

THE THIRD INDOCHINA CONFLICT: CAMBODIA'S TOTAL WAR

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## ABSTRACT

THE THIRD INDOCHINA CONFLICT: CAMBODIA'S TOTAL WAR, by  
LTC Boraden Nhem, 142 pages.

This thesis provides a narrative of the complex political and military history of the civil war in Cambodia from 1979 to 1991, also known as the Third Indochina Conflict. The war started when communist Vietnam supported a Cambodian resistance army and defeated the Khmer Rouge communist government in 1979. The Vietnamese intervention in Cambodia drew ferocious opposition from regional powers and Cambodian resistance movements. As a result, China supported the communist resistance movement (Khmer Rouge) while the United States and the countries of the Association of South East Asian Nations supported two non-communist resistance movements. These three resistance movements joined forces to fight against the Vietnamese-installed government, the People's Republic of Kampuchea. The latter emerged victorious in 1991 due to three factors: an appealing political message, cohesive military organization, and the use of a hybrid army which was predominantly composed of territorial forces. Using the lessons from the civil war in Cambodia, this thesis provides insights into the complexity of civil war, the dynamics of hybrid warfare, and the challenges facing an insurgent movement which struggles to become an effective conventional army.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE THESIS APPROVAL PAGE .....	iii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vi
ACRONYMS.....	viii
ILLUSTRATIONS .....	ix
TABLES .....	x
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER 2 ROOT OF THE CONFLICT .....	7
The French Buffer.....	7
From KPRP to the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK).....	9
Turn Right: The End of the Communists' Free Access in Cambodia .....	11
The Coup of 18 March 1970.....	13
Democratic Kampuchea: War and Genocide.....	15
Prince Sihanouk .....	15
The Four Year Plan (1977-1980) and the Genesis of a Genocide .....	16
Conflict with Vietnam.....	17
Comrades at War .....	19
Kampuchea Solidarity Front for National Salvation .....	21
East Zone Exodus .....	21
Prince Sihanouk's Late Departure: Adding One More Insult to Injury .....	23
Adversaries Line-Up.....	24
CHAPTER 3 MILITARY ORGANIZATION, CONCEPT OF OPERATIONS, AND STRATEGIES .....	34
From Irregulars to Regulars, From Regulars Back to Irregulars .....	34
The Non-Communist Resistance (NCR) .....	40
The Vietnamese Volunteer Army (VVA).....	43
The Kampuchea People's Revolutionary Army (KPRA).....	44
Mobilization and Concept of Operations .....	45
Political Concept and Ideology.....	45
The Armed Propaganda Units and the Dual-Duty Companies.....	47

The KPRA’s Provincial Military Commands (PMC).....	49
History of the Battambang PMC.....	49
History of Banteay Meanchey PMC.....	50
History of Kampong Thom PMC.....	51
Region 4, Military Region 4 and 5.....	52
Territorial-Based Versus Population-Based Strategy.....	54
Impacts of the Territory-centric Strategy on the KPRA Mobile Divisions.....	58
CHAPTER 4 THE FINAL OFFENSIVE.....	67
Prelude to the 1989 CGDK Combined Offensive.....	67
The 1989 CGDK Combined Offensive.....	68
Battambang Province: Easy Picking, Hard Swallowing.....	68
Banteay Meanchey: The Locals Who Dared Say No to the Central.....	74
Phase 1: The KPRLF Onslaught.....	75
Phase 1, First Axis: Svay Chek.....	76
Phase 1, Second Axis: Phnom Srok.....	78
Phase 2: The KPRA Counter-Offensive - “My home, my war”.....	81
CGDK’s Attack in Kampong Thom Provincial Capital.....	87
The Political Context.....	87
Military Operations.....	89
CHAPTER 5 LESSONS OF HISTORY: THE CAMBODIAN CIVIL WAR.....	101
Diplomacy Without An Army: The Road to Peace.....	101
External Support: The Vietnamese Connection.....	104
Political Context and Military Organization: The Government’s Perspective.....	105
Political Context and Military Organization: The Revolutionaries’ Perspective.....	107
Counter-Revolutionary War: The Role of Territorial Forces.....	109
APPENDIX A CAMBODIAN TIMELINE: CHRONOLOGY OF THE CONFLICT.....	114
APPENDIX B FACTIONS AND ORDER OF BATTLE.....	117
APPENDIX C MAP LEGEND.....	120
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	125

## ACRONYMS

ANKI	Armée National du Kampuchea Indépendant (English equivalent: National Army of Independent Kampuchea).
ANS	Armée Nationale Sihanoukhiste (English equivalent: Sihanouk's National Army).
ASEAN	Association of South East Asian Nations.
CGDK	Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea.
CPK	Communist Party of Kampuchea.
FUNCINPEC	Front Uni National pour un Cambodge Indépendant, Neutre, Pacifique, Et Coopératif (English equivalent: National United Front for a Cambodia Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative).
ICP	Indochina Communist Party.
KPNLAF	Khmer People's National Liberation Armed Forces.
KPNLF	Khmer People's National Liberation Front.
KPRA	Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Army.
KPRP	Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party.
MR	Military Region.
NR	National Road.
OMZ	Operational Military Zone.
PAVN	People's Army of Vietnam.
PMC	Provincial Military Command.
PRK	People's Republic of Kampuchea.
VVA	Vietnamese Volunteer Army.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

	Page
Figure 1. Map of Cambodia .....	12
Figure 2. Khmer Rouge's Areas of Operations .....	38
Figure 3. Operations in Battambang Province (1989).....	70
Figure 4. Operations in Banteay Meanchey Province, Phase 1 (1989).....	76
Figure 5. Operations in Banteay Meanchey Province, Phase 2 (1989-1990).....	82
Figure 6. Operations in Kampong Thom Province (1990).....	90

## TABLES

	Page
Table 1. The Pinnacle of Complexities: Factions in the Cambodian Civil War and Their Sponsors .....	26
Table 2. Unit Size Conversion .....	36
Table 3. An Estimate of the PRK's Military Power (1987).....	45

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Much of Cambodia's modern history is a story of war and tragedy. The last war in Cambodia lasted from 1979 to 1991 and was also the last part of a larger conflict called the "Third Indochina Conflict."<sup>1</sup> However, historical literature on this conflict is currently lacking, particularly for this period. This thesis therefore intends to redress this shortfall by providing a historical narrative and analysis of the last part of the Third Indochina Conflict.

The history of modern Cambodia began with the official imposition of the French protectorate in Cambodia in 1863. Cambodia took ninety years to reclaim its independence from France, in 1953. The iconic Cambodian leader and hero of independence was Prince Norodom Sihanouk, who was much revered by the population. Unfortunately for Cambodia, independence came during the Cold War. In an attempt to shield Cambodia from the Cold War, Prince Sihanouk tried to adhere to the policy of neutrality and non-alignment. However, as the Vietnam War escalated and spilled over the Cambodian border, this policy was abandoned.<sup>2</sup> The year 1968 marked the first time that there were armed conflicts in many provinces in the previously quiet Cambodia.

In March 1970, right-wing politicians and elements of the military, under the leadership of Lon Nol, carried out a coup that deposed Prince Sihanouk. At the time of the coup, Prince Sihanouk was on an official visit to Moscow, after which he then continued his journey to Beijing, where he received full support from China. In an attempt to return to power, Prince Sihanouk allied himself with the Cambodian

communists who were commonly known as the “Khmer Rouge.” By exploiting Prince Sihanouk’s popularity, the Khmer Rouge was able to recruit a lot of supporters to fight against the Lon Nol regime that had emerged from the 1970 coup. In 1975, the Khmer Rouge took power, but then its leaders turned against Prince Sihanouk. From 1975 to 1979, Prince Sihanouk was imprisoned in his own palace in Phnom Penh.

The infamous legacy of the Khmer Rouge regime was the genocide which killed an estimated one million people out of the total population of eight million.<sup>3</sup> In 1977, Khmer Rouge troops began to clash with Vietnamese troops over territorial disputes. The conflict was also fueled by ethnic animosity between the two sides. This was the beginning of the Third Indochina Conflict. As the war between the Khmer Rouge and Vietnam escalated, Vietnam decided to support a Cambodian resistance army, and then overthrew the Khmer Rouge in 1979. Vietnam then installed a new government in Phnom Penh which was known as the “People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK).”

Remnants of the Khmer Rouge regime escaped to the Cambodian-Thai border and started a resistance movement aimed at deposing the PRK and driving out the Vietnamese. Meanwhile, China, the US, and several countries of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) helped to establish two non-communist factions to resist the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia.<sup>4</sup> The first non-communist resistance faction was the Khmer People’s National Liberation Front (KPNLF). The second non-communist resistance faction was the *Front Uni National pour un Cambodge Indépendant, Neutre, Pacifique, Et Coopératif* (FUNCINPEC) which was led by Prince Sihanouk.<sup>5</sup> In 1982, the Khmer Rouge and the two non-communist resistance factions organized themselves

into a unified movement and assumed the name “Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK).”

The Vietnamese troops withdrew from Cambodia in 1989 and the CGDK launched a conventional offensive against the PRK that same year. Despite early losses, the PRK was able to blunt the CGDK’s offensive and launch a general counter-attack in 1991. The PRK’s success allowed it to strike a favorable political deal which brought all factions within the CGDK to a United Nations-sponsored election, thus cementing its (the PRK’s) legitimacy.

The historiography of the PRK, covering the exploits of its military (the Kampuchean People’s Revolutionary Army), is lacking. Perhaps, this is due to the CGDK propaganda which claimed that the PRK relied solely on the Vietnamese forces for survival. Therefore, according to this claim, studying the PRK would be less relevant because the role of Cambodians is minimized. In the current historiography of the Third Indochina Conflict, very few books cover the PRK and its military.

One of the most comprehensive studies, and most in-depth research on the PRK, was presented by Margaret Slocomb in her book, *The People’s Republic of Kampuchea, 1979-1989: The Revolution after Pol Pot* (Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2004). In this book, Slocomb chronicled the development of the PRK from the defeat of the Khmer Rouge in 1979 to the time it (the PRK) had to reform in order to meet the CGDK threat in 1989. However, the book contains only sketchy military history and was not able to link political objectives with the military strategy of the opposing factions.

In 2012, another book on the civil war in Cambodia was published. Kenneth Conboy, a former CIA agent in Cambodia in the 1970s, published a history of the American (i.e. CIA) support for various factions in Cambodia. The second half of the book narrates the history of one of the CGDK non-communist factions, the KPNLF, from its beginning until its demise in 1990. Conboy's account, however, was biased in favor of the KPNLF. Not only did he try to minimize the importance of the PRK, but Conboy also dismissed the contributions of the other CGDK non-communist faction, the FUNCINPEC.

This thesis will therefore provide a competing narrative (i.e. based on the PRK's accounts) of what happened in Cambodia between 1979 and 1991, with special emphasis on the military operations between 1989 and 1991--which significantly influenced the political outcomes.<sup>6</sup> This thesis also takes advantage of the PRK's military archives in order to build a more complete historical narrative. The archives include official unit histories, *People's Army* newspapers (1979-1991, with the year 1983 missing), recently declassified materials, as well as unpublished manuscripts in Khmer. The official unit histories include those of the territorial units (provincial military commands and the military regions) and the general staff headquarters.

In order to ensure balance and objectivity, this thesis cross-checks the PRK's sources with those of the CGDK and western sources, most notably the *Far Eastern Economic Review* (FEER). The FEER was a dominant regional magazine which covered political, economic, and military news in Asia at the time. It became defunct in December 2009 when it could not keep up with the rise of Internet-based news. Nevertheless, the FEER archives provide an unrivaled resource for the construction of an English language

historiography of Cambodia's political and military affairs from 1979 to 1991. At the height of the war, the FEER published at least one story on Cambodia in each issue.

This thesis is divided into five chapters. This chapter introduces the topic and the structure of the following analysis. Chapter 2 gives a brief narrative of the history of Cambodia from the 1950s to the Vietnamese intervention in 1979, which set the stage for the subsequent civil war in Cambodia. Chapter 2 begins with the birth of the communist movement, and how its leader Pol Pot hijacked this movement. It then outlines how he and his allies came to dominate the communist forces in Cambodia after the 1970 coup. Chapter 2 ends with the rise of the four factions of the conflict (FUNCINPEC, Khmer Rouge, KPNLF, and PRK).

Chapter 3 examines the military organization and tactical and operational doctrine of all four factions, as well as those of the Vietnamese forces in Cambodia. As the largest forces, the Khmer Rouge and the PRK's military deserve relatively lengthy examination. The second part of chapter 3 discusses major Vietnamese strategic and operational concepts of the war until their withdrawal of forces in 1989. Chapter 4 discusses the CGDK's combined offensive in 1989, which occurred soon after the last Vietnamese units withdrew from Cambodia. Chapter 5 summarizes and concludes the thesis.

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<sup>1</sup> French historians characterized the conflicts in Indochina as three separate conflicts. The First Indochina Conflict was Vietnam's War for Independence and the Second Indochina Conflict was the Vietnam War. The Third Indochina Conflict was a collection of three related wars. The first war was between Cambodia (under the Khmer Rouge) and Vietnam which lasted from 1977 to 1979. The second war was China's "punitive offensive" on Vietnam's northern border in early 1979 following the Vietnamese intervention in Cambodia. The third war was the Cambodian Civil War which lasted from 1979 to 1991. Even though this was a civil war, Vietnam, the Soviet Union, the United States, China, and several countries of the Association of South East

Asian Nations all supported different factions in Cambodia. This war was also a response to the Vietnamese intervention in Cambodia. The last part of the Third Indochina Conflict, Cambodian Civil War, is the focus of this thesis. On the three Indochina conflicts, see Nicholas Régaud, *Cambodge dans la Tourmente: Le Troisième Conflit Indochinois 1978-1991* (Paris: Harmattan, 1992). On the complexity of the Cambodian Civil War, see Sowath Nem, *Civil War Termination and the Source of Total Peace in Cambodia: Win-Win Policy of Samdech Techo Hun Sen in International Context* (Phnom Penh: Reahoo, 2012); Boraden Nhem, *The Khmer Rouge: Ideology, Militarism, and the Revolution that Consumed a Generation* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Security International, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> The major issue was the presence of the North Vietnamese troops along the Cambodian-Vietnamese border. Prince Sihanouk's foreign policy fluctuated between the support for North Vietnam and the support for the United States. The issue will be elaborated in chapter 2.

<sup>3</sup> The estimates of the number of casualties from the Khmer Rouge genocide vary from 800,000 to three million people. The conventional estimate is one million. See Nhem, *The Khmer Rouge*.

<sup>4</sup> During the war, China supported both the communist and non-communist resistance factions. China's main goal in this war was not the spread of ideology but rather, the support to the resistance movement that was aimed at weakening Vietnam, which China considered to be a threat. See Nayan Chanda, *Brother Enemy: The War after the War* (New York: Collier Books, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> The approximate English translation for the FUNCINPEC is: National United Front for a Cambodia Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative.

<sup>6</sup> Most of the military actions in the war were small-scale skirmishes, especially when the Vietnamese forces still remained in Cambodia. This thesis studies only operations that involved brigade-size units and above. This decision is based on the assumption that any encounter below that level is unlikely to be of strategic importance in and of itself.

## CHAPTER 2

### ROOT OF THE CONFLICT

#### The French Buffer

A major part of modern Cambodian history is dominated by the complicated nature of Cambodian-Vietnamese relations. Grievances and bitter experiences between Cambodia and her neighbors, Thailand (formerly Siam) and Vietnam (formerly Annam), run deep throughout Cambodian history. Seeing the potential danger of Cambodia being divided by the two hostile neighbors along the Mekong River, King Ang Doung of Cambodia (who came to the throne with Siamese support) began courting French authorities in Singapore around 1853.<sup>1</sup> Initially, this scheme was interrupted by Siamese threats, but in 1863, Cambodia had become a French protectorate.

When France asserted its control, a major issue arose. A large part of what was to be the southern part of the future state of South Vietnam, the Mekong Delta included, was formerly Cambodian territory. France transferred this area to the new state of South Vietnam after the Geneva Accord in 1954 (which was concluded after the First Indochina War between the French and the Viet Minh).<sup>2</sup> The Vietnamese expansion from the southern border of China was known as the “Southern March” which completely destroyed the Champa Kingdom in 1832.<sup>3</sup> Many Cambodians saw the Vietnamese influence in its political affairs in the 1950s as potentially another episode in this expansion. This fear would come to engulf both the left-wing revolutionaries and the right-wing politicians.

Before the First Indochina War, the independence movement in Vietnam organized itself as the Indochina Communist Party (ICP). Between 1930 and 1954, a section of the ICP became the founding members of the future Cambodian leftist movement.<sup>4</sup> The establishment of the ICP was spearheaded by the Vietnamese communist movement which sought to unify the efforts of the independence movements in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam against the French.<sup>5</sup> The Cambodian left-wing revolutionaries who would come to power later, considered the ICP as a Vietnamese ploy to dominate Cambodia.<sup>6</sup> The Cambodian communist movement eventually organized its own party, the Khmer People's Revolutionary Party (KPRP), on 28 June 1951.

After Cambodia gained independence in 1953, Prince Sihanouk established the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* party (Khmer for "populist society party") and won a landslide victory in the general election in 1955. The KPRP also participated in the election, as did other minority right-wing parties, but did not win any seats in the national assembly. At this point, the communist movement in Cambodia had little hope of taking power from the popular Prince Sihanouk. However, international events soon changed that situation.

Prince Sihanouk's rule came at a difficult time in global politics. In order to avoid the adverse effects of the Cold War, Prince Sihanouk adopted a policy of neutrality and non-alignment. However, despite this official policy declaration, events forced Prince Sihanouk's foreign policy to fluctuate between support for the United States and communist North Vietnam.

In 1959, several right-wing politicians were implicated in a failed coup attempt against Prince Sihanouk.<sup>7</sup> In his memoir, Prince Sihanouk wrote that he believed the US

was behind the failed coup attempt.<sup>8</sup> Finally, on 26 April 1965, Cambodia broke diplomatic relations with the US.<sup>9</sup> Taking advantage of favorable conditions, North Vietnam tried to ensure that no communist movement in Cambodia threatened Prince Sihanouk's rule. The North Vietnamese insisted that the Cambodian communists should adhere to a political struggle (read: low intensity and long term) rather than a coordinated political-military one (i.e. potentially decisive).<sup>10</sup> The KPRP's prospect for taking power was bleak. It had no army, no broad popular support, no external support, and the public wing of the party was effectively suppressed by the Cambodian regime.

It was amidst this confusion within the Cambodian communist party that a small, but influential, group of new leaders emerged. These leaders would later establish the reign of terror in Cambodia from 1975 to 1979 and bear the notorious name "Khmer Rouge." In fact, the term "Khmer Rouge" started to appear in Prince Sihanouk's speeches in the 1960s when he used the term to describe all Cambodian communists. "Khmer" denotes both the language of Cambodia and ethnic Cambodians while "Rouge" is the French word for "Red," a popular denomination of all things communist.

#### From KPRP to the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK)

The communist movement in Cambodia was hit by one disaster after another. The KPRP participated in the general election in 1955, but did not win any seats in the national assembly. In addition, because Prince Sihanouk leaned towards North Vietnam in the 1960s, North Vietnam cut off vital support to the communist movement in Cambodia to avoid antagonizing Prince Sihanouk. Finally, in 1962, the second man in the

KPRP defected to the Cambodian government and helped the government hunt down Cambodian senior communist leaders.<sup>11</sup>

According to one account, in the midst of this upheaval, twenty-one junior members of the KPRP met at a secret location in Phnom Penh in 1963 to draw up a charter for a new party.<sup>12</sup> The leader of this junior group named Saloth Sar, alias Pol Pot, was elected the new general secretary of the KPRP. According to a veteran of the KPRP, upon assuming the position of general secretary in 1963, Pol Pot changed the name of the party from KPRP to the “Communist Party of Kampuchea” (CPK) in an attempt to sever all ties to the ICP and the Vietnamese communists.<sup>13</sup> Many positions in the party were occupied by people close to Pol Pot.<sup>14</sup> People such as Keo Meas, who was a veteran of the KPRP and had close ties with the Vietnamese communists, did not hold any important post in the new party. Upon taking over, Pol Pot changed the direction of the party and decided that armed insurrection was to be carried out in tandem with political action.<sup>15</sup> To the dismay of his North Vietnamese comrades, this new policy meant that henceforth, the overthrow of Prince Sihanouk’s regime was on the communist agenda.

While the communist movement in Cambodia undertook a revolutionary metamorphosis and secretly became the CPK, North Vietnam either did not know of, or paid little attention to, these developments. After all, they were already comfortable with the support they received from Prince Sihanouk. However, North Vietnam would soon come to regret this decision as the CPK shifted its policy towards the overthrow of Prince Sihanouk, thus driving a wedge between the Prince and the Vietnamese communists.

## Turn Right: The End of the Communists' Free Access in Cambodia

The implicit understanding between North Vietnam and Prince Sihanouk was that the Vietnamese communists could have somewhat free access along the Cambodian-Vietnamese border as long as they did not present any threat to the Prince's regime. However, that changed on 2 April 1968 when a violent revolt took place in Battambang province (northwestern part of Cambodia, cf. Figure 1 Map of Cambodia in the next page). The event started out as a local rebellion by farmers who had no connection whatsoever with the communists. Responding to the abuse of power by local officials, farmers in a village called Samlot attacked a military outpost, killing two soldiers and capturing many weapons.<sup>16</sup> Pol Pot and his comrades took advantage of this situation and declared responsibility for leading the revolt in Samlot.<sup>17</sup>

The Cambodian military responded to the revolt by killing many villagers and burning houses, forcing hundreds or even thousands of farmers to flee into the nearly jungle and mountains. Prince Sihanouk received a detailed report on what had happened. As a result, he dismissed many local officials and forced his Prime Minister to resign.<sup>18</sup> However, Prince Sihanouk simply could not ignore the fact that the communists claimed responsibility for leading the revolt. That suspicion was confirmed when, after Samlot, revolts in other areas became more widespread.<sup>19</sup> In the context of these simultaneous revolts, in addition to reports from some local authorities who had all the motivation to spin the information so that it would point the blame at others, that Prince Sihanouk began to focus on the communists for inciting the revolts.<sup>20</sup>

This caused a significant foreign policy shift. Prince Sihanouk began to move away from supporting North Vietnam. Rhetoric against the communists increased, while

the relations between Cambodia and the US started to improve. Cambodia and the US reestablished diplomatic relations on 11 June 1969, and in the last days of July, Cambodia sent a letter inviting President Nixon for an official visit to Cambodia. The government also imposed strict controls over the press to avoid antagonizing the US.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, Prince Sihanouk authorized the Cambodian military to take actions against the Vietnamese communists along the Cambodian-Vietnamese border.<sup>22</sup>

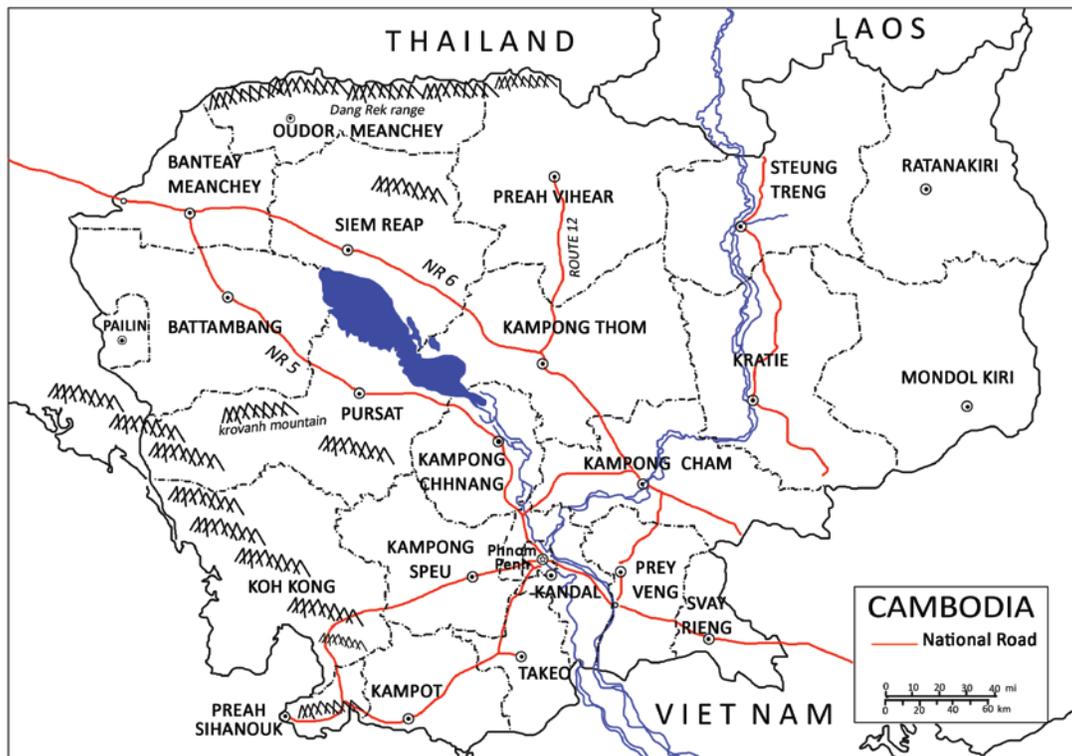


Figure 1. Map of Cambodia

Source: Created by author.

North Vietnam, of course, could not be indifferent about these disturbing developments, because the loss of sanctuaries in Cambodia would prove disastrous for its campaigns in South Vietnam. On 5 July 1969, Huynh Tan Phat, Prime Minister of the newly formed, underground communist government, the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam, paid an official visit to Cambodia to conclude some economic and trade agreements. The main objective of the visit was an attempt to defuse the tensions resulting from these recent developments. However, the attempt failed when Prince Sihanouk publicly denounced the Vietnamese communists after the visit.<sup>23</sup>

As the specter of a complete strategic reversal loomed large, the Vietnamese communists began to look to the remnants of the Cambodian communist party, which was now controlled by the largely unknown Pol Pot, in an attempt to find former allies for support.<sup>24</sup> Because Hanoi had no idea who Pol Pot was, it was faced with a dilemma: create a new, malleable Cambodian communist party to undermine Pol Pot and his CPK, thus further weakening the communist movement in Cambodia, or provide support, however temporary, to Pol Pot, at least until victory over South Vietnam was assured.<sup>25</sup> Hanoi chose the second alternative.

#### The Coup of 18 March 1970

On 18 March 1970, when Prince Sihanouk was on an official visit abroad, the right-wing politicians and the military carried out a coup to depose the Prince. On that day, the legislature voted to remove him from power. The National Assembly made this

decision behind closed doors while paratroopers took up positions around the National Assembly.<sup>26</sup> Soon after, the Khmer Republic was proclaimed.

The coup cut short the official visit of Prince Sihanouk in Moscow. Prince Sihanouk then flew to Beijing where he held a secret meeting on 21 March 1970 with Pham Van Dong (North Vietnamese Premier) and Zhou Enlai (Premier of China).<sup>27</sup> On 23 March, Prince Sihanouk broadcast a message from Beijing calling for his “children” (denoting the Cambodian population) to go to the jungle and join the Marquis (a French term originated from World War II denoting resistance movement).

The coup in 1970 was an unprecedented and provided a unique if somewhat ironic opportunity for Pol Pot. To be able to return to power, Prince Sihanouk had no choice but to rely on the communist Khmer Rouge. This enabled the Khmer Rouge to exploit Prince Sihanouk’s reputation to attract recruits and build its power base. The coup of 1970 effectively made the Khmer Rouge leaders the temporary servants of Prince Sihanouk, while it positioned them for the future. In addition, the Cambodian communists received military aid from both China and North Vietnam while their enemy, the Khmer Republic, received less and less aid from the departing American troops.

The Khmer New Year of 1975 marked the final offensive on Phnom Penh. The Khmer Rouge knew the Spring offensive to take Phnom Penh would be bloody. Nonetheless, Pol Pot believed that it was better to capture Phnom Penh before the North Vietnamese army (officially called the People’s Army of Vietnam, or PAVN) could capture Saigon so that he (Pol Pot) would be able to remain independent of Vietnamese influence.<sup>28</sup> On 17 April 1975, the Khmer Rouge took the capital city. Their first step was

the evacuation of the city.<sup>29</sup> This operation marked the beginning of Pol Pot's paranoid and bloody reign. He believed that the "enemies of the revolution" were still hiding in the city, waiting to bring down the revolution after the war.<sup>30</sup> He believed the evacuation would disrupt these internal enemies before they could act.

### Democratic Kampuchea: War and Genocide

Upon taking over, the Khmer Rouge established a new government called "Democratic Kampuchea." This new government made a series of decisions that eventually led to disaster. First of all, the Khmer Rouge turned against Prince Sihanouk. Even then, Pol Pot never felt safe. For him, the threat of a Vietnamese takeover was still a distinct possibility, and support for Prince Sihanouk among the Cambodian people was still strong. To deal with these problems, he had to eliminate all enemies, internal and external. The external enemy was Vietnam and the internal enemy included those who had any relations with Vietnam or who planned to destroy the revolution from the inside.

#### Prince Sihanouk

At the outset, the Khmer Rouge leaders sought to undermine Prince Sihanouk, who was now seen as a liability and not trustworthy. In July 1975, the Khmer Rouge requested the return of Prince Sihanouk from China. Upon his return, Prince Sihanouk was immediately appointed as head of state of Democratic Kampuchea and even presided over a cabinet meeting. However, just like the cabinet meeting that the Prince presided over, the title of head of state was nominal only. A few weeks later, Prince Sihanouk was forced to go to the United States to petition the United Nations and he successfully reclaimed the Cambodian seat for Democratic Kampuchea.<sup>31</sup> Not long after he returned

home, but his requests to go to the countryside to meet his compatriots were repeatedly denied, and Prince Sihanouk finally decided to submit a request for resignation in 1976.<sup>32</sup>

After an internal meeting in March 1976, the Standing Committee of the CPK accepted the Prince's resignation. The Khmer Rouge leaders never trusted Prince Sihanouk, and they feared that, due to the Prince's immense popularity, any contact between the Prince and the people would undermine their power. Prince Sihanouk survived under Democratic Kampuchea only because of the intervention of China.<sup>33</sup> After his resignation, Prince Sihanouk was held prisoner in his own palace, with no contact with the outside world until January 1979 when Democratic Kampuchea collapsed.

#### The Four Year Plan (1977-1980) and the Genesis of a Genocide

The Khmer Rouge's second major strategy was to reaffirm the collectivization of private property to maximize rice production. In early 1976, a Four Year Plan (1977-1980) was announced. The Khmer Rouge divided the land into two categories. Normal land was required to produce three tons of rice per hectare (approximately 2.47 acres), while the best quality land was required to produce at least four to seven tons per hectare. It was this policy that led to famine and the brutal killing of people who were deemed enemies of the state because they could not meet the production targets.<sup>34</sup>

Apart from this simplified system, the Khmer Rouge also established the "cooperatives" system, which was a collectivization of land and private property. The cooperative was a production unit that could cover many hamlets and villages, depending on the scale of the rice fields and the number of workers. The Khmer Rouge abolished

the market system and replaced it with this cooperative system. The cooperative was the place where people worked for subsistence. The chief of the cooperative determined the daily food ration for everyone under his control, and the cooperative was the only place where eating was allowed. Anyone caught eating outside of the cooperatives would be considered a traitor to the party and the revolution. The offender would be arrested and executed. Thus, the chiefs of the cooperatives had the authority to kill anyone they deemed “unnecessary” to the revolution. There was no independent legal system in Democratic Kampuchea. Justice rested on the will and the mood of the cadres.

The Four Year Plan collapsed almost as soon as it was implemented.<sup>35</sup> This had three drastic consequences. First, it generated a famine. Second, as the laborers, weakened by malnutrition, could not work to raise production, they were either considered lazy or enemies of the revolution. Both of these offenses could easily lead to execution. Third, Pol Pot feared that the failure to meet targets must have been the work of internal enemies who plotted to overthrow the revolution. This led to many waves of purges, which devastated not only the ordinary people but also the Khmer Rouge cadres themselves.

#### Conflict with Vietnam

The conflict with Vietnam started on 1 May 1975 when a battalion of the Khmer Rouge 164th Division invaded an island south of the Cambodian coast which was claimed by both Vietnam and Cambodia.<sup>36</sup> The attack was a debacle. Nevertheless, Vietnam did not take any large-scale retaliation for the event and still maintained diplomatic relations with Democratic Kampuchea. Perhaps still convinced that the Khmer

Rouge was subscribing to the idea of world socialist revolutionary solidarity, Vietnam did not take any major actions that might exacerbate the problem. However, the debacle following the invasion of the jointly-claimed island only put a temporary halt to Pol Pot's anti-Vietnamese policy, and it took him just one year to organize additional military forces to fight with Vietnam on a larger scale.

In spite of the disparity in numbers between Vietnam and Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge did not hesitate to pursue an adventurous policy against Vietnam, because it falsely believed its own propaganda that it had defeated the US in 1975. How the Khmer Rouge planned to overcome the disparity in numbers can be discerned from a state radio broadcast on 10 May 1978. In this broadcast, the Khmer Rouge propaganda service briefed the nation about national defense between April 1977 and April 1978:

We are few in number, but we have to attack a larger force; therefore, we must preserve our forces to the maximum and try to kill as many of the enemy as possible. . . . In terms of numbers, one of us must kill 30 Vietnamese. If we can implement this slogan, we shall certainly win. . . . So far, we have succeeded in implementing this slogan of 1 against 30; that is to say, we lose 1 against 30 Vietnamese. . . . We should have 2,000,000 troops for 60,000,000 Vietnamese. However 2,000,000 troops would be more than enough to fight the Vietnamese, because Vietnam has only 50,000,000 inhabitants. . . . We must use one against 30. This is just the number fixed by the Party, but in concrete, deeds of some of our comrades fought 1 against 10; we shall certainly win with 1 against 10 or 1 against 5. Some of our people have fought 1 against 20, and some have even tried to fight one against 50 or 1 against 100. There was no problem; they were still victorious.<sup>37</sup>

The mathematics were simplistic, if not totally absurd. However, not long after the above broadcast, fresh campaigns by the Khmer Rouge against Vietnam restarted.<sup>38</sup>

Meanwhile, the Khmer Rouge never ceased finding and eliminating suspected internal enemies. Suspects were arrested, tortured, and then forced to make new lists of suspects, which led to more purges. This purification policy destroyed the cadres of

Democratic Kampuchea to a point where even the Chinese technicians who were sent to help the regime complained about the too frequent disappearances of their Cambodian counterparts.<sup>39</sup>

### Comrades at War

Between 1976 and 1977, small-scale clashes between Khmer Rouge troops and Vietnamese troops along the border were very frequent. Both sides exchanged diplomatic correspondence as well as meeting frequently to try to solve the conflict. However, most of those sessions tended to degenerate into mutual accusations. Finally, on 24 September 1977, the Khmer Rouge launched a furious, and perhaps the most brutal attack of the war, on Tay Ninh province, killing hundreds of Vietnamese civilians.<sup>40</sup> For some reason, the Vietnamese still offered negotiation.

On the ground, however, the Vietnamese were less lenient than in previous skirmishes and retaliated on a large scale. The Vietnamese seemed to have sensed that a non-response would be interpreted as weakness, even though at the same time, the Vietnamese felt the need to leave the channel for negotiation open. The Khmer Rouge ignored the call for negotiation.

On 6 December 1977, the Vietnamese conducted a coordinated counter-attack with brutal efficiency and completely stunned the Khmer Rouge forces. One can gauge the severity of the situation by looking at one of the Khmer Rouge's telegrams from the battlefield. On 23 December, one Khmer Rouge commander, comrade Phourng, noted that the Vietnamese moved in very quietly and achieved surprise in many places.<sup>41</sup> Just

fifteen minutes after the first telegram, Phourng relayed another message. The situation was getting worse:

For the Yuon [i.e. Vietnamese. cf. endnote] situation on the 22nd of December 1977, they pushed forward to capture the Krek rubber plantation in its entirety... We lost contact with the rubber plantation and factory at Memot because the courier has not yet returned... This Yuon force, according to [our] soldiers, consisted of many trucks and many tanks. The fighting occurred against our forces chaotically, in front and in the rear of our artillery positions, and we could not discern which side was ours and which side was the enemy's. According to my own analysis, we have lost control to a great extent, we lost communication between the troops and the command headquarters; and that was why the enemy could penetrate this deep with ease.<sup>42</sup>

The Vietnamese army had moved in with armor and motorized infantry. That was the reason why they could achieve breakthrough this easily. This was a classic blitzkrieg tactic. The Khmer Rouge operations probably ended in late December 1977. The following report reveals a total loss of control:

We have a hole in the middle with no large formation of troops. The rubber plantation's militias could not fight and the big formations went to fight at the border for a long time and were now losing control and as we know, our brothers in the big formations were routed and could not yet establish communication.<sup>43</sup>

In late December 1977, Democratic Kampuchea publicly announced the armed clashes with Vietnam, as well as that it had broken off diplomatic relations with Vietnam. Vietnam unilaterally withdrew all of its forces from Cambodia despite gaining territory during the fight.<sup>44</sup> As late as 1977, it seemed Vietnam still had not been prepared to undertake anything drastic.

Defeat on the battlefield was not the main problem for the Khmer Rouge, however. It was the new wave of purges that destroyed the regime. By simply looking at the reports that were coming in, one can see that the Vietnamese could easily penetrate the rear of the formations and effectively disrupt the Khmer Rouge supplies and artillery

support. Once that occurred, the front formations collapsed. One can easily see that the Vietnamese triumphed because of correct tactics, i.e. a blitzkrieg-type tactic. In the mind of the Khmer Rouge leaders, however, when campaigns initially ran so well and then immediately and inexplicably collapsed, this could only mean one thing: internal treachery that was perpetrated by Vietnamese sympathizers.

### Kampuchea Solidarity Front for National Salvation

#### East Zone Exodus

In June 1977, when the Khmer Rouge was at war with Vietnam, internally, the purges of the cadres in an area along the Cambodian-Vietnamese border, called the “East Zone,” was also under way. Hun Sen, a junior Khmer Rouge commander in the East Zone, escaped to Vietnam when he knew his name was next on the execution list.<sup>45</sup> He also wanted to seek support from Vietnam in order to return and defeat the Khmer Rouge.<sup>46</sup> On 27 September, Hun Sen was allowed to meet with Lieutenant General Van Tien Dung, a member of the Politburo of the Vietnamese communist party, who was also the chief of staff of the PAVN.<sup>47</sup> At the end of the meeting, however, no explicit pledge for support was given to Hun Sen.<sup>48</sup> It seemed that as late as 1977, Vietnam still maintained some hope of negotiating with the Khmer Rouge. Therefore, Vietnam did not give any political or military support to the Cambodian refugees who had escaped to Vietnam.

For the Khmer Rouge, the year 1978 was eventful. It marked a much larger Khmer Rouge offensive against the Vietnamese. The most brutal attack of the war was launched in late February 1978 by the Southwest Zone and the elite divisions from

Phnom Penh. According to one report, the second wave consisted of around 30,000 to 40,000 troops and was aimed at Vietnam's Tay Ninh province.<sup>49</sup> However, just like in 1977, the Khmer Rouge campaign in 1978 was a total disaster.

In April 1978, the PAVN responded in kind with a multidivisional counter-attack. Unlike in 1977, the Vietnamese now used tanks in greater numbers, as well as air support.<sup>50</sup> Khmer Rouge battlefield reports also revealed another important aspect of tactics used by the Vietnamese army. In 1977, the Vietnamese moved swiftly with armor and motorized infantry to penetrate behind the Khmer Rouge lines, avoided strong points, and induced confusion and collapse of the main forward formations of the Khmer Rouge. In 1978, however, the Vietnamese pushed forward more slowly. While the Vietnamese counter-attack in 1977 had been a blitzkrieg tactic, the counter-attack in 1978 was purely attritional.

In April 1978, at the same time that the war reached its climax, Colonel General Tran Van Tra, the commander and chief political commissar of Vietnam's Military Region 7, told Hun Sen that the Vietnamese leadership had already agreed to provide support for a Cambodian resistance movement.<sup>51</sup> Accordingly, a new military formation, the "Kampuchean Solidarity Armed Forces for National Salvation," was established on 12 May 1978. Eventually, by recruiting the Cambodian refugees who escaped to Vietnam, the resistance movement had twenty one infantry battalions, one all-female battalion, and one hundred armed operations groups, while the units of the headquarters consisted of a general staff section, a political section, a logistics section, a finance section, one special forces company, one medical company, and one unit for military

bands.<sup>52</sup> These forces operated out of the refugee camps in Vietnam's Long Giao province.

On 22 November 1978, the Cambodian resistance army (Kampuchean Solidarity Armed Forces for National Salvation) established to support the Vietnamese forces began drafting a political program to create a political movement.<sup>53</sup> The political movement was formally established in Kratie province on 2 December 1978.<sup>54</sup> On Christmas day 1978, the Cambodian resistance army and the Vietnamese army combined forces for a final push into Cambodia to overthrow Democratic Kampuchea on 7 January 1979, ending the Khmer Rouge's genocidal regime that had lasted for 3 years 8 months and 20 days.

#### Prince Sihanouk's Late Departure: Adding One More Insult to Injury

While these actions were in full progress, Prince Sihanouk was still kept in almost solitary confinement by Pol Pot. Nonetheless, in late 1978, Prince Sihanouk noted an unusual generosity and kindness on the part of the regime.<sup>55</sup> At dusk on 5 January 1979, a senior Khmer Rouge leader came to the house and told Prince Sihanouk that Pol Pot had invited the Prince for evening tea.<sup>56</sup> Upon arrival, Prince Sihanouk noted that Pol Pot was more courteous than ever before, prostrating himself to welcome the Prince, a standard Cambodian etiquette of respect for senior people and the royal family, something Pol Pot had never done before.<sup>57</sup> He also addressed Prince Sihanouk as "His Majesty". Pol Pot dropped a hint about what he wanted Prince Sihanouk to do:

Comrade Khieu Samphan that Your Majesty had met before had told me that Your Majesty would be happy to represent our government at the United Nations and defend the righteous cause of our people against invasion by the Yuon, in the (political) discussions that might take place in the Security Council...of the United Nations. Your Majesty is a nationalist and Your Majesty has many friends

in the world. Your Majesty could be of great advantage to the Cambodian people.<sup>58</sup>

Pol Pot then briefed Prince Sihanouk that the Vietnamese would soon capture Phnom Penh, but reassured the prince that it would not be a problem, as the Cambodian soldiers and people would soon chase the Vietnamese out.<sup>59</sup>

Pol Pot then gave Prince Sihanouk 20,000 USD as pocket money for the mission-- money the Prince returned in full after departing Democratic Kampuchea. In retrospect, we can see that the Prince had no choice but to agree. It was either take the money and leave, or perish under the Khmer Rouge for non-compliance. Vietnam sent a special forces detachment to rescue Prince Sihanouk so that the new regime could gain legitimacy through the Prince's popularity, but this operation failed.<sup>60</sup> Prince Sihanouk had already left the Royal Palace the day before.

#### Adversaries Line-Up

The infamous legacy of the Khmer Rouge regime was genocide that killed almost one million people out of the total population of eight million.<sup>61</sup> For the survivors, the Khmer Rouge was an existential threat that they had to fight against at all costs. Preventing the return of the Khmer Rouge and Pol Pot's genocidal regime became the main propaganda message of the Vietnamese-backed government, the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). The PRK established its army called the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Army (KPRA). The genocide message not only pushed many people to join this army, but this was also used to justify Vietnam's intervention in Cambodia. From Vietnam's point of view, the intervention was justified because it was based on the grounds that the Khmer Rouge attacked Vietnam first and had the goal of ending to a

genocidal regime. The Vietnamese troops were simply a “volunteer army” who came into Cambodia for “selfless duty for the sake of international socialist solidarity.”<sup>62</sup>

Accordingly, the Vietnamese troops in Cambodia called themselves the Vietnamese Volunteer Army (VVA). In this logic, they were not the PAVN, but Vietnamese soldiers who volunteered to fight for the sake of humanity and for the survival of their fellow socialist regime, the PRK.<sup>63</sup>

However, not everyone saw themselves as victims of the Khmer Rouge. Some Cambodians were too young to understand what had happened. When these young people grew up, some had not experienced or did not understand the causes of the genocide, but they did see the Vietnamese troops, just like the Khmer Rouge’s propaganda described. These people joined the Khmer Rouge army and fought ferociously against what the Khmer Rouge called the Vietnamese invasion. Calling the operation a humanitarian intervention did not make sense because the international community was then largely unaware that a genocide had taken place.

Two political groups were caught in a more awkward position. For the remnants of the Khmer Republic who were living abroad, as well as those who stayed along the Cambodian-Thai border after the fall of Phnom Penh in 1975, the Vietnamese intervention was the materialization of the fear in the 1960s and 1970s of the proverbial *Westward March*.<sup>64</sup> Even though they and the Khmer Rouge now had mutual enemies, they still did not cooperate. Most of the remnants of the Khmer Republic came together to establish the Khmer People’s National Liberation Front (KPNLF) led by Son Sann, a former Prime Minister under Prince Sihanouk.

Another very important actor in this awkward game was Prince Sihanouk. He was still a key player both inside the country and internationally. However, Prince Sihanouk was only one man and he needed a movement to chase the Vietnamese out of Cambodia. Prince Sihanouk faced a dilemma. He had bitter experiences with the Khmer Rouge. Yet, the Khmer Rouge was the strongest fighting force of the resistance groups opposing the Vietnamese and the PRK. Ultimately, Prince Sihanouk was determined not to be fooled by the Khmer Rouge for a second time, and he created his own movement, the *Front Uni National pour un Cambodge Indépendant, Neutre, Pacifique, Et Coopératif* or FUNCINPEC for short. Prince Sihanouk established the movement in February 1981 in France, and in March the same year, the FUNCINPEC absorbed three smaller movements in Cambodia which, hitherto, had always suffered from infighting.<sup>65</sup> The military arm of the FUNCINPEC was called the *Armée Nationale Sihanoukhiste* (Sihanoukist National Army) or ANS for short.

Table 1. The Pinnacle of Complexities: Factions in the Cambodian Civil War and Their Sponsors

Factions	Primary Sponsor	Secondary Sponsor
People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK)	Vietnam	Soviet Union
CGDK 1: FUNCINPEC	China, North Korea	United States, ASEAN
CGDK 2: KPNLF	United States, Thailand	China, ASEAN
CGDK 3: Khmer Rouge	China	ASEAN

*Source:* Author's estimate based on the narratives in Nicolas Régaud, *Cambodge dans la Tourmente: Le Troisième Conflit Indochinois 1978-1991* (Paris: Harmattan, 1992).

In spite of having a common and stronger enemy, the three resistance groups worked separately to fight against the Vietnamese forces and the PRK. Not only did they not cooperate they sometimes attacked each other as well. However, in 1982, Prince Sihanouk finally gave in to pressure from the sponsoring countries and accepted the establishment of the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) which combined the FUNCINPEC, the Khmer Rouge, and the KPNLF into one single political organization opposing the PRK and the Vietnamese. Prince Sihanouk explained his rational, yet excruciatingly difficult decision:

In 1979, 1980, 1981, neither myself nor Mr. Son Sann wanted to enter into a coalition with the Khmer Rouge. But in June 1982, we had to do so after all, because our followers, i.e. the patriotic and nationalist Khmers as a whole, who had decided to fight against the Vietnamese, in order to save our fatherland, would have received neither arms nor ammunition from China nor foodstuffs or any other humanitarian aid from friendly countries nor the support of the UNO [United Nations Organization], if we had remained simple 'rebels'. China and ASEAN gave us to understand that our two nationalist movements, our two national liberation fronts, would not have any future outside the lawful framework of the state of Democratic Kampuchea, a full member of the UNO.<sup>66</sup>

In other words, the Khmer Rouge was the necessary evil because its government, the Democratic Kampuchea, still retained a seat at the United Nations. This put Vietnam squarely in the position of the aggressor fighting against a sovereign Cambodia as well as delegitimizing the PRK. Such was the complexity of the civil war in Cambodia, the last war of the Third Indochina Conflict.

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<sup>1</sup> Marie Alexandrine Martin, *Cambodia: A Shattered Society*, trans. Mark W. McLeod (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 30.

<sup>2</sup> This issue is controversial and politically charged. However, the perception of many Cambodians during the war was that the land belongs to Cambodia and its loss was simply another example of Vietnamese expansionism. On the bitter relations between Vietnam and Cambodia prior to the 1970s, see Martin, *Cambodia: A Shattered Society*;

David Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History*; Charles Meyer, *Derrière le Sourire Khmer* (Paris: Plon, 1971).

<sup>3</sup> Mark W. McLeod, “Indigenous Peoples and the Vietnamese Revolution, 1930-1975,” *Journal of World History* 10, no. 2 (1999): 353-389.

<sup>4</sup> Dmitry Mosyakov, “Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese Communists: A History of Their Relations as Told in the Soviet Archives,” *Searching for the Truth*, no. 17 (May 2001): 36.

<sup>5</sup> Ben Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Communism in Cambodia, 1930-1975* (Yale University Press, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History*.

<sup>8</sup> Prince Norodom Sihanouk and Wilfred Burchett, *My War with the CIA: The Memoirs of Prince Norodom Sihanouk* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1973).

<sup>9</sup> Kenton Clymer, “The Perils of Neutrality,” *Searching for the Truth*, no. 1 (January, 2000): 26. Clymer speculated that the delay between the time of the failed coup attempt (1959) and the cessation of the diplomatic relations (1965) was perhaps due to the reliance of the Cambodian economy on the inflow of American dollar. This factor, according to Clymer, explained Prince Sihanouk’s hesitation.

<sup>10</sup> Nhem, *The Khmer Rouge*. Ironically, this insistence ran against the Vietnamese concept of “*đấu tranh*” (Vietnamese for “the struggle”) which blended political and military actions as well as combining guerrilla warfare with conventional warfare. For a detail description, see chapter 9 of Douglas Pike, *The PAVN: People’s Army of Vietnam* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1986). The fact that the Vietnamese communists applied *đấu tranh* in Vietnam but told their Cambodian comrades not to do the same in Cambodia was perhaps evidence that the Vietnamese communists did not want their Cambodian comrade to win.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* Dmitry Mosyakov claimed that as a direct result of this defection, the KPRP party secretary disappeared and was presumed dead. See Mosyakov, “Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese Communists.”

<sup>12</sup> David Chandler, “Revising the Past in Democratic Kampuchea: When was the Birthday of the Party? Notes and comments,” *Pacific Affairs* 56, no. 2 (1983): 288-300. Mosyakov, on the other hand, concurred on the new charter but did not mention the name.

<sup>13</sup> Mosyakov, “Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese Communists.”

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Interviews with Nuon Chea in 2005, presented as Annex in ឌឺប សុផល [Diep, Sophal]. *សោកទាសកម្មកម្ពុជា៖ មរោគមនីវិជ្ជានយោបាយ បដិវត្តន៍សង្គម និង សង្គ្រាមបង្ករឈាម* [Cambodia's Tragedy: Political Ideology, Social Revolution, and Bloody War] បោះពុម្ពនៅភ្នំពេញ រោងពុម្ពផោកជ័យ ឆ្នាំ ២០០៨ [Phnom Penh: Tchouk Jey Publishing, 2008].

<sup>16</sup> Charles Meyer, *Derrière le Sourire Khmer* (Paris: Plon, 1971).

<sup>17</sup> Martin, *Cambodia: A Shattered Society*.

<sup>18</sup> Meyer, *Derrière le Sourire Khmer*.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. According to Meyer, just like the revolt in Samlot, other revolts in many parts of the country were genuine farmers revolts against local officials. But the communists once again claimed they had led the revolts.

<sup>20</sup> Nhem, *The Khmer Rouge*.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> The operation was dubbed “Operation TEST VC/NVA.” Its objective was to test the strength of the Vietnamese communists along the Cambodian-Vietnamese border and, if necessary, to destroy them. See Sak Sutsakhan, *The Khmer Republic at War and Its Final Collapse* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1980).

<sup>23</sup> Martin, *Cambodia: A Shattered Society*.

<sup>24</sup> Mosyakov, “Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese Communists.”

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ros Chantrabot, *La République Khmère: 1970-1975* (Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 1993).

<sup>27</sup> William Shawcross, *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1979).

<sup>28</sup> David Chandler, *Brother Number One: A Political Biography of Pol Pot* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Martin, *Cambodia: A Shattered Society*.

<sup>31</sup> Dy Khamboly, *A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)* (Phnom Penh: Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2007).

<sup>32</sup> Martin, *Cambodia: A Shattered Society*.

<sup>33</sup> Nayan Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 43. Nayan Chanda wrote that Mao Tse-tung understood that when Pol Pot took power, he would no longer need Prince Sihanouk and perhaps might even try to harm the Prince. Fearing this eventuality, the ailing Mao struggled with his failing health to speak to the sister-in-law of Pol Pot and told her not to send Prince Sihanouk and his wife to the cooperative (i.e. hard labor). This proved to be a lifesaver for the Prince and his family.

<sup>34</sup> By 1975, most of the arable land had been ravaged by bombing and unexploded ordnance, as well as landmines. Moreover, the ones who had to work to achieve the goals of the Four Year Plan were former city residents with little to no experience with agricultural labor. The Khmer Rouge distinguished between the “Old People” or “Base/Local People” and the “New People,” or “17 April People.” The former were considered as the owners of the country, while the latter were considered as “latecomers” to the revolution. This latter group were “sub-people” and could only obtain the status of full-fledged citizens by way of forced labor.

<sup>35</sup> Three main reasons could explain why this Four Year Plan failed. First, the people who were sent to the cooperative came from the cities and were not accustomed to either hard labor or even agricultural practices in general. Second, because the Khmer Rouge did not have any machinery to help with the cultivation, the productivity was dismal. Third, most arable land was ravaged by war and unexploded ordnance and landmines prevented a large-scale cultivation. See Nhem, *The Khmer Rouge*.

<sup>36</sup> Sok Vannak, “Koh Tral Under the Khmer Rouge Regime,” *Rasmei Kampuchea Daily*, 26 August 2012.

<sup>37</sup> A Khmer Rouge’s radio broadcast in 1978, Documentation Center of Cambodia’s collections, quoted in Nhem, *The Khmer Rouge*.

<sup>38</sup> Stephen Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia: Political, Culture and the Causes of War* (Stanford University Press, 1999).

<sup>39</sup> Andrew Mertha, “Surrealpolitik: The experience of Chinese experts in Democratic Kampuchea, 1975-1979,” *Cross-Current: East Asian History and Culture Review*; E-journal no. 4 (September 2012), accessed 15 September 2014, <https://cross-currents.berkeley.edu/e-journal/issue-4/Mertha>.

<sup>40</sup> Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodi*, 99.

<sup>41</sup> “Telegram 07,” 23rd December 1977 (19:30), Document number: D01975, Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam).

<sup>42</sup> The term “yuon” was a Khmer term denoting Vietnamese. In the 1960s, however, with the rise of the Khmer Rouge, this term began to contain racial pejorative. When this term is used today, it tends to have a heavy derogatory meaning. See “Telegram 06,” 23rd December 1977 (19:45), Document number: D01972, DC-Cam. This telegram was sent later than the previous one but was received by Office 870 one day earlier. That is the reason why this one was marked “Telegram 06.”

<sup>43</sup> “Telegram 08, Dear respected and beloved Office 870, from Phourng,” 24th December 1977, Document number: D01974, DC-Cam.

<sup>44</sup> According to Stephen Morris, the reason that Vietnam did not follow through with their campaign was that they saw no exit strategy, i.e. no political solution after the military action. See Morris, *Why Vietnam Invaded Cambodia*.

<sup>45</sup> Harish and Julie Mehta, *Hun Sen: Strongman of Cambodia* (Singapore: Graham Brash, 1999).

<sup>46</sup> For one man to seek support from a country to attack another country was indeed a very ambitious plan. However, comrade Hun Sen speculated that the intensity of the war and the severity of Khmer Rouge’s atrocity made such plan possible. Moreover, comrade Hun Sen was among the very first Cambodian refugees who escaped to Vietnam. These people were the only source of information from which Vietnam learnt about the general situation and the genocide inside Cambodia. Consequently, the first group of refugees had close contacts with the Vietnamese. They were, therefore, in a good position to request support from Vietnam. The claim was made in *Speech of the Prime Minister*, “Commemoration Ceremony of Fallen Veterans and the Inauguration of the Historical Memory Statue at the Former Location of Unit 125 [Dong Nai province, Vietnam], the Source of the Armed Forces of Cambodia Under the Command of Comrade Hun Sen,” aired on 2 January 2012 on the National Television of Kampuchea (TVK).

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. Dung was the commander of the North Vietnamese Army that defeated the South Vietnamese Army in the Spring Offensive of 1975.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Editorial staff, “Le Cambodge aurait lancé une offensive dans la province vietnamienne de Tay Ninh,” *Le Monde*, 26-27 February 1978. The newspaper mentioned that the number was given by a “reliable source” to a representative of AFP.

<sup>50</sup> Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 342.

<sup>51</sup> *Speech of the Prime Minister*, “Commemoration Ceremony of Fallen Veterans.”

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> *Speech of the Prime Minister*, “Commemoration Ceremony of Fallen Veterans.” The peculiarity of this case was that the army was established before the political movement. Thus, the Kampuchean Solidarity “Armed Forces” for National Salvation was born before the Kampuchean Solidarity “Front” for National Salvation.

<sup>54</sup> Chanda, *Brother Enemy*.

<sup>55</sup> Sihanouk, *Prisoniers des Khmers Rouges*.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 338.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 340.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 358-59.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Chanda, *Brother Enemy*. According to Chanda, one team of Vietnamese special forces was sent in after the Prince had already been evacuated out of the country by the Khmer Rouge. Chanda claimed the team was decimated. However, the author’s conversation with a relative of a Vietnamese soldier involved in the operation revealed that before the combat team went in, a forward, light, reconnaissance team had already went in to scout the approach. This team survived but lacked the capabilities to change the situation.

<sup>61</sup> This is a conservative estimate. See the discussions in Nhem, *The Khmer Rouge*, Preface.

<sup>62</sup> Nguyễn Văn Hồng (colonel), *Cuộc chiến tranh bắt buộc* [The Obligated War]. Nhà xuất bản Quân Đội Nhân Dân, Hanoi, 2008 [People’s Army publishing house, Hanoi, Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2008]. Nguyễn Văn Hồng was a retired colonel who had served under Front 479. The author of this thesis would like to thank Captain Tran Duc Huong (of the People’s Army of Vietnam), the author’s classmate at the US Army Command and General Staff College, class of 14-02 for assisting with parts of the translation of the book.

<sup>63</sup> For instance, as part of the effort, Democratic Kampuchea’s infamous S-21 prison was preserved and turned into a genocidal museum. Here too, Pol Pot’s policy of secrecy kept the workers in the prison in the dark until the last days of the regime. When the Vietnamese came in, the workers had no time to destroy the evidence and they largely remained intact.

<sup>64</sup> This was the title of a publication of a historical-demographic book in the 1960s by a right-wing scholar. The book’s major prediction was that as the Vietnamese expansionism reached the sea after it controlled Cochinchina, Vietnam had no choice but to expand westward, i.e. into Cambodia.

<sup>65</sup> Nhek Bun Chhay, *A Luck in Thousand Dangers* (Phnom Penh: [unknown publisher], 1998).

<sup>66</sup> Peter Schier, "An Interview with Prince Norodom Sihanouk, 1st December, 1983," *SUDOSTASIEN aktuell* (Hamburg: Institute of Asian Affairs, January 1984).

CHAPTER 3  
MILITARY ORGANIZATION, CONCEPT OF OPERATIONS,  
AND STRATEGIES

From Irregulars to Regulars, From Regulars Back to Irregulars

The Khmer Rouge started as outlawed guerrillas in the 1960s. The 1970 coup saw the Khmer Rouge become the liberation army which fought to put Prince Sihanouk back in power. Members of the Khmer Rouge came into the hamlets and villages and started recruiting the peasants who were hoping to fight in order to bring Prince Sihanouk back to power.<sup>1</sup> The organization was designed and based on Chinese and Vietnamese guerilla units. The villagers were organized as “armed propaganda units,” meaning that they had a dual mission - to educate people about their cause while retaining the ability to fight, should the situation demand it. The “educators” required little training and all they needed to do was to go from hamlet to hamlet, singing revolutionary songs and spreading propaganda in order to help recruit the local population.<sup>2</sup>

The Khmer Rouge forces prior to 1979 had two main echelons. The first echelon was the conventional units. After the Khmer Rouge victory in April 1975, the Kampuchea Revolutionary Army was established in Phnom Penh on 22 July 1975.<sup>3</sup> In March 1977, a document by the general staff stated that there were nine divisions under direct control of the Central Committee, totaling around 60,000 men.<sup>4</sup> A typical division had between 4000 and 6000 soldiers.

The second echelon of the Khmer Rouge army was the regional troops.<sup>5</sup> Both the Region (province) and the Zone (a group of provinces) had their own military units. The

Zone could organize only one division or brigade to carry out operations in its area of responsibility. The Region could have one regiment. A shadow of the two-echelon forces was more or less perpetuated after 1979, albeit on a smaller scale.

During the war in Cambodia, all factions had about the same basic structure in their military organization. A unit was typically composed of three maneuver units of smaller echelons. Heavy support weapons units would usually appear at the regimental level and above. The number of troops in a particular unit varied from one faction to another. A typical Vietnamese division had around 10,000 troops while the KPRA division only had 5,000 troops on average. As the KPNLF and the ANS made the transition to the conventional level in 1989, their standard division was similar in size to the KPRA's.

The size of the Khmer Rouge divisions, on the other hand, was very different from that of other factions. The Khmer Rouge adhered to the "People's War" concept of war and cemented its military organization with the local population, either through selective intimidation or ideology.<sup>6</sup> In the post-1979 reorganization, each Khmer Rouge division had three or four regiments (no heavy artillery).<sup>7</sup> Each regiment had three or four battalions. Each battalion, however, controlled only two to three squads. Thus, each Khmer Rouge battalion would have only between 30 and 40 soldiers, each regiment had between 70 and 80 soldiers, and each division had between 300 and 400 soldiers. In other words, a Khmer Rouge division functioned as the equivalent of a KPRA's battalion-plus. During the war, whenever the Khmer Rouge mobilized to attack a large objective, it

almost never committed less than one division. This downsized organizational structure gave the Khmer Rouge more than forty nominal divisions.<sup>8</sup>

There were a few exceptions to this rule. Benefiting from the sanctuaries along the Cambodian-Thai border and the ability to retreat to Thailand in difficult times, most divisions that operated around the Khmer Rouge border headquarters were heavy divisions. Four divisions were the most prominent. The 415th Division operating around Route 10 near Pailin (in Battambang province) and the 450th Division operating in Malai (the border between Battambang and Banteay Meanchey) each had a strength similar to that of a KPRA division. Unlike most Khmer Rouge divisions, which were primarily infantry divisions, these two divisions were heavy divisions, i.e. they had organic heavy artillery. The 980th and 912th Divisions in Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey also had a similar strength. None of the divisions had tanks.

Table 2. Unit Size Conversion

KPRA's Unit Strength (Average number of personnel)	Khmer Rouge	KPNLAF	ANS/ANKI
Battalion (200-300)	Regiment	Regiment	Regiment
Regiment (300-500)	Division (except some special divisions)	Brigade	Brigade
Brigade (1500-2000)	Special Regiments	OMZ	Division
Division (3000-4000)	980th, 920th, 450th, 415th Divisions		
Division-plus (7000) or Corps	Front		

*Source:* Author's estimate.

The Khmer Rouge divided its area of responsibility into three Areas of Operation (cf. Figure 2 Khmer Rouge's Areas of Operations, next page): the first area was in the Tonle Sap Lake region (because of its economic potentials), the second area along the

Cambodian-Thai border (due to its infiltration potentials), and the third area covered the rest of the country (to fix the KPRA forces). In the northwestern provinces, the Khmer Rouge organized two Fronts: Front 909 which operated in the Battambang-Pursat border and Front 250 which operated south of Sisophon (provincial capital of Banteay Meanchey), i.e. along the border between Battambang and Banteay Meanchey provinces.

Front 909 oversaw the operations of nine divisions while Front 250 controlled four heavy divisions and four special (augmented) regiments. By Cambodian standards, therefore, both were corps-size formations, at least based on their strength.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the Khmer Rouge did not rely solely on refugee camps for sanctuaries or manpower. Unlike the non-communist factions which will be examined next, the Khmer Rouge relied more on their underground networks in the villages all over the country.

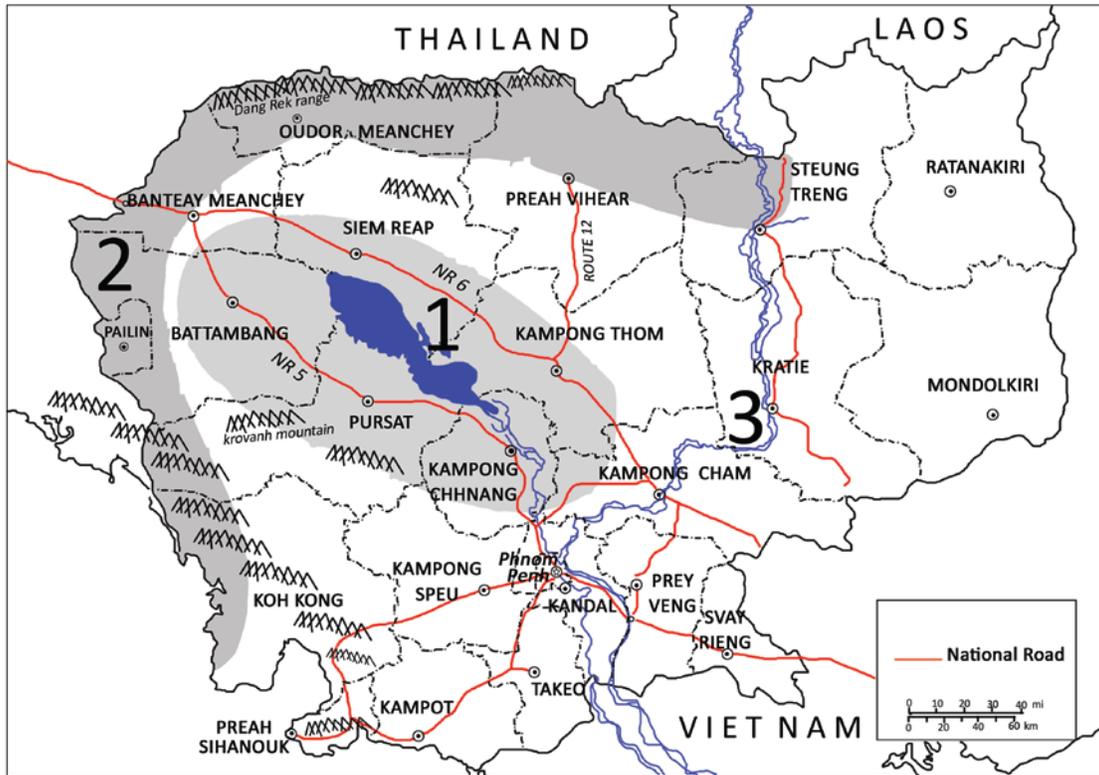


Figure 2. Khmer Rouge's Areas of Operations

Source: Created by author.

During the war, the Khmer Rouge struggled to cope with two conflicting realities. On the one hand, the Khmer Rouge had organized its forces as a conventional army and it wanted to fight as such. On the other hand, the Khmer Rouge's conventional army was not strong enough to defeat the Phnom Penh governmental forces and its ally, the Vietnamese forces in Cambodia. Consequently, the Khmer Rouge dispersed its conventional army forces into smaller units. It was not until the Vietnamese forces withdrew from Cambodia in 1989 that the Khmer Rouge were able to transition to a large, conventional army and adopt conventional tactics.

Former KPRA soldiers spoke of their fear of Khmer Rouge ambushes and anti-infantry tactics.<sup>10</sup> Small Khmer Rouge ambush squads relied on the liberal use of rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) which were devastating against infantry, vehicles, and lightly armored units. On major roads, the Khmer Rouge used recoilless rifles to take down heavy trucks. They also used anti-personnel and anti-tank mines in conjunction with improvised traps which could include even primitive bamboo-stick pits. The Khmer Rouge's ambush tactics were unrelenting. Even when their position was destroyed by a KPRA surprise attack, they still prepared ambush positions to counterattack the KPRA as they left the scene.

Secondly, the Khmer Rouge sought to build a cohesive fighting unit. In all of their battles, the Khmer Rouge fighters always fought to retrieve the bodies of their fallen comrades. In some cases, the attack to retrieve the bodies could even be more intense than the original attack itself, especially because the KPRA units did not expect such attack.<sup>11</sup> According to a former chief of staff of the Kampong Thom provincial military command (KPRA side), the Khmer Rouge units never left more than five bodies on the battlefield unless they completely exhausted their resources to recover them.<sup>12</sup> In fact, this tradition was observed since the time they were guerrillas in the 1960s. For the Khmer Rouge fighters, they fought not for material gain but rather for ideology. A former non-communist resistance officer duly noted: "the Khmer Rouge did not eat rice, they ate ideology".<sup>13</sup> The body retrieval practice also made it hard for the KPRA to assess damage inflicted on the Khmer Rouge.

### The Non-Communist Resistance (NCR)

Also fighting against the Vietnamese and the PRK was a collection of armed groups who controlled the refugee camps that straddled the Cambodian-Thai border. These small bands of fighters were either remnants of the Khmer Republic or former royalists who continued to fight after the fall of Phnom Penh in 1975. In 1979, refugees fled to the border and many of these groups became involved in black marketeering as well as preying on helpless refugees. Many were known by the infamous title of “warlords.” Eventually, they gravitated towards two major movements. Thailand sought to organize a resistance group to try to curb the Vietnamese advance and Prince Sihanouk also looked to organize his own movement so that he would not have to rely on the Khmer Rouge.

With support from the Thai army, the Kampuchea People’s National Liberation Front (KPNLF) was established on 9 October 1979.<sup>14</sup> The core of the membership of the KPNLF were former commanders and politicians of the Khmer Republic. The KPNLF was to be governed by an “Executive Committee” made up of seven delegates and one president. Mr. Son Sann, a former premier under Prince Sihanouk’s government in the 1960s held the latter post. The United States’ Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Thai army worked jointly to advise and train the KPNLF army, called the “Khmer People’s National Liberations Armed Forces” (KPNLAF).

In 1984, Mr. Son Sann tried to request the Executive Committee to grant him consolidated power over the KPNLF (meaning the veto power over the Executive Committee). However, the proposal was rejected by the military, most notably Dien Del, the Executive Committee’s delegate for military affairs and Sak Sutsakhan, the chief of

staff of the KPNLAF.<sup>15</sup> The rift between the Son Sann loyalists and the Dien Del/Sak Sutsakhan loyalists was never resolved until the end of the war. The Thai army and the CIA were usually the mediators between the two factions.

Starting in 1987, the KPNLAF reorganized into conventional units in anticipation of the offensive that would follow the Vietnamese withdrawal. The KPNLAF created military regional commands, perhaps as they planned for the eventual control of a liberated Cambodia. In early 1987, the KPNLAF reduced the number of military regions from nine to seven and then changed the name of the formations to Operational Military Zone (OMZ).<sup>16</sup> An OMZ controlled a number of battalions, each of which mustered around three hundred fighters. There was also a disparity between the OMZs where some like OMZ6 controlled four battalions while OMZ4 controlled only two.<sup>17</sup> An OMZ was an equivalent of a KPRA brigade.<sup>18</sup>

The second non-communist force was Prince Sihanouk's FUNCINPEC. The organization of its armed wing, the *Armée Nationale Sihanoukhiste* (ANS), paralleled the KPNLAF in many ways. The majority of its forces were raised from the border camps and the organization of the military regions of both sides also paralleled each other (each had seven military regions).

Just like the KPNLAF, the ANS was born out of several armed groups that controlled the camps along the Cambodian-Thai border. In 1987, Prince Sihanouk decided to present himself as the neutral (read: transcendent) party in the eventual political negotiation and changed the name of his army from *Armée Nationale Sihanoukhiste* to *Armée Nationale du Kampuchea Indépendant* (ANKI) so that the army

no longer bore his name.<sup>19</sup> By the time of the 1989 offensive, the ANKI had established five divisions. Using the KPRA's unit as base, the ANKI had an equivalent of five brigades.

One notable event in the history of the non-communist factions of the CGDK was in 1985 when both non-communist forces agreed to pool their military resources and create a Joint Military Command (JMC). A KPNLAF officer was appointed as the commander of the JMC and the deputy commander came from the then ANS/ANKI. The ANS/ANKI held the post of the chief of staff while a KPNLAF officer was the deputy chief of staff. The great irony of this attempt was the fact that throughout the war, the impact of the JMC was not very decisive and the ANS/ANKI eventually found itself cooperating more with the Khmer Rouge than with the KPNLAF.<sup>20</sup>

In retrospect, the establishment of the CGDK and the JMC, while not perfect, was indeed a welcoming development. First and foremost, it prevented the communist and non-communist forces from attacking each other. The main problem for the CGDK's non-communist factions was the fact that only the Khmer Rouge could maintain an expansive network among the population while the KPNLAF and the ANKI had much less success. Without the Khmer Rouge's acquiescence, it would be next to impossible for the NCR to infiltrate inside Cambodia in large formations. The CGDK mechanism also helped alleviate some of these problems.

Finally, another problem came from the sponsors. Many sponsors such as the advisory section of the Thai army inadvertently exacerbated the problem when it decided to offer financial rewards for success, leading many non-communist rebel forces to fight

for money instead of a political ideology. One American advisor noted that many, if not all, non-communist Cambodian camp leaders ruled as warlords and could not care less about the people inside, while the Khmer Rouge elected the camp leaders.<sup>21</sup> Another issue related to the financing of the non-communist fighters. This became a multi-layered corruption process reportedly perpetuated by the advisors themselves. Some estimated that one third of the CIA money and about half of the Chinese money was lost under the management of the Thai army's advisory section.<sup>22</sup>

### The Vietnamese Volunteer Army (VVA)

The Vietnamese army in Cambodia maintained a structure similar to the PAVN units that operated in the Vietnam War with the United States. A typical division would have on average 10,000 men with organic armor and artillery support. When they came into Cambodia, however, the PAVN called themselves the “Vietnamese Volunteer Army” (VVA) in an attempt to justify their intervention.<sup>23</sup> The VVA fielded two types of divisions. The first type was the typical division which had one, two or three-digit numerical designation. For a lack of better terms and for the sake of simplicity, in this thesis these units are called “VVA mobile divisions.” The second type of divisions can be tentatively called “local-governance military expert groups” (*quân sự địa phương như đoàn*), which was identified by a unique four-digit numerical designation. This was a military formation the size of a division but its task was exclusively nation-building.<sup>24</sup>

These latter units never moved outside of their assigned provinces and they typically had a battalion at each district and a company at each village (the size of the garrisoned unit varied depending on the size of the districts and villages). In Cambodia,

Unit 7701 stationed in Kampong Thom province (also responsible for Preah Vihear province), Unit 7704 stationed in Battambang-Banteay Meanchey province, and Unit 7705 stationed in Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey province.<sup>25</sup>

### The Kampuchea People's Revolutionary Army (KPRA)

The Cambodian resistance forces that accompanied the Vietnamese forces liberated Phnom Penh on 7 January 1979 and established a new state, the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). Its army was the Kampuchea People's Revolutionary Army (KPRA). The KPRA had three main echelons.

The first echelon was the mobile division, called the "sharp troop" (*toap srouch*). The second echelon was the territorial troops, controlled by Regions which were later transformed into Military Regions (MR), of which there were five in 1989. The MR controlled several provincial military commands (PMC) which managed operations in their respective provinces. The PMCs were organized as conventional formations but they did not have organic artillery or armor and fought primarily as infantry units. The MRs controlled "intervention units," which denoted armor units and heavy artillery. The third echelon of the KPRA was the paramilitary units consisting of office militias (protecting government offices), fishing lot militias (in the Tonle Sap Lake area), the defense militias (protecting the key infrastructure such as rail road and bridges), the village militias, and the hamlet militias. An estimate of the total forces in 1987 showed the following distribution:

Table 3. An Estimate of the PRK's Military Power (1987)

Categories	Estimate	Percentage of total	Notes
Regular troops	75,000	24 percent	Mobile divisions, commanded by the general staff HQ and the Ministry of Defense.
Territorial forces	55,000	17.62 percent	Troops at the district level and above. This included regular troops under the authority of the province.
Village militias (including national road militias)	16,000	5.12 percent	Received a substantially lower salary than the regular troops. Weapons can be requisitioned on the battlefield.
Hamlet militias	150,000	48 percent	Did not have salary, frequently received rice allocation. Weapons can be requisitioned on the battlefield.
Railroad and rubber plantation militias	7,000	2.24 percent	Sustainment and logistics during operations covered by the government.
Government establishment militias	9,000	3.02 percent	Guard the government office buildings at night.
Fishing lot militias	N/A	N/A	A very small segment of militias in charge of security of the fishing lots in the Tonle Sap Lake area
Sub-total militias	182,000	58.33 percent	
Sub-total militias and territorial troops	237,000	75.96 percent	
TOTAL	312,000		

*Source:* The estimate is that of a former deputy chief of staff of the KPRA. See វិទ្យាស្ថានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រកម្ពុជា [Institute of Military History]. ប្រវត្តិយោធាភូមិភាគ ៥ [History of Military Region 5]. ភ្នំពេញ, កម្ពុជា: អគ្គនាយកដ្ឋាននយោបាយនិងកិច្ចការបរទេស, ក្រសួងការពារជាតិ, ឆ្នាំ ២០១៣. [Phnom Penh, Cambodia: General Department of Policy and Foreign Affairs, Ministry of National Defense, 2013]. Section: Order of the General Staff headquarters. The number roughly corresponds to the estimate of western scholars. Westad and Quinn-Judge, for example, put the number of regular troops at 100,000 and the militias at 200,000; both numbers are for 1989. See Odd Arne Westad and Sophie Quinn-Judge, ed., *The Third Indochina War: Conflict between China, Vietnam, and Cambodia, 1972-79* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006).

## Mobilization and Concept of Operations

### Political Concept and Ideology

Following the communist tradition, there was a tendency of the party to control every aspect of military life. The ministry of homeland defense managed all military matters while the general staff headquarters was in charge of operational matters. The

general staff was under direct control of the ministry of homeland defense and the chief of staff concurrently held the position of first deputy minister of homeland defense.

The second communist influence was the role of the political officer or political commissar. In each unit, there was a position called “political commander” who was in charge of the political direction in the unit. Despite having the same rank as the operational commander, the political commander usually did not involve himself in operational matters. However, he acted as the bearer of the party’s message, maintained unit discipline, and rallied the troops and the population, as well as countering infiltration by the enemy.

The KPRA functioned around a concept called “*pror-long pror-naing*” which can literally be translated as “friendly competition.” In this concept, a legacy of the Soviet’s “socialist competition,” promotions and reward were based on the friendly competition between different units as well as within units. The political commander and the commander of the higher units were the record keepers. The friendly competition centered on three interrelated areas: fighting the enemy, building the unit, and political and ethical integrity.<sup>26</sup>

Just like any other units, fighting the enemy, either through ambushes, defense, deliberate attacks and rallying of the bystanders, all counted in this category. Secondly, and related to rallying, the unit was expected to maintain its members integrity and morale, as well as self-sufficiency, through good rapport with the population. Thirdly, within the unit itself, the soldiers and officers were vetted by the political officer as to their personal character and ethical principles, especially their conduct towards the local

population. This concept not only applied to the regular units but also to the territorial troops and the militias.

Within the KPRA, in many instances where there were individual cases of extraordinary heroism, the officer or soldier would receive the highest distinction of all, the “hero” (*virak tchunn*) designation. Throughout the war, many people would receive this distinction, including many militia troops who outnumbered the award recipients from the conventional units.<sup>27</sup> The KPRA officers considered the Khmer Rouge as an existential threat which was a great motivation to fight. One of the reasons why the PRK succeeded in building a strong state was its ability to blend the anti-Khmer Rouge propaganda with the friendly competition concept to build a strong army.

#### The Armed Propaganda Units and the Dual-Duty Companies

The party’s tendency to assume control of everything to the lowest organizational level is consistent with the concept of “People’s War,” which calls for general mobilization of the whole population. The KPRA taught each of the soldiers, officers and political cadres, “a villager is a soldier, a policeman, a propagandist, a producer, and an intelligence agent.”<sup>28</sup> The policy integrated political, conventional and paramilitary forces under one umbrella.

With the support of Vietnamese local-governance military expert group, around 1980, the PRK sent small teams called “armed propaganda units” to all provinces across the country. These were a direct copy of the Viet Minh units of the same name,. The main mission was to spread the party’s propaganda as well as building local government infrastructure at the village level and above. The Vietnamese mobile divisions also

assisted the provincial military commands in launching many operations to extend the PRK's influence beyond the provincial capital. These mobile divisions then organized elections, built the local government, and recruited people to defend the hamlets and villages.

Between 1984 and 1985, the armed propaganda units recruited enough people to upgrade themselves into larger units. Thus, they became "dual-duty companies." As the name implied, these units operated at the district level and conducted two main missions: fighting, and spreading propaganda, in essence, the reproduction of the armed propaganda units at the district level. The company could fight as a conventional unit, yet it was small enough to move around for its propaganda missions. In most cases, a district would have more than one company because there had to be at least one dual-duty company and one combat company. In cases where the population in the district could not support more than one company, one of the platoons in that company would become the dual-duty platoon.

By continuing to adhere to the slogan "a villager is a soldier, a policeman, a propagandist, a producer, and an intelligence agent," the dual-duty companies continued to sustain their propaganda and the recruitment of more people to serve in the provincial battalions. As soon as a battalion was raised, the province was expected to contribute this to the mobile division or the MR as required. The mobile divisions received most of their reinforcements from the PMCs this way because a conscription law did not exist until 1988. The PMCs contributed a lot of troops to the mobile divisions, but still retained a far more substantial force in the order of battle. Provinces in the eastern part of the country

such as Kampong Cham, Svay Rieng, and Prey Veng had more people but less of a Khmer Rouge threat and in 1989 these provinces contributed many battalions and regiments to the western provinces.

### The KPRA's Provincial Military Commands (PMC)

#### History of the Battambang PMC

Before 1989, Battambang was part of a large province, Battambang-Banteay Meanchey. In 1980, Battambang-Banteay Meanchey had seven district companies. In 1984, from these companies, the province established three infantry battalions which were combined to create an infantry regiment that was transferred to the MR. Beginning in 1987, each district had to augment its companies to create at least one battalion. In 1988, because the province was too big for one command to control and because the threat varied (the KPNLF was active only in the Banteay Meanchey part of the province while the Khmer Rouge and ANKI were active in Battambang), the province was divided into two parts: Battambang and Banteay Meanchey. After the split with Banteay Meanchey, Battambang still had eight infantry battalions under its direct command. In 1988, three of these battalions were combined to create another independent regiment which was once again transferred to the MR.

In 1989, the 196th Division was lacking manpower and Battambang contributed five battalions to replenish it. During the CGDK combined offensive in 1989, the Battambang PMC had a total of thirteen infantry battalions under its command.<sup>29</sup> In other words, Battambang constantly raised additional forces and frequently contributed those forces to the regular units. Three of the six KPRA mobile divisions were stationed in this

province. The 196th Division defended Pailin, the 4th Division defended Samlot, and the 6th Division defended Malai.

There was a reason why Battambang had this enormous formation: the main force of the Khmer Rouge operating in this area had two fronts and two major divisions.<sup>30</sup> In the areas around Malai, a town on the junction of Cambodian-Thai border and the border between Battambang and Banteay Meanchey, stood the full strength 450th Division. To the southeast of Battambang, the Khmer Rouge's headquarters put Front 250 in charge. Front 250 operated from the Cambodian-Thai border across Battambang and extended into the Tonle Sap area. It consisted of four full divisions and four special regiments. To the southwest of Battambang, the 415th Division (which was also a full division) operated in the Pailin area. Another important formation, Front 909, sought to divide Battambang and Pursat by operating along the border of the two provinces.

#### History of Banteay Meanchey PMC

Before 1988, this northwest province was part of Battambang-Banteay Meanchey. The 179th Division was responsible for the Sisophon area and the eastern part of the province. On 7 January 1988, Banteay Meanchey province was formally inaugurated. It received five districts from the former province and created a new district and a provincial capital. Banteay Meanchey also inherited the 179th Division.

The 179th Division had three regiments. Banteay Meanchey also received five reinforcement units coming from outside the province: a contingent from Prey Veng PMC (battalion-plus), the 69th Armor Regiment (from MR4), the 12th Artillery

Regiment (from MR4), the 42nd Regiment (from MR4), and the 71st Infantry Regiment (from MR4, which was levied from the Kampong Thom PMC).<sup>31</sup>

Banteay Meanchey was facing the bulk of the KPNLAF. As a result, each district had at least two companies and the provincial capital had six companies. In total, the province had twenty district companies and two battalions. In 1989, the province upgraded all companies to battalions in anticipation of the KPNLAF offensive. Banteay Meanchey had a staggering twenty-two battalions on the eve of the KPNLAF offensive. However, such a hasty upgrade produced a shortage of manpower and each battalion was understrength and only had between 250 and 370 soldiers, which were commensurate with the KPNLAF's standard regiment in 1989.<sup>32</sup>

#### History of Kampong Thom PMC

In 1981, this province had recruited one infantry battalion, six district companies and thirteen dual-duty companies.<sup>33</sup> In 1983, Kampong Thom recruited five more dual-duty companies and in 1984, it was able to create the 71st Regiment. Just like the regiments in other provinces, this regiment was transferred to the military region. The following year, the province created two more battalions. One was the 55th Riverine Infantry Battalion which was in charge of security along the Steung Sen tributary connecting the provincial capital to the Tonle Sap Lake. Another unit, Battalion 36A, was created for the purpose of defending the provincial capital. In 1986, the province created another district to the northeast with three companies. At the same time, it established another regiment, the 72nd Regiment, which was once again transferred to the military region.

In 1988, the province began to accelerate its recruitment as it expected the heavy operations to come after the withdrawal of the Vietnamese troops. Another riverine infantry battalion, the 15th Battalion, was created in September 1988, but was again transferred to the Naval Directorate of the Ministry of Homeland Defense. In 1989, the Kampong Thom PMC reached the highest point of its build-up with the following combat units: the 20th Infantry Regiment (two battalions), three independent infantry battalions, the 55th Riverine Infantry Battalion, thirty companies (in eight districts), one artillery battery, one armor company and one reconnaissance troop.<sup>34</sup>

The CGDK units operating in this area consisted of elements of the Khmer Rouge divisions (especially those in Preah Vihear province whose mission was to cut Route 12) and one ANKI division. The Khmer Rouge had seven divisions operating in the area.<sup>35</sup> The ANKI had one division operating in Kampong Thom province, the 15th Division. The total number of the combined CGDK regular troops permanently fighting in Kampong Thom was estimated to be between 1400-1800 soldiers.<sup>36</sup>

#### Region 4, Military Region 4 and 5

The second echelon of territorial units were the Regions and Military Regions (MR) which controlled several PMCs in the same areas. The strength of these higher headquarters rested upon their ability to mobilize armor and heavy artillery to intervene in any provinces that were threatened by the CGDK. The Cambodian Regions and MRs were the successors of the Vietnamese units operating in the same areas.

The highest command headquarters of the Vietnamese troops in Cambodia (VVA) were organized into “Fronts.” The VVA had four fronts under the command of a supreme

headquarters known as Front 719 based in Phnom Penh.<sup>37</sup> Front 579 was supported by the PAVN Military Region 5 (meaning, the military region back in Vietnam) and controlled operations in Steung Treng, Ratanak Kiri, Mondul Kiri, parts of Kratie, and Preah Vihear. Front 979 was supported by Vietnam's Military Region 9 and controlled operations in Takeo, Kompot, Kampong Som, Koh Kong, Kampong Speu, Kampong Chhnang, Pursat, and parts of Battambang (from the town of Samlot to the south). Front 797 was supported by Vietnam's Military Region 7 and controlled operations in Kratie, Kampong Cham, Prey Veng, and Svay Rieng.

Finally, Vietnam's Military Region 7 supported one additional front, Front 479, based in the Siem Reap provincial capital, which controlled operations in Battambang-Banteay Meanchey and Siem-Reap-Ouddar Meanchey. While this front controlled only two provinces, it was perhaps the most important due to the threats that it had to face. In late 1984, as the VVA began to withdraw some of its forces from Cambodia, these four fronts were replaced by the Cambodian military regions. At the beginning, the Cambodian military regions were known as "Regions." Thus, Region 1 replaced Front 579, Region 2 replaced Front 797, Region 3 replaced Front 979, and Region 4 replaced Front 479. Region 4 outlined in detail below was the location of the decisive battle in 1989 and 1990.

In August 1984, Region 4 was formally inaugurated. The headquarters was in the Siem Reap provincial capital and then it gradually moved to replace the headquarters of Front 479 east of the Angkor Wat temple, less than ten kilometers from the provincial capital. Region 4 controlled forces in three very large provinces: Battambang-Banteay

Meanchey, Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey, and Pursat (which was just added to the Region after the VVA left). All of the divisions operating in the area immediately fell under tactical control of Region 4.<sup>38</sup>

A few months after the PRK split Battambang and Banteay Meanchey, on 28 June 1988, Region 4 was also split into Military Region 4 (MR4) and Military Region 5 (MR5). MR5 controlled Battambang, Pursat, and Kampong Chhnang provinces while MR4 controlled Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey and Banteay Meanchey. Thus, MR4 maintained control of the 286th Division, the 179th Division, and the PMCs in its area of operations while MR5 controlled the 4th division, the 6th Division, the 196th Division and the PMCs in its area of operation.<sup>39</sup>

#### Territorial-Based Versus Population-Based Strategy

The last echelon of the KPRA was the mobile divisions. One cannot talk about the strategy of the PRK and the VVA without talking about these units, and vice versa. These units were under the control of the general staff headquarters and were used to achieve objectives of highest importance. As a result, they would move around the country to where they were needed most. The movement of these divisions was critical to KPRA's strategy. The KPRA's strategy is examined in the first half of this section and the second half of the section will consider the impacts of the strategy on the mobile divisions.

The Vietnamese grand strategy (VVA/PRK) in the Cambodian conflict was one of "building the Cambodian force so that it can defend itself."<sup>40</sup> As a country which had fought a protracted conflict based on the "People's War" concept, this was not surprising. Nonetheless, the Vietnamese strategy in Cambodia was torn between a territorial-based

strategy and a population-based one. During the Vietnam War, the PAVN and the South Vietnam based Viet Cong were the inferior forces when faced with American firepower. As the PAVN moved into Cambodia, however, it was the PAVN which possessed superior firepower.

There were three stages of the Vietnamese strategy in Cambodia.<sup>41</sup> The first phase of the Vietnamese strategy was the building of local governance, which was almost non-existent after the collapse of the Khmer Rouge regime. In fact, when the Khmer Rouge came to power in 1975, they fiercely hunted down all local officials or anyone who had any relations with the old regime. After 1979, the VVA assigned military expert units (the units with four-digit numerical designation) to work hand in hand with the Cambodian forces to build armed propaganda units, dual-duty units, provincial battalions, and then regiments. These units provided local security which enabled the local governance structure to perform its tasks and strengthen itself. In short, phase 1 was undeniably a population-centric strategy.

In phase 2, the VVA launched major operations along the border to clear the refugee camps from which the rebels used to launch raids into the interior. On 5 April 1984, elements from the Vietnamese 95th Regiment and the 6th Division formed the first axis of advance while elements from the 201st Regiment and the 302nd Division formed the second axis and both launched the attack into Thailand from Cambodia's Preah Vihear province (see Figure 1, page 12 for the map of Cambodia).<sup>42</sup> In a surprise move, the Vietnamese forces captured much high ground in Thai territory. In response to attack,

the Chinese army restarted their shelling into Vietnamese territory to retaliate for what China thought was once again a Vietnamese expansion in Indochina.<sup>43</sup>

Twelve days later, the Thai 6th Division counterattacked and recaptured lost territory. The battle was ferocious with both sides deploying tanks and heavy artillery.<sup>44</sup> However, the attack was a feint. In fact, Vietnam assumed that Thailand would support the CGDK in the event that the Vietnamese attacked the border camps. As a result, the VVA attacked in this area to draw the Thai army's attention away from the real objective further west.

The ploy worked. In late 1984, a far larger VVA formation led by Front 479 launched a major dry-season offensive on the border camps along the Cambodian-Thai border in Battambang-Banteay Meanchey province. The campaign was aptly dubbed the "14-Camps Campaign."<sup>45</sup> On Christmas day 1984, the Vietnamese captured the first camp belonging to the KPNLF.<sup>46</sup> On 7 January 1985, the KPNLF's headquarters fell.<sup>47</sup> In early 1985, most of the border camps were cleared and all CGDK factions had to move their base of operations into Thailand.

With the completion of this phase, the VVA launched phase 3 of its strategy which was the longest phase. The strategy then decidedly moved from population-centric to territory-centric tactics. Just before the dry season offensive of 1984, the PRK and the Vietnamese had planned a controversial strategy known as the "K-5" Belt strategy.<sup>48</sup> Conceived as a five-year plan, this strategy literally called for the construction of a "wall" along the Cambodian-Thai border. According to Nicolas Régaud, this wall or defensive belt was to be upgraded with the generous use of landmines, anti-infantry obstacles, and

tank ditches.<sup>49</sup> Laborers were sent from the interior to construct the fortifications and obstacles in the malaria-infested, dense jungle while the mobile divisions moved up to man the outposts in the isolated areas along the border to protect the wall.<sup>50</sup>

The strategy was never published in any official document, but the *People's Army* newspaper made numerous comments related to the strategy throughout the years. It was certainly not easy to comprehend how the Vietnamese, who were one of the masters of "People's War," could come up with such a fixed defense, territory-centric strategy at the expense of a mobile, population-centric one.

As the years went on, both the KPRA and the VVA realized that closing off a 500-plus kilometer border was no simple task. Even Premier Hun Sen who had come to power in late 1984 disowned the strategy.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, the PRK never totally abandoned the strategy and while the wall and the anti-infantry obstacles were never totally constructed, an enduring legacy of the K-5 Belt strategy still had a crucial role to play in the operations of the mobile divisions. After the VVA raided the border camps in 1984 and 1985, it began its gradual withdrawal to the rear while the KPRA mobile divisions assumed positions to the front (from west to east): the 4th Division in Samlot, the 196th Division in Pailin, the 6th Division in Malai, the 179th Division in Banteay Meanchey, the 286th Division in Ouddar Meanchey, and a sizeable number of territorial units also had to leave their provinces to move to the border to execute this flawed strategy.

### Impacts of the Territory-centric Strategy on the KPRA Mobile Divisions

From the start, the K-5 Belt strategy had many problems. First of all, the laborers who were recruited for the construction project were understandably not content with the hardship. Second, deploying the mobile divisions and territorial units far away from the population centers for an extended period of time had a negative effect on the morale of the troops. Third, this strategy effectively pushed all units into isolated positions, and firepower became the only thing that prevented the rebels from overrunning the positions. Finally, the KPRA had to adhere to a “six-month stockpile” logistics system because the positions were too distant and difficult to reach to maintain continuous re-supply.<sup>52</sup>

The KPRA’s mobile divisions were born out of the all-Cambodian battalions that came from Long Giao province with the Vietnamese forces in 1979. Initially, each province, except Phnom Penh and Kampong Cham, was allocated one battalion. But instead of becoming *the* genesis battalion that gave birth to the territorial troops in each province, some battalions combined to create brigades and then divisions. In the beginning, there were four mobile divisions: the 4th, the 179th, the 196th, and the 286th. After the dry season offensive of 1984-85, a new division, the 6th Division was created. These five divisions play the critical role and are the focus of the next chapter. Many other divisions that the KPRA created after 1989 will not be discussed here as they did not have the extensive battlefield activities as the former five divisions.

To the northwest of Battambang-Banteay Meanchey was the frontier town of Pailin, which was well known for its gemstone quarry. The 196th Division, formally activated on 19 June 1981, defended this town. The division had three maneuver regiments and nine functional battalions. To the south of Pailin was another frontier

town, Samlot, which was the site of the 1968 farmer's rebellion. This area was under the control of the 4th Division. Just like the 196th Division, the 4th Division had three maneuver regiments and nine functional battalions.

In 1987, as the VVA withdrew, the 4th Division was pushed into Samlot. Its 14th Regiment was detached and augmented to become the 94th Brigade. This brigade defended its position in the Moug Roessey district and guarded the border between Pursat province and Battambang province. Its 13th Regiment stayed in Pursat. So when the 4th Division was pushed to Samlot, it had only one maneuver regiment (the 15th Regiment), a headquarters unit, as well as the nine functional battalions. In short, the 4th Division (including its former regiments) arrayed its forces to cover the Cambodian-Thai border from Pursat to Samlot in Battambang.

Pailin and Samlot were almost like twin-cities. If one traveled from the Battambang provincial capital via Route 10 through Ratanak Mondul district, the road came to a fork at Treng where the northern route would lead to Pailin and the southern route would lead to Samlot. Therefore, the 196th Division and the 4th Division had to support each other. Should either one fail or should the Khmer Rouge capture the crossroad at Ratanak Mondul district and Treng, either or both of these units would be isolated and risk annihilation.

The third division stationed in Battambang-Banteay Meanchey was the 179th Division. This division arrayed its forces to protect the eastern flank of Banteay Meanchey province when the province was inaugurated in 1988. Lastly, to the east, the

province of Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey had only one division but it was a heavy, mechanized division (Map 3).

The main mission of the 286th Division was to defend the Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey province as well as its border with Thailand. Due to the geography that divided the province into two parts and because the PMC was able to maintain security in the areas surrounding the provincial capital, the 286th Division was pushed north past the Kulen Mountains. The area was the Ouddar Meanchey part of the province with flat terrain, making it relatively easy for armor to move around. One of its regiments, the 44th Regiment, had four battalions that were raised from the Prey Veng PMC.

Due to the importance of the Samraong and Chong Kal district, the 286th Division was not deployed to protect the border. It stayed behind to protect the two districts. MR4 also dispatched the 43rd Regiment to help shore up the defense of the two districts. Perhaps still true to its K-5 belt strategy, MR4 also deployed the 41st Regiment to defend the isolated village of Anlong Veng. The 41st Regiment was completely isolated.

In 1985, after the 14-Camps Campaign, as the VVA prepared to move away from the frontline, the KPRA established another new unit, the 6th Division. The 6th Division had an interesting history. Deployed to the remote area called Malai, it was perhaps the most isolated unit of all the divisions. Yet, its situation was representative of all the divisions. If travelling by foot from the nearest population center to the division headquarters, the journey took at least one week and the road was practically unusable during the rainy season.<sup>53</sup> A Khmer Rouge ambush along this road was a near certainty.

The division had the highest commander casualty rate of all the divisions. The area was infested with malaria and the water source had a high calcium concentration which had severe adverse effects on the soldiers' health.<sup>54</sup>

Apart from enemy action, disease and sanitation problems ranked second for the casualties of the 6th Division. The division was stationed at the junction of the Cambodian-Thai border and the border between Battambang and Banteay Meanchey province, filling the gap between the 196th Division, Battambang PMC, and the 179th Division. In the "stockpile" concept of logistics, during the entire dry season period, the transportation unit would struggle to supply the division for six months, covering the entire rainy season. All other units encountered similar problems.

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<sup>1</sup> Nhem, *The Khmer Rouge*.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>3</sup> Huy Vannak and Wynne Cougill, *The Khmer Rouge Division 703: From Victory to Self-Destruction* (Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Documentation Center of Cambodia, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> "Statistics of total forces," File: L00065, DC-Cam.

<sup>5</sup> The total number of regional troops and militias was not clear because the documents are incomplete. Moreover, after sensing an impending purge, some units in the East Zone were upgraded beyond the standard allowance and we could not trace the correct number. Only the total number of the troops under Central was clear.

<sup>6</sup> While the Khmer Rouge divisions might have had a substantially smaller number of troops than those of other factions, all of those were maneuver units, while the local population carried out logistics and sustainment support operations. The units of the other factions, however, included the support elements (logistics and sustainment) in their order of battle.

<sup>7</sup> Officially, the Khmer Rouge army was known as the National Army of Democratic Kampuchea, a symbol of Democratic Kampuchea who still held a seat at the UN. Yet, the soldiers in the field shied away from using this name which was associated with the murderous period between 1975 and 1979. Surprisingly, this army functioned

without official name or rank. Their hatred of the Vietnamese transcended these basic ancillaries.

<sup>8</sup> Nem Sowath, *Civil War Termination and the Source of Total Peace in Cambodia: Win-Win Policy of Samdech Techo Hun Sen in International Context* (Phnom Penh: Reahoo, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> “Front” in the Socialist military organization was the largest formation. It was equivalent to the German and American “Army Groups” during World War II which had approximately between one and one and a half million troops. Because the Khmer Rouge had inflated the notional strength of their unit, a Front was roughly equal only to a corps.

<sup>10</sup> វិទ្យាស្ថានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រយោធា [Institute of Military History]. *ប្រវត្តិយោធា ខេត្តបាត់ដំបង* [History of Battambang Provincial Military Command]. ភ្នំពេញ, កម្ពុជា: អគ្គនាយកដ្ឋាននយោបាយ និងកិច្ចការបរទេស, ក្រសួងការពារជាតិ, ឆ្នាំ ២០១២. [Phnom Penh, Cambodia: General Department of Policy and Foreign Affairs, Ministry of National Defense, 2012].

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>12</sup> វិទ្យាស្ថានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រយោធា [Institute of Military History]. *ប្រវត្តិយោធា ខេត្តកំពង់ធំ* [History of Kampong Thom Provincial Military Command]. ភ្នំពេញ, កម្ពុជា: អគ្គនាយកដ្ឋាននយោបាយនិងកិច្ចការបរទេស, ក្រសួងការពារជាតិ, ឆ្នាំ ២០១២. [Phnom Penh, Cambodia: General Department of Policy and Foreign Affairs, Ministry of National Defense, 2012].

<sup>13</sup> A quote by a former high-ranking ANKI commander. See Conboy, *The Cambodian Wars*, 274.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>15</sup> វិទ្យាស្ថានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រយោធា [Institute of Military History]. *ប្រវត្តិយោធាខេត្ត បន្ទាយមានជ័យ* [History of Banteay Meanchey Provincial Military Command]. ភ្នំពេញ, កម្ពុជា: អគ្គនាយកដ្ឋាននយោបាយនិងកិច្ចការបរទេស, ក្រសួងការពារជាតិ, ឆ្នាំ ២០១២. [Phnom Penh, Cambodia: General Department of Policy and Foreign Affairs, Ministry of National Defense, 2012].

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* Section: KPRLF’s order of battle.

<sup>17</sup> Conboy, *The Cambodian Wars*, 245.

<sup>18</sup> Within the seven OMZs, a Special OMZ, was created and was put under the control of the general staff of the KPRLF. This OMZ had two regiments, regiment 801 and 806. Special regiment 801 was perhaps the most courageous of all and they had attacked and occupied many KPRA’s positions in the early phase of the operations in

1989. The greatest irony of this was that this unit originated from a former Khmer Rouge unit which perhaps explained its battle prowess. In total, the KPNLAF had seven OMZs.

<sup>19</sup> Nhek, *A Luck in Thousand Dangers*. In fact, the Prince had already met with comrade Hun Sen, the PRK's premier in December that year. The meeting marked the first time the two major players had met each other, to the chagrin of other two factions (the Khmer Rouge and the KPNLF) who were absent from the meeting. Ultimately, the Sponsors had pressured the Prince to negotiate as a group instead, perhaps as they wanted to bring the Khmer Rouge's military might to bear.

<sup>20</sup> Conboy, *The Cambodian Wars*.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 205-11.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.

<sup>23</sup> This thesis will use the term VVA throughout, even though as a matter of fact, all these units were provided by the PAVN's military regions.

<sup>24</sup> Conboy claimed it was the size of a brigade but the Vietnamese sources and the KPRA's sources suggested it was division-size. See វិទ្យាស្ថានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រយោធា [Institute of Military History]. *ប្រវត្តិយោធាភូមិភាគ ៤* [History of Military Region 4]. ភ្នំពេញ, កម្ពុជា: អគ្គនាយកដ្ឋាននយោបាយនិងកិច្ចការបរទេស, ក្រសួងការពារជាតិ, ឆ្នាំ ២០១៣. [Phnom Penh, Cambodia: General Department of Policy and Foreign Affairs, Ministry of National Defense, 2013]. The official history of MR5 also corroborated this view.

<sup>25</sup> Other provinces in the eastern part of the country also received some of these units. On this issue, see a Vietnamese source: Nguyễn Văn Hồng (colonel), *Cuộc chiến tranh bắt buộc* [The Obligated War].

<sup>26</sup> The estimate is that of a former deputy chief of staff of the KPRA. See វិទ្យាស្ថានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រយោធា [Institute of Military History]. *ប្រវត្តិយោធាភូមិភាគ ៥* [History of Military Region 5]. ភ្នំពេញ, កម្ពុជា: អគ្គនាយកដ្ឋាននយោបាយនិងកិច្ចការបរទេស, ក្រសួង ការពារ ជាតិ, ឆ្នាំ ២០១៣. [Phnom Penh, Cambodia: General Department of Policy and Foreign Affairs, Ministry of National Defense, 2013]. Section: Order of the General Staff headquarter. The number roughly corresponds to the estimate of western scholars. Westad and Quinn-Judge, for example, put the number of regular troops at 100,000 and the militias at 200,000, both numbers are for 1989. See Westad, Odd Arne; and Sophie Quinn-Judge, ed. *The Third Indochina War: Conflict between China, Vietnam, and Cambodia, 1972-79* (New Yor, NY: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>27</sup> See Editorial staffs. "10-year Achievements Showed Our KPRA's Commitments to the Party, the Motherland, and the People which is Fitting to be the

Cutting Edge Instrument Which Protects the Power of the Party, the Power of the Administration, and the Power of the People,” *People’s Army*, 25 January 1989, 4.

<sup>28</sup> វិទ្យាស្ថានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រស្រុកយោធា [Institute of Military History]. *ប្រវត្តិយោធា ខេត្ត សៀមរាប* [History of Siem Reap Provincial Military Command].

<sup>29</sup> វិទ្យាស្ថានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រស្រុកយោធា [Institute of Military History]. *ប្រវត្តិយោធាខេត្ត បាត់ដំបង* [History of Battambang Provincial Military Command], 10.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, Section: Khmer Rouge Order of Battle.

<sup>31</sup> វិទ្យាស្ថានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រស្រុកយោធា [Institute of Military History]. *ប្រវត្តិយោធាខេត្ត បន្ទាយមានជ័យ* [History of Banteay Meanchey Provincial Military Command], 2.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>33</sup> វិទ្យាស្ថានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រស្រុកយោធា [Institute of Military History]. *ប្រវត្តិយោធាខេត្ត កំពង់ធំ* [History of Kampong Thom Provincial Military Command], 12.

<sup>34</sup> វិទ្យាស្ថានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រស្រុកយោធា [Institute of Military History]. *ប្រវត្តិយោធាខេត្ត កំពង់ធំ* [History of Kampong Thom Provincial Military Command], 14.

<sup>35</sup> Only three of the seven were indigenous to Kampong Thom: the 616th division, the 802nd division, and the 607th division. The 417th division operated on the border of Kampong Thom, Kampong Cham, and Kratie. The 920th division operated between this province and Kampong Cham and the 980th division operated in the area near Siem Reap’s southern border. The 785th division, in particular, was a transportation/special force division with forces stationed in Kampong Cham, Kampong Thom, and Siem Reap. According to the former chief of staff of Siem Reap PMC, this unit was primarily a logistics unit but was also used to spearhead the attack in places where the normal units could not get through.

<sup>36</sup> វិទ្យាស្ថានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រស្រុកយោធា [Institute of Military History]. *ប្រវត្តិយោធាខេត្ត កំពង់ធំ* [History of Kampong Thom Provincial Military Command].

<sup>37</sup> វិទ្យាស្ថានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រស្រុកយោធា [Institute of Military History]. *ប្រវត្តិយោធាភូមិភាគ ៤* [History of Military Region 4], Section: Introduction – History of Region 4.

<sup>38</sup> Technically, the general staff headquarter controlled the divisions, but the MR could coordinate with the divisions as required

<sup>39</sup> វិទ្យាស្ថានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រស្រុកយោធា [Institute of Military History]. *ប្រវត្តិយោធាភូមិភាគ ៤* [History of Military Region 4].

<sup>40</sup> Nguyễn Văn Hồng (colonel), *Cuộc chiến tranh bắt buộc* [The Obligated War].

<sup>41</sup> There has been no official publication of the Vietnamese military strategy in Cambodia, especially one that divides it in phases. An approximate general political strategy can be found in Slocomb, *The People's Republic of Kampuchea*. For a general description of the Vietnamese military strategy in Cambodia, see Nguyễn Văn Hồng (colonel), *Cuộc chiến tranh bắt buộc* [The Obligated War].

<sup>42</sup> John McBeth, “Raid into Thailand: The Thai Military Recaptures a Strategically Important Hill, 12 Days after it was Occupied by Vietnamese Forces,” *Far Eastern Economic Review* (19 April 1984).

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. In the same volume, see Paul Quinn-Judge, “Peking’s Tit For Tat: China Strikes out at Vietnam in Retaliation for an Incursion into Thailand.”

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. Section “Intelligence,” 1.

<sup>45</sup> វិទ្យាស្ថានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រយោធា [Institute of Military History]. *ប្រវត្តិកងពលរលម ២* [History of the 2nd Infantry Division]. ភ្នំពេញ, កម្ពុជា៖ អគ្គនាយកដ្ឋាននយោបាយ និងកិច្ចការ បរទេស, ក្រសួងការពារជាតិ, ឆ្នាំ ២០១៣. [Phnom Penh, Cambodia: General Department of Policy and Foreign Affairs, Ministry of National Defense, 2013].

<sup>46</sup> See Paul Quinn-Judge. “Christmas Assault: Hanoi Launches an Early Dry-Season Offensive along the Thai-Cambodian Border but Worries about Arkhipov’s Peking Visit.” *Far Eastern Economic Review* (1 January 1985).

<sup>47</sup> John McBeth and Paul Quinn-Judge, “Vietnamese Forces Overrun a Key Guerrilla Headquarters: The Fall of Ampil,” *Far Eastern Economic Review* (7 January 1985).

<sup>48</sup> “K-5” is a transliteration from the Khmer version of the abbreviation which use the first Khmer alphabet “k’orr” and the number 5. There are conflicting accounts as to the origin of this strategy. One account claims that K-5 came from five Khmer words, all started with the “k’orr” alphabets, which can be tentatively translated as: Construction Work for the Defense of Cambodia Homeland. Another account claims that the number 5 is both about the number of the alphabet “k’orr” in the abbreviation as well as the fact that it was a five-year plan.

<sup>49</sup> Régaud, *Cambodge dans la Tourmente*.

<sup>50</sup> Margaret Slocomb, *The People's Republic of Kampuchea, 1979-1989: The Revolution after Pol Pot* (Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2004).

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>52</sup> Because most positions along the border were isolated, the KPRA was not able to maintain continuous resupply. During the rainy season, the roads from the populated areas to the border outposts were completely cut off. To try to deal with this problem, the KPRA had to stockpile food, ammunitions, and other necessities at the divisional and regimental headquarters which were located in a series of outposts along the Cambodian-Thai border. This stockpile usually occupied the transportation corps for the entire dry season and the divisions and regiments had to rely on the stockpile for the entire rainy season.

<sup>53</sup> វិទ្យាស្ថានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រយោធា [Institute of Military History]. *ប្រវត្តិកងពលលេខ ១១* [History of the 11th Brigade]. ភ្នំពេញ, កម្ពុជា: អគ្គនាយកដ្ឋាននយោបាយនិងកិច្ចការបរទេស, ក្រសួងការពារជាតិ, ឆ្នាំ ២០១៣. [Phnom Penh, Cambodia: General Department of Policy and Foreign Affairs, Ministry of National Defense, 2013].

<sup>54</sup> វិទ្យាស្ថានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រយោធា [Institute of Military History]. *ប្រវត្តិយោធាភូមិភាគ ៥* [History of Military Region 5], 12.

CHAPTER 4  
THE FINAL OFFENSIVE

Prelude to the 1989 CGDK Combined Offensive

To alleviate international pressure, as well as boasting the PRK's progress, the ministers of foreign affairs from Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam met in 1982 to announce the beginning of the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia. Vietnam was true to its promise and in July 1982, a small contingent left Cambodia.<sup>1</sup> During the following five years, the VVA continued to withdraw in three increments (June 1984, May 1985, and May 1986) although these withdrawals only included small elements or units that were deployed in strategically insignificant areas.

On 28 July 1986, Mikhail Gorbachev made a historic speech at Vladivostok, in which he announced an overall reduction of Soviet troops in Mongolia, along the border with China, in Southeast Asia, and of the Warsaw Pact.<sup>2</sup> One significant point in the Vladivostok speech was the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, which he said could be used as the model for the withdrawal of the VVA from Cambodia. In November 1987, the VVA began the largest withdrawal to date. Two divisions and other units, totaling 20,000 men bid farewell in their last parade in Phnom Penh and the PRK invited the international press corps to witness the event.

This first, large-scale withdrawal in 1987 was aimed at opening the way for two of the most important parties to meet. On 2 December 1987, Premier Hun Sen met with Prince Sihanouk at Fère-en-Tardenois, France. The meeting was important for the PRK because, for the first time, Prince Sihanouk, the symbol of Cambodian legitimacy and

sovereignty, did not preclude the PRK from negotiation.<sup>3</sup> The last obstacle for the Prince's full acquiescence was the Vietnamese presence in Cambodia.

On 15 May 1989, Gorbachev made the first official visit by a Soviet leader to Beijing since 1959, and during this meeting, both Gorbachev and Deng Xiaoping agreed that there should be a political solution to the Cambodian conflict.<sup>4</sup> On that very day, the Soviet began its large scale withdrawal from Afghanistan. A few days later, Hanoi announced the second large-scale withdrawal of troops from Cambodia.<sup>5</sup> On 26 September 1989, all VVA's Front headquarters left Cambodia. Less than a week after the last VVA unit left Cambodia, the CGDK launched a combined offensive on all fronts.

### The 1989 CGDK Combined Offensive

#### Battambang Province: Easy Picking, Hard Swallowing

The 196th Division was garrisoned in the town of Pailin. Unlike the positions of 4th and 6th Divisions, which were in the middle of the jungle, Pailin was an old town. The gemstone quarry, perhaps the largest in Cambodia, had made this frontier village a boom town ever since the French colonial era. The 196th Division put its headquarters in a towering three-story house in the middle of the town. The regiments and the independent brigades put their outposts in fortified positions around the town and on surrounding high ground. The division had tanks, armored personnel carriers, heavy troop carriers (which could tow heavy artillery), anti-aircraft guns, and heavy artillery.

However, there were several reasons which combined to weaken the 196th Division. First of all, to fill the gaps after the VVA left, the division detached one regiment to create the 92nd Brigade and another one to create the 95th Brigade. Thus,

when these brigades were created, Pailin had only one regiment remaining, and even though more troops were supposed to augment the division to replace the other two detached regiments, there was not enough time to build a cohesive unit. Moreover, Pailin was too far from the 92nd and 95th Brigades to be able to intervene to help each other in difficult times.

The second weakness related to the exploitation of the gemstones. As soon as the KPRA controlled the area, private companies (established after the PRK reformed its economy in 1987) were already lined up for a piece of the potential profit. The KPRA allowed private companies to exploit the resources. In terms of operational security this provided opportunities for the Khmer Rouge to observe and report on the military situation in the town.

The third problem was attrition due to the elements, disease, and enemy action. To travel from the Battambang provincial capital to Pailin required large trucks that could traverse the mine-laden road. If they survived the landmines, then they had to meet the Khmer Rouge ambushes. Moreover, any casualties would have to be evacuated to the provincial capital. In 1989, morale was quite low at the front and many soldiers who were able to get to the rear never returned. When the Khmer Rouge stepped up its attacks in September 1989, the KPRA had to send units from MR2 and the Battambang PMC to reinforce the positions.<sup>6</sup>

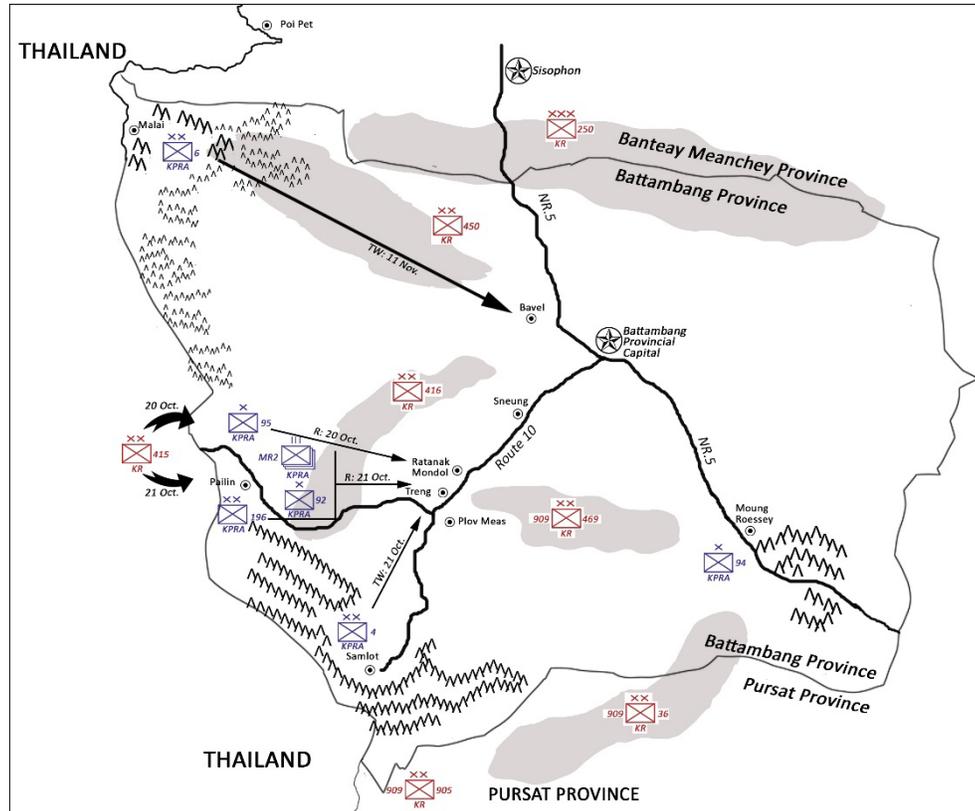


Figure 3. Operations in Battambang Province (1989)

Source: Created by author. Refer to APPENDIX C Map Legend for explanations of the symbols.

Observing these weaknesses, the Khmer Rouge did not launch a frontal attack on Pailin, but it decided to destroy the KPRIA's 196th Division by attrition. The first objective was to suppress and isolate the 196th Division and the surrounding brigades with persistent artillery and mortar fire so that they could not mobilize to help relieve each other. Secondly, the Khmer Rouge pushed the ambushes to the limit by putting maximum effort at interdicting any effort by the KPRIA to send relief units from the

provincial capital. Route 10 was interdicted twenty four hours a day and seven days a week.<sup>7</sup>

The first wave of Khmer Rouge attacks centered on the KPRA's 95th Brigade which was stationed to the northwest of Pailin. Constant shelling further degraded the KPRA's already low morale.<sup>8</sup> On 20 October 1989, a regiment of Khmer Rouge special forces dislodged the 95th Brigade from all the mountains and hills which were devoid of almost all vegetation due to constant shelling. As the 95th Brigade was in retreat, it left the rear of the 196th Division wide open.

While some elements of Khmer Rouge's 415th Division were still not able to advance from the front because the KPRA's 196th Division position was strongly fortified, the Khmer Rouge's 17th Special Forces Regiment penetrated from the rear (which was left open by the retreat of the KPRA's 95th Brigade). On the morning of 21 October, the Khmer Rouge's 17th Regiment overran the artillery positions of the KPRA's 196th Division and pushed to the divisional headquarters. Twenty six days after the last Vietnamese units left Cambodia, Pailin fell.<sup>9</sup>

The rout of the KPRA's 196th Division and the 95th Brigade was total, isolating the 92nd Brigade who also saw no point in staying in its threatened position. The reinforcement sent to reinforce from MR2 and Battambang made matters worse with a disorderly retreat to Ratanak Mondul district, a dozen kilometers to the east. These units also left behind all of their heavy equipment as well as warehouses full of ammunition of all types.

In a video taken by the Khmer Rouge after they captured the town<sup>10</sup> the following equipment could be counted: three T-54 tanks, three bulldozers, ten heavy trucks, ten 120mm “D30” artillery pieces, two 85mm artillery pieces, four 37mm anti-aircraft guns with double-barrels variants (which can be used to defend against infantry and lightly armored vehicles), two 130mm towed artillery pieces, a large number of heavy machine guns, recoilless guns, RPGs, light machine guns, and a warehouse full of ammunition. In line with the KPRA’s logistics concept, these resources were expected to support one full division for an entire rainy season.

In the same video, during the siege, when the 196th Division was about to collapse, the KPRA had sent at least two tanks to relieve the besieged troops.<sup>11</sup> One of the tanks made it to the outskirts of Pailin, but was immobilized and put out of action. The second tank hit a mine which ripped out its right side and the explosion must have been so devastating that its right track was scattered more than ten meters from the tank.

When the 196th Division collapsed, the PRK was shocked and finally revised its strategy. According to some accounts, the PRK shifted its strategy from defending the border to defending the population centers.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, the 4th Division received an emergency telegram from the Central Committee (which, in the socialist system, is senior to the the general staff headquarters) on the night of 21 October to withdraw in no more than twenty four hours to Treng (Ratanak Mondul district), west of Battambang, which commanded the road junction leading to both Pailin and Samlot.<sup>13</sup> The telegram stressed that the division must transport all heavy equipment if they could, but must destroy on site any equipment they could not bring with them.

On 22 October, the Khmer Rouge marched into Samlot unopposed, although western media wrongly reported, based on Khmer Rouge propaganda, that they had fought to seize Samlot from the KPRA's 4th Division just like what they did to the 196th Division in Pailin.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, the KPRA's 6th division withdrew to consolidate its forces in Bavel district, north of Battambang provincial capital on 11 November. "The general staff said that we must withdraw to Bavel and even then they did not think we would be able to hold out and they were prepared to lose Bavel as well, but we fought to defend our position successfully," the former commander of the 6th Division claimed.<sup>15</sup>

The 4th Division defended Treng village in the district of Ratanak Mondul with difficulties, but it held on.<sup>16</sup> Both sides pushed back and forth to try to capture more territories but neither succeeded. The Khmer Rouge tried to use its population network to attack the KPRA's 4th Division and the reinforcements at Ratanak Mondul district, but as the Khmer Rouge moved towards the provincial capital, its network weakened. The Khmer Rouge's attempt to interdict and cut the road between Ratanak Mondul and the provincial capital also did not succeed. On the other hand, the KPRA also tried to counterattack to try to re-capture Pailin, despite the revised strategy. However, it made little headway as the Khmer Rouge put up a staunch resistance. Eventually, the front stabilized around Treng in Ratanak Mondul district. The greatest irony from this episode was that the KPRA actually created the Pailin PMC, which remained a military command that did not control any territory until the government finally re-captured Pailin in 1996.

## Banteay Meanchey: The Locals Who Dared Say No to the Central

Banteay Meanchey province was in the eastern part of the former Battambang-Banteay Meanchey province. The Sisophon district became the capital of the new province. The geography in this region was quite complicated, defensive-wise. Major district towns lined up almost like a straight line from north (the Cambodian-Thai border) to south (the interior): Banteay Chhmar, Tmar Pouk, Treas, Svay Chek, Klaeng Por, M'kak, and the provincial capital Sisophon. Such geography posed unique defensive problem because of the long line of communication that the CGDK could cut into pieces.

Banteay Meanchey was the hub of the KPRLF's activities. It controlled many camps along the border in this area and its headquarters was located right at the border crossing. The KPRLF, not surprisingly, committed the bulk of its forces in the province: OMZ2, OMZ3, OMZ5, OMZ6, OMZ7, and the 801st Special Regiment (later upgraded to become 1st Brigade) of the Special OMZ.<sup>17</sup> In other words, the KPRLF committed a total force of an equivalent of two KPRA divisions. It also received reinforcement from ANKI 2nd, 7th, and 11th Brigades as well as the 2nd Division.<sup>18</sup>

The KPRA, on the other hand, had the 179th Division which divided its forces between the defense of the areas around Svay Chek and Phnom Srok. It also received reinforcements from MR2 (one regiment each from Prey Veng, Kampong Cham, and Svay Rieng), the newly established 42nd Regiment of MR4, 69th Armor Regiment (MR4), 71st Regiment (MR4), and sixteen local battalions (after six of the original twenty two were transferred to the 286th Division, the 179th Division and the 42nd Regiment).<sup>19</sup>

The operations in Banteay Meanchey can be divided into two stages. The first stage started with the CGDK offensive and lasted until the capture of the Svay Chek district. This phase was from September to December 1989. The operations transitioned to phase 2 when the CGDK's attack stalled after the capture of Svay Chek and after its debacle at Phnom Srok. Phase 2 was the KPRA's counterattack.

#### Phase 1: The KPNLF Onslaught

The operational history in Banteay Meanchey was one of CGDK's rapid gains with few major force-on-force engagements. The CGDK launched a two-pronged attack on Banteay Meanchey, one axis advancing from Thmar Pouk to Sisophon and the second axis attacking from the Phnom Srok area. While the KPRA arguably had more soldiers, as late as 1989, it still adhered to the border defense strategy where it tried to defend as much territory as possible. As a result, most outposts became undermanned and isolated. To compensate, the KPRA relied on its T-54 tanks which it would dispatch to any outpost that was threatened.<sup>20</sup>

According to Conboy, by the time the KPNLF initiated its offensive, however, it had received modern anti-tank weapons from Singapore.<sup>21</sup> The two main systems were the Swedish-designed 84mm "Carl Gustav" recoilless rifles and the German-designed 67mm Ambrust "Crossbow" which were the "one-shot, one-kill" anti-tank weapons of the time, and for which Singapore had purchased the production license. Singapore, Conboy claimed, had skirted the restrictions placed by the countries of origin not to export the weapons to a third country currently embroiled in conflict.<sup>22</sup>

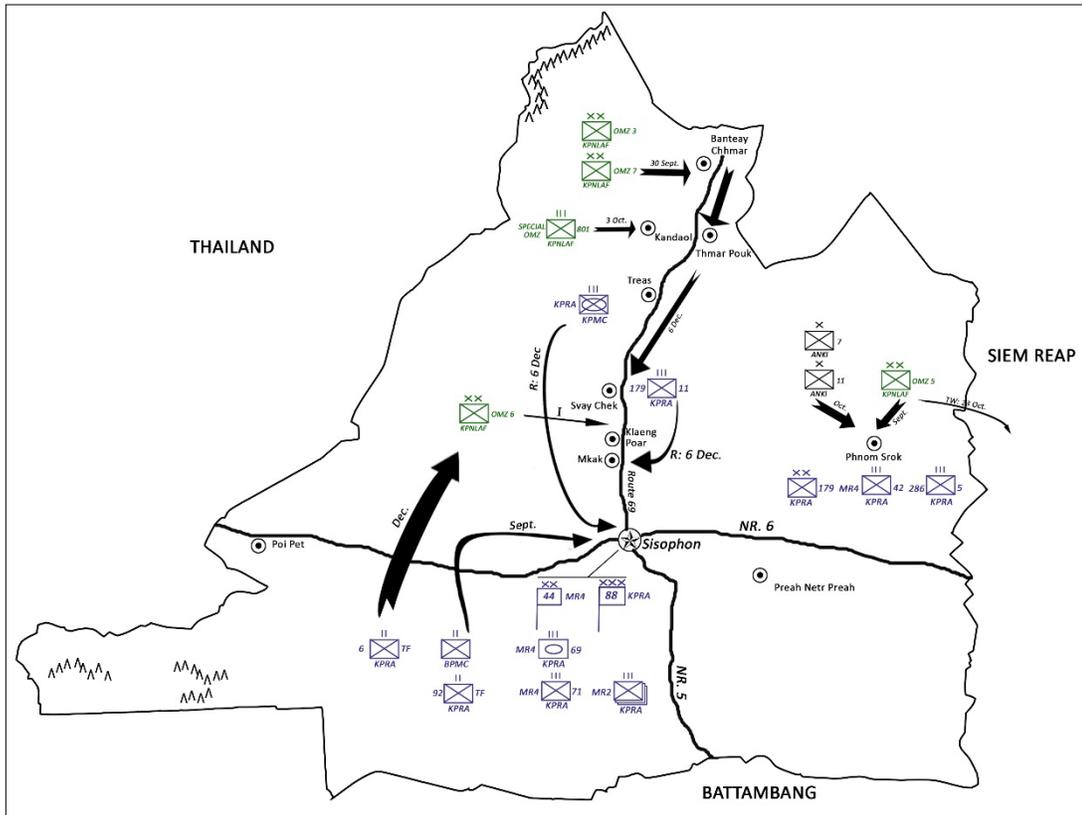


Figure 4. Operations in Banteay Meanchey Province, Phase 1 (1989)

Source: Created by author. Refer to APPENDIX C Map Legend for explanations of the symbols.

Phase 1, First Axis: Sway Chek

Two days after the last Vietnamese units left Cambodia, the KPNLF started its offensive by moving the forward headquarters deeper into the province. On 30 September, OMZ3 and OMZ7 moved along the first axis of advance to attack and occupy Banteay Chhmar village.<sup>23</sup> The KPRAs defenders deserted.

Not intending to lose the village, the KPRA forward headquarters in Banteay Meanchey predictably dispatched three T-54 tanks from Tmar Pouk district (south of Banteay Chhmar) to reinforce the position. In the Cambodian civil war, the CGDK fighters usually ran away when they saw the tanks, but not that day. According to Conboy, the first tank fell victim to the Carl Gustav anti-tank recoilless rifle which blew off the tank turret and exploded the magazine inside.<sup>24</sup> The second tank hit a mine, which destroyed its track, immobilizing it. The crews deserted. The third tank was wedged in a large hole along the road and the crew also deserted. As the KPNLAF moved into Thmar Pouk, the district town was already deserted.

With CIA support, the KPNLAF was also equipped with radio interception gear and with that, it learned that the KPRA's units at Kandaol, yet another district town to the south of Thmar Pouk, were panicking.<sup>25</sup> The position was not well fortified because it was primarily a fire base. The KPNLAF's 801st Special Regiment, which was one of the elite units, attacked the position and on 3 October, it entered the town unopposed. Because of this success, the 801st Special Regiment was augmented with new recruits to become the 1st Brigade and the commander was promoted to brigadier general.<sup>26</sup>

The KPNLAF then used Kondaol as their own fire base and started constant shelling on its next big prize, the district town of Svay Chek. But, as the KPNLAF moved south, the towns were bigger and the defenses denser and better fortified. Svay Chek proved to be a tougher nut to crack. As October passed into November, Svay Chek still held strong even though the morale of the troops inside the bunkers had already hit rock

bottom.<sup>27</sup> OMZ3 and OMZ7 kept pressuring from the northwest while OMZ6 interdicted the road between Sisophon and Svay Chek in order to isolate the latter.

For at least three weeks, the KPNLAF shelled Svay Chek, the position of the 11th Regiment, a vanguard unit of the KPRA's 179th Division, with perhaps as many as 1,000 rounds per day on average.<sup>28</sup> November passed into December and the fortified position still held despite the low morale. But then, on 6 December, one fateful round from a 76.2 mm field gun fell on and destroyed the regimental command bunker and killed everyone in it.<sup>29</sup> The soldiers of the KPRA's 11th Regiment then hastily abandoned the position.

On 7 December, the KPNLAF moved into Svay Chek. The loss of Svay Chek effectively isolated Treas, where many units were routed without a single shot being fired. One of these included a whole reinforcement battalion from the KPRA's Kandal PMC on a morale-building mission. The KPNLAF commandos who were interdicting Route 69 from Svay Chek to Sisophon captured the political commander of the Kandal PMC and sent him to the border.<sup>30</sup> Three KPRA's tanks were also captured by the KPNLAF. The political officer from the Banteay Meanchey PMC tried to rally the troops using loudspeakers mounted on a BTR-60 armored personnel carrier. But he was fired upon by his own routing troops, although no one was injured from the incident.<sup>31</sup>

#### Phase 1, Second Axis: Phnom Srok

While the CGDK's first axis achieved significant successes, the second axis was a story of gross tactical failure. The risk inherent in the KPNLAF's operations was that they could be outflanked by the KPRA from both the east and the west of the Thmar Pouk - Sisophon axis of advance. To the east, the risk was somewhat mitigated by the

ANKI and OMZ5 who jointly attacked in the Phnom Srok and Preah Netr Preah areas. To the west, the KPNLF could reasonably expect the Khmer Rouge to pin down most of Battambang PMC's troops and the KPRA's mobile divisions in the province. As the war progressed, both risks increased.

In September 1989, the regiments of the KPRA's 179th Division and another three provincial battalions defended Phnom Srok. While the KPNLAF was in charge of the battlefield on the west side of Banteay Meanchey, the ANKI and, to a certain extent, the Khmer Rouge, units fought on the east side. As the KPNLAF attacked Banteay Chhmar in late September, the ANKI also attacked Phnom Srok. The ANKI routed the KPRA units in Phnom Srok but the result was such a surprise for the ANKI that they did not attempt to occupy the town and instead set the houses of local officials ablaze as well as looted the local market and then withdrew.<sup>32</sup>

In mid-October, the KPRA mobilized the 42<sup>nd</sup> Regiment (belonging to MR4), which was just upgraded with armor and heavy artillery, from Poipet (west of Banteay Meanchey) to defend the Phnom Srok district. The 5th Regiment of the KPRA's 286th Division in the nearby Ouddar Meanchey also moved in to reinforce the district. The KPRA knew that the ANKI would certainly return for more looting and the rebels might also attempt to occupy the town. The former prepared a trap to lure the ANKI to move in and then surround them.<sup>33</sup> On 21 October 1989, while the KPNLAF was still besieging Svay Chek, the ANKI committed the 7th and 11th Brigades to a second attack on Phnom Srok. But this force was not a Khmer Rouge force, i.e. not a "People's Army." Without a local intelligence network, the two brigades walked right into the trap. Against an enemy

who was surrounded and lacked accurate intelligence, the KPRA's 5th regiment (286th Division) and the 42nd Regiment made short work of the two ANKI brigades.

The attack was carried out like clockwork. The next day, the KPRA broadcasted the story of its success, in which it claimed that it had detained hundreds of prisoners. The KPRA claimed they had put five hundred ANKI soldiers out of action, among which three hundred were taken prisoner and one hundred killed.<sup>34</sup> The majority of the modern Ambrust anti-tank weapons as well as a large number of rockets were also seized during the operation. In just one night, the ANKI lost the majority of its combat power in Banteay Meanchey. It could still attack as small units, but it could no longer engage in large-unit actions. The episode showed how bad tactical choices and a lack of popular support at the local level effectively ended the ANKI's operations prematurely.

At roughly the same time, units of the KPRA's 179th Division and the 42nd Regiment in the vicinity of Phnom Srok started to harass the KPNLAF's OMZ5 which threatened Sisophon from the northeast, but which was now isolated after the defeat of the ANKI brigades.<sup>35</sup> The 42nd Regiment finally pushed OMZ5 out of the area on 23 October.<sup>36</sup> As the KPNLAF's OMZ5 attempted to flee east, it ran into a KPRA's interconnected militias' defensive system made up of three districts of Siem Reap – Ouddar Meanchey province.<sup>37</sup> The militias killed one of OMZ5's regimental commanders, badly degraded the remaining regiments, thus effectively neutralizing OMZ5.<sup>38</sup> In a manner not dissimilar to what happened to the ANKI brigades, the KPNLAF's OMZ5 ceased to exist as a conventional unit.

So ended the first phase of the operations in Banteay Meanchey. The future was bleak for the CGDK. With the two ANKI brigades and OMZ5 out of action, the KPNLAF's eastern flank was wide open despite the gains in the first axis. The KPNLAF could rely on the Khmer Rouge to close that gap, but despite mutual understanding, perhaps the best thing it could hope for was only that the Khmer Rouge did not attack its troops. Direct combat support from the Khmer Rouge was perhaps too much to hope for. The operation now entered its second phase. The transition point occurred when the KPRA made a key operational decision to deal with the CGDK after Svay Chek fell.

#### Phase 2: The KPRA Counter-Offensive - "My home, my war"

On the KPNLAF's side, after the capture of Svay Chek, the general staff wanted to consolidate its gains and push further to Sisophon, thus totally liberating the province. Conboy noted that the commander of the 1st Brigade, however, was concerned that his troops, who had been fighting constantly since March, were exhausted and could not move further. He requested a two-day break, to which the chief of staff reluctantly agreed.<sup>39</sup> The troops returned to the border camps to spend time with their families. Then, Conboy lamented, almost all of them did not return. Worse of all, the communication team intercepted the message from the KPRA headquarters in Sisophon who panicked and would have abandoned the provincial capital had there been another attack. This was how Conboy explained the missed opportunity and the end of the KPNLAF's operations in Banteay Meanchey, which were its major activities in the war.

Conboy's account on this point is puzzling. The 1st Brigade (formerly the 801st Special Regiment), OMZ2, OMZ3, OMZ6, and OMZ7 all participated in the operations



*Source:* Created by author. Refer to APPENDIX C Map Legend for explanations of the symbols.

Former KPRA officers, however, had a different perception as to why the KPNLAF's offensive fell apart. They argued that the KPNLAF functioned based on financial rewards for successful operations (as Conboy would concur, especially the financial incentives provided by their Thai liaison officers). Consequently, the financial gains became more important than the larger political strategy or long term military objectives. When the KPNLAF's fighters captured Svay Chek, they came upon a large pile of abandoned equipment and materiel: three 122mm artillery pieces, two 85mm field guns, one BTR-60 armored personnel carrier, two T-54 tanks (one of which the ANKI 2nd division later claimed), one hundred mortars and light weapons, four Zil transport trucks, one UAZ command jeep, and four thousand cases of ammunitions.<sup>40</sup>

In a raging war, there was no shortage of buyers. In such a war, anyone could be the client as long as they had the cash. The former KPRA officers speculated that the reasons why the men of the 1st Brigade as well as other units did not return was because they were busy trading these war spoils when they took their leave to the border.

On the KPRA's side, there was a very important development. Just like what the KPNLAF had intercepted, after the fall of Svay Chek, the PRK did indeed panic despite the success in Phnom Srok; it lost almost half of the province.<sup>41</sup> With the KPNLAF now staring down from Svay Chek, some sixteen kilometers from Sisophon, the KPRA was in a dire situation. According to some accounts, the PRK Central Committee started to contemplate abandoning the provincial capital, thus surrendering the whole province.<sup>42</sup>

While the advocates of this strategy considered Banteay Meanchey to be a lost cause at that point, the emerging plan was not a defeatist proposition, however. As the story went, the KPRA general staff headquarters began to assess the options and one prominent suggestion was to lure the KPNLF and the FUNCINPEC to move in and establish their headquarters in the provincial capital, which they would have surely done for propaganda purposes. Then, the KPRA would level the city with all the artillery in its arsenal, thus destroying the entire non-communist resistance's leadership.<sup>43</sup> While the idea sounded good, it relied on too many assumptions that would have to hold true for the strategy to work.

The Central Committee was torn between defending the province and abandoning it. As they debated what to do next, the local officials learned about the "lost cause" proposition. In an unprecedented move, the local party officials in the province vehemently opposed any plan to abandon the province and they vowed to defend the province to the bitter end.<sup>44</sup> Perhaps impressed with the determination of the local officials, the Central Committee finally decided to defend the province. The chief of staff came to Sisophon to take command of the operations while the minister of homeland defense maintained supervision and paid numerous visits to the area.<sup>45</sup> MR4, MR2, and the KPRA general staff all deployed their forward headquarters to Sisophon. The KPRA also deployed the newly acquired multiple-rocket launcher system, the dreaded BM-21, to the province.

In the meantime, units from Siem Reap and even those from besieged Battambang province were rushed in to counter the KPNLAF's offensive while units from MR2 and

the local units maintained defensive positions north of Sisophon. While the defense of Sisophon was upgraded significantly, Phnom Srok and Preah Netr Preah were still threatened. The Khmer Rouge became active in phase 2. It was not entirely clear why the Khmer Rouge did not join the attack with OMZ5 and the ANKI brigades in the debacle in October 1989, but ideology might be one of the reasons.

After the ANKI and the KPRLF were suppressed, the Khmer Rouge threw in their forces, led primarily by the 518th and 519th Divisions (each was an equivalent of a KPRA's regiment) in early January 1990. With the KPRLF (or whatever was left of it) still controlling Svay Chek and staring down on Sisophon, the capture of Phnom Srok could potentially wrestle control of the province from the PRK. The KPRA then called upon a regiment from the Siem Reap – Ouddar Meanchey PMC to coordinate with the 5th Regiment of the 286th Division in order to relieve Phnom Srok.

The battlefield was in disarray but the Siem Reap Regiment fought 21 operations in 20 days in January 1990 in order to relieve the units of the 179th Division.<sup>46</sup> According to a former commander of the task force, his unit fought against the Khmer Rouge every day for twenty days. In one of those days, according to the former commander, his unit seized the objective in the morning and transferred it to one of the 179th Division's units. The latter unit then lost it in the afternoon on the same day which prompted the regiment to launch its twenty first attack. In late January, the Khmer Rouge's 912th Division attacked Varin district in Siem Reap, forcing the regiment to withdraw. But it was too late for the Khmer Rouge as the Siem Reap regiment had already achieved what it was ordered to do in Banteay Meanchey.

The destruction of the two ANKI brigades, the neutralization of OMZ5 and the suppression of the Khmer Rouge's 518th and 519th Division began to unravel the CGDK's design on Banteay Meanchey. Compounding this problem were the men of the KPNLAF's 1st Brigade who did not return from the border after the capture of Svay Chek. This left OMZ3 and OMZ7 as the only two units which could function as conventional units, but now they were greatly outnumbered.

During phase 2, a regiment-size task force from the KPRA's 6th Division led by the divisional commander himself, a fresh graduate from the Mikhail Frunze military academy in the Soviet Union, was sent to reinforce Banteay Meanchey. The main objective was to eliminate the KPNLAF units who held the high ground near Sisophon in order to suppress their artillery.<sup>47</sup> After the 6th Division's task force achieved its objective, the forward field headquarters of the KPRA general staff in Sisophon then unleashed its firepower from the dreaded BM-21 "Grad" multiple rocket launcher system which devastated the remaining forces of OMZ3 and OMZ7. A former officer of the general staff claimed that after the war, when queried about what happened, the former KPNLAF officers in the unit admitted that in some places, the BM-21 salvo virtually destroyed a whole battalion.<sup>48</sup>

In February 1990, a KPRA joint task force started to counterattack to destroy KPNLAF's remnants in the province. On 21 February, the KPRA recaptured Svay Chek. At 0930 on the morning of 4 April 1990, a KPRA's joint task force composed of the 9th Regiment (belonging to the 179th Division), a Svay Rieng Regiment, a Kampong Cham Regiment, and MR4's 69th Armor Regiment pushed their mechanized forces into Thmar

Pouk district.<sup>49</sup> Men of the KPNLAF's OMZ2 ran away after a brief firefight, leaving behind hundreds of 80mm mortar shells, mines, and a few Carl Gustav anti-tank recoilless rifles. The KPRA wasted no time in loading them onto their trucks and continued the journey. On the same day, the KPRA soldiers tore down a banner which the KPNLF had put up in Thmar Pouk. The banner read: "Thmar Pouk sub-provincial office."<sup>50</sup> The KPNLF enjoyed having its own capital city for only six months.

Thus ended the best attempt by the CGDK's non-communist forces in the war. While they could manage to occupy parts of the province with their victories in the early phase of the operations, they were more preoccupied with creating a liberated city, with looting, and with amassing the spoils of war, than with the long-term strategy. Conboy lamented that when the CGDK non-communist factions created the sub-province of Thmar Pouk, the KPNLF and the FUNCINPEC had already disagreed about who would be the new governor.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, a lack of popular support and the failure of the CGDK factions to cooperate with each other caused the operations in Banteay Meanchey to fizzle away.

### CGDK's Attack in Kampong Thom Provincial Capital

#### The Political Context

The KPRA's victory over the non-communist resistance in Banteay Meanchey was perhaps its most important achievement. Arguably the KPRA did not grasp that point at the beginning of the operations, but the non-communist armies were the strategic centers of gravity for the CGDK. The defeat of the CGDK's non-communist factions threatened the unity among the CGDK itself. By mid-1990, the non-communist forces

had already lost the majority of their combat power. That reduced any hope of Prince Sihanouk to force a political solution through military means. Fearing the Khmer Rouge's further dominance of the CGDK, Prince Sihanouk agreed to meet with Premier Hun Sen of the PRK in a Japanese-hosted summit in Tokyo in June 1990 without the presence of the other two CGDK factions.<sup>52</sup>

The meeting was not the first time that the factions had come to the negotiating table, however. One can trace the first meeting back to 1987 (although that was a bilateral meeting). Yet, in all of those meetings, nothing concrete was agreed upon. Because military power was not yet tested on the battlefield, no one could expect any faction to agree to anything. Indonesia, in particular, was very active in creating a series of dialogues known as the Jakarta Informal Meetings. However, the Indonesian foreign minister often found himself alone at the meeting as factions boycotted the meeting.

It was a different story in Tokyo. The Tokyo summit was a breakthrough because Premier Hun Sen and Prince Sihanouk agreed to the concept of a UN-sponsored election and the establishment of a supreme body made up of representatives from all conflicting parties who would rule the country in the transition period. At least the PRK knew its unconditional surrender, even if possible at all at that point, was not on the plate anymore.

Prince Sihanouk's action in this case was not surprising, however, given the past history between the Khmer Rouge and the Prince. Also not surprising were the reactions of the Khmer Rouge, the KPNLF, and the countries who sponsored the CGDK. All of them did not want to lose Prince Sihanouk whose change of side would spell the end of

the CGDK. Thus, the Khmer Rouge and the KPNLAF (whose OMZ4 still remained unscathed) needed to carry out a military operation to make a point. Kampong Thom province was the target.

What was interesting was that the ANKI had one of the toughest and locally-based divisions in this area, the 15th Division. Unlike the ANKI units along the Cambodian-Thai border, the 15th Division was at full strength. But in this operation, it remained idle after it had captured some villages on the fringes of Kampong Thom. It seemed that the ANKI's 15th Division adhered to the political stance of the FUNCINPEC and consequently, did not get itself involved with the other two CGDK factions.

### Military Operations

Kampong Thom was a pivotal town at the heart of the country. Firstly, National Road 6 (NR6) ran through the provincial capital. The road then continued to Siem Reap – Ouddar Meanchey, the headquarters of the KPRA's MR4. Secondly, also at Kampong Thom was Route 12, which was the only access to the besieged Preah Vihear province. Should the Khmer Rouge capture the provincial capital, it would be able to cut the line of communication between the capital city and MR4, as well as isolating Preah Vihear province. Kampong Thom itself was more or less isolated; NR6 was the only viable road into the provincial capital and any attempt to attack from Steung Treng or Kratie would require the KPRA to travel off-road into the Khmer Rouge's territories.<sup>53</sup>

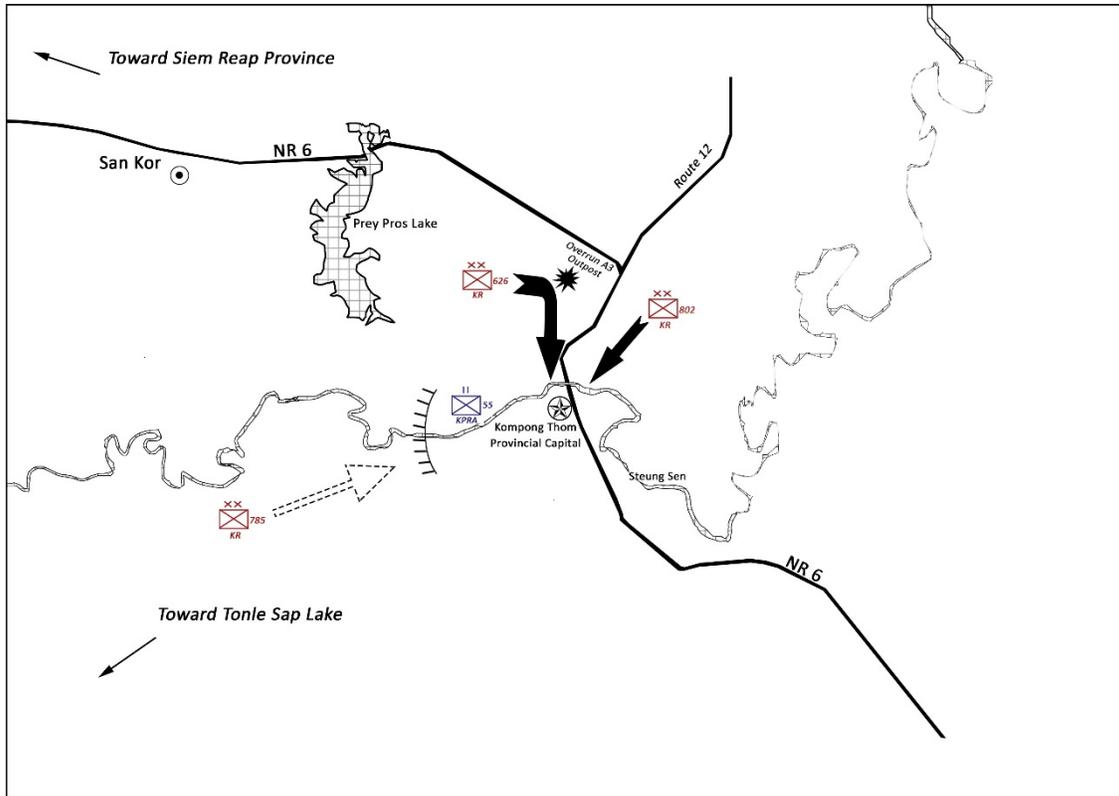


Figure 6. Operations in Kampong Thom Province (1990)

*Source:* Created by author. Refer to APPENDIX C Map Legend for explanations of the symbols.

To the northwest of the province was a district called Staung, which sat on NR6 on the road to Siem Reap – Ouddar Meanchey. Staung was a trouble spot as the CGDK made repeated raids on the district and the PRK frequently lost control. After the Tokyo Summit, the PRK sent a large task force to defend the town: the 5th Division task force (from Preah Vihear), a naval infantry battalion, the 9th Division task force (a unit composed of cadets), the 7th division task force, MR4 task force, and a task force from MR2.<sup>54</sup> Some of Kampong Thom provincial battalions also participated in the defense of

Staung. The KPRA general staff headquarters issued a clear order: any lost territory must be swiftly recaptured.<sup>55</sup>

To make sure all these distinct units could work together as a team, the Ministry of Homeland Defense assigned the chief of the political directorate from Phnom Penh to oversee the operations. However, the new commander did not have any prior experience in combat operations; he was the political officer who oversaw all political matters on behalf of the ministry. Perhaps the KPRA thought that the position itself would command respect from all units, but once he got to the battlefield, he did (or did not do) two things.<sup>56</sup> First, he did not prepare any integrated defensive plans in order to coordinate the actions of these different units who had never worked with each other before. Second, and perhaps the most crucial, he positioned his tactical headquarters right at the frontline, perhaps to observe the battlefield clearly even though the troops that he commanded had already reached almost corps level by Cambodian standard.<sup>57</sup>

The Khmer Rouge's attack on Staung came only a few days after the Tokyo Summit. It was swift. The Khmer Rouge attacked one battalion that occupied the flank of the KPRA's 5th Division task force which, in turn, occupied the flank of the entire formation. The battalion was routed and then, seeing that, the division asked the task force commander for instructions. No order came from the task force headquarters, which was under heavy shelling by the Khmer Rouge, a direct result of positioning the headquarters too close to the frontline. As the headquarters could not issue any order, the 5th Division panicked and began to be routed like its battalion and then the entire

formation collapsed.<sup>58</sup> They all retreated to the vicinity of San Kor village, a dozen kilometers north of the provincial capital.

The collapse was so quick that even the Khmer Rouge commanders were surprised that their first attack could do so much damage, so much so that they had not prepared any follow up occupying force.<sup>59</sup> According to a former chief of staff of the Kampong Thom PMC, when the KPRA's task force was routed, a local unit, the 30th Battalion, which was stationed north of Staung, rushed to the scene but when it arrived at the district, it did not see anyone, neither the KPRA units nor the Khmer Rouge.<sup>60</sup> The battalion commander then radioed his superior at the provincial capital, but no one believed him. His superior thought the battalion commander must have been captured by the Khmer Rouge who forced him to relay false information to lure the KPRA into a trap.<sup>61</sup> The 30th Battalion was then ordered to withdraw to the provincial capital. Despite having a lot of soldiers in and around the provincial capital, however, nothing other than the provincial battalions were in any condition to fight. The KPNLAF's forces then moved into Staung and started setting up their administrative offices.

At this time, the KPRA then dispatched an officer from the operations section of the general staff headquarters as well as a deputy chief of staff, both of whom had ample combat experience, to stabilize the situation. When the deputy chief of staff arrived, however, the province's party secretary had already prepared the counterattack. The former claimed that he was against the plan because the task force was too small; it was composed of only seventy soldiers and three amphibious, medium tanks, the Soviet-made PT-76.<sup>62</sup> The provincial party secretary argued that the party's intent was to swiftly

recapture lost territory. The deputy chief of staff then argued that while that was true, not enough troops were in sufficient condition to carry out the counterattack. Moreover, two lightly armored platoons would stand no chance against a force that had routed a corps-size force. The attack would only give away the tanks to the CGDK. After a heated debate, the provincial party secretary yielded and both agreed to strengthen the defense of the provincial capital before carrying out the counter-offensive.<sup>63</sup> That proved to be a fateful decision.

On the night of 15 June 1990, three Khmer Rouge divisions jointly attacked the provincial capital. According to a former chief of staff of the Kampong Thom PMC, and based on interviews with former Khmer Rouge soldiers, three Khmer Rouge units participated in the operations: the 802nd Division, the 616th Division and the elite mobile transportation unit, the 785th Division.<sup>64</sup> The first two were indigenous to Kampong Thom while the third was a roving division which operated along the Tonle Sap Lake.

A few hours after midnight, the Khmer Rouge's 616th Division infiltrated from the northwest, overrunning a KPRA "A3" combat police outpost. It then attacked into the provincial capital along NR6. The Khmer Rouge's 802nd Division was supposed to attack from the east but, according to the former chief of staff of the KPRA's Kampong Thom PMC, it radioed the 616th that it had already reached its objective in the provincial capital, while in fact it had not.<sup>65</sup> The former chief of staff speculated that the Khmer Rouge's 802nd Division was not as strong as the 616th and the former had only previously attacked lightly defended positions or areas far away from the urban centers.<sup>66</sup> Perhaps the 802nd Division wanted to wait until the 616th cleared out the KPRA main

forces, thus taking more casualties so that the 802nd would not have had to fight as hard as it would have needed to do otherwise.

Believing what the commander of the 802nd Division had said, the 616th rushed into town. But it had to cross a tributary where a bridge (on which NR6 ran) bottlenecked the attack. To make matters worse, less than a hundred meters from the bridge was a water tower which stood at about 30 meters high. At the top of this, the Kampong Thom PMC had mounted a 12.7 mm heavy machine gun and a 75 mm “DK-75” recoilless rifle.<sup>67</sup> At the time when the Khmer Rouge’s 616th Division tried to force its way into the provincial capital, a squad of KPRA provincial militia manning this emplacement mowed down the Khmer Rouge soldiers who tried to cross the bridge.

Along the third axis, the Khmer Rouge’s 785th Division, which many considered an elite unit, was supposed to infiltrate the provincial capital using a route south of the Steung Sen tributary, which, had it done so, would have outflanked the water tower emplacement. But observing that the 616th was in trouble and that the 802nd did not seem to move, the 785th Division also decided to avoid this fight in order to preserve its forces. Moreover, the KPRA’s 55th Riverine Infantry Battalion of the Kampong Thom PMC was maintaining defensive positions along the tributary at the time, which might have deterred any attack by the Khmer Rouge’s 785th Division.<sup>68</sup> By sunrise the next day, the Kampong Thom PMC had effectively neutralized the Khmer Rouge’s 616th Division.

Ultimately, Kampong Thom was always under threat, but when the Khmer Rouge had to attack large targets, it failed as a conventional force. Unlike the forces in

Battambang which benefited from the organization of Fronts 250 and 909, the Khmer Rouge divisions in this area had rarely worked together in large formation. Unlike in the provinces along the Cambodian-Thai border, the attack on the Kampong Thom provincial capital was ill-coordinated.

The attack also showed the strength of the KPRA's local forces. Had there been another attack on the retreating formation of the KPRA's regular forces, they could have always retreated either further to Siem Reap or to Kampong Cham. As a former officer of the Kampong Thom PMC noted, the forces who routed from Staung district to San Kor village were ready for a second retreat and any explosive sound could potentially trigger a rout.<sup>69</sup> But the Kampong Thom provincial units had nowhere else to go, so they had no choice but to stand and fight to protect their homes, just like what was done by the party officials in Banteay Meanchey. It was their home, hence their war. The regular forces became the supporting effort and the PMC became the main effort. One month later, the 101st Regiment from the Siem Reap – Ouddar Meanchey PMC led an attack that fully liberated Staung.<sup>70</sup> They breached the Khmer Rouge and KPNLAF regimental defenses and marched to meet the troops from Kampong Thom PMC in Staung on 15 July 1990.

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<sup>1</sup> Editorial staff, "Chronology of the withdrawal of the Vietnamese Volunteer Army from Cambodia," *People's Army* (27 September 1989).

<sup>2</sup> Hugh De Santis and Robert A. Manning, *Gorbachev's Eurasian Strategy: The Dangers of Success and Failure* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that by this time, the PRK started to make some "cosmetic" changes to the system. On 30 April 1989, the regime stopped calling itself the People's Republic of Kampuchea and changed the name to the "State of Cambodia" which was a more neutral name. To avoid confusion, this thesis will continue to call the Phnom Penh government, the People's Republic of Kampuchea and will continue to use the acronym PRK.

<sup>4</sup> Editorial staff, “The Soviet-China summit,” *People’s Army* (24 May 1989).

<sup>5</sup> De Santis and Manning, *Gorbachev’s Eurasian Strategy*, 18. The VVA had already withdrawn most of its forces from Cambodia since late 1988. From June to December 1988, roughly 50,000 VVA troops as well as the VVA’s general staff headquarters left Cambodia. From 15 to 21 December 1988, six divisions were withdrawn and only one fourth of the original strength remained in Cambodia.

<sup>6</sup> វិទ្យាស្ថានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្ររដ្ឋបាល [Institute of Military History]. *ប្រវត្តិរដ្ឋបាល ខេត្តប៉ៃលិន* [History of Pailin Provincial Military Command]. ភ្នំពេញ, កម្ពុជា: អគ្គនាយកដ្ឋាននយោបាយនិងកិច្ចការបរទេស, ក្រសួងការពារជាតិ, ឆ្នាំ ២០១២. [Phnom Penh, Cambodia: General Department of Policy and Foreign Affairs, Ministry of National Defense, 2012].

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>9</sup> Rodney Tasker, “Another Year Zero? International concern focuses on Khmer Rouge strength,” *Far Eastern Economic Review* (9 November 1989).

<sup>10</sup> Khmer Rouge news crew, 1989. *Khmer Rouge troops captured Pailin*. Author’s collections. MPEG video, 43:35. The author obtained this archival video from a former officer of Bureau 5, Operations, of the KPRA general staff headquarter. The video was taken when the Khmer Rouge captured the town in 1989. In the video, the crews interviewed the Khmer Rouge soldiers on the scene about the weapons that they had seized as well as showing those weapons. The officer who gave the author the video said that he retrieved the video cassette during the brief recapture of Pailin in 1994 when the new coalition government made up of forces from other former CGDK factions tried to defeat the Khmer Rouge who did not participate in the election.

<sup>11</sup> In the Cambodian Civil War, tanks were precious commodity due to its scarcity as well as the scarcity of an effective anti-tank weapon system. RPGs were the weapon of choice to fight against the tank but it was not very effective. So it was not surprising for the KPRA to send only two tanks to relieve a division.

<sup>12</sup> វិទ្យាស្ថានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្ររដ្ឋបាល [Institute of Military History]. *ប្រវត្តិរដ្ឋបាល ភូមិភាគ ៥* [History of Military Region 5]. ភ្នំពេញ, កម្ពុជា: អគ្គនាយកដ្ឋាន នយោបាយនិងកិច្ចការបរទេស, ក្រសួងការពារជាតិ, ឆ្នាំ ២០១៣. [Phnom Penh, Cambodia: General Department of Policy and Foreign Affairs, Ministry of National Defense, 2013]. Section: Order from the General Staff headquarters.

<sup>13</sup> វិទ្យាស្ថានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្ររដ្ឋបាល [Institute of Military History]. *ប្រវត្តិកងពល លេខ ១១* [History of the 11th Brigade].

<sup>14</sup> Tasker, “Another Year Zero?”

<sup>15</sup> វិទ្យាស្ថានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រយោធា [Institute of Military History]. *ប្រវត្តិកងពល លេខ ៥១* [History of the 51st Brigade]. After the war, units of the 6th Division were later broken up and then augmented to combine with the 196th Division, the KPNLAF, and the ANKI elements in order to create new units like the 51st, 52nd, and 53rd Intervention Infantry Brigades. That is the reason why the history of the 6th Division as well as other divisions were contained in the history of the intervention infantry brigades. This thesis collected parts and parcels of the stories from many official unit's histories and combined them to reconstruct the history of the 6th and 196th Divisions.

<sup>16</sup> វិទ្យាស្ថានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រយោធា [Institute of Military History]. *ប្រវត្តិកងពល លេខ ១១* [History of the 11th Brigade].

<sup>17</sup> Conboy. *The Cambodian Wars*, chapter 15: White Pigeon.

<sup>18</sup> This is an estimate of the KPRA. See វិទ្យាស្ថានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រយោធា [Institute of Military History] .*ប្រវត្តិយោធាខេត្តបន្ទាយមានជ័យ* [History of Banteay Meanchey Provincial Military Command], Section: KPNLAF Order of Battle.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> The tanks usually travelled by themselves with no infantry support in order to increase their mobility. This risk was mitigated by the fact that the CGDK forces had no effective anti-tank weapons.

<sup>21</sup> Conboy, *The Cambodian Wars*.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 289-91.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 292.

<sup>24</sup> វិទ្យាស្ថានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រយោធា [Institute of Military History] .*ប្រវត្តិយោធា ខេត្តបន្ទាយមានជ័យ* [History of Banteay Meanchey Provincial Military Command].

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>26</sup> Conboy. *The Cambodian Wars*.

<sup>27</sup> វិទ្យាស្ថានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រយោធា [Institute of Military History] .*ប្រវត្តិយោធា ខេត្តបន្ទាយមានជ័យ* [History of Banteay Meanchey Provincial Military Command].

<sup>28</sup> វិទ្យាស្ថានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រយោធា [Institute of Military History]. *ប្រវត្តិកង ពល លេខ ៥១* [History of the 51st Brigade].

<sup>29</sup> វិទ្យាស្ថានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រយោធា [Institute of Military History] .ប្រវត្តិយោធា ខេត្ត បន្ទាយមានជ័យ [History of Banteay Meanchey Provincial Military Command].

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. Section: Higher field headquarters in Banteay Meanchey (MR2, MR4, and the General Staff headquarters).

<sup>33</sup> វិទ្យាស្ថានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រយោធា [Institute of Military History]. ប្រវត្តិយោធា តំបន់ភាគ ៤ [History of Military Region 4], 5.

<sup>34</sup> KPRA's Army Television, 1989-1990. *Banteay Meanchey's defense system*. Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Institute of Military History. MPEG video, 1:55:27. The news also appeared in the periodical *People's Army*, 1 November 1989, 7.

<sup>35</sup> It was unclear why OMZ5 did not join force with the ANKI brigades. It was also possible that they also participated in the operations but was able to avoid the large-scale defeat. Nevertheless, it met the same fate as the ANKI brigades a few days later.

<sup>36</sup> Editorial staff. "News from the Battlefields." *People's Army* (1 November 1989).

<sup>37</sup> The *People's Army* periodical made frequent mentioning of this local tactic in which the hamlets, villages, and sometimes districts took the initiative and form an interconnected system to counter the CGDK's infiltration. The term in Khmer is "sompoan sahak phum prayut" which can be literally translated as "union of inter-hamlet operations."

<sup>38</sup> Editorial staff, "News from the Battlefields," *People's Army* (1 November 1989).

<sup>39</sup> Conboy, *The Cambodian Wars*, 294.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 290-91.

<sup>41</sup> The KPNLAF actually claimed it controlled two third of the province at that time. See វិទ្យាស្ថានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រយោធា [Institute of Military History] .ប្រវត្តិយោធា ខេត្តបន្ទាយមានជ័យ [History of Banteay Meanchey Provincial Military Command]. Section: KPNLAF's attack.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>44</sup> This account was independently confirmed by a former deputy chief of staff (whose testimony appear in the history of Battambang PMC – when explaining the reinforcements that were sent from Battambang to Banteay Meanchey), a former commander of the Banteay Meanchey PMC (in the official history of the Banteay Meanchey PMC), and a former regimental commander of the 179th division (in the official history of the MR4).

<sup>45</sup> KPRA’s Army Television, 1989-1990. *Minister Tea Banh's visit to the battlefield in MR4 and MR5*, Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Institute of Military History. MPEG video, 18:38.

<sup>46</sup> វិទ្យាស្ថានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រស្រុកយោធា [Institute of Military History] .*ប្រវត្តិយោធា ខេត្តសៀមរាប* [History of Siem Reap Provincial Military Command].

<sup>47</sup> វិទ្យាស្ថានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រស្រុកយោធា [Institute of Military History]. *ប្រវត្តិកងពល លេខ ៥១* [History of the 51st Brigade].

<sup>48</sup> វិទ្យាស្ថានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រស្រុកយោធា [Institute of Military History]. *ប្រវត្តិ យោធា ខេត្ត បាត់ដំបង* [History of Battambang Provincial Military Command]. The former chief of staff was later attached to MR5 whose headquarter is in Battambang.

<sup>49</sup> KPRA’s Army Television, 1990. *KPRA's advance in Banteay Meanchey*. Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Institute of Military History. MPEG video, 48:47.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Conboy, *The Cambodian Wars*, 289.

<sup>52</sup> Crocker Chester et al., ed., *Herding Cats: Multiparty Mediation in a Complex World* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 1999), 302.

<sup>53</sup> Moreover, the KPRA had already mobilized most of its reserve, especially MR2, to fight in MR4 and MR5 further west.

<sup>54</sup> There was not sufficient information to determine the size of each task force. However, it was customary for the KPRA to assign either a battalion-size or regiment-size unit as a task force.

<sup>55</sup> វិទ្យាស្ថានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រស្រុកយោធា [Institute of Military History] .*ប្រវត្តិយោធា ខេត្តកំពង់ធំ* [History of Kampong Thom Provincial Military Command].

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., vi (Appendix 1).

<sup>57</sup> វិទ្យាស្ថានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រស្រុកយោធា [Institute of Military History]. *ប្រវត្តិយោធា ភូមិភាគ ៤* [History of Military Region 4].

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>59</sup> វិទ្យាស្ថានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រស្រុកយោធា [Institute of Military History] .*ប្រវត្តិយោធា ខេត្តកំពង់ធំ* [History of Kampong Thom Provincial Military Command].

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, vii (Appendix 1).

<sup>61</sup> វិទ្យាស្ថានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រស្រុកយោធា [Institute of Military History]. *ប្រវត្តិយោធា ភូមិភាគ ៤* [History of Military Region 4], 18.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>65</sup> វិទ្យាស្ថានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រស្រុកយោធា [Institute of Military History] .*ប្រវត្តិយោធា ខេត្តកំពង់ធំ* [History of Kampong Thom Provincial Military Command].

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, ix (Appendix 1).

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> វិទ្យាស្ថានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រស្រុកយោធា [Institute of Military History]. *ប្រវត្តិយោធា ភូមិភាគ ៤* [History of Military Region 4].

<sup>69</sup> វិទ្យាស្ថានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រស្រុកយោធា [Institute of Military History] .*ប្រវត្តិយោធា ខេត្តកំពង់ធំ* [History of Kampong Thom Provincial Military Command].

<sup>70</sup> KPRA's Army Television, 1990. *Staung Battlefield*. Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Institute of Military History. MPEG video, 1:04:51.

## CHAPTER 5

### LESSONS OF HISTORY: THE CAMBODIAN CIVIL WAR

#### Diplomacy Without An Army: The Road to Peace

The CGDK started the 1989 offensive with high hopes and determination. But after several bad tactical decisions, the bulk of its forces were neutralized and key territories lost. With the Khmer Rouge becoming the only remaining party to still have a force cohesive enough to fight as regular units, the non-communist factions began to fear the Khmer Rouge dominance. In early June 1990, Prince Sihanouk met bilaterally with Premier Hun Sen of the PRK in Tokyo and both parties struck a deal without the participation of the other two parties. The agreement was very significant. Both sides agreed to an eventual cease fire, a concept of UN-sponsored elections, and the establishment of a Supreme National Council of Cambodia (SNC).

The SNC was supposed to be a political body that would guarantee Cambodian sovereignty during the transition period. But prior to the Tokyo meeting, the conflicting parties always disagreed as to the composition of the SNC. The PRK feared that an equal distribution among all four parties would see the CGDK capturing three fourths of the positions.<sup>1</sup> The Tokyo meeting made a breakthrough as it gave the PRK and the CGDK equal seats in the SNC.<sup>2</sup> That was a major concession that the PRK received from the CGDK. One could only wonder if that concession was related to events on the battlefield.

The Japanese ministry of foreign affairs offered a rather simplistic reason for the absence of the other two parties (KPNLF and the Khmer Rouge), saying that it was difficult to contact those two parties.<sup>3</sup> Needless to say, the KPNLF and the Khmer Rouge

never agreed to the results of the meeting. Against this backdrop, the KPNLAF moved into Staung in Kampong Thom province and the Khmer Rouge attacked the provincial capital days later. The failure of the offensive means that the KPNLAF had lost key elements of its remaining combat power and the Khmer Rouge's activities in Kampong Thom were further curtailed by the attrition of its 616th Division.

In late July and early August 1990, Son Sann, the president of the KPNLAF communicated with Hun Sen of the PRK, calling for the cancellation of the results of the Tokyo meeting and replacing these with a new meeting in Paris. Fresh from victory in Kampong Thom, Hun Sen of the PRK rejected the proposal.<sup>4</sup> Without an army, it seemed, one cannot force one's own terms in a negotiation. Subsequent political negotiations continued to follow the result of the Tokyo meeting. Thus, the PRK's overall success in Kampong Thom and Banteay Meanchey were crucial. As the KPNLAF no longer had any military capabilities to force any more concessions, it fell into line. The only remaining actor was the Khmer Rouge.

According to one source, it was near Malai, an isolated position along the Cambodian-Thai border that Pol Pot's chief of staff met with two representatives from the People's Republic of China on 18 August 1990.<sup>5</sup> At that meeting, the chief of staff lauded the glorious achievements of the Khmer Rouge, including many victories over the KPRA.<sup>6</sup> The realities on the ground did not escape the attention of the Chinese delegates. Also unbeknownst to the Khmer Rouge leaders, the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council had already reached an agreement on the Cambodian

conflict.<sup>7</sup> The delegates tried to be polite and showed their consideration of the presentation. Then they uttered their position:

You always told us you are winning but this [office in the jungle] is what you always had since then. Soldiers are demoralized and they wanted freedom and free market [...] You simply can't use dictatorship for the second time [...] We do not intend to sell you out, but we want you to adhere to the non-violence principles and seek a political solution to the conflict, in accordance with the goodwill of the United Nations, the goodwill of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, and the desire of the Cambodian people [...] The sponsors to the Cambodian civil war agreed to cease their support and negotiate for peace in 1991. The People's Republic of China must completely stop the support. Our visit here today brought this message. We think that if the peace negotiation succeeds in 1991, all Cambodian people will unprecedentedly rejoice. You should take this as priority.<sup>8</sup>

On 9 and 10 September 1990, all four parties to the Cambodian conflict met in Jakarta and agreed to a UN-sponsored election while the SNC was to act as the ruling body in the transition period.<sup>9</sup> As the dominant party on the battlefield, Hun Sen's PRK preserved an important concession: the SNC was composed of twelve members, six of which came from the PRK.<sup>10</sup> This was essentially a direct implementation of the result of the Tokyo meeting. Eventually, Prince Sihanouk and Hun Sen became the co-chair of the SNC.

On 23 October 1991, all details regarding the UN's supervision of the election in Cambodia had finally been hammered out in the meeting in Paris, known as the Paris Peace Accord. The Accord dictated that all four parties were to cease hostilities immediately. On 10 November 1991, the soldiers of the United Nations Advance Mission in Cambodia (UNAMIC) arrived in Cambodia. On 14 November, Prince Sihanouk returned to Phnom Penh for the first time since 1979. In February 1992, the UNAMIC

became the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) and it started preparing for the first election in Cambodia in three decades.

The favorable conditions under which the PRK negotiated with the CGDK were due in no small part to its victories on the battlefield. There are three major lessons we can draw from the PRK's successes in the Cambodian Civil War: the role of external support, the importance of military organization, and the challenges of hybrid warfare.

#### External Support: The Vietnamese Connection

Because the Vietnamese troops remained in Cambodia for ten years, any discussion on the PRK's success had to refer back to the role of the Vietnamese forces. This thesis found that the Vietnamese contributions were mixed. The K-5 Belt strategy was flawed but the organizational support to the PRK and the KPRA was very important.

First of all, perhaps the most controversial Vietnamese influence in Cambodia was the adoption of the K-5 Belt strategy. As the previous chapter has shown, this strategy was the main cause of the KPRA's earlier losses. The strategy simply defied all military common sense. The KPRA units were completely cut off while the target that was being defended did not have any strategic value. The KPRA's mission of interdicting the CGDK's infiltration was also unsuccessful. Furthermore, because the morale of the troops was extremely low, most units collapsed in the face of the CGDK's attacks. There was no official publication which sought to justify this strategy, but we can speculate.

The reason why the strategy was adopted was perhaps "common sense" for a strong, conventional army. As the VVA and the KPRA became the dominant forces on the battlefield, it was simply natural that they chose territory-centric strategy over a

population-centric one. Logically, when people perceived that they could control the whole country, it would be extremely difficult for a dissenter to argue that one should leave some territories to the enemy.

Despite this flawed strategic design, however, Vietnam did provide two types of external support for the PRK: a regular army and organizational support. Even though the VVA finally withdrew in 1989 just before the CGDK's offensive, one lingering Vietnamese influence on the PRK was its organizational support to the PRK. Vietnam was responsible for building the administrative structure of the PRK and for fighting to buy time for this regime to survive long enough in order to consolidate and defend itself. Perhaps that was the only advantage that Vietnam could provide to the PRK. For that, Vietnam could be said to have played a significant role in helping the PRK to eventually win the war.

#### Political Context and Military Organization: The Government's Perspective

In Cambodia, the government (PRK) presented itself as the only defense against the return of the murderous Pol Pot regime. On the other hand, the CGDK claimed that it fought to push the Vietnamese troops out of Cambodia. Because both the PRK and the CGDK had similarly appealing political ideologies or national goals, the distinguishing factor was organization, i.e. how both sides capitalized on their respective political ideology.

Several factors influenced the organizational design of the KPRA. The most important factor was the communist system. This combined with a second factor, a legacy of the "People's War" concept which was influenced by the Chinese army and the

Vietnamese army. The system produced a military that reached down to the hamlet level. In addition, the people at all levels were fully indoctrinated and were then recruited to serve in different echelons of the KPRA. They started as recruits in the armed propaganda units which later combined to create dual-duty companies, provincial battalions, and regiments.

A special aspect of this system was the reliance on territorial forces. The KPRA did not rely on conscription law to recruit its soldiers.<sup>11</sup> Because the unit came from the same geographic areas, they tended to be more cohesive than a conscript army and tended to desert less when they fought closer to their homes. This is not to say that the KPRA (and the Vietnamese) chose this system because they knew it would be successful. Instead, the system was chosen only because it was “what all communists do” and success was rather incidental. The system had produced a very large and cohesive army.

Eventually, by the time the CGDK launched the offensive in 1989, the KPRA outnumbered the CGDK by a ratio of more than two to one. While the territorial units lacked the heavy weapons of the regular units, they made up for this lack of material with good intangible qualities: morale, knowledge of terrain, and unit cohesion.<sup>12</sup>

As a result, the CGDK had several major problems. First, there were simply too many KPRA units that the CGDK had to fix so that it could mass on a certain target. The CGDK achieved several successes along the border but when the KPRA consolidated in the populated areas, the CGDK simply did not have enough forces to pursue its fix-and-mass strategy that had been so successful in the early phase of the offensive.

Furthermore, due to the CGDK's inferior numbers, any single failure could potentially become catastrophic. Successful campaigns would have to rest on the assumption that all operations were successful. This assumption was hard to maintain because in war, tactical failures can never be totally eliminated. Thus, once the KPNLAF and the ANKI lost ground in Banteay Meanchey, the CGDK simply did not have enough combat power to pursue an offensive war plan.

The final problem for the CGDK was its relative disunity compared to the PRK. Because the CGDK was not a single entity, there was no provision for strategic reserve forces, which exacerbated the aforementioned risks. In addition, when the Khmer Rouge became the only force that still had offensive combat power, the other two factions and the sponsoring countries pushed for a negotiated solution to the conflict to prevent the Khmer Rouge from further dominating the CGDK.

#### Political Context and Military Organization: The Revolutionaries' Perspective

The civil war in Cambodia can be characterized as a revolutionary war.<sup>13</sup> In the context of revolutionary war, the weaker revolutionaries must use military power to defeat the government to achieve their political goals. In order to do this, Mao Tse-tung wrote that the revolutionaries must progress through three stages: strategic defensive, strategic stalemate, and strategic offensive.<sup>14</sup> In essence, Mao made one assumption, namely that successful revolutionaries were capable of making the transformation from a guerrilla army to a conventional army.

During the civil war in Cambodia, the case of the CGDK showed that this operational transition was a formidable task. It was about building a new military

organization. As an army transitions from a guerrilla army to a conventional army, a lot of factors have to change in order for this new army to function effectively, including but not limited to: doctrine, equipment, coordination, staff organization, communication, logistics, large-unit training, and commander's mindset.

While the Khmer Rouge had organized two Fronts along the border in Battambang, it was unable to mass those forces to attack the KPRA in 1989. Just like in many other provinces, the Khmer Rouge simply could not mass enough logistics to support corps-size operations as a result of the constant harassment from the KPRA's militias. Likewise, in Kampong Thom province, despite achieving surprise in the early hours of the operations, the three Khmer Rouge divisions failed to coordinate with each other. This was due to a lack of understanding between commanders who had never worked with each other before. The KPNLAF did not fare better. As it attacked isolated outposts, it achieved astounding successes. But as it moved forward, it could neither mass its own units nor cooperate with the other factions within the CGDK to attack. As soon as the CGDK exhausted most of its resources, it had to concede to negotiations on unfavorable ground.

The Khmer Rouge operation in Kampong Thom province was a clear example of this lack of mutual understanding and trust. The 616th Division and the 802nd Division lacked mutual trust and understanding and failed to jointly attack a target. Another unit, the 785th Division was not indigenous to the province and therefore did not coordinate well with the other two divisions. When it saw that the other two divisions were in trouble, the 785th Division decided not to take risks to help its comrades. The Khmer

Rouge failure in Kampong Thom was not due to its tactical combat experience, but it was rather due to the lack of the basic intangible qualities of a conventional army.

Specialized training, logistics, cadre of capable officers, and mutual understanding between commanders are only some of the aspects a conventional army must master before it can fight effectively against the government's large army. This is also where external support could make a difference. Several sponsoring countries did help to organize and equip the CGDK, but one thing that was lacking was the promotion of the aforementioned intangible qualities of a conventional army. These things take time. To make matter worse, the different ideology among the three CGDK factions further debilitated their transformation into an effective conventional army. In this aspect, the KPRA had beaten the CGDK army.

#### Counter-Revolutionary War: The Role of Territorial Forces

Because it is necessary for the revolutionaries to make an operational transition, revolutionary war is, by nature, a hybrid war. In the civil war in Cambodia, the war was a hybrid war because both conventional units and irregular units fought alongside each other. When the VVA remained in Cambodia, the CGDK could only attack in small formations. As the VVA was preparing to leave in 1987, however, the CGDK began to reorganize as a conventional army. In 1989, the CGDK fought as a conventional army.

A hybrid war generally presents a difficult problem for the government's military because any military that is built as a conventional unit might have a hard time responding to a threat that is both irregular and conventional. The civil war in Cambodia was interesting in the sense that the government, by virtue of being influenced by the

communist system, had designed a hybrid army. Fighting alongside the conventional divisions were the regiments from the military regions, the provincial battalions, the district companies, and the militias. In Cambodia, these territorial units outnumbered the conventional force with a ratio of three to one.

As the KPRA revised its K-5 Belt strategy and adopted a population-centric strategy, the territorial troops played a major role in defending the population centers. While the territorial units who were sent to supplement the conventional divisions on the border lost morale, those very same units became more courageous than the conventional divisions as they fought closer to home. In Cambodia, those who wanted to pursue a career in the armed forces would join the provincial battalion, while those who wanted to work close to homes and did not want to move to the border usually chose to serve part-time in the militias.

The KPRA commonly organized the militias in many nearby districts to build an integrated defensive system. The system was called “*sompoan sahak phum prayut*” which can be literally translated as “union of inter-hamlet operations.” The KPRA’s *People’s Army* newspaper made frequent mention of this local tactic which was aimed at preventing the CGDK’s infiltration.

It is hard to analyze the effects of this defensive system without looking at each individual encounter. The thesis precluded this from the study. We can certainly count the individual encounters in the *People’s Army* newspaper, but it would still be incomplete. However, as we have seen in the previous chapter, in late October 1989, that inter-hamlet militias system disaggregated the KPNLF’s OMZ5. That was the only

recorded evidence of the militia system destroying a large unit (brigade). The Siem Reap–Ouddar Meanchey PMC, in particular, boasted in its unit’s official history that after the election in 1993 when the ANKI was integrated into the government, a former high-ranking commander of the ANKI admitted that he dreaded the militias who always disturbed the ANKI’s infiltration.<sup>15</sup>

Once again, it is hard to substantiate this claim. But we can look at what actually happened. With the exception of the areas along the border, the KPRA seemed to be able to move across provinces to reinforce its besieged units without encountering any catastrophic ambush from the CGDK. The regiment task force of the Siem Reap PMC, for example, was most famous in moving back and forth to reinforce other provinces. Someone must have covered its movement. Perhaps it was the militias, the unsung heroes of the KPRA.

Moreover, the Khmer Rouge did organize two Fronts in Pursat, Battambang, and Banteay Meanchey. Yet, there was no evidence in the historical records where the two Fronts could mass and attack in large formation (corps-size) when the CGDK made transition to conventional war in 1989. That was understandable, because if the Khmer Rouge was to attack as a Front, logistics would be extremely demanding. Such operations could not be launched if the KPRA’s militias were effective at observing the Khmer Rouge logistical nodes, leading the main KPRA’s units to destroy those logistics nodes prematurely.

Ultimately, the KPRA’s victory was in part due to the increased role of the territorial forces towards the end of 1989 and early 1990. In Banteay Meanchey, the local

forces refused to give up. In Kampong Thom, they were keys to the defense of the provincial capital. In Pursat and Siem Reap – Ouddar Meanchey, they prevented the CGDK's attacks. Siem Reap, just like MR2, reinforced the Western provinces. MR5, the Battambang PMC, and the conventional divisions even tried to counterattack to recapture Pailin, in spite of the revised strategy.

For the KPRA, the territorial forces became the main effort, and the conventional divisions became the secondary effort. However, such strong territorial forces could only work under three conditions. First of all, they had to believe in a political ideology. Without it, no one would fight. In the Cambodian Civil War, the KPRA's territorial forces fought to defend their homes.<sup>16</sup> Second, political ideology cannot exert its influence unless there was a system in place which recruited people and then built them up from teams to companies, battalions, and then regiments. Thus, the units were cohesive. Third, the territorial forces worked best with a population-centric strategy, mainly because such strategy placed the territorial units closer to their homes, thus precluding any chance of them running away from the war.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Sola, *Le Cambodge de Sihanouk: Espoir, desillusions et amertume, 1982-1993* (Paris: Sudestasie, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> Sar Pormeant Kampuchea (SPK), "The Hun Sen-Sihanouk Tokyo bilateral negotiation succeeded," *People's Army*, 6 June 1990.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Sar Pormeant Kampuchea (SPK), "Interview of SPK with Comrade Premier Hun Sen," *People's Army* newspaper (1 August 1990). The section also contained an open letter from Premier Hun Sen to Mr. Son Sann.

<sup>5</sup> ម៉ឺ មក្ក [Mey, Mak]. *ការស្រាវជ្រាវអំពីសង្គ្រាមឈ្នួលនិងសន្តិភាពនៅប៉ៃលិន* [Research into Guerilla Warfare and Peace in Pailin]. សារណាអនុបណ្ឌិត សាកលវិទ្យាល័យ ចម្រើន ពហុបច្ចេកវិទ្យា ឆ្នាំ ២០០៥ [Master Thesis, Cambodian University of Polytechniques, 2005].

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>7</sup> Sola, *Le Cambodge de Sihanouk*.

<sup>8</sup> ម៉ឺ មក្ក [Mey, Mak]. *ការស្រាវជ្រាវអំពីសង្គ្រាមឈ្នួលនិងសន្តិភាពនៅប៉ៃលិន* [Research into Guerilla Warfare and Peace in Pailin], 48.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Vatikiotis, “Grudging Unity: Big Powers Force Factions Towards UN Settlement,” *Far Eastern Economic Review* (20 September 1990).

<sup>10</sup> Editorial staff, “The SNC Cancelled the First Meeting Because the Other Party Had No Clear Position,” *People’s Army* (19 September 1990).

<sup>11</sup> Conscription law was indeed introduced in 1989 but produced a lot of deserters. Only the territorial forces could maintain unit integrity.

<sup>12</sup> Some of these qualities were negated under the K-5 Belt strategy when the territorial units were pushed away from their homes. But as the KPRA switched to population-centric strategy, it began to enjoy these good qualities of the territorial forces.

<sup>13</sup> The definition of revolutionary war adopted in this thesis is the following: “A violent struggle to seize power in order to effect radical social and political changes.”

<sup>14</sup> Mao, *Selected Works*.

<sup>15</sup> វិទ្យាស្ថានប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រស្រីយោធា [Institute of Military History] .*ប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រ ខេត្តសៀមរាប* [History of Siem Reap Provincial Military Command].

<sup>16</sup> We can see clearly in previous chapters that these territorial forces, especially those who were embedded with the conventional forces, were still routed when they fought along the border far away from their hometowns. But as they fought closer to home, they became even more courageous than the conventional divisions.

## APPENDIX A

### CAMBODIAN TIMELINE: CHRONOLOGY OF THE CONFLICT

- 1863-1953**: French Protectorate
- 1951**: The Indochina Communist Party (ICP) helped establish the communist movement in Cambodia, the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party (KPRP).
- 1955**: General election in Cambodia. Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the hero of Cambodian independence, won the election in a landslide. The KPRP did not win any seats.
- 1959**: Failed coup attempt against Prince Sihanouk. Many right-wing politicians and military officers were implicated in the coup attempt. Prince Sihanouk suspected they received American support.
- 1962**: The second man in the KPRP defected to the Cambodian government and helped the government arrest many KPRP senior leaders. The KPRP party secretary disappeared and was presumed dead.
- 1963**: Surviving junior members of the KPRP created a new party and changed the name to Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) in an attempt to sever all ties with the Vietnamese communists.
- 1965**: Cambodia broke off diplomatic relations with the United States. North Vietnam enjoyed almost free access on the Cambodian side of the Cambodian-Vietnamese border.
- 1968**: Farmer revolt broke out in Samlot, Battambang province. The Cambodian communists (Khmer Rouge) claimed responsibilities for the revolt. Prince Sihanouk began to suspect a communist conspiracy against his regime.
- June 1969**: Cambodia severed diplomatic relations with North Vietnam and reestablished diplomatic relations with the US. The Cambodian military conducted military operations against North Vietnamese troops along the Cambodian-Vietnamese border. The North Vietnamese troops generally avoided the engagements.
- 18 March 1970**: Coup d'état against Prince Sihanouk. The Khmer Republic was proclaimed. Prince Sihanouk joined force with the Khmer Rouge in order to fight to return to power.

- 17 April 1975**: The Khmer Rouge captured the Cambodian capital city, Phnom Penh. A new, totalitarian communist government, Democratic Kampuchea, was proclaimed. The Khmer Rouge turned against Prince Sihanouk and imprisoned the Prince in his own palace in Phnom Penh. An estimated one million people perished under Democratic Kampuchea.
- 1977**: War broke out between Democratic Kampuchea and Vietnam.
- 7 January 1979**: Vietnam supported a Cambodian resistance army and defeated the Khmer Rouge.
- 10 January 1979**: The Vietnamese-backed government, the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) was proclaimed.
- 1980-1981**: Thailand spearheaded the establishment of a Cambodian non-communist resistance movement, the Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF).
- 1981**: Prince Sihanouk established a royalist, non-communist resistance movement, the FUNCINPEC.
- 1982**: Under pressure from the sponsoring countries, the Khmer Rouge, the KPNLF, and the FUNCINPEC came together to establish a unified resistance movement, the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK). Prince Sihanouk became the President of the CGDK.
- 1984-85**: The Vietnamese forces in Cambodia launched the 14-Camp Campaign which pushed all CGDK camps deep into Thai territory. Vietnamese forces also clashed with Thai forces along the Cambodian-Thai border.
- 1985**: The Vietnamese forces and the PRK began implementing the K-5 Belt strategy.
- 1987**: Preliminary meeting between Comrade Hun Sen, Premier of the PRK and Prince Sihanouk in France. Before the meeting, the Vietnam had withdrawn a large contingent of its forces from Cambodia.
- September 1989**: The last Vietnamese units left Cambodia. A few days after the departure of the Vietnamese troops, the CGDK launched the offensive on all fronts.
- Early 1990**: The CGDK offensive stalled on all fronts. The Khmer Rouge stalled after the victory in Pailin, Battambang province. The KPNLF lost the majority of its units in Banteay Meanchey province and the FUNCINPEC did not make any advance in Siem Reap – Ouddar Meanchey province.

- March 1990:** Prince Sihanouk met bilaterally with Comrade Hun Sen of the PRK in Tokyo. The two leaders agreed on an eventual election sponsored by the United Nations.
- June 1990:** The KPNLF and the Khmer Rouge attacked Kampong Thom province in protest of their absence at the Tokyo meeting. The PRK successfully defended the province.
- 17 January 1991:** The PRK launched a general counter-offensive called “Operation X-91.” It was the largest offensive operation since the 14-Camps Campaign and was intended to recapture territories lost in 1989 and 1990. By sheer coincidence, on that very same day, the US-led international coalition launched Operation Desert Storm to push the Iraqi army out of Kuwait.
- 23 October 1991:** All four factions to the Cambodian civil war met in Paris and agreed to a political deal which called for a cease-fire and a UN-sponsored election in Cambodia. Cambodia would be ruled in the transition period by an organization called the Supreme National Council of Cambodia (SNC). The PRK obtained two key concessions: half of the SNC members came from the PRK and Premier Hun Sen co-chaired the SNC with Prince Sihanouk. The Khmer Rouge and the KPNLF had to fall in line.

APPENDIX B

FACTIONS AND ORDER OF BATTLE

Government: People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK)  
 Military: Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Army (KPRA)

Units	Parent unit	Areas of Operations
4th Division	KPRA general staff headquarter	Samlot, then Ratanak Mondul Battambang province
5th Division		Preah Vihear province
6th Division		Malai, then Bavel Battambang province
179th Division		Banteay Meanchey province
286th Division		Ouddar Meanchey Siem Reap province
196th Division		Pailin, then Ratanak Mondul Battambang province
92nd Brigade		Pailin, then Ratanak Mondul Battambang province
94th Brigade		Moung Roessey Battambang province
95th Brigade		Pailin, then Ratanak Mondul Battambang province
41st Regiment	Military Region 4 (MR4)	Anlong Veng, Siem Reap - Ouddar Meanchey province
42nd Regiment		Banteay Meanchey province
69th Regiment (armor)		Banteay Meanchey province
Siem Reap PMC's ad hoc regiment		MR4
Siem Reap PMC's 101st Regiment		MR4
Kampong Thom PMC		Kampong Thom
Kampong Thom PMC's 55th Riverine Infantry Battalion		Kampong Thom
Battambang PMC	Military Region 5 (MR5)	Battambang
Banteay Meanchey PMC		Banteay Meanchey
Pursat PMC		Pursat
Prey Veng PMC	Military Region 2 (MR2)	Banteay Meanchey province
Kampong Cham PMC		
Svay Rieng PMC		

Resistance movement: Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK)  
CGDK Faction 1: The Khmer Rouge

<b>Parent Units</b>	<b>Units</b>	<b>Areas of Operations</b>
Front 250		Border of Battambang and Banteay Meanchey province
	948th Division	These units did not feature in the study because they could not mass at the brigade level.
	707th Division	
	504th Division	
	320th Division	
	13th Regiment	
	405th Regiment	
	230th Regiment	
	23rd Regiment	
Front 909		Border of Battambang and Pursat province
	36th Division	These units did not feature in the study because they could not mass at the brigade level.
	695th Division	
	905th Division	
	469th Division	
	18th Division	
	305th Division	
	405th Division	
	107th Division	
	27th Division	
General staff	450th Division	Malai, Battambang province
	415th Division	Pailin, Battambang province
	416th Division	Battambang province
	920th Division	Siem Reap - Ouddar Meanchey province
	785th Division	Tonle Sap Lake area
	616th Division	Kampong Thom province
	802nd Division	Kampong Thom province
	518th Division	Banteay Meanchey province
	519th Division	Banteay Meanchey province

CGDK Faction 2: The KPNLAF

<b>Units</b>	<b>Areas of Operations</b>
OMZ 1	Banteay Meanchey province
OMZ 2	
OMZ 3	
OMZ 4	
OMZ 5	Siem Reap - Ouddar Meanchey and Banteay Meanchey province
OMZ 6	Banteay Meanchey province
OMZ 7	
Special OMZ	

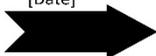
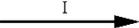
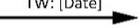
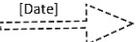
CGDK Faction 3: The ANKI

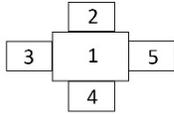
<b>Units</b>	<b>Areas of Operations</b>
1st Division (including the 7th brigade)	Banteay Meanchey province
2nd Division	Banteay Meanchey province Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey province
3rd Division (including the 11th brigade)	Banteay Meanchey province
5th Division	Battambang province
6th Division	Siem Reap-Ouddar Meanchey province
15th Division	Kampong Thom province

## APPENDIX C

### MAP LEGEND

Note: All dates are in 1989, unless otherwise noted.

Symbols	Meaning
[Date] 	Axis of attack.
I 	Interdiction.
TW: [Date] 	Tactical withdrawal: The unit also withdrew due to enemy action but unlike a rout, the commander in this case could still maintain command and control of the unit.
[Date] 	Planned axis of advance but one that never materializes.
R: [Date] 	Routed: The commander lost control. The unit was not necessarily destroyed but it panicked and ran away.
	Khmer Rouge area of influence: The shaded area denotes the area where the unit inside was active. If that area overlaps with a road, it means that the road was constantly ambushed. This is applicable only to the Khmer Rouge units.
	Field headquarter.
	Mountain and jungle.
	Defensive positions.



This is a unit symbol.

Amplifier 1 is the type of unit (infantry, armor, mechanized infantry).

Amplifier 2 is the size of the unit (echelon).

Amplifier 3 is the immediate unit of higher echelon.

Amplifier 4 is the faction.

Amplifier 5 is the name or number of the current unit.

For amplifier 1, this thesis only uses three type of unit: infantry, armor, and mechanized infantry. -Armor: , -Infantry: , and -Mechanized infantry: 

Amplifiers 2 is the “Echelon” which describes the separate levels of command.

Echelon	Symbol
Battalion	II
Regiment	III
Brigade	X
Division	X X
Corps	X X X

For amplifier 4, the factions are as follow:

ANKI: Armée Nationales du Kampuchea Indépendant

KPNLAF: Khmer People’s National Liberation Armed Forces

KR: Khmer Rouge

KPRA: Kampuchean People’s Revolutionary Army.

The following units belong to the KPRA: SVPMC: Svay Rieng PMC, SRPMC: Siem Reap PMC, KTPMC: Kampong Thom PMC, KCPMC: Kampong Cham PMC.

For amplifier 5, the abbreviation “TF” denotes an ad hoc task force. That task force has no name and was normally activated for a very short period of time.

Here are some examples of the symbols in use:



This is the 69th Armored Regiment which was under the command of Military Region 4 (MR4). The unit belongs to the KPRA.



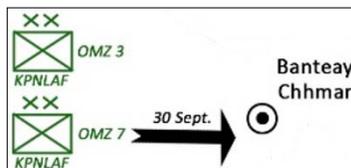
This is Front 250 (primarily infantry) belonging to the Khmer Rouge. Based on the way they fought, the gray area denotes the area of influence that the unit exerted.



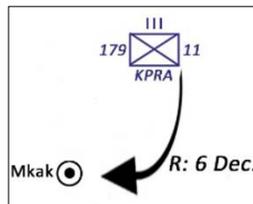
This is OMZ7 which belongs to the KPNLAF. It is a division-size unit. But because the KPNLAF called its division OMZ, the original term “OMZ” was preserved in the symbol.



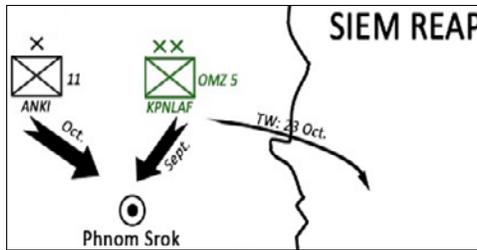
This is the headquarters of Military Region 4 (MR4) of the KPRA.



OMZ3 and OMZ7 of the KPNLAF attacked on 30 September (1989) into Banteay Chhmar.

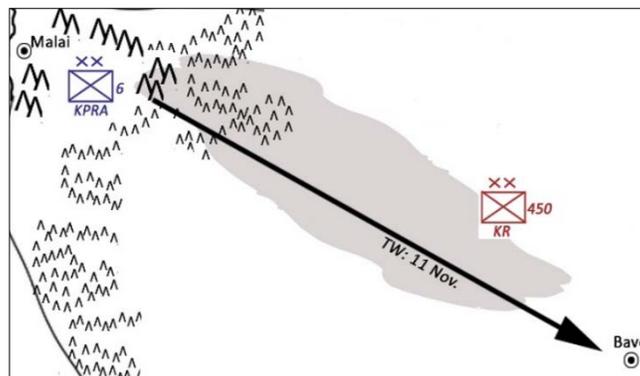


The 11th Infantry Regiment of the 179th Division belonging to the KPRA routed to M'kak on 6 December (1989). This means that the commander lost control of the unit and the soldier ran in a disorderly manner to M'kak.



-The KPNLAF's OMZ5 attacked into Phnom Srok district in September (1989). On 23 October to Siem Reap, it attempted to conduct Tactical Withdrawal (TW). Contrary to a rout, the unit still maintained its integrity during the TW.

-In October 1989, the ANKI's 11th Brigade attacked into Phnom Srok.



-The 6th (Infantry) Division of the KPR was stationed in Malai which was surrounded by mountains and jungle. On 11 November (1989), it conducted a Tactical Withdrawal (TW) to Bavel district. The unit still maintained its cohesion during the TW.

-The KPR's 6th Division withdrew across the gray area which denotes the "area of influence" of the Khmer Rouge's 450th Division. This means that the KPR's 6th Division had to move through potential ambush sites along the way.



This is a snapshot of Sisophon, the provincial capital of Banteay Meanchey. National Road 5 (NR5), NR6, and Route 69 all converged at Sisophon. The town was home to the field headquarters of MR4 (codenamed “44”) and of the KPRAs’ general staff (codenamed “88”). “44” controlled a division-size force while “88” controlled a corps-size force. These two were called “Field Headquarters” because they were located outside of their normal headquarters (in Siem Reap and in Phnom Penh, respectively).

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