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China's Cambodia Policy: Recent Signals of Flexibility

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Summary

Beijing's long-term strategy for forcing the Vietnamese out of Cambodia remains based on three policies established soon after Vietnam's 1978 invasion: military assistance to the Cambodian resistance, military pressure along Vietnam's northern frontier, and backing for ASEAN's diplomatic and economic measures. But Beijing has made some notable tactical adjustments to blunt Hanoi's diplomatic initiatives, to convince ASEAN and others that it does not seek a return to power of the Democratic Kampuchea (DK) or Pol Pot, and to demonstrate its flexibility on the potential composition of a Cambodian government following a Vietnamese withdrawal.

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Beijing has taken several initiatives in the past year to steer a careful course that clearly shows its strong commitment to sustain opposition to Vietnam while allaying fears that it seeks a DK-dominated government in Cambodia. Beijing's series of maneuvers is designed, in part, to inject new credibility into China's assertion that it will accept a neutral, nonaligned and independent Cambodia under

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Prince Sihanouk.

- China began by pressuring DK Supreme Military Commander Pol Pot into retirement in August 1985.
- Chinese influence has been crucial, in our view, in moderating DK excesses in the field and in increasing DK willingness to cooperate with non-Communist units inside Cambodia. China's successes in moderating DK behavior mark a sharp departure, in our view, from previous years when DK changes--such as abolition of the Kampuchean Communist Party in 1981--were made only grudgingly.

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The Chinese probably took a leading role in formulating the resistance coalition's eight-point proposal announced in Beijing in March, which for the first time allowed for inclusion of Vietnam's puppet Heng Samrin government in a coalition government.

- The proposal also departed from previous demands for a Vietnamese pledge to withdraw its forces prior to negotiations. Instead, it called for Vietnam and the resistance coalition to hold negotiations on a two-stage withdrawal.

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However, China's hardline opposition to any compromise that allows the Vietnamese to continue to dominate Cambodia remains unaltered.

- Beijing continues to rebuff Vietnamese overtures to resume talks that were abandoned by China in 1980. Although there have been recurrent reports of "secret" peace feelers from Hanoi, we have seen no sign the Chinese have been receptive.

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The Chinese have also consistently taken the Soviet Union to task for its unwillingness to pressure Hanoi to compromise. Of the three "obstacles" to improved Sino-Soviet relations cited by Beijing, the Chinese insist that Soviet willingness to terminate support to the Vietnamese in Cambodia is the "litmus test" by which Soviet sincerity can best be gauged.

- Beijing has been particularly critical of General Secretary Gorbachev for not showing any flexibility on the Cambodia issue in his Vladivostok speech delivered in July.
- Deng Xiaoping dramatized the importance of the Cambodia issue in his "60 Minutes" interview by offering a summit meeting with Gorbachev if the Soviets would use their influence to get the Vietnamese out of Cambodia--an offer he knows will be refused.

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China will remain committed, with occasional tactical adjustments, to its goals and overall strategy in Cambodia.

- Beijing's initiatives over the past year, however, signal greater willingness to use diplomatic means, if possible, to achieve those goals.
- Even if diplomatic measures prove unproductive in moving toward a settlement, continued stalemate in Cambodia, particularly at the relatively low costs involved at present, is likely to remain an attractive option for Beijing because of the pain it inflicts on Hanoi. 

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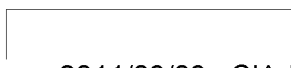
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