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Diplomatic Pragmatism:

ASEAN's response to the July 1997 coup

The July 1997 overthrow of Prince Norodom Ranariddh by co-Prime Minister Hun Sen came as little surprise to the members of the international community who had helped bring about the 1991 Paris agreements. But their political disengagement from Cambodia following the 1993 UN-organised elections had left them with few easy options for responding to renewed tensions and, for most of them, it was no longer a priority.

The members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), on the other hand, remained acutely aware of the threat Cambodia's internal problems posed to their security. Plans underway at the time to integrate Cambodia into ASEAN were seen as key to bolstering the country's fledgling peace and regional stability. While it was logical that ASEAN take the lead in managing the crisis which quickly spread to the western provinces bordering Thailand, it soon became apparent that it was ill-equipped to decisively influence events alone.

ASEAN and conflict containment

Since its inception in 1967, ASEAN has been extremely successful at reducing tensions and

averting military confrontation between member states despite sharply diverging interests on many matters. ASEAN's collective political coherence, even in the absence of military strength, was also a key factor in preventing it from becoming embroiled in the Vietnam War during the 1970s. Yet ASEAN has always been ill-equipped to prevent or resolve conflicts in non-member states. The alliance was, after all, designed to further the interests of its members and its cohesion is dependent on strict adherence to principles of 'non-interference' (see box).

The constraints this poses on ASEAN were illustrated when Vietnam invaded Cambodia in 1979 to drive the Khmer Rouge from power. Fighting escalated in Cambodia in the early 1980s between the tripartite 'resistance' movement comprising the Khmer Rouge and two non-communist factions – FUNCINPEC and the KPLNF – and the Vietnamese-backed Phnom Penh regime. Despite the threat this posed to regional stability, ASEAN was able to do little but contain the conflict. The group lacked the collective military capability to expel Vietnam from Cambodia and – being perceived by Vietnam as too closely linked to its former enemy the US – was not in a position to play a mediatory role either.

Source: David van der Veen



Differences within the grouping on how to respond to Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia led some ASEAN members to act individually. For example, Indonesia was more inclined to accept Vietnam's pre-eminence in 'Indochina' (comprising the former French colonies of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam) which it saw as a strategic check on China's ambitions in the region. Thailand, on the other hand, felt threatened by Vietnam's presence on its borders and, along with Singapore, channelled US and Chinese military assistance to the resistance factions. All ASEAN member states nonetheless agreed on the need to use diplomacy to keep the conflict on the international agenda and to bring pressure to bear on Vietnam to withdraw from Cambodia.

With ASEAN's backing, the resistance factions occupied Cambodia's UN seat under the name of the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) and Cambodia was further isolated internationally. While this strategy prevented the Vietnamese-backed regime from consolidating power in Cambodia, it was only under intense pressure from the permanent five members of the Security Council, main sponsors of the Khmer factions, that the war was brought to an end.

Rebuffed by Hun Sen: the ASEAN 'troika's' attempt to mediate following the July coup. From left to right: Domingo Siazon of the Philippines, Ali Alatas of Indonesia and Prachuab Chaiyasan of Thailand

ASEAN's 'inward-looking' mandate

ASEAN was formed in 1967 by Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand with a primary aim being to foster regional peace and security and to prevent external interference in any form. Brunei Darussalam was granted membership in 1984, Vietnam in 1995, and Laos and Myanmar in 1997, bringing the total membership of ASEAN to nine. Cambodia's accession to membership was postponed indefinitely following the July 1997 coup.

While internal security and stability are also major preoccupations for ASEAN states, the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation adopted in 1976 — the so-called ASEAN 'code of conduct' — stresses the sacred nature of 'state sovereignty'. The association does not have a mandate to mediate in the internal problems of its members, much less those of non-member states, and has traditionally limited its role to providing diplomatic support to member states in international fora such as the UN.

During the peace process, ASEAN countries played a significant role in promoting dialogue between the factions by hosting a range of peace conferences in both Indonesia and Thailand. Moreover, each of the ASEAN countries contributed troops to the UN peace-keeping mission which implemented the 1991 Paris agreements.

However, when Cambodia regained its full sovereignty after 1993, the ability of ASEAN, like most members of the international community, to influence political events in Cambodia was greatly reduced. This was all the more so because ASEAN did not enjoy much economic leverage over the new government, given the very small amounts of reconstruction assistance its countries were providing. At the same time, however, optimism regarding prospects for a lasting peace in Cambodia were high, and what preoccupied ASEAN most after 1993 was securing Cambodia's membership. This would realise its goal of creating 'one Southeast Asia' with both the tangible and symbolic benefits this entailed for a common identity, market and security.

Having Cambodia in, instead of out – it was thought – would also allow ASEAN to help manage any problems which might eventually arise. The promise of membership could thus be used as an incentive to bring some influence to bear on events in the country. Accordingly, Cambodia was granted 'observer status' in 1994 and ASEAN countries followed this up by providing technical assistance to hasten and facilitate the transition to full membership. Yet when Cambodia's political situation began to deteriorate in early 1996, threatening the country's accession to membership and the stability of ASEAN as a whole, it could do little but make toothless appeals for peace to Cambodia's bickering leaders.

In May 1996, Malaysian Foreign Minister, Abdullah Badawi, warned the co-Prime Ministers against an escalation of violence which would delay Cambodia's entry into ASEAN. This was followed with a strong message from Singaporean Prime Minister Goh

Chok who, during a November trip to Phnom Penh, stressed the link between political stability and increased foreign investment. Tensions continued to mount, however, and ASEAN's decision in early 1997 to admit Cambodia, along with Myanmar and Laos, at its forthcoming 23 July annual meeting failed to prevent Hun Sen from moving against his coalition partner on 6 July.

Some days later, as fighting between forces loyal to the two Prime Ministers spread into Cambodia's western provinces bordering Thailand, Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim of Malaysia acknowledged that ASEAN's 'non-involvement in the reconstruction of Cambodia contributed to the deterioration and final collapse of national reconciliation'. For the first time the idea of a more 'constructive intervention' in Cambodia's affairs involving diplomatic mediation was openly advocated. While it was clear that ASEAN had a real interest in responding proactively to Cambodia's political problems, this meant breaking precedent with its hallowed principle of 'non-interference'.

Constructive engagement

A few days after Prince Ranariddh's overthrow at a 10 July meeting of ASEAN Foreign Ministers in Malaysia, a firm, though far from punitive, position was adopted. The issued statement reaffirmed a joint commitment to the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, but considered Hun Sen's use of force 'unfortunate'. It was also announced that Cambodia's admission into ASEAN would be delayed 'until a later date' and that Prince Ranariddh would continue to be recognised as the 'first' Prime Minister of Cambodia. This announcement was backed up by the United States' decision to suspend its aid to Cambodia for a period of 30 days as well as sanctions imposed by other countries.

Consensus emerged at the summit of the Asian Regional Forum (ARF) which followed shortly afterwards, bringing together ASEAN countries and dialogue partners including the

US, Japan, Russia, China and the European Union, that ASEAN should take the lead in addressing the crisis. The dilemmas were evident: to insist on returning Prince Ranariddh to power seemed unrealistic, and would restore the unwieldy coalition government which many countries felt had led to the crisis in the first place. At the same time, a weak reaction would call into question the international community's stated commitment to the Paris agreements and their support for Cambodia's fledgling democracy.

Instead, a strong appeal was made to Hun Sen to adhere to the Paris agreements and the Constitution and ensure that the elections scheduled for May 1998 took place. In the meantime, a 'troika' of three Foreign Ministers (Ali Alatas of Indonesia, Prachuab Chaiyasan of Thailand, and Domingo Siazon of the Philippines) was formed to define a mediatory role and push for a peaceful resolution to the crisis. With King Sihanouk's blessing, the ASEAN troika arrived in Phnom Penh on 19 July to talk with Hun Sen for the first time. The meeting accomplished little, however, with Hun Sen demanding that ASEAN either admit 'his' country by 23 July or 'forget it for the next five or 20 years'.

Hun Sen eventually accepted ASEAN's mediatory role on condition that it refrain from interfering in Cambodia's 'internal affairs' and respect a role of strict neutrality. By the end of July, however, Hun Sen had pressured the National Assembly to revoke Prince Ranariddh's parliamentary immunity. This would allow the Prince to be charged with the 'crimes' of illegally importing arms and colluding with the Khmer Rouge – Hun Sen's stated justifications for overthrowing Ranariddh in the first place. Ung Huot, a former Ranariddh minister, was then appointed the new 'first' Prime Minister in order to maintain the illusion that the coalition government was still intact.

At a second meeting between the troika and Hun Sen on 3 August, Hun Sen again criticised ASEAN for interfering in Cambodia's

Internal realignments, mixed reactions

Despite the appearance of unity given by the joint statement, ASEAN's rather weak reaction to the July coup was indicative of the substantial political realignments underway in the regional forum. Vietnam, the newest ASEAN member, remained sympathetic to Hun Sen given both their strong historical links and Prince Ranariddh's publicly hostile attitudes toward Hanoi. Within days of the outbreak of violence, Hanoi expressed appreciation of Hun Sen's 'contribution' to the 'consolidation of friendship and cooperative relations between the two states'.

Thailand, Singapore and the Philippines, on the other hand, reacted negatively to the coup, though this did not mean a renewed willingness on their part to support an anti-Phnom Penh armed resistance movement, as they had during the 1980s. In fact, Thai Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh even refused to meet with Ranariddh after the coup despite the fact that his counterparts in Indonesia, the Philippines and Singapore, had done so. Relations between the two had cooled dramatically since 1993 with Ranariddh seen as unappreciative of past support the Thais had provided to his royalist faction. Moreover, with fears of Vietnamese 'expansionism' in sharp decline in Thailand, commercial interests had quickly come to take precedence over traditional political concerns, and lucrative business relations had been established between associates of Chavalit and Hun Sen.

The backdrop to these mixed responses was the emerging regional economic crisis which increasingly preoccupied the ASEAN countries. The reality, moreover, was that their own mixed record of democracy left them poorly placed to criticise Hun Sen. This was forcefully brought home in January 1998 when Hun Sen snubbed the ASEAN countries, noting that on 'other things, like economics, they can teach us, but on the subject of democracy and human rights, they must not teach us.'

The 'Four Pillars' peace plan

- 1) All parties should abandon any cooperation with the Khmer Rouge, who are specifically forbidden by the terms of the Paris peace accords from participation in Cambodian political life.
- 2) Both the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF) and the forces loyal to Prince Ranariddh should implement an immediate ceasefire on the basis that Cambodian territorial integrity should be respected and the soldiers of the former RCAF should be re-incorporated into the RCAF with their original status and safety guaranteed.
- 3) The Cambodian legal authorities should conclude Prince Ranariddh's trial as soon as possible, after which the King should immediately bestow amnesty on the Prince on the basis of a petition from his family or other parties.
- 4) The Royal Cambodian Government should guarantee Prince Ranariddh's security and safety in Cambodia and should not bar him from participating in the election, so long as he observes the law of Cambodia.

"... if we opposition leaders were indeed immoral then we would accept the undemocratic outcome that the ruling party has engineered. If we were indeed irresponsible, then we would ignore the democratic aspirations of our people ..."

Prince Ranariddh and Sam Rainsy responding to Domingo Siazon, Foreign Secretary of the Philippines, who suggested it would be "highly immoral or irresponsible" for them not to form a government with Hun Sen, September 1997

internal affairs. In response to requests that Ranariddh be allowed to return to Cambodia, Hun Sen would henceforth argue that the problem of Prince Ranariddh was a 'legal' one, not a political one, and demand that the Prince cease his armed resistance and face trial for his crimes. While ASEAN, for its part, continued to maintain that there would be no change in Cambodia's 'observer' status within ASEAN until political stability had been achieved, by late August it had stopped raising the issue of who was Cambodia's legal 'first' Prime Minister.

As Malaysian Foreign Minister Abdulla put it: "To us, the question of recognition no longer arises. Our principle is that we have to deal with whichever government is in Phnom Penh". This change of heart was indicative of ASEAN's weakening ability to influence events in Cambodia and Hun Sen's increasing consolidation of power. The remaining fighters loyal to Prince Ranariddh were by then boxed in at O'Smach, their last stronghold on the Thai border, while a number of FUNCINPEC deputies and ministers had made a pragmatic decision to return from exile and work with Hun Sen. Moreover, at the end of October, Cambodia's head of state — King Sihanouk — abruptly departed for China when Hun Sen rebuffed his efforts to mediate in the crisis.

Hun Sen's strengthening position at home, however, did not obviate the need for him to regain some form of international legitimacy which only the elections scheduled for May 1998 could provide. ASEAN declared that it would not grant Cambodia membership until after the elections had taken place and also supported a UN decision to leave Cambodia's seat vacant until such a time. This struck a real blow to Hun Sen. His heavy dependence on international funding to organise credible elections thus opened the way for Cambodia's major donors to become more actively involved in finding a solution to the impasse.

The Japanese initiative

Building on a growing international consensus for the need to link funding for elections to Prince Ranariddh's return, Japan, Cambodia's largest donor, advanced the so-called 'Four Pillars' peace plan in January 1998. It called for a ceasefire between troops loyal to the two sides, for Prince Ranariddh to distance himself from the Khmer Rouge and reintegrate his forces into the Royal Cambodian Air Forces, and for him to be tried and amnestied of all crimes. The peace plan would thus satisfy Hun Sen's demand to try Prince Ranariddh for his alleged crimes while allowing the Prince to return to Cambodia and contest the elections, by now delayed until July.

On 15 February, the ASEAN troika endorsed the Japanese plan at a consultative meeting of the 'Friends of Cambodia', an informal diplomatic group of countries involved in the Paris agreements. The group included Australia, Canada, China, the European Union, Japan, Russia and the United States; countries whose political and financial clout would underpin the peace plan's effectiveness. Hun Sen immediately and unconditionally accepted the Japanese proposals. Ranariddh initially rejected them, arguing that his alliance with the Khmer Rouge was 'informal' and protesting his innocence of any significant wrongdoing, but later accepted the peace plan.

The overriding objective of the international peace plan was to ensure Prince Ranariddh's return to Cambodia. The questions of whether there was any legal justification for a trial and whether the Prince would be tried fairly were not addressed. In two separate 'show trials' which took place in Phnom Penh in March, Prince Ranariddh was found guilty in absentia of importing arms illegally into the country and colluding with the Khmer Rouge. He was sentenced to 35 years in prison and fined US \$54 million. Then, in line with the peace plan, King Sihanouk granted his son an amnesty in response to a request from Hun Sen, thus opening the way for the Prince's return to Cambodia on 30 March.

The Japanese peace plan revived flagging international support for the elections, though it had required few concessions from Hun Sen. He still maintained full control over the state and the electoral machinery while the Prince's party, FUNCINPEC, and the other opposition parties were split and in disarray. In the run-up to the July vote the international community stressed to Hun Sen the importance of creating a 'neutral political environment' so that the elections would be free, fair and credible. As main funders of the elections, neither Japan nor the European Union were willing to withhold their assistance when it became evident that such an environment was not emerging.

Limited options

Many countries – including most members of ASEAN – felt strongly that Hun Sen offered Cambodia badly needed stability at the time. On balance, it was argued that flawed elections were better than no elections at all and there were few alternatives to address the crisis. Despite the fact that Hun Sen's victory was secured under the shadow of widespread allegations of fraud, ASEAN and other countries placed immense pressure on opposition leaders Prince Ranariddh and Sam Rainsy to form a coalition government with him. This would grant Cambodia international 'legitimacy' again and open the way for it to become a full member of ASEAN.

Even once Cambodia becomes a member, ASEAN will still face the same dilemmas as it tries to influence the country's internal affairs. In reality, no member is yet prepared to sanction the surrender of sovereignty that a more interventionist approach would entail, a move which might very well prove terminal to the regional grouping. In the absence of political consensus or the joint capacity to exercise economic leverage, ASEAN's crisis management role will remain limited to containing the worst effects of Cambodia's political crises until more viable solutions can be found. ■