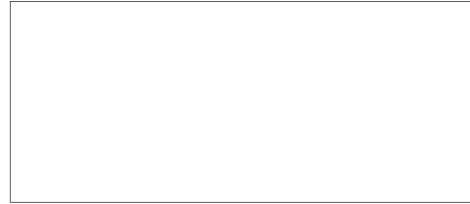




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# **Kampuchea: The Impasse Continues**



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**An Intelligence Assessment**

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*EA 83-10238C*

*December 1983*

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# **Kampuchea: The Impasse Continues**



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**An Intelligence Assessment**

This paper was prepared by  Office of  
East Asia Analysis. Comments and queries are  
welcome and may be directed to the Chief,  
Southeast Asia Division, OEA, 

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**Kampuchea:  
The Impasse Continues**



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**Key Judgments**

*Information available  
as of 1 December 1983  
was used in this report.*

More than five years after the Vietnamese overthrew the Pol Pot regime, Hanoi is still struggling to consolidate its control over Kampuchea. Vietnamese troops have conducted aggressive, successful military campaigns over the past two years that have kept the resistance mostly on the defensive, but, even if they were to commit some of the elite forces now tied down along the border with China, they would be unlikely to eliminate the resistance. The guerrillas, for their part, have avoided heavy casualties and continue to make incremental improvements in troop strength and operations but still are not able to seriously challenge Vietnamese control.

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Vietnam is now gearing up for another dry season—when its forces regain the tactical advantage—and we expect renewed attacks on major resistance bases after the first of the year. But because we also expect the resistance to avoid major casualties, we look for an indefinite military standoff.



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Nor do we see much progress on the diplomatic front. ASEAN has won most of the political victories over the past year, and international support for the resistance coalition appears strong. Despite efforts by both ASEAN and Hanoi to appear flexible, however, there has been no real movement on fundamental issues. Third-party mediation efforts have produced no positive results, and none is likely in the near future.



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As the conflict drags on, sentiment within ASEAN for a more assertive US role will probably grow. These feelings will lead to intensified pressure on Washington to provide arms to the resistance as well as to increase economic or military aid to the ASEAN countries.



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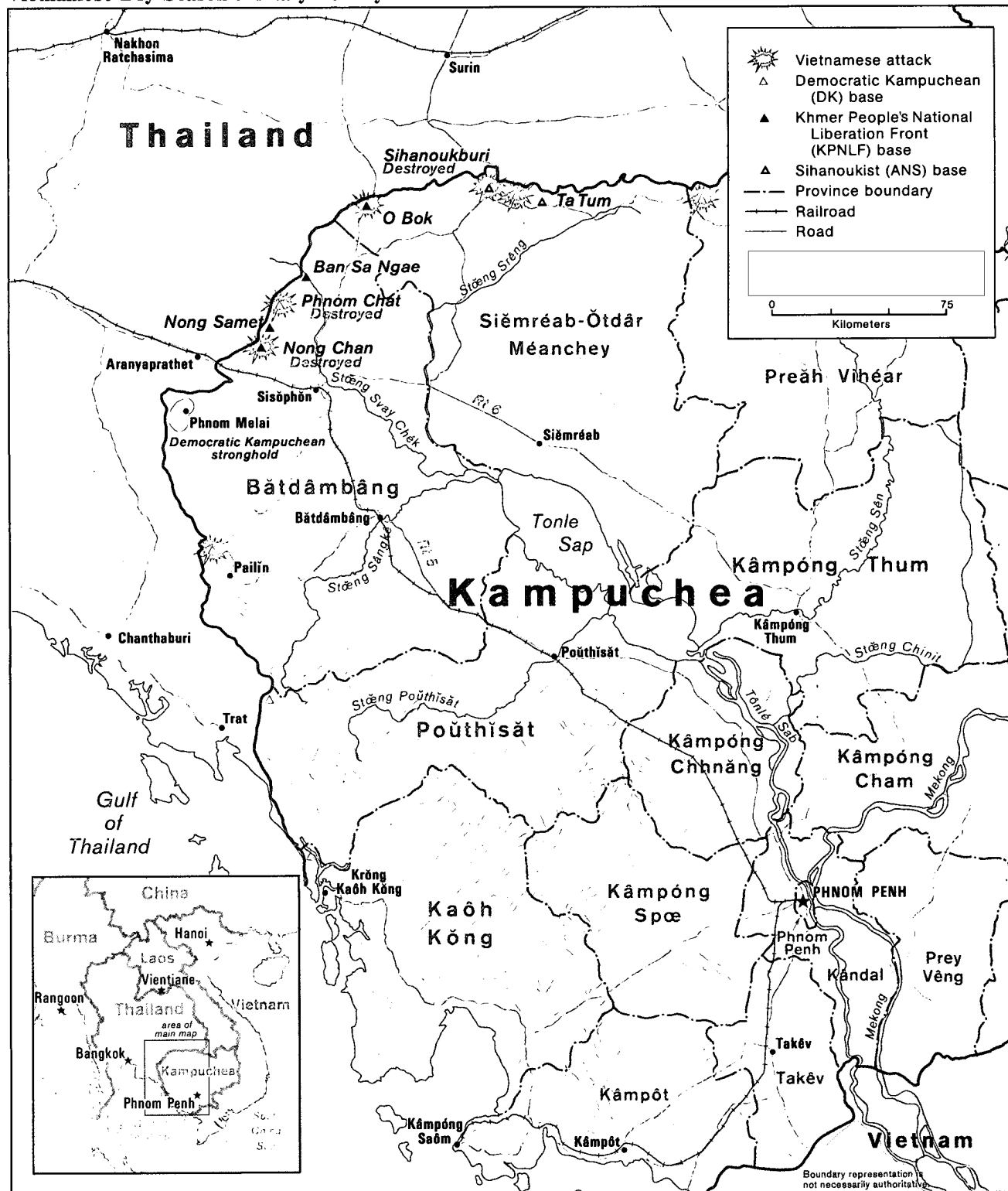
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Figure 1  
Vietnamese Dry Season Military Activity



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**Kampuchea:  
The Impasse Continues**



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Five years after its invasion of Kampuchea, Vietnam is still battling to eliminate the resistance forces operating largely along the Thai border. With its best forces tied down in northern Vietnam opposite China, Hanoi has been unable to deal the resistance a decisive defeat. Communist Democratic Kampuchea (DK) guerrilla forces, operating with generous amounts of Chinese supplies funneled through Thailand, have waged a generally well-disciplined and well-coordinated guerrilla campaign in many lightly populated areas. And ASEAN has nurtured the development of two non-Communist resistance factions to increase pressure on Vietnam to agree to a political compromise. In June 1982 ASEAN engineered the formation of a tripartite resistance coalition under the nominal leadership of Prince Norodom Sihanouk, although the three factions operate almost entirely independently of one another.

The conflict has worn on inconclusively, with Vietnam's more mobile forces holding the initiative during the November-May dry seasons and the guerrillas' responding with increased operations during the May-November rainy periods. Although the non-Communists have improved their capabilities in some respects, Vietnam and the DK remain the key players in the conflict.

**The Military Pendulum**

Vietnamese military actions during the November 1982-May 1983 dry season were the most focused, best planned, and most destructive of any operations since the invasion of Kampuchea in 1978 (see appendix). Between December and April the Vietnamese rolled back Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF) tactical advances in northwestern Batdambang Province and overran the Front's base at Nong Chan, the main Sihanoukist camp at Sihanouk-buri, a Democratic Kampuchean forward headquarters, and the large DK base at Phnom Chat. About 100,000 refugees were displaced. Although resistance casualties were not high, guerrilla activity was constrained by the need to plan for the defense or evacuation of remaining bases.

Immediately upon completion of Vietnam's large-scale dry season operations in April, however, DK guerrillas mounted one of their most effective rainy season campaigns of the five-year-old conflict. Exploiting the normal rainy season retrenchment of Vietnamese forces to rear base areas, guerrilla forces, [redacted] conducted wide-spread operations in at least 10 of Kampuchea's 19 provinces. Guerrillas kept steady pressure on primary transportation arteries, such as routes 5 and 6 and the rail line, and harassed shipping on the Tonle Sap. Their strongest effort was in Batdambang Province where guerrilla units, sometimes operating in groups as large as 300, overran and held temporarily several Vietnamese and People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) outposts. The DK also established logistic corridors in north-central Kampuchea to support expanded operations in Kampong Thum, Kampong Cham, and Kracheh Provinces. DK forces, however, did not seriously threaten strategic areas of the country or compel Vietnam to undertake drastic countermeasures.



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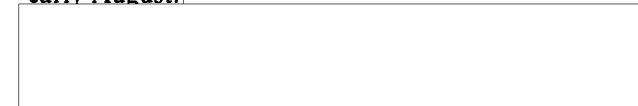


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[redacted] Vietnamese forces began reasserting control over guerrilla logistic areas in late July and early August.

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**Vietnamese Forces: Their Strengths . . .**

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Vietnam's success during the dry season is in large part attributable to its increasingly effective use of combined-arms operations. Multiregimental attacks on major resistance bases were preceded by reinforcement from neighboring divisions, extensive combat rehearsals, and logistic buildups. Artillery fire, [redacted] [redacted] was particularly effective in forcing KPNLF forces to evacuate O Bok in

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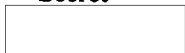


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late January and in the destruction of Nong Chan shortly afterward. Guerrillas were unable to counter Vietnamese armor, either because of the poor quality of their antitank weapons or, more likely, lack of skill in using them.

Fundamental organizational improvements in the past three years have strengthened Vietnam's capabilities to sustain a long-term military effort in Kampuchea. A streamlined command structure implemented in 1981 replaced the inefficient apparatus hastily set up in 1979. Control over local tactical matters previously exercised by regional military authorities in Vietnam was turned over to new, permanent front organizations with clearly delineated responsibilities and reporting channels to senior authorities in Phnom Penh and Hanoi.



The Vietnamese also have progressively improved their logistic structure throughout Kampuchea. They have built and improved roads to facilitate operations in forward areas. Since the construction in 1979 of port facilities on the northern shore of the Tonle Sap, inland waterways have been used extensively during the rainy season to move supplies to forward areas.



Finally, the Vietnamese have benefited from improved training and increased equipment deliveries. Soviet advisers have helped the Vietnamese plan a series of large nationwide combined-arms exercises since 1981.



The Soviets have also stepped up deliveries of small arms, artillery, trucks, and other items to replace aging equipment.

**... and Their Weaknesses**

The Vietnamese are nevertheless plagued by fundamental shortcomings that not only prevent achievement of a decisive military solution but often result in erratic battlefield performances. Three separate Vietnamese operations in December 1982 and January 1983 against DK bases on the mountainous northern frontier were repulsed, and a preliminary probe against Phnom Chat in February had to be abandoned when DK minefields claimed heavy casualties. During the rainy season, the Vietnamese were unable to prevent frequent interdiction of several strategic roads.

At least part of the problem is the low number and poor quality of troops Vietnam has committed to Kampuchea. Of the 150,000 to 170,000 Vietnamese troops, only 50,000 to 60,000 face the 40,000 to 50,000 guerrillas concentrated in border areas. many of the southern Vietnamese conscripts filling the ranks in Kampuchea have serious morale problems traceable to resentment toward northern officers, apathy toward the war effort, and widespread malaria. Although defectors report a growing proportion of more reliable northern troops are being assigned to Kampuchea, most of Vietnam's elite forces remain committed to the defense of northern Vietnam. Finally, overall advantages in manpower, mobility, and firepower are frequently negated by the skillful use of guerrilla tactics by DK forces in heavily mined, mountainous jungle terrain.

Vietnamese troops have gotten little support from PRK military forces. Although the PRK Army has grown from about 20,000 troops in 1981 to approximately 30,000 today, the increase has been entirely in provincial and local forces. The four main-force units, despite their elevation from brigade to division status in the past two years, have not increased their overall manpower strength from the 12,500 Hanoi assembled

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**Military Forces in Kampuchea**

Organization	Estimated Armed Strength	Military Leadership	Comments
Democratic Kampuchea (DK)	30,000	Pol Pot, Son San, Ta Mok	Most effective of the three resistance groups. Conducts operations in several interior areas. Retains dedicated core of revolutionaries and receives ample material support from China.
Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF)	12,000	Sak Sutsakhan, Thach Reng, Chea Chhut, Prum Vith	The leading non-Communist group. Receives material support from Singapore and Malaysia, plus limited aid from China. Has made organizational improvements, but many of its troops are tied down defending large civilian camps and have had only minor impact on military situation.
Sihanoukist National Army (ANS)	4,000	In Tam, Tiep Ben	The weakest of the resistance groups. Is disorganized, faction ridden. Has performed poorly in combat, losing main base at Sihanouk-buri. Receives limited support from China, Singapore, and Malaysia.
Vietnam	150,000 to 170,000	Lt. Gen. Hoang Cam	Has gained military initiative since 1981. Effectively containing most resistance activity but cannot achieve outright military victory.
People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK)	30,000	Unknown	Weak, poorly motivated. Getting some frontline experience, but will remain heavily dependent on Vietnamese for at least several years.

for its invasion in 1978. According to defectors, PRK units do well to preserve existing manpower levels in light of extremely high desertion rates and deaths from malaria.

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Two PRK divisions are stationed in forward areas where they conduct occasional joint sweep operations with their Vietnamese mentors, but they remain generally unreliable and ineffective. resentment on the part of PRK troops toward the Vietnamese runs high and their loyalty is frequently suspect. According to the US Embassy in Bangkok, Vietnamese troops arrested over 100 officers and troops of the PRK 286th Division in late May for suspected collaboration with resistance forces. Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach stated in November that building a Kampuchean Army would take at least five more years, a projection we consider highly optimistic.

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**Democratic Kampuchea: Hanging Tough**

The DK's 30,000 guerrillas remain by far the strongest and most active opposition to Vietnam's occupation force. They receive a continuous flow of arms, supplies, and money from China that permits them to carry out guerrilla operations in widespread areas. They hold a virtual monopoly on the most defensible border terrain and, through acquisition of bulldozers and about 100 trucks, have improved their ability to support sustained operations in the interior.

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The DK has also had some success in submerging its past record of barbarity through a united front strategy featuring appeals to nationalist sentiment and close identity with Prince Sihanouk. The US Embassy in Bangkok reports that more tolerant popular attitudes toward the DK may be developing with the passage of time, aided by increased popular resentment of Vietnamese repressive actions. These conditions apparently have improved the DK's ability to operate among the people and attract recruits.

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the Chinese shipped 20,000 AK-47 rifles to Thailand in late September that the DK claims will be used to arm a new militia force in Kampuchea.

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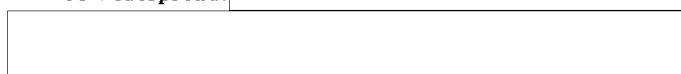
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However, the DK faces important obstacles to rapid progress. Logistic improvements notwithstanding, the DK still cannot support large numbers of guerrillas deep in the countryside for extended periods, and it lacks the manpower to take and hold more heavily populated areas. Although there has been a decline in defector reports of morale and disciplinary problems within the DK over the past year, we believe such problems, stemming in part from regional jealousies, persist.



DK discipline broke down totally during the March Vietnamese attack on Phnom Chat, with most troops ignoring appeals by their commanders to regroup and continue fighting.

The DK also remains vulnerable to the political appeal of the non-Communist factions. Several hundred DK troops deserted to Prince Sihanouk's forces when Sihanouk assumed leadership of the resistance coalition in mid-1982. And increased DK attacks against the two non-Communist factions this year reflect the DK's concern that any non-Communist gains will be at DK expense. Finally, despite some erosion in popular revulsion toward its past, willingness to support or join the DK still does not appear to be widespread.



**The Non-Communist Resistance: Serious Weaknesses**

The non-Communists have made steady progress in building their armed strength over the past year. The KPRLF now has approximately 12,000 armed men and 5,000 to 6,000 more who are trained but not yet armed. The Sihanoukist National Army (ANS) currently has over 4,000 men under arms and a similar number unarmed. The two groups have slowly extended some of their operating areas deeper inside Kampuchea.

Nonetheless, the two non-Communist groups have had only minimal impact on the military situation. Plagued by chronic ammunition and supply shortages, they were unable to exploit the tactical advantages afforded by the rainy season and conducted only minor military actions. In fact, the preponderance of

their military effort remains passive and focused on defense of the large, vulnerable civilian bases collocated with their military forces. The KPRLF's most ambitious military effort to date—the seizure of several villages in December 1982—ultimately backfired when the Vietnamese destroyed its nearby base at Nong Chan. That action illustrated a central dilemma for both the KPRLF and Sihanoukist forces. On the one hand, the non-Communist groups must demonstrate increased military capabilities in order to attract and retain external support. By the same token, however, actions large enough to attract sufficient publicity invite retaliation by the Vietnamese, who fear a growth in non-Communist military stature would enhance the domestic appeal of the resistance.



Thai military officers responsible for support to the resistance believe that poor performance by non-Communist military forces has been caused by inadequate training, factionalism, and the troops' unwillingness to make greater use of guerrilla warfare tactics. To overcome these deficiencies, Thailand, along with Singapore and Malaysia, has been pressing the two factions to increase cooperation. The KPRLF leadership has been reluctant to cooperate with the less competent Sihanoukists, claiming their own accomplishments would be undermined. Under heavy pressure from ASEAN, however, KPRLF leader Son Sann reluctantly agreed in September to begin joint radiobroadcasts with the Sihanoukists and open additional joint information offices abroad.

The Thai have been less successful in their effort to improve training. The KPRLF began training some 800 troops in guerrilla warfare tactics in May at a new training site near O Bok, but large numbers deserted because of inadequate logistic support from Front headquarters. Subsequently, approximately 1,000 family members moved to the base, necessitating deployment of 200 to 300 troops to provide security. The Front's weak infrastructure and the insistence of its troops on having their families nearby illustrate the institutional obstacles it faces in developing an effective guerrilla warfare capability.

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**Diplomatic Stalemate Continues**

Although the military situation remains heavily weighted in Vietnam's favor, the political victories over the past year have largely been won by ASEAN. For the fifth straight year, the UN General Assembly in late October overwhelmingly approved an ASEAN resolution calling on Vietnam to withdraw its troops and permit free elections in Kampuchea. And, for the first time, Vietnam decided not to challenge seating of Democratic Kampuchea in the UN General Assembly. Neither side, however, is any closer to negotiations. Both ASEAN and Vietnam have attempted tactical maneuvers to gain the diplomatic initiative, but there has been no real movement on the fundamental issues. Third-party efforts to mediate the conflict or stimulate a dialogue have met with a similar lack of success.

**Vietnamese Initiatives.** Hanoi intensified its diplomatic activities following the conclusion of its major military operations in early April. Its partial troop withdrawal in May was heavily publicized and observed in the early stages by numerous foreign correspondents. A longstanding offer to Thai Foreign Minister Siddhi to visit Hanoi was renewed, and Vietnam indicated for a time a willingness to consider a proposal by Siddhi that Vietnamese troops pull back 30 kilometers from the Thai border. Vietnam's Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach visited Manila and Bangkok in June for talks on Kampuchea and received a special representative of the UN Secretary General, who was exploring ways of getting negotiations under way. In the past several months, the Vietnamese have also held talks on Kampuchea with Belgian emissaries, French Foreign Minister Cheysson, and Australian Foreign Minister Hayden. Hanoi also has endorsed the Nonaligned Movement's call for negotiations between the Indochinese and ASEAN countries, while playing down the resolution's call for withdrawal of foreign forces from Kampuchea.

In the summer and fall of 1983 Hanoi claimed to have established a dialogue with ASEAN and other countries, emphasizing that they should avoid derailing the process with confrontational actions. The strategy seeks to depict Vietnam as the "reasonable" party, and, as a specific objective, it tried to undermine

support for ASEAN's UN resolution. This is consistent with past Vietnamese efforts to "regionalize" the Kampuchean issue and thus reduce its international visibility, particularly in the UN.

Despite its show of flexibility, however, Hanoi has not retreated from its long-stated position that China, not Vietnam, is the principal cause of instability in Southeast Asia, and that Vietnamese troops cannot be totally withdrawn from Kampuchea as long as the Chinese-supported DK Army exists. Moreover, Vietnam has categorically rejected the legitimacy of UN action as long as it seats Democratic Kampuchea. The outcome of this year's UN deliberations appears to have strengthened Hanoi's view that a political settlement under UN auspices is not possible.

**ASEAN Response.** Like Vietnam, the ASEAN states have tried to appear flexible while reaffirming their basic goals: withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Kampuchea and self-determination for the Kampuchean people. During the annual ASEAN Foreign Ministers meeting in Bangkok in June, Thai Foreign Minister Siddhi stressed the continuing need to apply strong political, economic, and moral pressures on Vietnam. He called on Western countries to press Moscow into ending its support to Vietnam's occupation of Kampuchea. But the communique was moderately worded, and it invited Hanoi to consider the "elements" of the International Conference on Kampuchea declaration, implying that ASEAN would not necessarily insist on strict adherence to the entire declaration.

Hardline ASEAN states—Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia—at the same time have continued to provide military aid to the non-Communist resistance. Thailand has served as overall coordinator of ASEAN military aid and the smaller quantities provided by China to the non-Communists.

ASEAN's immediate objective in building up the non-Communist military apparatus is to increase pressure on Hanoi to agree to a settlement of the

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Kampuchean problem. A parallel, but longer term objective, is to permit the non-Communist factions to reach a position of parity with the Chinese-supported Democratic Kampuchean forces that would allow them to compete for political power in a postoccupation Kampuchea. [Redacted]

**Third-Party Efforts.** The impasse on Kampuchea has prompted a variety of unsuccessful attempts by third parties to bring about a solution. Late in 1982 both France and Belgium surfaced plans for a settlement that featured a leading role for Prince Sihanouk. Belgian efforts apparently stemmed from Vietnamese requests for assistance in arranging a meeting with Sihanouk. ASEAN's lukewarm reaction and Hanoi's annoyance over Belgium's later criticism of Vietnamese military operations, however, appear to have eliminated Belgium as a possible mediator. Also in 1982, Romanian President Ceausescu proposed a four-party Kampuchean coalition to include the Heng Samrin regime. Sihanouk also floated the idea but subsequently backed off, saying he had spoken only for himself and not his coalition partners. [Redacted]

The most recent third-party initiative has come from the Labor government in Australia. Foreign Minister Hayden, in offering Australian help as a "facilitator," advanced a proposal in April calling for a Vietnamese-ASEAN accommodation on Kampuchea involving a phased withdrawal of Vietnamese troops, Kampuchean self-determination, and Western participation in the rehabilitation of Kampuchea. Because the Australian approach assumes that Vietnamese domination of Kampuchea is irreversible and that China must share the blame for instability in Southeast Asia, Hayden received a cool response during his visits to ASEAN capitals last spring. Hayden visited Hanoi in June and Beijing in August, with no significant results. He subsequently irritated ASEAN leaders by failing to condemn Vietnamese occupation of Kampuchea during his UN address and refusing Australian cosponsorship of ASEAN's resolution. These actions have dimmed what Canberra conceded at the outset were poor prospects for achieving any major breakthroughs. [Redacted]

**Pressure for Greater US Role**

The lack of progress toward a settlement has stirred some sentiment within ASEAN for a more assertive US role. Senior ASEAN intelligence officials at a meeting in May agreed that the unwillingness of Western powers and Japan to accept a larger role in resolving the conflict encouraged Vietnamese intransigence. They recommended acceleration of US military and economic assistance to ASEAN to counter Soviet assistance to Vietnam. Secondly, they called for "more tangible" assistance—arms or money covertly funneled through ASEAN, [Redacted] to the non-Communist Kampuchean resistance groups. [Redacted] a senior Malaysian official in late May recommended that Washington put unspecified pressure on Moscow and Beijing to help pave the way for a Vietnamese withdrawal from Kampuchea. [Redacted]

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**Looking Ahead: More of the Same**

Hanoi is well aware that an outright military victory is beyond its reach even if it were to commit additional divisions and risk provoking Chinese retaliation by sending forces into Thailand to attack resistance sanctuaries. With these limitations in mind, the Vietnamese apparently have settled into a "containment" strategy aimed at preventing major military inroads by DK forces and preventing substantial growth by the two non-Communist factions. This strategy offers no near-term hope for eliminating the resistance. Nonetheless, there is little evidence that the political and economic costs of its Kampuchean policy will become great enough to force Hanoi to compromise its basic aim of controlling Indochina or, on the other hand, drive it to seek an early, decisive military victory. [Redacted]

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[Redacted] we believe the DK's active rainy season campaign may prompt Hanoi to attack important DK bases on the Thai border. At the same time, the large non-Communist resistance bases remain both attractive and

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vulnerable targets to any Vietnamese strategy emphasizing deflation of the political appeal of the resistance. We believe the Vietnamese will be prepared logistically for large-scale operations by January.

[redacted] they have moved large amounts of supplies and heavy equipment via inland waterways to rear bases in western Kampuchea and have increased their fuel storage capacity at Siem Reap. [redacted]

[redacted] Although heavy monsoon rains have delayed resupply of combat units in forward areas near the Thai border, the heavy stockpiling in rear areas will allow rapid deliveries when the ground dries. [redacted]

DK forces will probably yield the tactical initiative in many areas as Vietnam's mobility and firepower advantages increasingly come into play during the dry season. They probably will reduce their operations deep in the interior and focus on interdiction of major Vietnamese supply routes and harassment of Vietnamese positions in border areas in hopes of preventing large-scale attacks on their bases. [redacted]

Activities this dry season (November-May) will help determine whether the DK's rainy season performance marks an enduring improvement in its capabilities or a short-term exploitation of advantages accruing to guerrilla forces during the monsoon period. There is no substantial evidence at this stage to corroborate DK claims that it has developed a militia, and we cannot substantiate recent reports of marked growth in overall DK manpower over the past year. Although we expect the DK to remain the principal obstacle to Vietnamese consolidation of control in Kampuchea, we do not look for any fundamental shifts in the military balance soon. [redacted]

The resistance coalition will continue to be buffeted by Son Sann's occasional threats to resign, Sihanouk's unilateral policy statements, and the DK's military assaults against its non-Communist partners. ASEAN's control over the delivery of aid to the resistance groups, however, gives it the leverage to force the factions to maintain at least outward unity, and we expect the coalition to remain intact over the near term. In any case, because the formation of the coalition so far has resulted in no change in the

conduct of the guerrilla campaign, we believe the collapse of the coalition would have little or no immediate effect on the military situation. [redacted]

The diplomatic picture also seems unlikely to change dramatically over the next several months. Hanoi will probably continue to stress its "flexibility" and encourage development of an ASEAN-Indochinese dialogue outside the United Nations. ASEAN will also avoid strong rhetoric as long as Vietnamese military actions are not overly provocative and will keep channels open to Hanoi. We see no signs, however, that either side will yield on fundamental issues. [redacted]

Moreover, neither the Soviets nor the Chinese—who are providing most of the arms to the combatants—are likely to change their policies. The Soviets have remained firm in backing Vietnam, and they signed a new long-term economic cooperation agreement with Hanoi in October. China, for its part, remains firmly committed to pressing Vietnam militarily in Kampuchea through aid to the resistance, and Beijing periodically increases military pressure on Vietnam's northern border to keep Hanoi's elite forces tied down. Beijing, moreover, has remained uncompromising on the diplomatic front, making progress on Kampuchea one of its three preconditions for a fundamental improvement in Sino-Soviet relations. [redacted]

Over the longer term, pressure within ASEAN for a diplomatic solution will grow. Indonesia is concerned that prolonged conflict will keep Vietnam in the Soviet camp and contribute to Chinese expansionism and a polarization of Southeast Asia. [redacted]

[redacted] Nonetheless, although a split between hardliners and accommodationists could result in a collapse of ASEAN unity, we believe continuing modifications of ASEAN policy will be a more likely scenario. [redacted]

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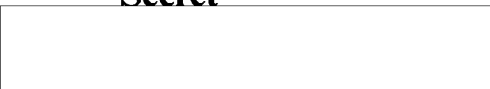
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