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Soviet Policy Toward the Cambodian Conflict

Summary

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Since the beginning of this year, Soviet comments on the necessity for a resolution of the Cambodian conflict have taken on a new urgency. To some extent, this appears to be an outgrowth of Gorbachev's desire to improve relations with China and the ASEAN countries. Moscow also is increasingly dissatisfied with having to support the crippled Vietnamese economy. In recent months, the Soviets have taken steps-- including seeking information on resistance leaders, probably to determine acceptable participants in negotiations--that suggest they are urging Hanoi to start negotiations for a political settlement. While recent Soviet actions are not inconsistent with a campaign simply designed to disassociate Moscow from Hanoi's actions in Cambodia, we believe that Soviet concern with the situation and desire for a settlement are genuine. So far, however, Moscow's reluctance to jeopardize relations with Hanoi has constrained the Soviets from putting excessive pressure on the Vietnamese to withdraw. If negotiations do not begin or if they fail, the Soviets probably still will encourage the Vietnamese to hold to their promised withdrawal date of 1990.

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A New Sense of Urgency

Until recently the Soviets appear to have been content to leave the initiative on resolving Vietnam's continued war in Cambodia--begun in 1978--to the Vietnamese. For example, during the 1985 and 1986 visits to Moscow of the Vietnamese Communist Party General Secretary--Le Duan in 1985, Truong Chinh in 1986-- press reports of discussions with Soviet leaders made no mention of the need to solve the Cambodia question, concentrating instead

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on the efforts of the Indochinese states to resist outside interference. Since the beginning of 1987, however, Moscow appears to have invested a new sense of urgency in the Cambodia problem:

- References in Soviet talks with Vietnam and with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries to the need to solve the Cambodia situation have increased dramatically. During Vietnamese Communist Party Secretary Nguyen Van Linh's May 1987 visit to Moscow, for example, practically every meeting contained some reference to the Cambodia problem, according to the Soviet press. The Soviets also have stressed to foreign leaders Moscow's interest in achieving and willingness to guarantee a political settlement to the Cambodian problem.
- The Soviets agreed for the first time to discuss the Cambodia situation with China during biannual Sino-Soviet political consultations in October 1986, and again in April 1987--a departure from their previous insistence that they were not in any way involved, and therefore could not discuss the situation.
- The Soviets have publicly stated that elements of the Khmer Rouge--minus the "Pol Pot clique"--would be acceptable participants in negotiations for a political settlement. Soviet diplomats in Thailand recently began inquiring about the strength and composition of the Khmer Rouge and which of its leaders would have to be removed for it to become "flexible," according to the US Embassy in Bangkok. A Hungarian diplomat in Bangkok told US Embassy officials that the Soviets, without telling the Vietnamese, were looking into "second echelon" Khmer Rouge to identify possible acceptable participants in future negotiations. He noted that the Soviets did not expect the current Vietnamese leadership to accept the Khmer Rouge, but that the Soviets believed that future Vietnamese leaders might be more flexible and therefore Moscow was simply preparing itself for the future.
- Statements by Soviet diplomats imply that Moscow is taking a more active role in attempting to influence Hanoi. 25X1
- The US Embassy in London reports that Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Rogachev said during US-Soviet regional discussions in March that the Indochinese countries

recognize the impossibility of resolving their internal difficulties without normalization in the region. [redacted]

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Sources of Concern

The heightened Soviet interest in a settlement probably stems from at least two factors; Moscow realizes that its association with the problem will continue to harm its relations with the other countries in the region, and also is increasingly dissatisfied with having to bear the burden of Vietnam's ruined economy. [redacted]

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Since his assumption of power in 1985, Gorbachev has placed special emphasis on improving Soviet relations with China. Despite purported Soviet movement on the other two "obstacles"-- Afghanistan and the buildup of Soviet troops along the Sino-Soviet border--the Chinese continue to say that Cambodia is the most important obstacle to improved Sino-Soviet relations. Even if, as some Soviets may believe, the Chinese have simply seized on the Cambodia issue for negotiating purposes, Soviet movement on Cambodia could put the Chinese in a position where they would have to respond. Likewise, the ASEAN countries have pressed the issue; during Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze's March visit to the region and Thai Foreign Minister Sitthi's May visit to Moscow, ASEAN made Cambodia the dominant issue. The Soviets may also believe that anti-Soviet feeling among the ASEAN countries provoked by the Cambodian situation may lead to an expansion of Chinese influence in the region.

- According to State Department reporting, an East German diplomat said in February that the Soviets perceived the Cambodia conflict as a deterrent to the expansion of Soviet influence in Asia.
- In his July 1986 speech in Vladivostok on Asian affairs, Gorbachev referred to Cambodia as an area of tension. He called for the improvement of Vietnam's relations with China and ASEAN as necessary steps toward normalizing the situation in Cambodia. [redacted]

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Vietnam's continued presence in Cambodia diverts resources from its domestic economy, as well as costing Moscow military aid. According to the US Consulate in Shanghai, a Soviet diplomat said in May that peace in Cambodia would help Vietnam's economy and ease the heavy aid burden on the USSR. Vietnam's continued presence in Cambodia also precludes it from receiving some Western aid that, while unlikely to be significant any time soon, would still reduce Moscow's load slightly. In addition, the Soviets have complained repeatedly about Vietnamese misuse of

Soviet aid--aid which supports, directly or indirectly, Vietnam's activities in Cambodia. [redacted]

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No Significant Movement. . .

Recent Soviet actions are not inconsistent with a campaign simply aimed at disassociating Moscow from Hanoi's activities in Cambodia. The Soviets may believe that their apparent interest in a settlement will cast them as a progressive force in the region and reduce ASEAN opposition to improving political and economic ties with Moscow as well as make the Chinese "main obstacle" difficult to sustain. By broadcasting their flexibility, the Soviets might also be hoping to encourage ASEAN and China to offer concessions to get negotiations started. [redacted]

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Indeed, to date Moscow has taken no concrete steps toward solving the Cambodian problem. The Soviets do not appear to have threatened to cut off military or economic aid to Hanoi; on the contrary, Moscow has reaffirmed its 1985 promise to double its economic aid, currently running over \$1 billion a year, during the 1986-90 Five Year Plan. The Soviet press, while carrying pieces implicitly criticizing Hanoi's misuse of Soviet aid, has not linked this problem to Vietnamese activities in Cambodia or otherwise implicitly criticized Hanoi's Cambodia policy. The Soviets continue to insist that the Vietnamese-backed Heng Samrin government must participate in any negotiated settlement. Although Gorbachev's Vladivostok speech addressed the Cambodian problem, it contained no new initiatives, and Soviet "discussions" with the Chinese on the subject reportedly have been no more than reiterations of standard positions by both sides. Soviet diplomats stress to third parties that they have only limited influence over Vietnam and that ASEAN and China have to make concessions before talks can start. [redacted]

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In addition, Soviet expressions of interest in a political settlement are not completely new; Moscow has publicly called for a negotiated settlement for a number of years. Although their recent public statements go beyond anything they have said before on the subject, the Soviets had hinted as early as 1985 at the possibility of some form of Khmer Rouge participation in negotiations. [redacted]

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. . . But Genuine Concern

On balance, we believe that the new expressions of Soviet concern with Vietnamese involvement in Cambodia and desire for a settlement are genuine. The most convincing evidence of heightened Soviet concern is Moscow's apparent willingness, as indicated by the extensive discussion of the issue during Linh's

visit, to make the need for a solution a bilateral issue between Moscow and Hanoi rather than a purely Vietnamese concern. [redacted] 25X1

Soviet dissatisfaction with the status of the Cambodian problem, while sufficient to excite concern, nevertheless is not yet as important to Moscow as its good relations with Vietnam. The Soviets are primarily interested in continued access to the naval and air bases at Cam Ranh which act as a partial counter to the US bases in the Philippines. Good relations with Vietnam also greatly expand Soviet influence in the rest of Indochina and have the potential, if the Cambodia conflict reaches a diplomatic solution, to help Moscow's efforts to block the expansion of Chinese influence in Southeast Asia. There is also evidence suggesting that Vietnam has been used to a limited extent by Moscow as a surrogate in aiding some Third World countries and insurgents.¹ For these reasons, we believe that the Soviets are unlikely to take drastic action, such as threatening to cut off aid, to force Hanoi to leave Cambodia. Instead, the Soviets are likely to:

- Continue to emphasize to Hanoi the economic advantages of a diplomatic solution.
- Continue to look on their own for possible avenues of dialogue for Hanoi.

[redacted]

- Emphasize to the ASEAN countries and to China Moscow's interest in a settlement, in hopes of both stimulating concessions on negotiations and reducing regional opposition to improved relations with Moscow.

If negotiations never get started, or if they fail, the Soviets are likely to urge Hanoi privately to hold to its promise to withdraw its troops in 1990--a promise well-publicized by both the Vietnamese and the Soviets. A Vietnamese failure to pull out in 1990 would result in a loss of international credibility for both Hanoi and Moscow, despite probable efforts by the Vietnamese under those circumstances to nullify the commitment by alleging continued foreign interference in Cambodia. The Soviets almost certainly will not, however, break publicly with Hanoi over the issue. [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

At the same time, Moscow will try to elicit movement from China and ASEAN. The Soviets probably will try to convince the ASEAN countries that Vietnam has already softened its stance, and that therefore ASEAN must respond with concessions on negotiations. Moscow also will continue to press the Chinese to enter into direct talks with Vietnam to defuse border tensions and to discuss the Cambodian situation. In addition, the Soviets are likely to continue to support Hanoi's tough stance against continuing support for the resistance. [redacted]

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What Would the Soviets Accept in Cambodia?

Moscow is likely to let Hanoi draw the bottom line on which Khmer Rouge figures constitute the "Pol Pot clique" that must be excluded from negotiations and on the composition and leadership of a coalition government. The Soviets appear to have formulated at least general guidelines on both questions, however:

- According to the US Embassy in Moscow, Soviet Foreign Ministry officials recently defined the "Pol Pot clique" as Pol Pot and his wife, Ieng Sary and his wife, and Son Sen. This definition is extremely narrow--almost certainly narrower than Hanoi's--and might be expanded if negotiations were imminent. [redacted]

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- The Soviets appear to envisage a neutral, nonaligned coalition government that would include the leadership of the Heng Samrin government and the Sihanouk and Son Sann factions and elements of the Khmer Rouge. [redacted]

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The Soviets have said that they are prepared to join the other permanent members of the United Nations Security Council in "guaranteeing" any settlement. According to the US Consulate in Shanghai, Soviet diplomats have said that Moscow's guarantee would include no Vietnamese colonization of Cambodia. Nevertheless, the Soviets would be unlikely to support the removal of Vietnamese settlers already in Cambodia. [redacted]

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