

Belated Help? The United Nations' Transitional Authority in Cambodia's Ambiguous Contribution of Peace and Democracy by Christopher Durrant, third year honours international relations

Much could be made of the failure of the United Nations (UN) to mitigate any of the tragedies that occurred in Cambodia during the Cold War. The incursions of North Vietnamese troops into the country, the subsequent aerial bombings by the American military, the "killing fields" of the Khmer Rouge, and the Vietnamese invasion of the country all rank as events that violate the norms of international security — norms the UN ideally is supposed to protect. The failure however, may be fairly easily explained. Cambodia² was jostled between the competing interests of the Soviets, the Americans, and the Chinese, all holding veto powers on the UN Security Council (UNSC) with the Soviets providing support for the Vietnamese invasion, and China supporting the Khmer Rouge in the conflict because Vietnam was a Soviet ally, speaks to Cambodia's role as a playground for Cold War politics. This sad period when concerns of ideology were given more priority than the situation of Cambodian people came to an end with the Cold War. With Mikhail Gorbachev's new approach to Soviet foreign policy, the deadlock at the UN ended and 14 major peacebuilding missions were launched between 1989 and 1999 (Paris, 2004: 3). Among these were the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) in 1992-1993 and its predecessor the United Nations Advance Mission in Cambodia (UNAMIC), which served as a fact-finding mission from 1991 until the beginning of UNTAC.

In discussions of the UN peacekeeping record, UNTAC is frequently overshadowed by the disastrous peacemaking experiences of the United Nations Operation in Somalia II (UNOSOM II) and United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda's (UNAMIR) inability to prevent genocide. It begs the question; have discussions of UN peacekeeping not focussed on UNTAC because it was a success? Or was it simply an unspectacular failure? To understand UNTAC's seeming absence in the popular peacekeeping discourse, it is critical to understand the mission's results. Key among the criteria to judge UNTAC is whether it was able to do more for the security of the Cambodian people than it was able to do during the Cold War. Considering the fact that a large portion of the mission was devoted to the organization of elections, it is not obvious how the mission related to security. The two come into relation because there was a belief that democracy could produce peace. "Peace-building missions in the 1990s reproduced Wilson's faith in the peace-building powers of liberalization" (Paris 2004: 7). It is with this in mind that we try to appraise UNTAC's contributions to both goals of security and democracy in Cambodia. Only after these issues have been settled can UNTAC's absence from the majority of the discourse on peacekeeping be addressed.

The structure of this examination is as follows. Sections I and II deal with the initial situation in Cambodia and UNTAC's mandate. Section III deals with UNTAC's successes and failure in the security issues of disarmament, refugee repatriation, and de-mining. Section IV covers UNTAC's role in supervising Cambodia's 1993 election, Section V consists of conclusions on UNTAC's interconnected legacies of peace and security legacy in Cambodia, and finally, section VI takes section V's conclusions and speculates on how they improve understanding UNTAC's minimal role in the peacekeeping discourse.

² I will be using the name Cambodia as the general name of the country for the purposes of this essay. Variations on the name such as Democratic Kampuchea will only be used when making reference to the particular regime.

I. The Paris Peace Process

Throughout the 1980s, various attempts had been made towards peace in Cambodia, through the efforts of the Association of Southeast Nations (ASEAN); often, however, there was an inability to reach an agreement even between the anti-Vietnamese factions of the Khmer Rouge; Prince Norodom Sihanouk's royalist party, the United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative Cambodia (is usually referred to by its French acronym FUNCINPEC); and former prime minister Son Sann's Khmer People's Liberation Front (Mayall, 1996: 31). The power balance in the country changed, however, when in April 1989, the Vietnamese government announced that it would begin to withdraw its troops from Cambodia. This was a decision based on Gorbachev's apparent lack of interest in supporting Soviet allies in regional conflicts and Vietnam's desire to present itself better on the international stage so as to further trade relations (Mayall, 1996: 31-2). This left the government of People's Democratic Kampuchea (PDK) still insisting on its legitimacy, while the three anti-Vietnamese parties looked to regain control.

To the international community, the three anti-Vietnamese parties looked more like "an incipient civil war than a government in waiting" (Mayall, 1996: 31). With the obvious power vacuum, Secretary-General of the UN, Perez de Cullar, convened an international conference in Paris, co-chaired by France and Indonesia, to work on a power-sharing arrangement in Cambodia. Beginning in 1989, the talks in Paris continued intermittently until October 23, 1991. The repeated breakdowns of the talks involved disagreements regarding the future of the Khmer Rouge (the PDK wanted a provision barring the return to power of the Khmer Rouge) (Mayall, 1996: 34) and the status of the then current-government of the PDK. Eventually, the Supreme National Council (SNC) was created, a body that was intended to embody Cambodian sovereignty, chaired by Norodom Sihanouk, and including members from all factions including the Khmer Rouge. The SNC assumed Cambodia's seat at the UN and was to be the body with which UNTAC was to communicate. On October 23, 1991, it was the SNC that signed the *Agreement on a Comprehensive Political Settlement of the Cambodian Conflict*.

II. The Peace Agreement and UNTAC's Mandate

In attendance at the Paris peace conferences were all five of the permanent members of the UNSC, which had officially encouraged the talks by resolution in 1990. The Security Council's support and attendance at the conference made it possible for the Paris peace agreement to presuppose a UN mission in Cambodia. UNTAC was already named in the agreement, and on October 16, the Security Council passed resolution 717 to establish the UN Advance Mission in Cambodia (UNAMIC) in anticipation of the forthcoming peace agreement. It is the Paris Peace Agreement, therefore, that lays down UNTAC's mandate.

The first Annex of the Agreement states, "UNTAC will exercise the powers necessary to ensure the implementation of this Agreement, including those relating... to elections" (Agreement on a Comprehensive Political Settlement of the Cambodian Conflict, 1991). UNTAC seems to be generally remembered as a UN mission to ensure free-elections, however it seems that it was also responsible for all aspects of the peace agreement. This gave UNTAC a wide range of responsibilities. Section IV of the agreement stipulates a total withdrawal of all foreign military forces from Cambodia. The agreement's second annex makes clear that all military forces are to be cantoned under the supervision of UNTAC as part of a cease-fire. Part V implies that all Cambodian refugees are to be settled back in the country and Part III says that all Cambodians are to "enjoy the rights and freedoms embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights" (Agreement on a Comprehensive Political Settlement of the Cambodian Conflict, 1991). With all these responsibilities, plus the oversight of elections and various other tasks including training Cambodian volunteers in de-mining and complying with SNC advice (as stimulated in the first annex), UNTAC certainly had a full plate. In addition to all the duties set out by the Agreement, the Security Council resolution that authorized UNTAC did not just clarify the reason why the mission was being undertaken (to produce "a just and durable settlement to the Cambodian conflict") but it also added a condition to UNTAC's mission: the election and the mission had to be completed within 18 months (Resolution 745, 28 February 1992).

The large amount of duties assigned to UNTAC were matched with a large amount of resources. At its peak, the mission had 22,000 military and civilian personnel and cost 1.6 billion dollars (Chesterman, 2004: 73). In addition, it was not without power inside the country. The peace agreement signed by all members of the SNC agreed "that all administrative agencies, bodies, and offices acting in the field of foreign affairs, national defence, finance, public security, and information will be placed under the direct control of UNTAC" (Annex 1, Section B). As Michael Doyle writes "[n]ot since the colonial era and the post-colonial era World War Two Allied occupations of Germany and Japan had a foreign presence held so much formal administrative jurisdiction over the civilian function of an independent country" (Paris, 2004: 82).

III. Successes and Failures in UNTAC's Security Related Duties

In 1991, Cambodia had been through a 15-year period of "civil war and extraordinary levels of internal violence" (Greenhill, 2006: 28). It is not absurd, therefore, to suggest that when the Paris Peace Agreement was signed by all four groups possessing militaries, that they might have been sincere in their promise to submit their forces to cantonment, motivated by either the desire for peace or sheer exhaustion. It soon became apparent that neither was the case. In July 1992, only seven months after the start of UNTAC's mission, the Khmer Rouge was refusing to let UNTAC into their areas and they would not provide it with estimates of their troop numbers (Mayall, 1996: 42). The other factions also seemed hesitant, cantoning troops that were mainly teenagers with derelict weapons (Paris, 2004: 84). Despite the timetable goal of having 70 per cent of all armies cantoned by September 1992, only 55,000 troops in total were cantoned under UNTAC (Mayall, 1996: 43). Estimates of the total amount of military personnel belonging to all the factions ranges from 100,000 (at the lowest) to 200,000 which in either case, does not seem to indicate a fantastic success (Greenhill 2006: 29; Mayall, 1996:43). In the end, UNTAC abandoned its cantonment mission and released the few soldiers it had cantoned for agricultural leave.

UNTAC failed in this portion of its mandate, and there is little surprise why. The UN's role was to be a neutral overseer of a cantonment process agreed upon by all four parties in the Paris Peace Agreement. The UN was clear on the fact that UNTAC "could only solve problems through dialogue, persuasion, negotiation, and diplomacy" (Mayall, 1996: 37). Trying to enforce the cantonment process by force would have undoubtedly changed the character of the mission. In the approach UNTAC did take, it was at least able to maintain a degree of peace. UNTAC sustained a total of 82 fatalities during the mission (UN, 2003: untac.htm) and there was a decrease, but far from an end, to fighting between the factions.

In contrast to the containment process, UNTAC was highly successful in its efforts to repatriate refugees living in Thailand; of the 360,000 that had been identified in Thailand, 96 per cent had been repatriated and settled in Cambodia by 1993 (Mayhall, 1996: 42). The Khmer Rouge were helpful in this process, allowing UN officials into their base areas (Myhall, 1996: 41). While at first this cooperation may seem bizarre, it is well explained by the Khmer Rouge's ethnocentric point of view. The Khmer Rouge repeatedly demanded that UNTAC force all Vietnamese to leave the country, which included any ethnic Vietnamese who were Cambodian citizens (Greenhill, 2006: 31). A major source of the violence perpetrated during UNTAC's presence in the country was by the Khmer Rouge towards ethnic Vietnamese.

The pattern emerging is that UNTAC appeared to be successful when other actors involved wanted them to be. By all indications, the Vietnamese troops withdrew from the country according to plan; however, it may be that this had much more to do with the Vietnamese government's willingness than UNTAC's presence. UNTAC lacked tracking tactics and the ability to monitor movement across borders because of the dense Cambodian jungles, which led to an inability to monitor locations of Khmer Rouge or Vietnamese troops (Mayhall, 1996: 48).

Discouragingly, one of UNTAC's failures that cannot be blamed on anyone except its own organization is its failure to significantly de-mine the country. The estimate is that UNTAC's small de-mining team removed 15,000 of the country's eight to ten million mines during the mission (Mayhall,

1996: 48). While a complete de-mining of Cambodia in UNTAC's 18-month mandate would have been nearly impossible, it seems questionable why UNTAC brought such a small de-mining team to a country with such a large amount of mines. It was a failure on multiple levels, because it also undermined and impeded the work of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) inside the country. It is quite telling of the UN's sluggishness to adapt to local factors that it was only in January 1992, a month before the commencement of UNTAC, that UNAMIC's mandate was expanded by the Security Council to include training in mine clearance (Mayall, 1996: 130).

IV. Free and Fair? UNTAC and the 1993 Cambodian Election

Though UNTAC's success in other areas of the mission appear to be shaky, it is for the running of election process, on schedule, that UNTAC is remembered best. This is the reason why inside the UN, the mission is remembered as a partial success (Chesterman, 2004: 224). Considering the record in Somalia and Rwanda, it might be easy to see why the UN would be able to take a favourable view towards the Cambodian mission based on the fact that nothing dramatic happened; yet in terms of the elections supervised, it was hardly a success.

The Paris Peace Agreement says several times, most notably in Part 2, Article 12, that the elections are to be "free and fair" (Agreement on a Comprehensive Political Settlement of the Cambodian Conflict, 1991). This was not the case. One of the main reasons for this was UNTAC's inability to take administrative control from the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), which was merely the electoral name of the party that had ruled the PDK. Despite having the unprecedented power over the administration of the country, as deemed necessary in the Paris Peace Agreement for holding a fair election, UNTAC was incapable of actually doing so. This was largely due to a lack of knowledge of the local culture and the Khmer language (Mayall, 1996: 44), and led to situations where UN officials had to rely on briefings on the activities of ministries as provided by the same ministries. For better or worse, this caused the Khmer Rouge to leave the election process, because they had thought that it was agreed UNTAC was going to dismantle government institutions, even ones related to facilitating daily life, if they were controlled by the CPP (Greenhill, 2006: 30).

As unreasonable as the Khmer Rouge demands may have appeared, it seems "the CPP continued to hold all positions of administrative power within Cambodia" and that they used any advantage they could derive from them in the election (Greenhill, 2006: 33). It should also be noted that the CPP did not stop at administrative meddling; they targeted the other parties and their supporters with violence. In the 10 weeks prior to the election, the CPP and the Khmer Rouge are thought to be the primary perpetrators of the acts of political violence, which totaled 176 deaths, 316 injuries and 67 abductions (Paris, 2004: 85). As repugnant as their actions were, the Khmer Rouge targeted mainly ethnic Vietnamese and were not trying to influence the outcomes of the election, where as the CPP "violat(ed) both the letter and the spirit of the Paris agreements...and murdered activists and voters for the other parties" (Greenhill, 2006: 34).

Despite these flaws in the process, during the planned time span of May 23 to May 27 in 1993, the elections took place in relative peace. Critics of UNTAC admit that the election themselves were conducted fairly (Greenhill, 2006: 34) and there was encouraging 89 per cent voter turnout. (Mayall, 2006: 55). The results were that FUNCINPEC (led by Prince Ranariddh, who had served as leader since Sihanouk had stepped down to play a more neutral role as the leader of the SNC) won an unexpected 45 per cent of the vote, with the CPP winning 38 per cent. Once it learned the unfavourable results, the CPP did what it could to undermine the election. The first incident involved the CPP supporting Prince Chakrapong (half-brother of Prince Ranariddh) in leading a secessionist attempt in the eastern part of the country. Though this attempt had little basis in any real social cleavage and had fizzled by mid-June, it provided exactly what the CPP wanted: pressure on UNTAC and FUNCINPEC to include it in government (Mayall, 1996: 56). Prince Sihanouk quickly constructed an agreement for an interim government where he would serve as head of state and both Prince Ranariddh and Hun Sen (long time

leader of the CPP) would be co-prime ministers. Most notably he arranged this agreement without consulting his son, Prince Ranariddh.

Considering FUNCINPEC would have had more than 50 per cent of the seats in the assembly with a coalition with the Buddhist Liberal Democratic Party, the deal with Hun Sen was not obvious. It was never agreed that power sharing among major players would continue after the end of the transition period. The Paris Peace Agreements only set out specifications that the new Cambodian constitution would have to provide for the protection for human rights, the creation of a mode of government along the lines of a liberal democracy, and that it would have to be passed by a vote of two-thirds in favour. Nowhere did it specify anything about first and second prime ministers, or dividing ministerial posts between the two largest parties. There was much debate in the international community about whether this was a fair interpretation of the will of the Cambodian people or not (McCargo, 2005: 100). UNTAC allowed the assembly to be formed with the dual-prime minister system, and in September, after the passage of a new constitution, declared the mission finished.

V. Conclusion UNTAC's Legacy of Peace and Democracy in Cambodia

The question of whether UNTAC's presence in Cambodia had a lasting effect of improving peace and democracy in the country is a complicated one. The idea that democracy can lead to a reduction in violent conflict is an interesting one, but democracy in Cambodia is fraught with issues. Firstly, it has been suggested that UNTAC and the UN have done more harm than good in declaring the success of the 1993 Cambodian elections. "The successes of the 1993 election ... were more technical than substantive, for FUNCINPEC's victory led to no real transfer of power" (McCargo, 2005: 99). Cambodia has been described as "an electoral authoritarian regime with pseudo-democratic elements" (McCargo, 2005:106). John Sanderson, the head of the military division of UNTAC, has said that in holding elections in the manner introduced by UNTAC — elections that are technically correct but neither free nor fair — the ruling group in Cambodia has received "considerable undeserved support from the international community (and) its hand has...been strengthened" (1998).

There are some voices that support the notion that the cause of liberal democracy in Cambodia has been advanced by UNTAC. Simon Chesterman writes,

[i]f one takes the view Hun Sen...was always going to be the dominant political force in Cambodia, and that the purpose of the mission was to mollify the exercise of that power through introducing the language of human rights to Cambodian civil society, fostering the establishment of a relatively free press, and taking steps in the direction of a democratic basis for legitimate government, the mission was indeed a partial success (2004: 224).

Chesterman appears to be correct in his assertions. Freedom House reports that "many civil society groups operate in Cambodia, work[ing] on a broad spectrum of issues" including human rights (2007). However, it should be noted that in 2007, Cambodia received a six for political rights and a five for civil liberties (with seven being the lowest score in both categories) meaning it receives the "not free" designation (Freedom House, 2007). Undoubtedly, civil society is essential for democratic change; however, there is little signal that the Cambodian leadership is feeling the right kind of pressure. Many make the case that post-UNTAC, Cambodian politics did not experience any pathological change (Paris, 2004: 88). In some ways, things appear to be worse. Hun Sen remains the leader of the CPP, and until 2006, Prince Ranariddh was the head of FUNCINPEC. Both parties are described as being "post-ideological" in that they only strive for power and wealth, and FUNCINPEC has served as a uncritical coalition partner with the CPP (McCargo, 2005: 99). Sam Rainsy (head of the Sam Rainsy Party) is "the only significant opposition figure" and he faces harassment from the other parties" (McCargo, 2005: 99).

Despite the feebleness of Cambodia's democracy, some suggest that there is evidence to support the idea that holding the elections helped reduce violence. Though the Khmer Rouge continued violence after the elections (though oddly, not during), their "decision to abandon the democratic process resulted in a gradual unraveling of the organization, which eventually led to the KR's effective dissolution by

1997" (Greenhill, 2006: 31). However, the author who makes that claim also points out the Khmer Rouge "never politically recovered from domestic reaction to the abuses it perpetrated" and that it was "financially hobbled" because it was no longer receiving military or financial support from China or Thailand (Greenhill, 2006: 32-33).

If the Khmer Rouge had other factors in its demise, and the current political parties use violence and intimidation, has Cambodian democracy contributed to the security of the Cambodian people? The answer is, slightly. With the Khmer Rouge's increasing weakness and irrelevance, Cambodia post-UNTAC went from a country where "election-related violence could have easily escalated into renewed civil war" to a country where "the CPP is now indisputably hegemonic" (Paris, 2004: 86; McCargo, 2005: 106). As UNTAC failed in its mission to disarm the Cambodian factions, one can imagine that FUNCINPEC and other groups had the choice to continue fighting. However, with the CPP controlling the largest amount of forces (over 100,000 by the end of the UNTAC mission), taking the battle to the political arena must have seemed like the best choice for other parties (Greenhill, 2006: 35). And, with the CPP still firmly in control of the state administrative structure, elections are neither free nor fair. In the end, it is hardly surprising that FUNCINPEC is devoid of any real oppositional zeal. If the CPP did not have hegemonic control however, and if there was real political pluralism in the country, it may well have resulted in renewed civil war. Democracy's potential for peace building is hardly backed up by the Cambodian example, though perhaps this is because of fortunate circumstances, meaning this idea is not completely disproved either. At best, however, it seems the introduction of electoral structures in Cambodia has meant that violence is now constrained to the people who participate in these elections at a level beyond voting. In the end, there is little surprise as to why Cambodia has been cited as one of the reasons why the UN shifted from an emphasis on democracy in the early 1990s to good governance in the current decade (Chesterman, 2004: 225).

VI: Conclusions on UNTAC's Role in the Peacekeeping Discourse

UNTAC can be said to have had success in Cambodia, but not in any sort of ideal way. Sent to oversee a peace agreement when parties like the Khmer Rouge broke the terms of agreement, UNTAC took only diplomatic action. When UNTAC was unable to get the administrative control of the country away from the CPP, the former let the CPP continue to run the country. Taking a more aggressive stance in either case, even had they had the resources to do so, would have likely ended in a violent and protracted mission. In terms of its humanitarian role, the sluggishness of de-mining the country alone is a good indication that the mission did not fulfill its potential. In the end, UNTAC conducted itself in the classic peacekeeping style, fulfilling only the roles all parties in the conflict would allow it to fill. Having presided over a shift in Cambodian politics from civil war to a generally peaceful authoritarian regime is the UNTAC legacy — they did not make the relative peace, but rather facilitated it. If UNISOM II is an example of the disasters that can result from peacemaking, UNTAC is an example of the uninspiring positive results that a classical peacekeeping mission can yield. There is little wonder then, why UNTAC crops so little in the peacekeeping discourse despite being considered a flagship UN mission at the time. Its lack of major disasters and its superficial and coincidental successes make it an ineffective stick with which critics can beat the UN. Yet at the same time, the fact that UNTAC helped facilitate CPP's dominance in the country makes it a poor example for the champions of the idea that the UN can help bring democracy or even remain neutral in a conflict. The fact that UNTAC's mission does not easily lend itself to any broad opinions on peacekeeping operations should not discourage its study. UNTAC's experiences contain many lessons on the possibilities and limitations inherent in peacekeeping operations.

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