khmer Rouge (see PDK)
Perm Five (P-5)	The five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council: China, France, Great Britain, the Soviet Union (now Russia), and the United States
PDK	Party of Democratic Kampuchea (aka Khmer Rouge)
POW/MIA	Prisoner of War/Missing in Action
PRK	People's Republic of Kampuchea
SNC	Supreme National Council
SOC	State of Cambodia

UN	United Nations
UNTAC	United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia

Exiting Indochina


Chengdu
CHINA
Canton
Hong Kong
MYANMAR
(BURMA)
Dien Bien Phu
Hanoi
LAOS
HAINAN
Vientiane
THAILAND
Bangkok
Pailin
VIETNAM
CAMBODIA
Phnom Penh
Ho Chi Minh City
(Saigon)
MALAYSIA
Kuala
Lumpur
Scale 1:32,000,000 at 5°N
Mecator Projection
0
500 Km
0
500 Miles
Khmer Rouge base areas
in the 1980s

Indochina