

Russia, China, and U.S. play geopolitics at Cambodia conference

by Linda de Hoyos

The international conference now in session in Paris, France, on a resolution for the ten-year conflict over Cambodia, has become the new testing ground for the global condominium among the United States, the Soviet Union, and the People's Republic of China, which the Bush administration appears to cherish. All three powers dispatched their foreign ministers to the conference.

From Washington, preliminary remarks of Secretary of State James Baker and other dignitaries indicate to what degree the Bush administration is seeking to retain its ties to Beijing in particular. On July 27, Baker announced that he would have a private meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen, in Paris—despite the Bush administration's stated policy that there would be no high-level contacts between American and Chinese officials until the Deng Xiaoping government renounced its repression policy against the Chinese democracy movement.

Baker made clear that in this case, Washington was acting solely on the basis of what it perceives as the geopolitical "special relationship" between Washington and Beijing. Baker told reporters: "This [the Cambodian conflict] is a good instance where we have a shared strategic interest and we will deal with them [the Chinese] in that framework. This is not going to be an occasion to beat up on them on their internal situation."

Kissinger's evil influence

Baker was indicating that the U.S. is following precisely the "framework" outlined by Henry Kissinger in a commentary in defense of Deng Xiaoping which appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* July 30. For Kissinger, the events of Tiananmen Square have not changed the motivations for the "China card." He wrote:

"China remains too important to U.S. national security to risk the relationship on emotions of the moment. The United States needs China as a possible counterweight to Soviet aspirations in Asia, and needs China to remain relevant in Japanese eyes as a key shaper of Asian events. China needs the United States as a counterweight to perceived ambitions from the Soviets and Japan. In return, China will exercise a moderating influence in Asia and not challenge America in other areas of the world. These realities have not

been altered by events."

Beijing's "moderating influence" was certainly not evident at the Paris conference. In discussions with Baker, Qian Qichen stood firm in defending the repressive policies of his government. As a senior State Department official described the meeting: "There is clearly a difference of approach in the way that they view the events that took place. We simply had a frank and candid discussion of that aspect of the relationship"—that is, close to acrimonious.

In regards to Cambodia, China exhibited the same level of intransigence.

Aside from the three "superpowers," the conference involved the participation of Vietnam and the Vietnamese-backed Phnom Penh government of Heng Samrin represented by Prime Minister Hun Sen; the resistance coalition, which includes the forces of the Beijing-backed Khmer Rouge, Prince Sihanouk, and former Cambodian prime minister Son Sann; and representatives from France, Japan, Thailand, South Korea, and other countries contiguous to the conflict.

The conference itself had been prompted by the announcements from Hanoi that Vietnam would withdraw all of its troops from Cambodia by the end of September 1989. This has been the key demand of the resistance forces, who have refused to negotiate a political settlement to the conflict, until the withdrawal is assured. Right before the conference, Vietnam specified that all of its 200,000 troops which have been occupying Cambodia ever since Vietnam ran the Khmer Rouge out in 1979, would be gone by no later than Sept. 26.

The Vietnamese have further declared that they will not return their troops to Cambodia under any circumstances—even if the Khmer Rouge, which murdered nearly three-fifths of the Cambodian population by torture and starvation during its 1975-79 rule, were to return to power. In addition, prior to the conference, the Vietnamese and Hun Sen made it known that they would accept the participation of the United Nations as a supervisory and peacekeeping force in Cambodia.

These promised concessions from Vietnam have now placed the spotlight on the resistance coalition. Baker's apparent assumption that Beijing wants a settlement to the Cambodian crisis has so far proven to be wrong. The Chinese, defying superpower consensus, are insisting that the Khmer

Rouge must play a full and substantial role in the next government. In addition, diplomats cited by the press report that the Khmer Rouge is blocking the progress of the conference at every turn. "They won't agree on anything," said one quoted source.

Furthermore, the Khmer Rouge has upped the ante. Not only is it necessary for the Vietnamese to withdraw their troops from Cambodia; but the Khmer Rouge insisted that all civilian Vietnamese must be forced to leave the country. This is a sure signal that the Khmer Rouge have not changed (as the Chinese and others have been wont to pretend). One of the Khmer Rouge's first acts upon coming into power in 1975 was to kill or force out the Vietnamese civilians living in Cambodia—at that time numbering about 400,000—before turning to murdering all Khmer Rouge cadre who had been trained by Hanoi.

It has also become apparent that the strings of Prince Sihanouk are being pulled from Beijing, where he was placed under virtual house arrest at the point of the Kissinger-orchestrated 1970 coup that overthrew his government. Despite his independent meetings with Hun Sen last year and his own public attacks on the Khmer Rouge, in the face of Vietnamese concessions, Sihanouk has turned intransigent, demanding a place in the government for the killers of his own family.

Sihanouk's hard line on behalf of the Khmer Rouge tends to nullify the U.S. "middle position" that the non-communist resistance should be funded, without any money going to the Khmer Rouge, and that the Khmer Rouge must be excluded from any future government. It should be remembered, however, that it was the United States—on behalf of executing the China card—that pasted together the resistance coalition in the first place, as a means of giving a fig leaf of credibility to the Khmer Rouge.

In a meeting with the prince July 23, Richard Solomon, a veteran of Henry Kissinger's National Security Council, was told point-blank by Sihanouk that U.S. "full support" for Sihanouk, under a provision that the Khmer Rouge be excluded from a future government, was simply "unrealistic." The Khmer Rouge and their Chinese backers are clearly prepared to back up their demands with force. The Khmer Rouge has refused all calls for a cease-fire. There will be no end to the war until the provisional government—including the Khmer Rouge, of course—is established.

Who, then, could possibly believe that the Deng Xiaoping government perceives its strategic interests to lie in bringing peace to the war-torn nation of Cambodia? In reality, the exact opposite is the case, as Deng and company see it. The Khmer Rouge is the trump card to use to wrest ever more concessions in other matters from the Soviet Union and United States.

What is most likely, therefore, for Cambodia's immediate future, is civil war.

In its last remaining days in Cambodia, Vietnam is making all efforts to weaken the Khmer Rouge militarily. Toward

the end of July, Phnom Penh troops were concentrating on sweeping out the Khmer Rouge from the Battambang region, once Cambodia's most productive rice-growing area. The Vietnamese expect that once they have left Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge will attempt to seize the city of Battambang. If the Khmer Rouge fail, Phnom Penh hopes, then the Khmer Rouge will be reduced to only marauding operations in the countryside, but will have no capability to conquer the country. Battambang, it is expected by Vietnam, will become the Khmer Rouge's "Jalalabad."

In addition, the Vietnamese have been pounding with artillery the Khmer Rouge camps along the Thai-Cambodian border, attempting to force the Khmers back into Thailand. The Khmer Rouge, according to Bangkok reports, are meanwhile marshaling their own troops and civilians along the border for the forced-march war against Phnom Penh.

Vietnam changing hands

If Beijing has nothing to gain by aiding the peace process in Cambodia, the Vietnamese in particular have everything to lose if they do not make a very good showing of leaving Cambodia. It would appear that ultimately the Chinese strategy of attrition has won out against Vietnam. The combination of the economic embargo imposed on Vietnam by the West, the poor quality of economic—as opposed to military—aid received from the Soviet Union, its own communist ineptitude, and the constant drain of manpower and resources imposed by its occupation of Cambodia, has reduced Vietnam to a point of economic desperation.

While Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach was winging his way to Paris, Prime Minister Do Muoi was receiving a delegation of the International Monetary Fund in Hanoi. Thanks to a bridge loan from France, Vietnam will be paying its longstanding debt to the IMF, thereby fulfilling a requirement for any financial input from the Western nations, the Fund, or the World Bank.

Meanwhile, the Soviet Union has begun to complain in the pages of its press that it would like to drastically pare down economic aid to its "satellite" countries, including Vietnam. In short, Vietnam, and with it the other countries of Indochina, are in the process of being economically turned over to the West for more efficient exploitation.

The Soviet Union can meanwhile be expected to retain its strategic military bases at Cam Ranh Bay and Danang in a manner equivalent to the U.S. presence at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, as the Russians bow out of Vietnam's internal affairs.

Under these conditions, with all powers devoid of any positive development policy for the region, the countries of Indochina and their neighbors remain—as they have throughout the postwar period—pawns on a larger super-power chessboard, ceded to one power or another as the Kissingerian "framework" demands. This is not a framework that will bring peace to Southeast Asia.