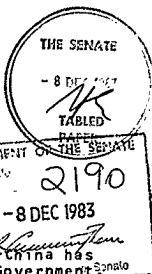


AUSTRALIA AND INDO-CHINA

PARLIAMENTARY STATEMENT
REPORT OF THE JOINT COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN
AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE ON "POWER IN INDO-
CHINA SINCE 1975" (1981)



I make no apologies for the fact that Indo-China has been a major foreign policy pre-occupation of this Government. The problem of Cambodia, in all its many dimensions, is the greatest unresolved source of tension in South East Asia. It is not unnatural that we seek to offer, as a good neighbour, to help in the pursuit of a resolution of tensions which could beset our region for decades. To this end we have sought, without illusions as to the complexity of the problem, to build upon the mature and robust relationships established over many years with the ASEAN countries, and upon the growth of a more productive and comprehensive relationship with Vietnam, in order to seek out areas in which dialogue on the problem can be encouraged. As a government which has good relations with all parties we have an opportunity to involve ourselves in this process, and an obligation not to allow that opportunity to be missed.

Moreover, we have an obligation to the Australian people. I have been greatly impressed in recent years by the compassion Australians have shown towards the suffering Khmer people. Their plight has aroused a response among Australians proportionately greater than in any other Western society. This is perhaps not surprising in view of our growing involvement in this region but I think it brings home to any Government a recognition that the Khmer people's destiny has for too long been determined by others. Their plight is one which is to a great extent dictated by historical reality as a small nation. Like the Lao people, their future depends on how rival historical ambitions are resolved. For, in the end, the Government is conscious that the survival of the Khmer nation is at the centre of the dispute. Only a solution that guarantees their survival is acceptable; indeed only such a solution can secure the interests of all concerned.

I commend for your reading the report entitled "Power in Indo-China since 1975" prepared by the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence. While that report was tabled in 1981, the issues it raises are much in our minds now. Despite the two years since the report was drawn up, there is a striking degree of relevance in its comments and recommendations to both the continuing situation in Indo-China and the policies of this Government.

There is broad concurrence in the report with the Government's policy in its emphasis on the need for due recognition of Vietnam's potential contribution to the region; on the desirability of promoting a peaceful solution to the

present situation; and on encouraging dialogue, both at the regional level and through international efforts, to decrease regional tension in South East Asia.

This concurrence is perhaps not surprising. The Committee has taken a broad and largely dispassionate view of its topic, and its findings reflect the reality of the situation. Sadly, that reality has not changed substantially in the past two years. Stalemate still faces Indo-China. Vietnam's relations with China and the ASEAN countries in general remain at best cool. Cambodia is still an occupied country, subject to guerilla activity especially in border areas, and is still reliant on international aid for the foreseeable future. The Australian Government remains concerned at the increase in Soviet influence in the Indo-Chinese region resulting from Vietnam's current close relationship with the Soviet Union. Such continuity with the findings of an all-party committee also points to the strength of shared community perceptions on Indo-China which spread across party lines. The Committee's study was prepared under the former Government, yet its findings fit well with this Government's current policy.

It is especially important, in view of comments made by the Opposition in the House of Representatives during this session, to note the unmistakable and significant elements of continuity in the approach of this Government and its predecessors.

Mr Street reminded the House of Representatives on 18 October of his statement to the International Conference on Kampuchea in 1981. I should like to quote his remarks to that conference in some detail, to demonstrate the care with which he chose his words. He said that among the prerequisites for an acceptable settlement were "the withdrawal of foreign forces from Kampuchea"; he mentioned the general history in the past decade of "war, genocide, famine and the invasion and occupation of their territory by foreign forces" endured by the Khmer people; and he noted that "there are still some 200,000 Vietnamese troops in Kampuchea, and a significant proportion of these are stationed close to the Thai-Kampuchean border: this Vietnamese presence in Kampuchea is challenged by forces belonging to the various Khmer groups". He called for "a phased withdrawal" to "avoid the creation of a power vacuum which could result in the return to power of the Pol Pot regime". He added: "Australia does not deny that Vietnam has certain legitimate security interests of its own: however, that is no justification for their invasion of a neighbouring country".

Similarly Mr Peacock, when he addressed the UN General Assembly as Foreign Minister in 1980, had said: "A peaceful and secure South East Asia cannot be achieved until a political settlement has been reached in Kampuchea which is acceptable to all parties concerned and which gives full opportunity to the Kampuchean people to determine their own style of government and way of life. We accept that Vietnam has legitimate interests to safeguard in regard to Kampuchea. What we cannot

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accept is that Vietnam and its allies should be able to go on refusing to discuss seriously the fundamental questions of the occupation of Kampuchea by foreign troops and the legitimacy of the regime in Phnom Penh."

I emphasised Australia's unequivocal condemnation of Vietnam's invasion and occupation of Cambodia in talks with the ASEAN Foreign Ministers earlier this year, and the Prime Minister reminded the House of Representatives on 1 November and again on 9 November that the Government in no way condoned Vietnam's action. We have repeated this point at the UN General Assembly and in discussions with ASEAN leaders. This Government, in close consultation with its regional neighbours, is seeking dialogue on the Cambodia question. I have quoted these passages to demonstrate that our predecessors largely shared our approach. No purpose is served for this country by attempts to exaggerate any differences of perception which may arise in such a complex policy area.

The report of the Joint Committee provides a useful outline of the history of developments in Indo-China up until 1975. The history of the three decades from 1945 to 1975 brings out the lack of any longer-term Western perspective on an appropriate response to the aspirations of the Indochinese people. Australian attitudes were formed around a policy of commitment of troops which is now recognised to have been a mistake. We are only slowly assimilating the lessons of that mistake and perceiving in the events of these 30 years the consistent thread, not of international communist expansionism, but of the struggle of the Vietnamese people for their independence. Moreover, before 1975 the community perception of Cambodia as a nation was, at the best, hazy.

The need now to develop an understanding of events in Indo-China is important not simply as a means of exorcising our feelings of guilt about the past. Events since 1975 have shown us the peril of excluding Indo-China from our perception of the future of South East Asia. There should be no iron curtain in this part of the world. The future of Australia lies in developing a mature and balanced set of relationships with its neighbours in South East Asia. Indo-China is part of that neighbourhood. There can be no secure future for the whole of South East Asia without an accommodation between Vietnam and its neighbours. This Government wishes to pursue the development of its relations with South East Asia by developing with Vietnam a mature and productive relationship.

Eight years ago Indo-China emerged from over three decades of conflict into what was hoped would be a period of post-war reconstruction and recovery. Many Australians breathed a sigh of relief; although the expected post-war period would not be easy, and although the installation of communist regimes in all Indo-Chinese capitals was a result which few found desirable, peace would have to be better than the decades of conflict that had preceded it. The ASEAN countries also made it clear that they were prepared to work for a constructive and stable relationship with the three Indo-Chinese states.

Yet by 1979 many of these hopes were dashed. Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge had turned Cambodia into a wasteland. In addition to the Khmer Rouge reign of terror within Cambodia, the regime's aggressive actions against Vietnam had revived fears of Pol Pot's regional aspirations. The consequent Vietnamese armed intervention had touched off a series of population movements that brought a refugee flood right to Thailand's borders.

Perhaps even more than 1975, 1979 was a critical year in South East Asian affairs. The very survival of the Cambodian nation seemed to be in danger; Thailand's security appeared threatened; Vietnam's armed forces responded to provocative actions across its borders by openly intervening in Pol Pot's Cambodia, where they remain to this day; and hostilities occurred on the Chinese-Vietnamese border. The results were hard for outsiders to assimilate. Even now, four years later, the issues not only remain unresolved but have led to a new form of stalemate in Indo-China which offers further risks of instability and of great power involvement in the region.

There are many aspects of the events of 1979 which Australia cannot accept. Vietnamese forces invaded another country in an action which, although presented in terms of crusade to save the Cambodians from Pol Pot, also followed sustained attacks by the Pol Pot regime into Vietnamese territory and realised Vietnamese security objectives at the expense of the independent status of Cambodia. The continued presence of Vietnam's forces in Cambodia is unacceptable. The heightened tensions on the Chinese-Vietnamese border, which have continued, are also a regrettable cause of instability. On Thailand's border with Cambodia over 200,000 Khmer civilians are caught in a refugee situation which bears many signs of perpetuating itself.

Finally, and perhaps most ominously, the new situation has brought an intensification of relations between the Soviet Union and Vietnam which can only work to the disadvantage of all of us in the region. The Soviet presence and Soviet ambitions not only serve to focus great power rivalry in the area but leaves Vietnam almost exclusively dependent on its Soviet benefactor.

Since 1979, we have thus been faced with a series of problems in South East Asia considerably more menacing and intractable than those we faced in 1975.

Looking for a way to resolve these problems, we are faced with a multitude of proposals. There are two - among many - conventional schools of thought. The first would urge the acceptance, however reluctant, of the Vietnamese presence in Cambodia and the Heng Samrin regime as an inescapable reality. The second, outraged by Vietnam's invasion and occupation of Cambodia in 1979, would advocate continued economic, political and military pressure on Vietnam through support for the Cambodian coalition which includes Pol Pot.

Immediate practical considerations can be seen as giving some validity to both of these schools of thought: ASEAN has the strength and unity to stand behind Thailand and the Cambodian coalition in their resistance to Vietnam; while on the other hand Vietnam can take comfort from the fact that the situation on the ground in Cambodia is largely in its favour, despite resistance to its occupation especially in the border areas. But other realities remain. A sizeable refugee concentration exists on the Thai-Cambodian border; while inside Cambodia the brutality of the Pol Pot forces has not been forgotten. This perpetuates a situation which prevents the Khmer people from addressing the task of reviving their economy, restoring their food production and finding again their identity as a people.

In those divisive circumstances Soviet influence in the area can only increase, particularly given Vietnam's massive reliance on Soviet assistance to maintain its military effort. Moreover, in terms of people, a new generation of Soviet trained and influenced officials, teachers and experts is coming to the fore. In Cambodia the Khmer people will increasingly have only Vietnam and the Eastern bloc to which to turn. And Vietnam's horizons will be narrowed even further by the lack of any access to the rest of the world for economic, educational and other support.

With all of these considerations in mind it seems clear to us that what must be pursued is a comprehensive Cambodian solution based on: the acceptance by Vietnam of an appropriate accommodation with its neighbours; phased withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia matched by an effective arrangement to prevent Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge forces going back into Cambodia; an act of self-determination for Cambodia; the creation of conditions for the peaceful return of displaced Cambodians to Cambodia; the acceptance by all parties that Cambodia is neutral, independent and non-aligned; and the restoration of normal relations on the part of Vietnam with China, ASEAN and the West.

In seeking to achieve this I remind Honourable Senators again of the very similar words of the former Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Street, which I endorse and which are an essential pre-condition to any arrangements which have a chance of being accepted by the parties principal to the whole issue, and therefore of working. He said in his address to the International Conference on Kampuchea in July 1981: "The prerequisites for an acceptable settlement are the withdrawal of foreign forces from Kampuchea; an act of self-determination by the Khmer people; the establishment of conditions which will allow Khmer refugees to return; continued humanitarian assistance to the Khmer people; a guarantee of non-interference in the internal affairs of Kampuchea; and an undertaking that a fully independent Kampuchea will not act against the interests of its neighbours." And, as I noted earlier, he also said: "Australia does not deny that Vietnam has certain legitimate security interests of its own. However, that is no justification for their invasion of a neighbouring country."

Even so, we do not insist on an immediate withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Kampuchea. A phased withdrawal would avoid the creation of a power vacuum which could result in a return to power of the Pol Pot regime."

I have said on innumerable occasions this year that I have no magic solution. I do not delude myself that the situation is other than extremely complex. The policies pursued by the main parties to the Indo-China situation were firmly fixed in reaction to the events of 1978/79. Given the cataclysmic events of that year, it is not surprising that positions of principle have been firmly set up. Countries are entitled to preserve their principles. What can change are the modalities by which they are implemented. Many Western politicians preached during the fifties and the sixties that it would be capitulation to go against the West's principles by recognising China. By 1970 however it had become clear that Western countries did not have to capitulate to set up sound and mature relations with China. A veil was lifted once countries realised they could talk to each other.

In relation to Indo-China, I do not say that the situation is analogous. Indeed it is a good deal too complex to be approached in terms of the simplistic misapprehensions and misunderstandings of the cold war period. Relations between China, Vietnam, the ASEAN countries and the West at large are firmly interlocked with global issues including the many levels of the Sino/Soviet dispute. In urging on the parties some re-assessment of positions, some readiness to explore dialogue, Australia is playing a sober and responsible role as a member of the South East Asian region.

We are not without credentials on the issue. We are firmly committed to the series of United Nations General Assembly resolutions on the situation in Cambodia which have been proposed by the ASEAN countries, including this year's resolution, which we voted for on 27 October following a statement in the debate on the situation in which we explained our attitude to the resolution. Our firm support for the ASEAN position flows from the congruency of the principles on which it is based and the principles we advocate in pursuit of a Cambodia solution. In seeking to facilitate dialogue between the parties, Australia is not lining up against old friends or playing one side off against another. In speaking to Vietnam, for example, I have been aided by our treaty links with the United States, our close and friendly ties with ASEAN, and our warm and increasingly important relationship with China. I have taken no steps that will detract from these links. Indeed Vietnam in its response has offered the view that our role is enhanced by our ability to talk freely to all parties to the Indo-China problem, including its adversaries.

I would not wish to give the impression that there is anything revolutionary in this approach. The new element Australia contributes is that it is a close neighbour of the South East Asian countries and that its links with its existing

friends are extremely close. They will remain so. I am conscious that it will sometimes require a degree of tolerance from these old friends when we say things they may not always agree with. But recent weeks have demonstrated that we have developed the habit of talking freely to each other and doing so directly. I am confident it will be appreciated that broader links will not evolve at the expense of existing friendships which are valued highly by this Government, as by its predecessors.

Moreover I hope it will be accepted that Australia has developed its own foreign policy perceptions. We may be a young nation and one which has only since the Second World War accepted the task of developing its own relations with the world. It should by now be clear, however, that we no longer feel the need to borrow our foreign policy perceptions, that we make up our own mind, read the evidence ourselves and listen carefully to perceptions which have evolved in our own community.

Australia's earlier attitudes to Indo-China and its 1965 to 1973 military involvement did not provide a basis for a continuing and realistic policy. Since 1975 not only the opponents of Australia's involvement in Vietnam, but also those who supported it, have had to build on the new reality in Indo-China. The fundamental continuing basis for our approach has been the ALP's policy before 1975 of recognising the strength of the desire for independence on the part of all the countries of Indo-China. As in the case of our relations with China, the Labor Party alone has developed the seeds of a realistic policy approach. What in 1965 was heresy, in 1983 has become commonplace. Not all the events since 1975 have been to our liking, but there are some lessons to be learnt from the disasters of 1945 to 1975, particularly about the dangers of outside involvement. It is a matter for grave concern to Australia and its regional neighbours that similar risks exist again today.

Since 1975 the Indo-China situation has also brought another great reality to Australian minds, one which may take even longer to absorb than the communist victories in Indo-China: the arrival in Australia, including direct boat arrival, of a sizeable Indo-Chinese community. I would like to address those who have left their homelands in Indo-China and are now settled in Australia. I understand the fears and experiences which brought about their departure and which must be expected to colour their attitude towards their homeland and particularly to the government in Hanoi. I know that they are conscious of the proud nationalist tradition of their homeland and do not want to let that be forgotten in the free and tolerant atmosphere of this continent. The changes since 1975 in their homeland have clearly not been to their liking and the policies of the Australian Government in reacting to those changes may not always meet with their approval.

It is, however, realistic to accept that many different points of view co-exist; and we cannot cut ourselves off from Vietnam because its government does not act in the way we would want it to. Moreover, having relations with Vietnam and building up those relations does not mean approval for all of its actions, such as its policy on human rights. But the broader interests the Government must look to is in maintaining and indeed widening contact with Vietnam so that its government is susceptible to outside opinion including respect for the feelings of former Vietnamese citizens and their desire to have their families united in their new homelands. In the end, it is only through more productive relations based on mutual respect that we can ensure that we are listened to responsively when we press our point of view with Hanoi.

For this reason I do not accept any policy of isolation and punishment of Vietnam. This substitutes a policy of frustration for one of positive action. Furthermore, punishing Vietnam simply doesn't work. We are all victims of the misconceived practices which have marked the West's dealings with Vietnam from 1945 until now. The Vietnamese, as a proud and resilient people, want to be treated with dignity and will only deal on that basis. This we will do without in the process sanctioning their Government's errors or overlooking its excesses. I ask the Vietnamese community to understand this process, and to see it as part of the way in which a pluralist Australia must seek to look after the interests of all its citizens.

I do not accept that the present regime in Phnom Penh is any guarantee of Khmer survival. It is too clearly a regime dependent on Vietnam; the government itself and its administrative apparatus is too fragile; too much of the talent which should be at its disposal is dead, politically alienated, or has fled the country; and the political basis of the regime is too narrowly founded on a simple fear of Pol Pot's return. Australia will give what reasonable assistance it can to the Khmer in ways that will help them to get on their feet economically and to revive their agriculture. Sadly, however, they are far from that goal. This is the tragic kernel of the Cambodian and indeed the Indo-Chinese problem. We will use our ingenuity to address it but will not, in the process, sanction the regime of Heng Samrin.

This Government, as did its predecessor, has made it clear that it will not take any action which could be seen as recognising the claims to legitimacy of the Khmer Rouge, the major part of the coalition resistance. We cannot support any strategy based on the Pol Pot forces, whose ruthlessness and disregard for democratic values and human rights are virtually unrivalled. I see much to admire in the nationalist aspirations of the non-Communist Khmer leaders, Prince Sihanouk and Mr Son Sann, and respect their role in serving as rallying points for Khmer opinion, but it is regrettable that they have locked themselves into a military situation which relies on, and can only be sustained by, the cooperation of the Khmer Rouge.

I intend to maintain my contacts with the principal parties to the dispute. I have had frequent discussions with the ASEAN Foreign Ministers as well as talks with the governments of Vietnam, Laos and China. I continued these contacts in New York during this year's UN General Assembly session. During November the Prime Minister and I visited Bangkok for talks with Thailand's leaders, who welcomed our productive role in the region and agreed that Australia and Thailand share the same objectives. In New Delhi at the CHOGM meeting the Prime Minister discussed aspects of the Cambodian problem which are important to both ASEAN and Australia with the Malaysian and Singaporean delegation leaders, while I visited Indonesia for discussions with the Foreign Minister, Dr Mochtar, in which we agreed to maintain the closest possible consultation on Indo-China.

The Vietnamese Foreign Minister, Mr Thach, will be visiting Australia in March 1984 and I shall follow up with him then the questions we have pursued in our earlier sessions. We have kept in close touch on this issue with the American administration and Secretary of State Shultz has commended the role I have sought to play. We shall continue to take other opportunities to pursue a solution of the Cambodian problem, such as the discussions which will occur during the Prime Minister's forthcoming visits to China and the North Asia region.

I have spoken at some length on Australia's policies in this important area because I welcome the product of the 1981 Joint Committee's work, particularly as many of its recommendations are valid today. This Government has sought to pull together these thoughts and the many other threads into a consistent policy; not one that seeks spectacular or foolhardy results but one that recognises that much patience is required. The Government is aware of the need for a great deal of careful talking, and is prepared to face the likelihood of many discouragements and ultimately, perhaps, the prospect of a continued bleak stalemate. We do however have an obligation to try and, in the process, to stake some of our national imagination on the development of an intelligent and broad perspective regarding the future of South East Asia.