

# **Cambodian-Thai Relations during the Khmer Rouge Regime: Evidence from the East German Diplomatic Archives<sup>1</sup>**

Christian Oesterheld

*Social Science Division, Mahidol University International College*

## **Abstract**

Unsurprisingly, the scholarly literature on Democratic Kampuchea focuses on the Khmer Rouge's internal policies, notably aspects of their ideology and regime of terror. By and large, Democratic Kampuchea is seen as a hermetically sealed hermit state with little engagement in foreign relations. If indeed foreign policy is scrutinized, most accounts are limited to a discussion of the Khmer Rouge's relations to China and the Cambodian-Vietnamese war of the late 1970s. The similarly troublesome, if non-escalating relationship between Democratic Kampuchea and Thailand during the Khmer Rouge's time in power is rarely touched upon in the scholarly literature on Cambodia.

Based on an analysis of primary sources from the East German diplomatic archives, this paper aims to help filling this historiographical gap by providing an account on Thai-Cambodian relations during the period of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979), framed by a discussion of some basic principles of Khmer Rouge foreign policy.

**Key words:** Border Disputes, Democratic Kampuchea, Foreign Relations, Khmer Rouge, Thailand

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## **Introduction**

Throughout the 20th century, bilateral relations between Thailand and Cambodia have been marked by limited cooperation in terms of petty trade along the Thai-Cambodian border on the one hand, and territorial disputes – often of a rather symbolic nature – on the other hand. Despite recurrent skirmishes in the vicinity of Preah Vihear temple and anti-Thai riots in Phnom Penh in 2003, so far no systematic historical study has been undertaken to scrutinize Thai-Cambodian relations in the post-colonial era – in stark contrast to the scholarly concern with Thai-Burmese or Cambodian-Vietnamese relations. In an attempt to narrow this historiographical gap, the study of archival materials presented here discusses a short, yet tremendously significant period in Cambodia's recent history, namely the less than four years-long regime of the Khmer Rouge's Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979). In this context, the present analysis also aims to contribute to the scarce literature on Khmer Rouge diplomacy and foreign relations, critically questioning the frequent depiction of Democratic Kampuchea as a hermetically sealed hermit state. Belying this standardized view, documents from diplomatic archives attest to the Khmer Rouge's attempts to gain international recognition by continuing Prince Sihanouk's engagement in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). This non-partisan outlook of Democratic Kampuchea's foreign policy helps, in part, to explain the differences in the development of bilateral relations to Cambodia's neighbour states in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Whereas territorial conflicts with Vietnam led to armed conflict in the late 1970s, similar border disputes with Thailand proved to be non-escalating and limited economic cooperation between both states could be maintained throughout the period of Democratic Kampuchea. It is argued here that beyond the frequently discussed cultural similarities of Indianized Cambodia and Thailand vis-à-vis the more Sinitic culture of Vietnam, geostrategic considerations have contributed to the relatively calm relationship between Democratic Kampuchea and neighbouring Thailand.

## **Materials and Methods**

This study is based on an analysis of diplomatic documents from the Foreign Ministry of the German Democratic Republic (Ministerium für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten, MfAA), now kept in the Political Archives at the Federal Foreign Office in Berlin. Information from these primary sources are then contextualized and correlated to secondary sources “in order to communicate an understanding of past events” (cf. Elena et al., 2010, p. 25). Secondary sources here include scholarly articles touching upon the subject of Democratic Kampuchea’s foreign relations, as well as contemporary media reports.

## **The Significance of Archival Research**

The use of evidence from archival sources in historical science is generally seen as paramount. Historians depend on primary materials in order “to rule out rival explanations and to increase confidence in their own account” (Vitalis, 2006, p. 11). Sole reliance on secondary media accounts, as in some semi-historical writing on current affairs, does not only decrease the overall validity of argument and interpretation, but also fails to account for the inherent complexity of political action. This is particularly the case for research on secretive political regimes like the Khmer Rouge’s Democratic Kampuchea.

In consequence, archival research has been a key to understanding the highly opaque Khmer Rouge regime (see Chigas, 2000, or Caswell, 2010). David Chandler’s seminal study on the Khmer Rouge’s central detention facility S-21 (see Chandler, 1999), for example, relies mainly on the prison’s archival records, now safeguarded as part of the Tuol Sleng Museum for Genocidal Crimes, and – in copy – at the Documentation Centre of Cambodia (DC-Cam). The collections of DC-Cam by now extend far beyond the tortured ‘confessions’ of prisoners in S-21. They include Khmer Rouge radio telegrams, minutes of cadre meetings and other official documents, as well as an extensive photographic archive and records of oral testimony. As such, the collections hold at DC-Cam have

become a major source for historical research on the Khmer Rouge regime as well as an important asset for the currently on-going accountability process in the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC).<sup>2</sup>

Notably, little attention has been paid, so far, to archives outside of Cambodia. An exception to this is Dmitry Mosyakov's work on relations between the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese communists based on materials from the Russian State Archive of Modern History (see Mosyakov, 2005). Surprisingly, it seems that no major attempts have been undertaken, either by scholars or the ECCC, to access Vietnamese archives, which are suspected to keep a significant number of Khmer Rouge documents taken out of the country during the period of the Vietnam-backed People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK).

### **The Diplomatic Archives of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in Berlin**

As mentioned earlier, this study of Thai-Cambodian relations during the period of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-79) relies on diplomatic documents from the socialist German Democratic Republic (East Germany). After German reunification in 1990, the records of the GDR Ministry of Foreign Affairs and those of diplomatic missions of the GDR (1949-1990) abroad have been integrated into the holdings of the Political Archives at the Federal Foreign Office in Berlin (PAAA).<sup>3</sup> According to German law, access to (non-classified) materials is restricted to files that have been closed for at least 30 years. In consequence, materials on Democratic Kampuchea have only recently become accessible to scholars. Diplomatic relations between Cambodia and East Germany had been formally initiated in May 1969 and the PAAA holdings on Cambodian affairs during the following decade count well over five thousand pages.

Although East Germany was not among the scant number of

<sup>2</sup> DC-Cam has provided about half a million pieces of documentary evidence to the parties at the ECCC and the center's director Youk Chhang has been questioned as a witness for three days in February 2002.

<sup>3</sup> *Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts*. – Archival research in the Political Archives of the Federal Foreign Office was conducted in August 2011 and May 2012. I wish to express my gratitude to the assistance in allocating relevant materials, which I received from the archive's staff on these occasions.

countries able to maintain an embassy in Phnom Penh from 1975-1979, documents from its diplomatic archives are nonetheless of significant interest for research on Democratic Kampuchea's foreign policy in general, as well as bilateral relations with its Southeast Asian neighbour states, particularly Thailand and Vietnam. Relevant archival holdings of the PAAA in this regard include materials from Democratic Kampuchea's Embassy in East Berlin, which remained active until May 1977,<sup>4</sup> and minutes of meetings between the East German and the DK diplomatic corps in Hanoi, Vientiane and Beijing. Additionally, the archive holds a vast collection of intelligence materials, internal country assessments, official DK documents and propaganda materials, as well as media clippings and translations of news wires from a diverse range of sources.<sup>5</sup>

### **Democratic Kampuchea's Foreign Policy**

It has been claimed that, "[i]n addition to being brutal, the Khmer Rouge regime of Democratic Kampuchea (DK) was one of the most isolated in the world" (Clymer, 2004, p. 109). If this claim suggests a lack of concern towards matters of foreign policy among the Khmer Rouge leadership, or the absence of DK diplomatic relations with the outside, it proves to be unqualified. Even the Khmer Rouge's staunchest critics admit that "despite its xenophobia, it would be wrong to see DK as a hermit state, shunning foreign entanglement" (Kiernan, 2001, p. 193).

### **Basic Principles of DK's Foreign Policy**

As early as April 25th to 27th, 1975, just a week after Khmer Rouge forces had entered Phnom Penh, a special National Congress outlined the principles of Democratic Kampuchea's foreign policy in terms of

"independence, peace, neutrality and non-alignment, absolutely prohibiting any country from establishing military bases in Cambodia, against all forms of subversion against Cambodia from outside, whether military, political, economic, cultural, social or diplomatic".<sup>6</sup>

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4 Cf. MfAA Hausmitteilung [Internal memo], November 2nd, 1977, in: PAAA/C 6689.

5 Beyond the main corpus of materials in German, the archives hold a range of Russian, French, Khmer and English language documents. The linguistic provenance of materials is clearly indicated in this article on a case-to-case basis.

6 Quoted in Pradhan, 1985, p. 184. Cf. also Information über Haltung Kambodschas zu

Although, throughout 1975, formal diplomatic relations were limited to China and North Korea, as well as DK's immediate neighbours Vietnam and Thailand (cf. Poole, 1976, p. 29), the "forging of international contacts" has been called "another significant political activity of the new regime in 1975" (Ragos-Espinas, 1983, p. 44). Consequently, an official delegation, led by DK's foreign minister Ieng Sary, was sent to attend the Ministerial Conference of Non-Aligned Nations in Lima (Peru) in late August, and the Seventh Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York from 1-15 September 1975, where "the delegates from around the world warmly applauded" the Cambodian delegation (Barron and Paul, 1977, p. 209). Ieng Sary's departure to Lima and New York was preceded by a state visit to Beijing, together with Khieu Samphan,<sup>7</sup> who "in his speech referred to the tremendous support and assistance rendered by China" (Pradhan, 1985, p. 185) to the Khmer Rouge struggle. Indeed, China, alongside North Korea, would remain Democratic Kampuchea's foremost international ally for years to come. The special relationship to China is mentioned throughout in diplomatic minutes of the GDR, noting the array of bilateral trade and aid agreements, the posting of Chinese specialists in DK industrial estates, or the Phnom Penh's sole functioning air link, which was to Beijing.<sup>8</sup>

Reverberating the basic foreign policy principles of the special National Congress, DK's then Head-of-State Samdech Norodom Sihanouk assured the United Nations General Assembly in October 1975 that

"Cambodia wants to establish friendly relations with  
all countries, states and governments which cherish peace, justice  
and freedom and which respect the independence, neutrality, sovereignty,  
territorial integrity and non-aligned policy of the Cambodian

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internationalen Problemen [Information regarding Cambodia's attitude towards international problems], Abteilung Ferner Osten [Far East Division], August 20th, 1975, in: PAAA/C 6694.

7 Khieu Samphan did not join Ieng Sary on his trip to the Americas, but continued to Pyongyang (North Korea).

8 Cf. Informationen über einige Aspekte der Innen- und Außenpolitik des "Demokratischen Kampuchea" seitens der SRV [Information regarding some aspects of the interior and foreign policies of 'Democratic Kampuchea' voiced by the PRV], Embassy of the GDR in Hanoi, August 9th, 1976, in: PAAA/C 6682. Cf. Clymer, 2004, p. 109, Ragos-Espinas, 1983, pp. 80-83, or Jackson, 1978, p. 82.

nation and people”<sup>9</sup>

Throughout the period of Democratic Kampuchea, and after,<sup>10</sup> the Khmer Rouge leadership utilized the United Nations and the Non-Aligned Movement as their primary international platforms.

In accordance with the Khmer Rouge’s foreign policy thrusts of territorial integrity, non-interference, and the right for national self-determination, Ieng Sary’s and Khieu Samphan’s speeches at these international forums commonly voice support for the Palestinian and East Timorese struggles for self-determination and urge the final decolonization of southern Africa, repeatedly condemning the racist Apartheid regime. Reversely, and due to DK’s close allegiance with China, the reintegration of Taiwan into the ‘Chinese motherland’ is urged. Similarly, the Khmer Rouge leadership condemns “the splittist schemes of the American imperialists, seeking to maintain their domination over South Korea” and encourages “the independent and peaceful reunification of Korea”.<sup>11</sup>

The Khmer Rouge’s subscription to the revolutionary ideals of the Non-Aligned Movement, rather than to the idea of socialist brotherhood, were also promulgated in Ieng Sary’s speeches before the tiny diplomatic corps in Phnom Penh. During the 1977 New Year’s reception he promoted

“the revolution of Kampuchea as a modest contribution to the common cause of the revolution in the world and to the struggle of all peace- and justice-loving peoples, especially to the struggle of the peoples of the non-aligned countries and the Third World”.<sup>12</sup>

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9 Quoted in Ragos-Espinas, 1983, p. 44.

10 The Khmer Rouge retained their official acknowledged seat at the United Nations, representing the Cambodian government during the opposition’s Vietnam-supported *Peoples Republic of Kampuchea* (PRK) from January 1979.

11 ‘The People of Democratic Kampuchea Hails the Victories of the 5th Summit Conference of Non-Aligned Countries’, in: Democratic Kampuchea, a Workers’ and Peasants’ State in Southeast Asia, (Embassy of Democratic Kampuchea in Berlin, GDR. March 1977).

12 Extracts from his speech are reprinted in: Democratic Kampuchea, a Workers’ and Peasants’ State in Southeast Asia, (Embassy of Democratic Kampuchea in Berlin, GDR. March 1977).

## Expanding Diplomatic Relations

If throughout 1975 formal diplomatic relations remained very limited, the Khmer Rouge leaders were anxious to expand their international cooperation since early 1976, notably with a focus on the non-communist developing world assembled in the Non-Aligned Movement, but also including Western countries like Great Britain, the Netherlands, Denmark, Austria, Greece, Finland or Italy (see Morris, 1999, pp. 75 f., Ragos-Espinas, 1983, p. 46, and Pradhan, 1985, p. 186). During 1976 and 1977 the rate of state visits by Khmer Rouge leaders increased dramatically too, including a vast array of Asian and African countries.<sup>13</sup> Some ‘Kampuchea Friendship Organizations’, notably from Scandinavian countries, were invited for guided tours of Democratic Kampuchea, and the number of foreign embassies in Phnom Penh increased gradually. However, until the end of 1977, the diplomatic missions active in the Cambodian capital remained restricted to China, North Korea, Vietnam (until December), Laos, Cuba, Albania, Romania, Yugoslavia, and Egypt (Jackson, 1978, pp. 81 f.), with little, if any, freedom of movement for the diplomatic corps:

“The foreign diplomats stationed in Phnom Penh led a closely guarded existence, allowed little contact with each other and no contact at all with the Cambodian population. They lived in an almost hermetically sealed country”.<sup>14</sup>

Beyond the diplomatic presence of the aforementioned nine countries in Phnom Penh, intelligence assessments of the GDR claim that Democratic Kampuchea, by the time, “entertain[ed] diplomatic relations

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Informationen über einige Aspekte der Innen- und Außenpolitik des “Demokratischen Kampuchea” seitens der SRV [Information regarding some aspects of the interior and foreign policies of ‘Democratic Kampuchea’ voiced by the PRV], Embassy of the GDR in Hanoi, August 9th, 1976, in: PAAA/C 6682.

<sup>14</sup> Morris, 1999, p. 75. – See also similar appraisals in the GDR diplomatic archives, e.g. Informationen über einige Aspekte der Innen- und Außenpolitik des “Demokratischen Kampuchea” seitens der SRV [Information regarding some aspects of the interior and foreign policies of ‘Democratic Kampuchea’ voiced by the PRV], Embassy of the GDR in Hanoi, August 9th, 1976, in: PAAA/C 6682.

with around 100 states, mostly non-aligned countries”.<sup>15</sup>

### **Democratic Kampuchea and ASEAN**

By mid-May 1976, Democratic Kampuchea had established diplomatic relations with all member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) except for Indonesia. Apparently, relations with Indonesia were hampered by Democratic Kampuchea’s support for the East Timorese resistance movement Fretilin, although it has also been suggested that Indonesia’s friendly relations with Vietnam posed an impediment (Ragos-Espinas, 1983, p. 96) or that “Indonesia’s continuing suspicion of China” played a role (Morris, 1999, p. 76). However, on August 6th, 1978, Phnom Penh Radio announced the formal establishment of diplomatic relations between both countries at the ambassadorial level (see Morris, 1999, p. 83).

Despite its wish to develop friendly relations to ASEAN member states, as well as relations with the ASEAN group at a bilateral level, the Khmer Rouge leadership explicitly refused offers to join ASEAN<sup>16</sup> in the future (Weggel, 1977, p. 53 and Ragos-Espinas, 1983, p. 96).

### **Relations to the Socialist Block**

Significantly, the Khmer Rouge showed little interest in developing closer diplomatic ties with the states of the Warsaw Pact, except for maverick Romania, which had an embassy in Phnom Penh since 1976. Until 1977, Soviet Russia and the “socialist brother states” had aimed towards a normalization of diplomatic relations with the DK regime.<sup>17</sup> East Germany’s continuous attempts to reopen its diplomatic mission in Phnom Penh failed, and even Berlin’s offers of solidarity aid to Democratic Kampuchea remained unanswered.<sup>18</sup> Undoubtedly, this distance to the

<sup>15</sup> *Zur Entwicklung im Demokratischen Kampuchea* [Regarding developments in Democratic Kampuchea], Abteilung FO (Fern-Ost) [Division Far-East], Berlin, March 30th, 1977, in: PAAA/C 6682.

<sup>16</sup> Possibilities in this regard were discussed between Malaysia’s Foreign Minister Tengku Ahmad Rithaudeen and Ieng Sary during his visit to Kuala Lumpur in March 1977.

<sup>17</sup> See Jahresorientierung 1977 für die Gestaltung der Beziehungen DDR-Demokratisches Kampuchea [Annual orientation for the formation of relations GDR-Democratic Kampuchea], December 1976, in: PAAA/C 6664.

<sup>18</sup> Id., and cf.: PAAA/C 954/77.

states of the socialist block was warranted in order to entertain close economic and military relations with China.<sup>19</sup>

Until border clashes with Vietnam worsened throughout 1977, Democratic Kampuchea had officially pursued a policy of limited cooperation with its neighbour state, encouraging Vietnam to reopen its embassy in Phnom Penh in December 1975, voicing support for the international recognition of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam at the United Nations,<sup>20</sup> and fostering diplomatic exchange by mutual state visits throughout 1976. Behind the scenes, however, the Vietnamese were accused of expansionism and neo-imperialism, and a major Vietnamese attack upon Democratic Kampuchea in late 1977 ultimately led to the closure of the Vietnamese embassy in Phnom Penh and the termination of all remaining diplomatic relations with the states of the Warsaw pact.

Based on the increasingly hostile relations between Democratic Kampuchea and Vietnam (as well as the country's socialist allies), and the intensification of armed conflict throughout 1978, the Khmer Rouge leadership started to seek broader international support in order to avoid a fully-fledged Vietnamese invasion. From the beginning of 1978, foreign dignitaries were invited to visit Democratic Kampuchea.<sup>21</sup> At a conference of the Non-Aligned Movement in Belgrade, in July 1978, Democratic Kampuchea sought, unsuccessfully, Vietnam's expulsion from the movement (Pradhan, 1985, p. 190). Also, high-level meetings had been arranged between Ieng Sary and Japan's foreign minister Sunao Sonoda, and even a normalization of relations with the United States was initiated, leading to the visit of Washington Post special envoys to Democratic Kampuchea in December 1978. Out of protest against the Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea – the final campaign lasting from December 25th, 1978 to January 7th, 1979 – the Khmer Rouge regime would ultimately be able to mobilize lasting support from an unlikely alliance of communist

19 Since the Sino-Soviet border war of 1969, relations between the two communist countries had deteriorated sharply.

20 See Ieng Sary's speech "On Certain International Problems", at the 31st session of the United Nations General Assembly, reprinted in: *Democratic Kampuchea, a Workers' and Peasants' State in Southeast Asia*, (Embassy of Democratic Kampuchea in Berlin, GDR, March 1977).

21 E.g. the Swedish ambassador to China, cf. internal notes of the 'Division Northern Europe' in the GDR Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in: PAAA/C 6675.

China and capitalist Western powers for years to come (cf. Ragos-Espinass, 1983, pp. 90 ff.).

**Cambodian-Thai Relations during Democratic Kampuchea:  
Barter Trade and Non-Escalating Border Clashes**

Similarly to Vietnam, Thailand and Democratic Kampuchea were sharing a common, historically troublesome border, and the Khmer Rouge leadership was very conscious about the possibility of Thailand reaffirming territorial claims in disputed border areas during periods in which the Cambodian state was politically weakened. In a CPK gathering in August 1976, Pol Pot “singled out the ‘contemptible people to the east and to the west’ (Vietnam and Thailand) as causes for vigilance and alarm” (Chandler, 1999, p. 56). Additionally, the legacy of Thailand’s alliance with the United States during the Second Indochina War increased the Khmer Rouge’s suspicions and unease towards their western neighbour. However, reversely there was a long tradition of cross-border trade between the two countries, which even had persisted throughout the time of Cambodia’s civil war from 1970-75, and a fair amount of geostrategic interests would enable an unlikely alliance between the Khmer Rouge and Thailand’s right-wing governments of the mid-1970s. Significant in this context was to be the regional influence of China and the commonly perceived threat of Vietnam’s vision of an Indochinese Union.

Consequently, Thai-Cambodian relations during the period of Democratic Kampuchea are determined by these tensions between mutual suspicions and (non-escalating) border conflicts, and limited economic cooperation and shared geopolitical interests.

**From Revolutionary Hostility towards Reconciliation and Trade,  
1970-76**

During the early 1970s, Thailand, under military rule, had allowed the United States to establish air bases to support their war in Indochina. Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn, Thailand’s Prime Minister since 1963, and his deputy, the Thai army’s Commander-in-Chief Praphas Charusathian, had been regarded as the prime regional enemies of

the Khmer Rouge liberation movement. In retrospect, an Aide-Mémoire of Democratic Kampuchea's Foreign Ministry, dated February 4th, 1977, notes the

“extremely dolorous past for which the fascist Thai government, lackey of the American imperialists, is responsible in participating in the devastating aggression war of the American imperialists against the nation and the people of Kampuchea. At that time, the reactionary Thai government, whose file-leaders were Thanom-Praphass, handed Thailand over to the American imperialists to set up many important military bases for their air, naval and ground forces. There, troops, aircrafts of all kinds and the most sophisticated armaments were assembled and used to destroy Kampuchea and to massacre her people”.<sup>22</sup>

Despite comprised of many ultra-conservative politicians, the subsequent civilian governments of Sanya Dhammasakti (October 1973 – February 1975), M.R. Seni Pramroj (February – March 1975 and April – October 1976), and his younger brother M.R. Kukrit Promoj (March 1975 – April 1976) administered the withdrawal of US troops from Thailand, fostering policies of co-existence with its communist neighbours in Indochina (see Rungswasdisab, 2005, p. 80).

After M.R. Kukrit Promoj had announced the establishment of diplomatic relations with China and visited Beijing on July 1st, 1975, the way was paved for a normalization of relations between Democratic Kampuchea and Thailand (cf. Poole, 1976, p. 27). In late October 1975, Ieng Sary visited Bangkok and full diplomatic relations between the two countries were established by a joint communiqué co-signed by Thailand's foreign minister Chatchai Chunhawan, leading to the establishment of border liaison offices in order to deal with economic as well as political issues. Both sides stressed the historical relations between the countries,

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<sup>22</sup> *Aide-Mémoire, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Democratic Kampuchea*, February 4th, 1977, in: PAAA/C 6701. Unofficial English translation prepared by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MfAA), GDR.

rooted in shared customs as well as Buddhist influences.<sup>23</sup>

As internal communications of East Germany's diplomatic corps show, Vietnam's assessment of the normalization of DK-Thai relations in 1975 was marked by "critical distance", particularly since Kampuchea refrained from mentioning existing border disputes or the continuing American military presence in Thailand in the joint communiqué. At the same time, Vietnamese comrades showed understanding, since good relations with Thailand provided an avenue to tackle problems of scant supply based on cross-border trade.<sup>24</sup> This first rapprochement with Thailand was also part of DK's broader foreign policy to foster friendly international relations based on mutual respect and neutrality. Although the communiqué's ultimate aim was to develop diplomatic relations on the ambassadorial level by year's end, an increasing rate of border conflicts prevented this from materializing for the time being.

However, as a result of the joint communiqué, trade in the border areas, which had persisted throughout the Cambodian civil war of the early 1970s, was officially formalized and allowed to flourish, although problems ensued when Cambodian debts to Thai businessmen in Aranyaprathet remained unpaid (cf. Kiernan, 1996, p. 143). After a Cambodian-Thai border summit in June 1976, trade relations expanded,<sup>25</sup> and until they came to a near-hold after a military coup d'état in Thailand on October 6th, 1976,<sup>26</sup> truckloads of Thai products poured into Cambodia, including machine parts and oils, penicillin and vitamins, salt, sugar and other commodities (see Kiernan, 1996, pp. 144 f.).

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23 See Gemeinsames Kommuniqué Kambodscha-Thailand [Joint Communiqué Cambodia-Thailand], signed on October 31st, 1975. Translated copy of the GDR embassy in Vietnam, December 9th, 1975, in: PAAA/C 6701. Cf. Rungswasdisab, 2005, p. 83; Ponchaud, 1977, p. 148; and Ragos-Espinas, 1983, p. 93.

24 *Informationen über die Haltung der DRV zu einigen Aspekten der Innen- und Außenpolitik ihrer Nachbarländer Kambodscha, Laos und Thailand* [Information regarding the PRV's attitude towards aspects of the interior and foreign policy of Cambodia, Laos and Thailand], Embassy of the GDR in Vietnam, Hanoi, December 1st, 1975, in: PAAA/6675.

25 Note, however, that Ponchaud gives August 30th, 1976, as the date for the official opening of the border for commercial purposes (1977, p. 149).

26 Some observers suggest the final hold of trade between Thailand and Democratic Kampuchea followed the border skirmishes of January 28th, 1977 (Ponchaud, 1977, p. 149).

### **Border Skirmishes, Suspicion and Non-Escalation, 1975-77**

A series of Thai incursions into Cambodian territory had predated the diplomatic talks of October 1975, and it has been suggested that as a matter of fact “armed conflict existed between Thailand and Cambodia as early as August 1975” (Ciorcari, 2001 [22], p. 31). The “Minutes on the Standing Committee’s visit to the Southwest Zone, August 20-24, 1975” report infringements of the Cambodian air space, Thai subversion via leaflets distributed in Phnom Malai, as well as infiltration by Thai bands:

“The Thais illegally came about 3 kilometres into our territory to cultivate rice. We are seeking to smash them”.<sup>27</sup>

The liaison offices which had been set up at some border locations after Ieng Sary’s visit to Bangkok in October 1975 helped to calm the situation by providing a convenient institutionalized framework for negotiations about unresolved aspects of border demarcation, but tensions remained high, and on the ground issues of national pride often created an uneasy co-existence. In February 1976, a visitor to the border area reports:

“sometimes the Thai officials would demand meetings with the Kampuchean cadres. But when the appointment was decided, the Thais would claim that it was upon Kampuchea’s request. The Kampuchean leaders consider such claims an insult to their dignity”.<sup>28</sup>

Despite all efforts, border clashes persisted throughout 1976 with Thailand and Cambodia mutually blaming each other, but generally maintaining unusual calm regarding the incidents, no side being interested in military escalation (cf. Ragos-Espinas, 1983, pp. 93 f.). On February 7th, 1977, the DK Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent a lengthy note to its

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Ciorcari, 2001 [22], p. 30; cf. Johansen, 2000, p. 29.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. a manuscript entitled *Modern Kampuchea* by the PLO representative to Beijing, Hamad Abdul Aziz al Aiya, as quoted in Kiernan, 1996, pp. 143 f.

Thai counterpart in Bangkok, voicing concern about the increase in border hostilities since October 1976 but stressing at the same time that:

“Although the relations have deteriorated at this stage, [...] the government of Democratic Kampuchea [...] is still endowed with goodwill to promote the friendship with the Thai people. Democratic Kampuchea is convinced that the friendship between the people of Kampuchea and the people of Thailand will have a better future”.<sup>29</sup>

The possibility of Thailand’s involvement in efforts to topple the Phnom Penh government were probably more important to the Khmer Rouge leaders than issues of border demarcation, since the Thai border was regarded as a possible entry point for CIA agents and “Khmer traitors” – former Lon Nol troops who had fled to Thailand – into Democratic Kampuchea. In this context, the latter note of February 7th, 1977, alleges that:

“The Thai government has maintained, helped, protected and organized these traitors so that they continuously carry out provocative activities against Democratic Kampuchea”.<sup>30</sup>

Similar suspicions of hostile infiltration are reflected in a number of Khmer Rouge telegrams from the battlefields as well as the archive of torture-induced ‘confessions’ in the archives of Democratic Kampuchea’s central detention camp S-21 (‘Tuol Sleng’).

According to internal Khmer Rouge telegrams, a number of Khmer Rouge soldiers defected to Thailand in July 1976, recruited by

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29 *Democratic Kampuchea, Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, No. S/77/046, including a Summary record of the incidents brought about by the Thai side at the end of December 1976 and during January 1977, in: PAAA/C 6671. Unofficial translation of the MFAA, GDR.

30 *Id.* and cf. later official press communiqués up to November 1977 (e.g. in PAAA/C 6674). – Notably, similar suspicions against Thailand have internally already been voiced prior to the Thai *coup d’état* of October 6th, 1976 (cf. Son Sen’s address to a meeting of leading cadres of Division 164 on September 16th, 1976).

“CIA Santi Sampoan [who] came from Thailand through that passage at Preah Vihear<sup>31</sup>”. Interestingly, the currently embattled area surrounding the temple was insignificant in the context of border disputes during the mid-1970s. However, since January 1978, the area of Preah Vihear became the scene for “the activities of armed opposition elements [who] purportedly infiltrated [...] from Thailand” (Heder, 2001, p. 35). A telegram of DK North Zone secretary Chan Sam (alias ‘Se’ or ‘Sae’), on January 10th, 1978, characterizes them as “internal enemies and bandits” and suggests to ‘Office 870’<sup>32</sup> to “cut off contacts between the outside and internal enemies [, to] evacuate villages near the forest [and to] set up military posts along the border”.<sup>33</sup> In April 1978, he reports again about the “enemy situation along the Thai border”, mentioning “traitors who are surreptitiously sneaking around to conduct guerrilla attacks against us on the Preah Vihear border when our army is on foot in the forest”<sup>34</sup>. An internal telegram of April 11th, 1978, reports that

“the Thai enemy encouraged the In Tam<sup>35</sup>  
troops to launch activities to disturb us along the  
border by organizing their troops into small groups  
to intrude into our territory in order to launch  
hit-and-run attacks and to spy on us as well. [...]”  
These traitors are based along the Dangrek Mountains  
and we have plans to find their bases to crush them”.<sup>36</sup>

Suspicious of the Thai Armed Forces’ involvement in ‘counter-revolutionary’ activities in border areas can also be inferred from some

31 See “Khmer Rouge Telegrams from Battlefronts”, *Searching for the Truth* 2 [Feb 2000], pp. 18-27, here p. 21.

32 ‘Committee’ or ‘Office 870’ refers to the office of Pol Pot and other high-ranking cadres of the Central and Standing Committees of the Communist Party of Kampuchea.

33 Quoted in Huy, 2002, p. 20.

34 Quoted in Heder, 2001, p. 35.

35 In Tam was a prominent politician during the Lon Nol administration. He served a seven-month term as prime minister in 1973 and had fled to Thailand after the Khmer Rouge ascent to power in April 1975. He was claimed to be responsible for incursions into Cambodian territory in mid-December 1976 and was forced to leave Thailand a few days later (cf. Kiernan, 1996, p. 144). Despite his absence, the idea of “In Tam forces” is haunting the Khmer Rouge leadership throughout 1977 and 1978 (see also Sin, 2009).

36 See “Khmer Rouge Telegrams from Battlefronts”, *Searching for the Truth* 2 [Feb 2000], pp. 18-27, here pp. 25-26.

of the ‘confessions’ of Khmer Rouge cadre in the Tuol Sleng archives. For example, the former secretary of Democratic Kampuchea’s Western Zone, Chou Chet (alias ‘Sy’) suggests in his ‘confession’ of May 20th, 1978, that part of an alleged 1977 coup was to be the cooperation of defected KR forces and the Thai army to invade DK territory from Preah Vihear towards Kampong Thom<sup>37</sup>, and former Northern Zone secretary Koy Thuon’s ‘confession’ includes plans to “to assemble Thai, American, and Vietnamese patronage and support” (Chandler, 1999, p. 63). Another Thai-supported coup attempt is mentioned by S-21 inmate Prum Ky, a former KR village chief and army leader. He ‘admits’ that a

“plan to be implemented in April 1976 will be to capture Koh Kong as our base, from which we will achieve victory over all targets. When we win we, in cooperation with Thai troops, will break through national road 4 to Phnom Penh”.<sup>38</sup>

Similarly, some ‘confessions’ of former North-Western Zone cadres, purged in 1977, admit to a range of alleged counterrevolutionary cooperation between Thailand and local cadres. The ‘traitors’ in the Northwest are accused of “allowing others to flee the country, offering Cambodian territory to the Thais, plotting with Cambodian exiles, and trading rice to Thailand” (Chandler, 1999, p. 68; cf. Sin, 2009).

### **Rapprochement, 1977-1979**

After the Thai military’s brutal coup d’état of October 6th, 1976, economic and political cooperation between Thailand and Democratic Kampuchea, already deteriorated due to the continuing border clashes, had come to a near-halt. However, a year into the military regime, Thailand’s newly appointed Prime Minister, General Kriangsak Chomanan, adopted a policy of reconciliation with the Khmer Rouge regime. Meeting at the United Nations in October 1977, Ieng Sary approached Thailand’s foreign

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37 See Kalyan Sann’s English summary of Chou Chet’s confession in *Searching for the Truth*, 1st Quarter 2004, pp. 8 ff.

38 Quoted in Ly, 2001, p. 23.

minister Uppadit Pachariyangkun in order to “re-examine the development of friendly relations between the two countries” (Pradhan, 1985, p. 189). Urged by its influential ally China, and keeping the escalating situation on the Vietnamese border in mind, the Khmer Rouge leadership had decided to favourably endorse resuming talks on political cooperation with Thailand. Plans to foster full diplomatic relations on the ambassadorial level were made in September 1978 but did not substantiate due to the escalation of armed conflict with Vietnam shortly after.

### **Conclusion**

When the Vietnamese army entered Phnom Penh in January 1979, remaining Khmer Rouge troops gradually retreated to the Thai border areas in north-western Cambodia, which would become the basis for their resistance struggle against the Hanoi-backed regime of the newly established “People’s Republic of Kampuchea”. Backed by military aid from China and the United States of America, and with logistical support by the Thai army, the Khmer Rouge remained a key player in the ensuing civil war for two decades to come, and at the same time, they continued to enjoy diplomatic recognition as the official Cambodian representatives at the United Nations. While a remarkable body of scholarly and journalistic literature exists on the complicity of China, Western powers, and Thailand in supporting the Khmer Rouge after January 1979, few accounts scrutinize the preceding period of Thai-Cambodian relations or Democratic Kampuchea’s foreign policy more generally. In part this lack of scholarly concern seems to result from a lack of reliable sources. However, as this article demonstrates, with the gradually increasing accessibility of diplomatic archives from the early and mid-1970s, the striking differences in Democratic Kampuchea’s diplomatic attitude towards Thailand and Vietnam can be further elucidated. In this context it should be noted that geostrategic considerations need to be assessed vis-à-vis bilateral developments, often based on the changing outlook of domestic politics. Further archival research, particularly of Thai and Vietnamese diplomatic holdings, is highly recommended.

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