

CIAOGCR RP 75-26
Cambodia's Borders: New Govt.—Old Problems

S 1 of 1
Aug 75 GCR RP 75-26

~~Secret~~



*Cambodia's Borders: New Government—
Old Problems*

~~Secret~~

GCR RP 75-26
August 1975

Copy **Nº** 59

NATIONAL SECURITY INFORMATION
Unauthorized Disclosure Subject to Criminal Sanctions

Classified by 019641
Exempt from General Declassification Schedule
of E.O. 11652, exemption category:
§ 5B(1), (2), and (3)
Automatically declassified on:
date impossible to determine

SECRET

CAMBODIA'S BORDERS: NEW GOVERNMENT -- OLD PROBLEMS

KEY JUDGMENTS

Since it gained control of Cambodia in mid-April 1975, the new Khmer communist regime has been involved in numerous boundary squabbles with South Vietnam and Thailand. Current problems reflect both ancient antagonisms between the Khmers and their neighbors and a muddled history of poorly documented territorial transactions by French colonial administrators. While hostilities along some sectors of Cambodia's borders have already quieted, resolution of differences along others will be long and difficult.

The contested offshore islands will remain the focus of Cambodia-Vietnam differences.

Tensions will also remain high along the southern sector of the Cambodia-South Vietnam land border.

Maritime disputes between Cambodia and Thailand, involving overlapping territorial sea and continental shelf claims, will continue.

Disputes over alignment of the Cambodia-Thailand land border are not significant and recent tensions along the border will abate.

A latent Laotian claim to northeastern Cambodia will not impair Lao-Khmer relations in the foreseeable future.

NOTE: This paper was produced by the Office of Geographic and Cartographic Research. Comments and questions may be directed to [REDACTED] Code 143, Extension 3057.

25X1A9a

SECRET

SECRET

DISCUSSION

A Lost Empire

The small nation of Cambodia (about 180,000 square kilometers) is all that remains of the once powerful Khmer Empire. At the height of its power in the 12th and 13th centuries, the Empire controlled much of the area of present-day Laos, Thailand, and South Vietnam. Beset by encroachments by increasingly strong Siam (Thailand) and Annam (the predominant state in what is now Vietnam) in subsequent centuries, Cambodia maintained a tenuous independence only by surrendering large areas to these states. In the 19th century Cambodia appealed to France -- then embarking on its period of colonial expansion in Indochina -- for assistance in defending its boundaries. It became a French protectorate in 1863 and a French colony in 1884. Although Prince Sihanouk appealed to the United Nations in the late 1950s to regain Khmer-occupied lands in the delta of South Vietnam, no other serious effort has been made by Phnom Penh to recapture its lost territory.

No international agreements or authoritative maps accurately define Cambodia's borders. Lack of a post-independence accord -- and dim prospects for one any time soon -- complicates the difficulty of verifying territorial claims. All borders evolved from administrative actions taken in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by the French Indochina Government and often ethnic and geographic realities were ignored. Sizable Khmer minorities, for example, live in areas of Thailand and South Vietnam near to the Cambodian border (see map following text). Long sections of the approximately 2,575-kilometer-long frontier follow well-defined terrain features, such as the Dangrek Ridge between northern Cambodia and northeastern Thailand. Most other border sections, however, are not aligned along distinctive physical features. Despite their shortcomings, the boundaries have generally been accepted as de facto divisions by the contesting countries. Disputes over alignment, although frequent, have involved only small areas.

The Current Scene

Military clashes along Cambodia's borders with South Vietnam and Thailand since the Khmer communists assumed power have numerous historical antecedents but also reflect the desire of the new regime to assert its territorial integrity against potential encroachment by its two more powerful neighbors. Since Cambodia gained independence in 1949, protection of the nation's frontiers with Vietnam, Thailand, and Laos has been an integral part of its foreign policy and remains an important issue today. Recent statements from

- 2 -

SECRET

SECRET

Phnom Penh that stress Cambodia's territorial integrity echo those made by Prince Sihanouk during the 1960s.

Hostilities along the Thai-Cambodia border do not appear to be the result of central government directives and indications are that Phnom Penh is eager to deescalate tensions. In contrast, many sections of Cambodia's boundary with South Vietnam have become battlegrounds as both sides have fortified their border defenses. There have been no reported incidents along the Cambodia-Laos border.

Cambodia-South Vietnam Border: The Fight Goes On

Clashes over contested land sectors of the Cambodia-South Vietnam border, which began in early May 1975, have involved shellings and incursions by ground forces of both sides. Casualties in some of the incidents have been heavy. In addition, the waters around the tiny islands in dispute in the Gulf of Thailand have been the scene of fierce fighting between Cambodian and Vietnamese naval forces as each side has attempted to maximize its claim to the potentially oil-rich continental shelf through occupation of offshore islands.*

Mainland boundary differences between Cambodia and South Vietnam appear to stem from the problem of transferring inadequately defined data from maps to the ground rather than from deliberate efforts by either side to annex additional territory. Both countries used a French 1:100,000 map series to document their claims. Comparison of the two sets of maps -- collected by the U.S. Army Map Service in the 1960s when U.S.-ARVN (the South Vietnamese Army) military actions along the frontier were increasing -- revealed at least eight minor border discrepancies. Since that time, other differences have been uncovered. Saigon appears to have the better cartographic evidence. It used more current and unmodified sheets while Cambodia used older (and less accurate) maps and, in places, annotated minor boundary changes. The principal sectors believed to be in contention are shown in the table and map following the text.

The alignment of the 1,228-kilometer-long Cambodia-South Vietnam land border is uncertain in many places and only in places is the boundary demarcated. Many markers, moreover, have been destroyed or moved. In recent years incidents were reported in which ARVN moved markers as far as 8 kilometers into Cambodia's Svay Rieng Province.

* See GCR RP 75-24, Cambodian Claims in the Gulf of Thailand: More Trouble Brewing, May 1975, for a discussion of the maritime dispute.

SECRET

SECRET

The northern portion of the border follows drainage divides in most places and crosses a heavily forested and lightly peopled upland not closely administered by either country. Although disputed sectors exist in the north, it is in the more densely populated south -- between Tay Ninh and the Gulf of Thailand -- where the ill-defined border has been the scene of recent battles. Here the border crosses the vast lowland formed by the Mekong and its distributaries -- a landscape of marshes, swamps, and seasonally flooded rice paddies crisscrossed by meandering streams and manmade canals. The border alignment is complex and generally runs against the grain of the drainage pattern. In places it follows the middle of streams and canals, in other places one bank or the other, and in still other sections extends in a straight line for several miles following no identifiable terrain feature. The difficulty in locating the boundary is compounded during the May-October rainy season when floods mask the already obscure landmarks.

Phnom Penh repeatedly protested South Vietnamese military incursions into Cambodian territory during the 1960s. Sihanouk severed diplomatic relations with Saigon in 1963 partly in response to the incursions. He presented his charges against Saigon (and the United States) to the United Nations Security Council but rejected its recommendation for international control of the frontier. In the 1970s alleged brutalities against Cambodian citizens committed by ARVN forces on Cambodian territory were a chronic irritant to the Lon Nol government. Phnom Penh has recently charged that Vietnamese communist forces have moved into and staked claim to Cambodian territory that had been occupied by ARVN prior to the communist victory in South Vietnam.

The presence of more than 500,000 descendents of the Khmer Empire in the southern part of South Vietnam (formerly Cochinchina) complicates Phnom Penh's relations with Saigon. Cambodia has always harbored a low-level claim to Cochinchina, and in 1957 Sihanouk presented a memorandum to the United Nations claiming most of the territory. Historical and cultural grounds were cited to support the claim and a demand was made to return those provinces which had large Khmer minorities. These demands continued into the 1960s. Many of the recent battles between Cambodian and South Vietnamese forces have been along the border between South Vietnam's Chau Doc and Kien Giang Provinces and Cambodia's Takeo and Kampot Provinces, reflecting Phnom Penh's sensitivity to this ethnically Khmer region.

Cambodia-Thailand Border: Memories Die Hard

Until this year no disputes had arisen over the alignment of the Thai-Cambodian border since 1962. Territorial annexations by the

- 4 -

SECRET

SECRET

more expansionist predecessors of the present Thai and Cambodian governments, however, have created an atmosphere of mutual distrust of each other's territorial intentions. The tension along the border since the Khmer communists gained control of the government has sparked a number of military incidents. Thai and Khmer border patrols have exchanged gunfire, Khmer troops have planted land mines and punji stakes on Thai territory, and Khmer border guards have shot refugees attempting to flee into Thailand. Nonaggressive acts have provoked many of the confrontations between Khmer and Thai military units. Hungry Khmer soldiers have foraged for food in Thailand while Thai cattle thieves have extended their illicit operations into western Cambodia.

Local Khmer communist forces demanded the relocation of a demarcation post near where the border terminates at the Gulf of Thailand (between the Cambodian province of Koh Kong and the adjoining Thai province of Trat) to a point 1 kilometer on the Thai side. The Cambodians charged that during the Lon Nol administration, Thailand had annexed Cambodian territory by moving the boundary marker eastward. A Thai military build-up along this sector of the boundary led to a subsequent Phnom Penh denial that it had demanded that the post be moved. A realignment of only 1 kilometer would have permitted Cambodia to claim a substantially larger part of the offshore waters and continental shelf.

The most serious border incident occurred offshore in a sector of disputed territorial waters between Koh Kong and Trat. The incident was precipitated by the Cambodian seizure of Thai fishing boats in the rich, Cambodian-claimed fishing grounds off the Koh Kong coast -- a common occurrence over the years. Thai and Cambodian gunboats engaged in an hour-long battle in which six members of the Thai crew were wounded and one Khmer gunboat may have been sunk.

Bangkok, favoring a foreign policy that stresses accommodation with its new communist neighbors, has downplayed the border incidents in order to defuse a potentially explosive situation. Thai Government spokesmen have placed much of the blame on overzealous Khmer military commanders rather than on policy directives from Phnom Penh. Possibly in line with the developments along the Cambodia-South Vietnam border, Phnom Penh has recently indicated that it wished to ease the tension along the Thai border. It also expressed the hope that Thailand would respect Cambodia's sovereignty and territorial integrity and not permit Cambodian refugees to carry out "political, espionage, or commando activities" from Thai soil.

- 5 -

SECRET

SECRET

The 805-kilometer-long Cambodia-Thailand boundary, delimited by international treaties between Siam and France in the early 20th century, is aligned along ridges of the densely wooded and lightly peopled Cardamomes mountains in the south; crosses the rice-paddy covered lowland that drains into the Tonle Sap -- a natural corridor between the two countries -- in the central part; and follows the narrow, 600-meter-high Dangrek Ridge in the north. All but the Dangrek Ridge sector has been demarcated by a series of 75 pillars. Slight deviations of the border from the well-defined watershed of the Dangrek Ridge have, in the past, contributed to territorial disputes.

Thai-Khmer antagonisms were fueled in the 1950s and 1960s by the dispute over Preah Vihear, a crumbling, 1,000-year-old Buddhist temple ruins perched atop the Dangrek Ridge. The temple occupies a site that geographically is tied closer to Thailand than to Cambodia. In its 1962 decision, the International Court of Justice favored the cartographic evidence presented by Phnom Penh and awarded sovereignty to Cambodia. In 1966, Cambodian forces ousted Khmer Serei troops (a Thailand- and South Vietnam-based insurgent force that supported the overthrow of Sihanouk) who had seized the temple. Preah Vihear gained the spotlight once more in May 1975 when it was the last holdout of troops of the Lon Nol government.

Historically, northwestern Cambodia -- present-day Pailin, Battambang, Thbar Puok, Oddar Meanchey, Siem Reap, and parts of Pursat and Preah Vihear Provinces -- has alternated between Thai and Khmer authority. Siam controlled the territory between 1863 and 1907 and again between 1941 and 1945. After the war the area was again returned to French colonial administration. Despite the lack of any Thai expansionist efforts during the past 30 years, Cambodia has remained suspicious of Thai intentions to regain parts of the northwest. In 1973, for example, Phnom Penh expressed fears that Thailand wanted to wrest control of the Pailin gem mines (about 10 kilometers from the border) as well as areas of Battambang Province that had once been Thai territory.

Koh Kong Province, although never ruled by Thailand, has strong cultural and economic affinities with Thailand. In one of his many charges, Sihanouk claimed that Bangkok plotted to annex Koh Kong. The lightly populated province is isolated from Phnom Penh by the rugged Cardamomes range, has closer trade ties with Thailand than with the rest of Cambodia, and has a Thai-speaking minority with divided loyalties. Thai-speaking malcontents have on occasion sought refuge across the border. In 1966 some 300 Thai-speaking Khmers, who complained of ill treatment by local Cambodian officials, sought asylum in Trat Province. The May 1975

SECRET

SECRET

incidents along the Koh Kong-Trat border may reflect the concern of the new communist regime for the political loyalties of the people of Koh Kong.

No serious Cambodian-based sentiment exists to annex adjoining Thai territory that historically was part of the Khmer Empire and still supports a sizable Khmer minority. An effort was made by some Thai-Khmers after World War II, however, to recreate a natural Khmer state by joining several Thai border provinces to Cambodia. Most of the estimated 600,000 Khmers living in the Thai border provinces are poorly assimilated and apolitical; few have strong ties with Cambodia.

At least 1,200 Khmers fled from Cambodia to Thailand when the communists gained control of much of the Cambodian border territory in the early 1970s, and several thousand refugees have followed in recent months. Most have been housed in makeshift camps and the Thai Government has announced its intention to return them to Cambodia once the political situation stabilizes. Despite this intent, many assuredly will remain in Thailand, moving in with relatives and friends. Although they form a majority of the population in two provinces (Surin and Buriram) and large minorities in several others, the Thai-Khmers likely will remain a politically quiescent community that will not complicate Thai-Cambodian relations.

Cambodia-Laos Border: Quiet for Now

Although the frontier between Cambodia and Laos poses no immediate problem for the Khmer communists, an eventual border dispute is possible because of historical and ethnic ties between northeastern Cambodia and southern Laos and earlier territorial transactions by French colonial administrators.

The 540-kilometer-long Cambodia-Laos boundary, aligned along both drainage divides and streams, is undemarcated. It was first defined by an 1893 treaty between France and Siam. All territory east of the Mekong that Siam had conquered earlier in the century (including the present-day Cambodian provinces of Stung Treng and Ratanakiri) was relinquished to the French Laotian colonial administration. A French administrative decree transferred the Stung Treng-Ratanakiri territory to Cambodia in 1904.

Both non-communist and communist Lao leaders have maintained that the Cambodia-Laos boundary is a product of internal administrative actions by a former colonial government that are not necessarily binding on the present governments. They have further argued that northeastern Cambodia is ethnically more Laotian than Cambodian.

SECRET

SECRET

The Mekong valley of Stung Treng Province is occupied mostly by Laotians, the highlands of Stung Treng and Ratanakiri by non-Khmer upland peoples.

During the 1960s, Sihanouk was fearful that Laos retained an active territorial design on the northeastern territory. His suspicions were fortified in 1964 when both the non-communist Vientiane government and the communist Lao Patriotic Front (LPF) failed to respond to his request for recognition of Cambodian territorial integrity within its present frontiers. In 1966 the LPF claimed the northern part of Stung Treng and demanded that Cambodian troops withdraw. The claim apparently was dropped in 1968 and, according to the Phnom Penh-published Cambodge magazine, the LPF affirmed its recognition of existing Cambodian frontiers. The Vientiane cabinet agreed in 1969 to recognize the existing borders. An official pronouncement, presumably delayed until the Indochina politico-military situation stabilized, was never made. Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma had expressed no interest in annexing northeastern Cambodia but had been reluctant to formally respond to Sihanouk's request for recognition of Cambodia's territorial integrity because of stronger expansionist feelings among his political allies in southern Laos.

Outlook

July meetings between Cambodian and Vietnamese officials apparently have resulted in informal agreements which have at least temporarily reduced border hostilities. Long-standing tensions along the border and historical Khmer - Vietnamese animosities, however, cloud prospects for a quick solution to either maritime or land border disputes. Contested ownership of the offshore islands will be a more difficult problem to resolve than the disputed sectors of the land boundary. Until a settlement is reached, isolated incidents sparked by over-anxious local military units are likely to continue.

Lack of substantial differences over the legal delineation of the border, the apparent desire of the Khmer communists to reduce tensions, and an accommodating Thai foreign policy point to a reduction in tensions along the Thailand-Cambodia land border. In the Gulf of Thailand, however, the situation is not so promising. The rich fishing grounds and potentially oil-rich continental shelf suggest difficult negotiations over overlapping territorial sea and continental shelf claims.

- 8 -

SECRET

SECRET

The latent Laotian claim to northeastern Cambodia probably is not a serious problem for Phnom Penh. In the face of a weak Cambodian Government, however, Hanoi-backed Laotian leaders could resurrect the claim to this remote and underdeveloped area that has never been under firm Phnom Penh control.

SECRET

SECRET

CAMBODIA: DISPUTED BORDER SECTORS

| <u>Area</u> | <u>Location</u> | <u>Approximate Size</u> | <u>Characteristics</u> |
|-------------|---|---|--|
| 1 | Near Laos-Cambodia-South Vietnam border trijunction | 10 km ² | Rugged, virtually unpopulated. |
| 2 | Along Route 19 west of Duc Co | 10-12 km ² | Mountainous, lightly populated; boundary pillars frequently shifted by both sides. |
| 3 | Ia Drang drainage region | 5 km ² | Hilly, lightly populated. |
| 4 | North of the Srepok crossing | 0.8 km by 40 km strip | Hilly, lightly populated. |
| 5 | Between Mondolkiri and Quang Duc Provinces | 50 km ² | Hilly, lightly populated. |
| 6 | Along Route 13 north of Loc Ninh | undetermined; probably less than 12 km ² | Hilly, lightly populated. |
| 7 | Between Kompong Cham and Tay Ninh Provinces | 25 km ² | Hilly, moderately populated; inhabited mostly by Khmers. |
| 8 | Between Svay Rieng and Tay Ninh Provinces | undetermined; no more than 50 km ² | Hilly, moderately populated; inhabited mostly by Khmers; site of 1975 border skirmishes. |
| 9 | Between Bassac and Mekong Rivers | 12 km ² | Densely populated lowland. |
| 10 | West of the Bassac | 5 km ² | Densely populated lowland. |
| 11 | Between Takeo and Chau Doc Provinces | 250-meter-wide by 56-km-long strip | Densely populated lowland; large Khmer population; site of 1975 border clashes. |
| 12 | Between Kampot and Kien Giang Provinces | 20 km ² | Densely populated lowland; large Khmer population; Phnom Penh claims that a stream (the Rach Giang Than) forms the border while Saigon claims that the border lies to the west of it; site of 1975 border clashes. |

SECRET

