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## ***Introduction***

Jimmy Carter took office in early 1977 with the pronouncement that “our commitment to human rights must be absolute, our laws fair, our national beauty preserved; the powerful must not persecute the weak, and human dignity must be enhanced.”<sup>1</sup> The Carter administration intended to make human rights the cornerstone of its foreign policy. The top foreign policy advisors within the administration sought to distance themselves from the preceding administration by repudiating Henry Kissinger’s model of *realpolitik*. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance said, “in those early days, I was optimistic that we were on the threshold of an important period in American diplomacy. We had the confidence and support of the American people . . . Our priorities were clear to us . . . a principled yet pragmatic defense of basic human rights.”<sup>2</sup> The mood was ambitious and Carter felt that the traditional dichotomy between human rights and realism could be overcome. To him, they were not mutually exclusive doctrines, for “the demonstration of American idealism was a practical and realistic approach to foreign affairs, and moral principles were the best foundation for the exertion of American power and influence.”<sup>3</sup> National security and geopolitical concerns could be addressed with a foreign policy strategy built around a principled commitment to human rights.

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<sup>1</sup> Jimmy Carter, “Inaugural Address,” *American Presidency Project*, January 20, 1977, <<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=6575>>.

<sup>2</sup> Cyrus Vance, *Hard Choices: Critical Years in America’s Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 44.

<sup>3</sup> Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas, 1995), 147.

To give Carter's human rights policy some teeth substantial administrative changes were made. Carter's appointment of Patricia Derian as coordinator and then, in August 1977, Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights was the first step toward implementing a virtuous human rights policy that would transcend power politics. Derian, an outspoken civil-rights leader from Mississippi, and her staff wanted to immediately impose stiff sanctions against violators, disregarding the custom of lengthy deliberation by officers in the regional bureaus.<sup>4</sup> President Carter also took the initiative and signed, in October 1977, two United Nations covenants, one on civil and political and the other on economic, social, and cultural rights.<sup>5</sup>

Considering that the administration was outspoken in its support for human rights, the brutal Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia should have been an immediate concern. The murder of roughly one million people in Cambodia represented the quintessential violation of human rights. While it may not have been crystal clear at the time that a full-scale genocide was taking place, the stories coming out of Cambodia were informative enough for Carter to publicly blast the human rights record of the Khmer Rouge in April 1978. In spite of Carter's rhetorical pledge to uphold human rights, he did not respond to the situation in Cambodia in a way that was designed to save lives. The administration focused on a policy of joining most other nations in diplomatically isolating Cambodia and denying it aid.

In *Morality, Reason, and Power*, Gaddis Smith contends that the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in January 1979 complicated any attempt by the US to address the human rights violations perpetrated by Pol Pot. The invasion brought the Soviets and the People's Republic of China (PRC) into the fray, which made it difficult to divorce any action in support of human rights from the overarching national security concerns that dictated relations among the Soviets,

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<sup>4</sup> Gaddis Smith, *Morality, Reason, and Power: American Diplomacy in the Carter Years* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 51.

<sup>5</sup> Smith, *Morality, Reason, and Power*, 54.

PRC, and United States. Smith's own conclusion is that "since the P.R.C. saw the Soviet presence in Vietnam as a military threat, Peking supported Cambodia in the conflict with Vietnam."<sup>6</sup> Campaign promises and stump speeches expounding the virtues of a foreign policy positioned around a staunch commitment to human rights did not weigh that heavily in the administration's foreign policy decisions in Southeast Asia. This happened primarily because "of the transformation of policy from the 1977 emphasis on healing wounds, seeking peaceful settlement of remaining problems, and emphasizing human rights, to the dominant concern in 1980 with building military strength against the Soviet Union." The administration's foreign policy towards Cambodia was part of a return "to containment in Asia as everywhere else around the world."<sup>7</sup>

Two similar explanations of Carter's policy toward Cambodia come from Christopher Brady's *United States Foreign Policy towards Cambodia, 1977-92: A Question of Realities* and from Kenton Clymer's *The United States and Cambodia, 1969-2000: A Troubled Relationship*. Both authors recognize the genocide in Cambodia as a stark challenge to the Carter doctrine of human rights and evaluate Carter and his chief foreign policy advisors similarly. They both claim that Carter failed to effectively integrate a coherent human rights policy into his foreign policy and so failed to overcome his own criticisms of *realpolitik* and the Kissinger approach to US foreign policy. However, Brady and Clymer offer divergent assessments of US foreign policy during the Carter presidency. Brady characterizes America's failure to act decisively in defense of human rights in Cambodia as a personal fault of Carter, which reflected poorly on him because he had set the standard for making human rights a moral imperative in US foreign policy. Clymer, on the other hand, finds that geopolitics and the "desire to oppose the perceived

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<sup>6</sup> Smith, *Morality, Reason, and Power*, 97.

<sup>7</sup> Smith, *Morality, Reason, and Power*, 108.



expansion of Soviet influence in Southeast Asia . . . won out over human rights in Carter's Cambodia policy."<sup>8</sup> Clymer considers the administration's position towards Cambodia as the outcome of a misguided and incoherent human rights policy rather than the consequence of personal failure. In spite of these differences the central element of their arguments is the same: the Carter administration relied increasingly on a realpolitik foreign policy as its time in office progressed, and this caused the administration to abandon its criticism of the murderous Khmer Rouge for political support.

The most fundamental reason why Carter did not do anything to stop the Cambodian genocide was that he lacked viable options. Apart from invading Cambodia and forcibly removing the Khmer Rouge, which was out of the question in the wake of Vietnam, there was very little Carter could have done. The Khmer Rouge had isolated their country, economically and politically, from the outside world and made Derian's task of applying sanctions ineffectual against their regime. Carter still could have done more to raise awareness about the genocide but did not for two reasons. First, taking the Khmer Rouge to task over their flagrant disregard for human life, without resulting action on their part, would have made Carter's human rights rhetoric appear impotent and meaningless. Second, Carter was trying to foster better relations with China, which considered Cambodia a regional ally and strategic counterweight to Vietnam. China, after the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in early 1979 and even more so after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan later that year, counted on Carter to prove that their improved relations weren't for naught. Constrained by the geostrategic importance of maintaining good relations with China, Carter laid off the Khmer Rouge and eventually sided with the Pol Pot regime when debate over Cambodia's credentials came up in the UN.

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<sup>8</sup> Kenton Clymer, *The United States and Cambodia, 1969-2000* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 114.

Though this evaluation of Carter and his foreign policy towards Cambodia draws carefully on the work of other scholars, all of whom recognize that geopolitics ultimately trumped human rights in Cambodia, it differs in several key ways. In giving their appraisal of Carter's human rights policy most scholars fail to give a nuanced explanation about what exactly the Carter administration knew about Cambodia and when it received this information. Before criticism can be levied against Carter for failing to effectively apply his human rights doctrine to Cambodia it is crucial to understand that he learned about the brutality of the Khmer Rouge and their murder of Cambodians at the beginning of his presidency. Few scholars recognize that point and, therefore, lack a thorough assessment about Carter's decision to give precedence to geopolitics over human rights. As a result, judgment comes hastily and without enough consideration given to what Carter could have done to ameliorate the situation and when he could have done it. Though Carter was not ignorant to the atrocities being committed in Cambodia he lacked viable options for changing the situation and so only deserves to be criticized in a way that takes into account the complexity of the predicament he faced.

### ***Life in Cambodia Under the Khmer Rouge***

The Vietnam War, and in particular the clandestine US bombing and infantry raids during the Nixon administration, adversely affected Cambodia's political situation and way of life. In March 1970 Cambodia was officially renamed the Khmer Republic following a successful coup led by General Lon Nol against Prince Norodom Sihanouk, Cambodia's ruler since 1941.<sup>9</sup> Shortly after coming to power Lon Nol launched military attacks against North Vietnamese troops stationed in Cambodia. The Nixon administration was eager to hurt the North Vietnamese

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<sup>9</sup> Sheldon Neuringer, *The Carter Administration, Human Rights, and the Agony of Cambodia* (United Kingdom: Edwin Mellen Press, 1993), 5.

wherever it could, so it supported Lon Nol's campaign by authorizing an invasion of Cambodia on April 30, 1970, in conjunction with the bombing raids that had already been permitted. Increased US military presence, however, intensified North Vietnamese troop movements in Cambodia, which unintentionally sheltered a fledgling group of communist insurgents known as the Khmer Rouge. The leadership of the Khmer Rouge comprised of a group of Marxist intellectuals who had been students in Paris during the 1950s and spent the 1960s organizing their revolution in the jungles of Cambodia. With the cessation of American bombing raids against communist targets in August of 1973, the Khmer Rouge were unabated in their rise to power.<sup>10</sup> The end of American military involvement in Cambodia marked the beginning of Lon Nol's decline in power, for Sheldon Neuringer remarks that his regime was increasingly "plagued by corruption, military ineptitude and loss of popular support."<sup>11</sup>

On April 17, 1975, Lon Nol and his army lost control of Phnom Penh to Solath Sar and his band of communist revolutionaries, the Khmer Rouge. Sar, who changed his name to Pol Pot after the victory, promptly set about implementing a radical plan for Cambodia, which started by renaming the country again, this time as Democratic Kampuchea, and called for a complete reordering of society. Part of the Khmer Rouge's plan called for an immediate evacuation of Phnom Penh, a capital city of approximately 3,000,000 people, about 40 percent of Cambodia's total population.<sup>12</sup> Hospitals were closed and all patients were instructed to march out of town along with everyone else. With no time to prepare for their march to the countryside, thousands of people died from hunger and exhaustion. A week after the forced evacuation of Phnom Penh began, the city was a virtual ghost town inhabited by stray dogs and littered with corpses.<sup>13</sup> The

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<sup>10</sup> Neuringer, *The Agony of Cambodia*, 6.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Neuringer, *The Agony of Cambodia*, 7.

evacuation was part of the Khmer Rouge's program to eradicate any vestige of capitalism, abolish private property, and make Cambodia entirely self-sufficient.

Isolation and secrecy were essential elements of the Khmer Rouge's plan for self-sufficiency. According to Karl Jackson, the Khmer Rouge predicated their isolationist policies upon the belief "that most, if not all, of Kampuchea's problems stemmed from its subordinate position in an international system controlled by others."<sup>14</sup> Not until they removed themselves from the international market and forced a return to a self-sustaining precapitalist society would they begin to prosper. The government elite distanced themselves from the international community by abandoning formal alliances and diplomatic relations with any outside power. Cambodia's new rulers also expelled all foreigners and severed all forms of international communication. The borders were closed and mined, and anyone who attempted to enter or leave the country without permission was subject to the death penalty. Initially, the only sources of information about the Khmer Rouge were the eyewitness accounts of the few refugees who managed to make it out alive.

Those who escaped fled a country ruled by terror. First to be executed were "enemies of the revolution," most of who were leading figures from the Lon Nol regime and the political and bureaucratic elite of the old society. Teachers, engineers, and doctors were also executed in the first wave because they too were classified as dangerous counterrevolutionaries.<sup>15</sup> Pol Pot's draconian version of communism ruled the day, and, as Elizabeth Becker recounts, "there were now only revolutionary classes of people—workers, peasants, soldiers, and political cadre."<sup>16</sup> Peasants and workers were forced to work from six in the morning until eight or ten at night on

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<sup>14</sup> Karl Jackson, *Cambodia 1975-1978* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), 42.

<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth Becker, *When the War was Over: The Voices of Cambodia's Revolution and its People* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), 181.

<sup>16</sup> Becker, *When the War was Over*, 176.

semi-autonomous communes with hastily constructed barracks and scant provisions. Those lucky enough to survive work in the fields were still at the mercy of the Khmer Rouge's paranoia about traitors, which often resulted in arbitrary arrests, interrogations, and executions. The Khmer Rouge were ruthless administrators whose time in power took a devastating toll on Cambodian society. It is difficult to determine with certainty the number of Cambodians who died because of the Khmer Rouge, but most estimates place the number at around 1-1.2 million dead. Considering the scale of atrocity within Cambodia, it is appropriate to place it within the same historical context as the six million killed in the Holocaust and the mass murders of Stalinist Russia.<sup>17</sup> So, when Jimmy Carter became President in 1977 the situation was exceedingly deplorable and showed no sign of improvement.

### ***How Much Did Carter Know About The Human Rights Situation in Cambodia?***

Given what is now known about Pol Pot and his regime's policies, many assume that the Carter administration had a full understanding of what Pol Pot was up to. While it was apparent that death and suffering on a horrific scale was occurring within the confines of Democratic Kampuchea, less clear was the method and ideology behind the genocide. There was little doubt among the administration's foreign policy experts that the Khmer Rouge's policy of forced evacuation from cities and compulsory work on village cooperatives was causing hundreds of thousands of Cambodians to die. But, not knowing how events would transpire and what information would be released after it left office, the administration approached the situation cautiously. Carter was not about to assume the worst in Cambodia just so he could lead the United States into another open ended crusade in Southeast Asia, but before too long

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<sup>17</sup> Neuringer, *The Agony of Cambodia*, 15.

overwhelming evidence from refugees and journalists made any further reticence on the subject seem highly questionable.

Prior to the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in early 1979, detailed, precise reports about the Pol Pot regime were not entirely forthcoming. In fact, on October 2, 1977, the *New York Times* reported that until a week earlier the names of the Khmer Rouge leadership were not even known.<sup>18</sup> Access into Cambodia was difficult and treacherous, for the Khmer Rouge suppressed most opportunities for obtaining first-hand information about them. They had sealed the borders and expelled or executed most foreigners shortly after their takeover in April 1975. The administration was aware of these limitations on its intelligence gathering capabilities but still felt that the information it had received was credible enough to make firm conclusions about the human rights situation in Cambodia. An anonymous memo from September 21, 1977, noted, “our information on the harsh policies of the communist regime in Cambodia comes almost entirely from refugees. While their accounts undoubtedly are somewhat exaggerated, there have been enough reports from diverse groups over a period of time to provide a mosaic we find credible.”<sup>19</sup> In lieu of better intelligence, the administration relied on the commentary from refugees and journalists as a primary source of information.

Conditions inside Cambodia steadily deteriorated after the Khmer Rouge assumed power in April 1975. The April 19, 1976, issue of *Time* magazine reported, “since the Communist victory last year, an estimated 500,000 to 600,000 people—one-tenth of Cambodia’s population—have died from political reprisals, disease or starvation.”<sup>20</sup> Just a year after the Khmer Rouge takeover, *Time* found “little doubt that the Cambodian government is one of the

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<sup>18</sup> “Top Spot to Pol Pot.” *New York Times*, October 2, 1977, E7.

<sup>19</sup> NLC-6-42-7-2-0, Jimmy Carter Library.

<sup>20</sup> “The Khmer Rouge: Rampant Terror,” *TIME*, April 19, 1976, 65.

most brutal, backward and xenophobic regimes in the world.”<sup>21</sup> The situation was so deplorable that a refugee remarked, “in Cambodia today, death is preferable to life.”<sup>22</sup> In the same article a Cambodian specialist, trying to describe the human rights situation accurately stated that “I can only call this genocide.” The staggering estimates of dead Cambodians and horrific stories were publicized along with repeated accusations of genocide, which can also be found in John Barron and Anthony Paul’s 1977 book, *Murder of a Gentle Land: The Untold Story of a Communist Genocide in Cambodia*. Whether or not the administration agreed with those who described the atrocities in Cambodia as genocide is not entirely clear, but it is safe to assume that when Carter took office members of his foreign policy team knew it was witnessing the worst violation of human rights since the Holocaust.

Media reports about Cambodia remained relatively consistent throughout the first year of Carter’s term. In the May 30, 1977, issue of *Newsweek*, Kenneth Labich wrote, “some intelligence experts think the refugees exaggerate, but Thai authorities and Western diplomats trying to discover the secrets of Cambodia’s closed society have been impressed by the volume and uniformity of the reports.”<sup>23</sup> In a *New York Times* article of May 2, 1977, David Andelman recognized that a general picture had emerged of the situation in Cambodia through interviews with refugees.<sup>24</sup> The available evidence overwhelmingly confirmed earlier reports, which gave credibility to stories that “minor crimes like listening to the radio, or wearing Western dress or practicing astrology can bring execution.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> “The Khmer Rouge: Rampant Terror,” *TIME*, April 19, 1976, 65.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Kenneth Labich, “Cambodia: Horror Stories,” *Newsweek*, May 30, 1977, 50.

<sup>24</sup> David Andelman, “Refugees Depict Grim Cambodia Beset by Hunger,” *New York Times*, May 2, 1977, 1.

<sup>25</sup> Kenneth Labich, “Cambodia: Horror Stories,” *Newsweek*, May 30, 1977, 50.



David Aikman, who was the last *Time* correspondent to leave Cambodia before the capital of Phnom Penh fell to the Khmer Rouge, described their seizure of power and the ensuing evacuation of Phnom Penh as a situation where “even the dying, the maimed and the pregnant were herded out stumbling onto the streets. In some hospitals, foreign doctors were ordered to abandon their patients in mid-operation” in order to proceed with the unexpected evacuation.<sup>26</sup> Susan Drake, in a *Newsweek* article on November 6, 1978, reported that shortly after the evacuation of Phnom Penh in mid 1975 escaping refugees said

the government . . . embarked on a brutal new ‘purification campaign’ to weed out pro-Vietnamese sympathizers, intellectuals, and even distant relatives of Cambodians already executed for working with the previous government. Phnom Penh’s own heavy-handed propaganda films tend to confirm the refugee accounts.<sup>27</sup>

There were consensus and continuity among media reports and very little ambiguity as to what effect the ruthless reordering of society was having on Cambodians.

By mid-1977, enough information had circulated for the Carter administration to reveal what it knew about the horrific situation publicly. On July 26, 1977, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian Affairs Richard Holbrooke testified before a House International Relations Subcommittee on the subject of human rights in Cambodia. Holbrooke acknowledged that reports about Cambodia, which came primarily from refugees, “are too numerous and too detailed to be denied reasonable credibility.” These reports described a regime that “ordered or permitted extensive killings, forcibly relocated the urban population, brutally treated supporters of the previous government, and suppressed personal and political freedoms.” Relying on

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<sup>26</sup> David Aikman, “Cambodia: An Experiment in Genocide,” *Time*, July 31, 1978, 39-40.

<sup>27</sup> Susan Drake, Holger Jenson, “Cambodia: War of the Words,” *Newsweek*, November 6, 1978,



estimates from journalists and scholars, Holbrooke guessed that “between half a million and 1.2 million have died since 1975.”<sup>28</sup>

Press reports, which were based almost exclusively on testimony from refugees, were the basis for most US intelligence reports. On September 26, 1977, Jessica Tuchman, Director of the Office of Global Issues of the National Security Council, sent a memo to Brzezinski based on information from the CIA. It began by acknowledging that “the Agency knows little more than can be found in the press.”<sup>29</sup> Later in the same memo she reported, “there had been a massive death toll since the take-over (estimates range from 500,000 to 1.2 million people) but most have been the result of privation caused by the relocations, rather than of executions.”<sup>30</sup> The memo ended with a succinct description of the Pol Pot regime, which

has clearly attempted to mold a completely docile and ideologically pure society, and has obliterated virtually every human right in the process -- adequate food, education, the family, health (doctors have either been killed or sent to the rice paddies), as well as all the political and judicial. On the other hand, the term ‘genocide’ does not seem appropriate.<sup>31</sup>

It seems shocking to suggest that what occurred in Cambodia was not genocide, but given the fact that Tuchman was not a principal foreign policy advisor her choice of words should not be given too much weight. What is more important is the information about the death toll and process of deprivation that she relayed to Brzezinski, which in all likelihood was relayed to Carter. Brzezinski writes in his memoir that he cultivated a close working relationship with

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<sup>28</sup> U.S. Department of State, *American Foreign Policy Basic Documents, 1977-1980* (Washington, D.C., 1983), document 549. (Cited hereafter as AFP).

<sup>29</sup> NLC-6-42-7-1-1, Jimmy Carter Library.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

Carter and prided himself on the crisp briefings and frank comments he shared with the President.<sup>32</sup>

By 1978 the Carter administration had not received any indication that the human rights situation in Cambodia was improving. Brzezinski disclosed, in a September 7, 1978, memo to Carter, that a “dramatic increase in the numbers of refugees fleeing from northwestern Cambodia in recent weeks apparently is the result of an intensified campaign to identify and execute people whose loyalty to the regime is suspect.”<sup>33</sup> If anything, the increase in the number of refugees would indicate a worsening of the situation. Still without access to good intelligence, Brzezinski conceded, in the same memo, that

it is not clear how widespread the campaign is, but the renewed executions suggest that more than three years after they seized power, Cambodia’s leaders remain obsessed with threats posed by potential ‘traitors’. . . . Refugee accounts of the purge and the campaign against persons associated with the Lon Nol regime bear a striking resemblance to earlier reports of a major purge in the north and northwest in the spring and stepped up executions in the summer of 1977.<sup>34</sup>

The corroboration of refugee stories gave the Carter administration little room to doubt the grisly reality of life in Cambodia.

### ***US Policy Towards Cambodia***

In his commencement address at the University of Notre Dame on May 22, 1977, Carter outlined an approach to foreign policy that embraced human rights and freedom on their merits alone. He distanced himself from the “intellectual and moral poverty” in foreign policy that led to the debacle in Vietnam. Carter stressed that the United States should not waver in “our efforts

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<sup>32</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983), 18.

<sup>33</sup> NLC-1-7-7-33-0, Jimmy Carter Library.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

to inspire, to persuade, and to lead”<sup>35</sup> in pursuit of a better world. Yet the administration remained passive on the Cambodia issue and seemed to hope that neglect would defuse the situation.

The Carter administration said surprisingly little about the Khmer Rouge, considering they had so egregiously violated the rights of their own people and of the ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese living in Cambodia. The disparity between Carter’s outspoken commitment to international human rights and tepid attitude towards Democratic Kampuchea was glaringly obvious for those who were aware of the situation. They openly criticized Carter for his relative silence on the issue and made sure to point out the contradiction between the President’s rhetorical stance on human rights and his record on Cambodia. On April 23, 1978, *New York Times* columnist William Safire passionately criticized the US Ambassador to the UN, Andrew Young, because he could not “bring himself to upset third-world colleagues by demanding investigation and condemnation of the slaughter; to the shame of this nation, he sits silent as hundreds of thousands of human beings die.”<sup>36</sup> Two days later the House of Representatives voted unanimously to condemn the Cambodian Government for atrocities, killings, and disregard for basic human rights.<sup>37</sup> In August 1978 former antiwar activists Jane Fonda, Tom Hayden, Sam Hurst, and Fred Branfman sent a protest letter to Carter. In it they complained that Brzezinski’s desire to ally with China, and thus put pressure on the Soviet Union, gave tacit support for the brutality in Cambodia by regarding Cambodia within the Chinese sphere of influence.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Jimmy Carter, “University of Notre Dame,” *American Presidency Project*, May 22, 1977, <<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=7552&st=&st1=>>.

<sup>36</sup> William Safire, “Silence is Guilt,” *New York Times*, April 23, 1978, 466.

<sup>37</sup> “House Decries Cambodia on Rights,” *New York Times*, April 26, 1978, A17.

<sup>38</sup> Clymer, *The United States and Cambodia*, 118.

On May 3, 1977, a subcommittee of the House International Relations Committee convened to gather information on the scope and nature of the suffering in Democratic Kampuchea. Representative Stephen Solarz declared “that conditions in Cambodia could not be ameliorated without a show of impassioned outrage from an aroused public in the United States and elsewhere” and expressed puzzlement that even after Hitler it appeared the world had not learned its lesson on genocide.<sup>39</sup> Even more provocative was the suggestion by Senator George McGovern, at a hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in late August 1978, to use a military invasion of Cambodia to swiftly and decisively put an end to the rule of the Khmer Rouge. McGovern also alluded to Hitler and concluded that the case for military intervention into Cambodia was strong when considering that a greater percentage of the population in Cambodia was estimated to have died than in Nazi Germany. A number of officials from the State Department present at the hearings dismissed his proposal as impracticable but did not offer their own solution to the problem; they only spoke generally about trying to end the human rights catastrophe.<sup>40</sup>

Rep. Solarz kept pressure on Carter to be more vocal about the crimes being committed in Cambodia by introducing a bill in the House on July 27, 1977. The bill was intended, as written in its abstract, to express “the concern of the House of Representatives over human rights in Cambodia.”<sup>41</sup> A couple months earlier Solarz had already aired his concern about the deteriorating human rights situation and criticized Carter’s silence on the issue before a House subcommittee, but that had no impact. So, it appears Solarz was hoping that the consensus of a Congressional majority and passage of a House resolution would legitimize his complaints about

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<sup>39</sup> Neuringer, *The Agony of Cambodia*, 19-20.

<sup>40</sup> Neuringer, *The Agony of Cambodia*, 34-35.

<sup>41</sup> Stephen Solarz, “House Resolution 724,” *Bill Summary and Status for the 95<sup>th</sup> Congress*, July 27, 1977, <<http://www.geocities.com/khmerchronology/HRES724.htm>>.

Carter's handling of the situation in such a way that would make it harder for Carter to ignore. Though the House passed the resolution on September 27, 1977, it did not appear to have any measurable impact upon Carter's ongoing strategy for dealing with the Khmer Rouge. While it is not surprising that the administration ignored complaints from the general public, it is more shocking to learn that Congress had so little influence on its policy towards Democratic Kampuchea.

Richard Holbrooke, in his testimony before the Subcommittee on International Organizations on July 26, 1977, acknowledged that the administration had been relatively silent on atrocities perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge. However, he used that admission as an opportunity "to say in the strongest possible terms that we deplore what has taken place there." Holbrooke knew that a verbal wrist-slapping of the Khmer Rouge was ineffectual, but it had to be done for the administration to maintain a consistent posture against human rights violators. He stated frankly, "I cannot tell you, however, that anything we can realistically do would improve the lot of the Khmer people in the foreseeable future."<sup>42</sup> Instead, he asserted that what the US could do to help was to continue to aid the refugees fleeing into neighboring countries.

It was not until April 21, 1978 that Carter issued his sharpest criticism of the Khmer Rouge. The President decried Pol Pot as "the worst violator of human rights in the world today."<sup>43</sup> In the same statement he spoke of US support for international protest against the regime and welcomed the actions of the United National Human Rights Commission, which had recently adopted a resolution asking the Cambodian Government to respond to allegations of human rights violations.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> *AFP*, document 549.

<sup>43</sup> *AFP*, document 550.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

Apart from verbal denunciations of the Khmer Rouge, there was little the Carter administration believed it could have done to change the situation in Cambodia. Carter upheld the US response to the communist victory in Cambodia in 1975, which was to continue with economic embargoes and retract all diplomatic relations.<sup>45</sup> His administration was endowed with several important congressional enactments intended for use as leverage against troublesome foreign governments. Passed during the Ford administration, the 1976 amended version of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1974 and the International Development and Food Assistance Act of 1975 empowered the President to ban military or economic aid to any country that consistently engaged in a gross violation of internationally recognized human rights or other denials of just treatment.<sup>46</sup> If there ever was a candidate for Carter to deny aid to, it was Democratic Kampuchea. Yet, that country had neither received nor requested any aid from the United States and so there was nothing for Carter to retract or deny. Without diplomatic relations or any monetary ties to Democratic Kampuchea the US was, so to speak, out of carrots.

Carter's policy toward Democratic Kampuchea was consistent with one of his administration's primary human rights objectives. On December 1, 1978, in preparation for a press briefing, Rick Inderfurth, Special Assistant to the National Security Advisor, sent Brzezinski a memo stating that one of the administration's human rights goals was "to organize U.S. foreign policy making so that human rights concerns are taken into account in all relevant decisions including foreign assistance, political actions and economic benefits."<sup>47</sup> The trade embargo and absence of relations with Democratic Kampuchea meant that Carter, according to Michael Haas, "was using human rights performance as a screening criterion to apply to

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<sup>45</sup> Michael Haas, *Cambodia, Pol Pot, and The United States: The Faustian Pact* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 10.

<sup>46</sup> Neuringer, *The Agony of Cambodia*, 26-27.

<sup>47</sup> NLC-11-3-7-10-8, Jimmy Carter Library.

potential aid recipients.”<sup>48</sup> Carter’s human rights rubric was used as a gauge for testing whether or not certain countries were eligible for receiving various forms of US aid. Denying aid was a passive method of persuasion, for it was hoped that the economic and social importance of US aid would compel violators into complying with international law. But without any aid to deny the Khmer Rouge, the US was unable to pressure them into changing their behavior.

The only thing the administration did not deny the Khmer Rouge was DDT. In 1977 the administration lifted a ban on the sale of the chemical to Democratic Kampuchea to help it combat malaria. This was considered a humanitarian gesture aimed at saving lives.<sup>49</sup> DDT was so limited in its application that the United States was quite certain it would be used for the benefit of the general populace, which was a tangible, albeit feeble, attempt by Carter to improve a disastrous situation. Besides, the ban had not caused the Khmer Rouge to change their demonic ways thus far, so there was little to lose in lifting the ban.

The reply to a letter Representative Roman Mazzoli sent the President in December 1977 reiterates the lack of influence the US had had over Democratic Kampuchea since 1975. On January 31, 1978, the State Department stated succinctly to Mazzoli the administration’s static position toward Democratic Kampuchea:

The United States does not have relations with Cambodia. U.S. legislation prohibits aid to Cambodia; export and foreign assets control regulations restrict any unlicensed transactions between Cambodia and individuals or companies under U.S. jurisdiction. In the present circumstances, the United States has no leverage to affect the human rights situation in Cambodia.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Haas, *Cambodia, Pol Pot, and the United States*, 13.

<sup>49</sup> Neuringer, *The Agony of Cambodia*, 27.

<sup>50</sup> Letter, State Department to Romano Mazzoli, 1/31/78, “1/20/77-1/21/81” folder, Box CO-40, WHCF-CO 81, Jimmy Carter Library.

Rick Inderfurth, in his December 1, 1978, memo to Brzezinski repeated Brzezinski's comments from earlier that year. As part of a general discussion about the performance of human rights worldwide, he said that the situation in Cambodia continued to be deplorable and that Western influence had failed to help.<sup>51</sup> It was not just the lack of US influence that he was citing, but he went further and boldly asserted that Western influence, as a whole, was ineffectual in Cambodia. Western Europe did not have any more leverage in Southeast Asia than the United States did and was not about to initiate a multi-lateral intervention in Cambodia as a way to end reign of the Khmer Rouge.

Short of a military invasion to remove the Khmer Rouge from power, there was little, if anything, that Carter could have done about the genocide. It is unlikely that pressure from foreign governments would have compelled Pol Pot and his cronies to cease violating human rights, for dogmatic fanaticism and the pursuit of economic independence made the Khmer Rouge unbending in their policies. There is no indication that anyone within the administration even considered an armed military intervention into Cambodia; America had just begun to heal the wounds from one conflict in Southeast Asia and so military action, under any guise, into Cambodia was not on the radar for Carter.

Though unilateral military intervention was the most extreme option open to the President, he could have addressed the maniacal reign of the Khmer Rouge better by making more use of public diplomacy. Even though rhetorical pressure from the US would not have been a panacea, it would have highlighted the issue. Carter could have used his prestige as a world leader on human rights and the power and influence of the United States to focus world attention on Cambodia. Carter could have called on the international community for a multilateral condemnation of the Khmer Rouge, which he did tentatively in April 1978, but that

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<sup>51</sup> NLC-11-3-7-10-8, Jimmy Carter Library.



was the extent of it. What affect that may have actually had on the lives of Cambodians or the attitude of Pol Pot and the party leadership is speculative. At the very least, a more decisive public position on the issue would have assuaged some of Carter's critics.

Carter's feeble public stance towards the Khmer Rouge was proof of his struggle to formulate a response befitting the tragedy in Cambodia. There seemed to be little reason for officials within the Carter administration to bring attention to the human rights abuses in Cambodia because it was readily admitted that the effect of harsh public condemnation of the government in Phnom Penh would be nil. Yet this proved to be a double-edged sword for the administration. Its silence drew charges that it was not doing enough to alleviate the plight of Cambodians, but if it had been more vocal in its criticism of the Khmer Rouge, then it probably would have been accused of endorsing a human rights policy that was all talk and no action. Rather than dwell on a tragedy whose amelioration was beyond the reach of the most powerful nation on earth, the administration redirected the discourse on Southeast Asia in a way that was more politically advantageous.

Holbrooke, in his testimony before the House Subcommittee in July 1977, did what was common among administration officials; he framed the situation in Cambodia as a refugee crisis. By focusing on the plight of refugees rather than genocide, the administration presented a problem in whose solution it could participate. Officials like Brzezinski and Holbrooke made it clear that the US had no leverage in Democratic Kampuchea, and so it made sense to address a problem that the US could "realistically" help solve. Holbrooke, in an address before the Western Governors Conference in Honolulu on June 16, 1978, repeated what he said before the House Subcommittee in July 1977. He again focused on the refugee crisis and announced that the two humanitarian problems concerning the administration most was "the plight of Indochina

refugees and food shortages.”<sup>52</sup> Conspicuously absent from his comment was any mention of the ongoing crimes against humanity in Cambodia. Although Holbrooke was aware of the killing in Cambodia, he implied that the plight of the refugees and food shortages represented the most important problem in the region. These problems were used as a way to highlight “the fundamental actions of the United States in promoting the dignity and rights of people in all nations.”<sup>53</sup>

The memo Brzezinski sent to the President on September 7, 1978, lends support to the idea that the administration deliberately dissociated the topic of refugees from the pursuit of human rights. Brzezinski relayed to Carter that a dramatic increase in refugees fleeing northwestern Cambodia in recent weeks was the result of an intensified campaign to identify and execute suspected traitors to the regime.<sup>54</sup> It appeared that the administration knew that the violation of human rights and the refugee crisis were linked but chose not to divulge the connection. Instead, the refugee situation was presented alongside the human rights problem, but their relationship was never mentioned publicly. It is odd that the Carter administration, in its discussion of the refugee crisis, never acknowledged the fact that thousands of Cambodians fled their country, at least in part, to escape the despotic Khmer Rouge. Something must account for the disparity between what was known privately and talked about publicly.

The Carter administration’s focus on the flight of refugees, which made it appear proactive in its support for human rights, stemmed from a narrow conception of human rights issues in Southeast Asia. Since the United States was in the habit of dealing with refugees who fled during the Vietnam War, it became accustomed to thinking about human rights issues in Southeast Asia solely in terms of refugees. Undoubtedly, there were other humanitarian

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<sup>52</sup> *AFP*, document 488.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> NLC-1-7-7-33-0, Jimmy Carter Library.

problems in the region throughout the 1970s, but the overwhelming number of refugees seeking asylum dominated the public and political spotlight and, as a result, outweighed these other concerns. Some of the most indelible images of war refugees came during the fall of Saigon in 1975, when thousands of people clamored desperately to board US helicopters. There were also the “boat people,” desperate Vietnamese crammed into small boats and set off into the South China Sea as refugees, many of whom were relocated in the United States. Cambodians were also affected by the war, particularly by Nixon’s clandestine bombing campaign, which caused the acreage for rice planting to drop from six million to one million.<sup>55</sup> A pattern emerged amidst the war; US officials recognized that the protection of human rights in Southeast Asia was synonymous with making sure that war refugees received adequate care. Accordingly, by the time Carter took office a precedent for focusing on refugees in Southeast Asia had already been established.

The Carter administration soon realized that the turmoil in Cambodia was not limited to refugees because genocide was occurring. Administration officials were aware that dealing with refugees would not be sufficient for ending the Khmer Rouge’s murderous policies; something more had to be done. However, the administration knew its options for dealing with the government in Phnom Penh were limited by a nearly complete lack of relations. Quiet diplomacy and subtle acts of persuasion would not sway a regime that sought to sever ties with all other nations by creating an entirely self-sustaining economy. Even if Carter had wanted to do more, he was limited in his options because he did not want to upset the process of improving relations with China.

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<sup>55</sup> Michael Haas, *Genocide by Proxy: Cambodian Pawn on a Superpower Chessboard* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 18.

In the 1950s and 1960s, American foreign policy experts were guided by an undifferentiated antipathy toward communism. They saw a general communist menace, emanating from China and the Soviet Union, whose hegemonic expansion needed to be prevented on all fronts. The establishment of the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance in February 1950 fueled US fears that the two nations were working in concert to expand their communist orbit. Their shared hostility toward capitalism and their expansionist efforts, particularly in the Third World, caused many Americans to feel as though they were about to be encircled by the Reds. These concerns underscored the argument that escalating US involvement in the Vietnam War was necessary to stymie the expansion of both communist powers.

By October 1964, when Nikita Khrushchev was forced from office, the Soviet Union and China had become increasingly skeptical of each other and no longer shared solidarity. By the late 1960s the US recognized that a rift had developed in Sino-Soviet relations and Richard Nixon, who was welcomed personally to Beijing by Mao Zedong in 1972, helped foster better ties by reopening trade with China.<sup>56</sup> Over time the break in Sino-Soviet relations gave way to a differentiated view of communism, with a more focused opposition to Soviet power and a relatively pro-PRC stance. With communism no longer seen as a monolithic force, the United States could tailor its relations with China and formulate a policy toward Southeast Asia that no longer required uniform opposition to all communist states.

The Carter administration, like the Nixon and Ford administrations before it, was aware of the Sino-Soviet rivalry and sought to utilize China as a counterweight to the Soviets. A Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) memo from May 5, 1978, made clear to the administration

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<sup>56</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 218.

that "Peking's foreign policy objectives flow from the fundamental strategic perception that the USSR is a growing expansionist power that represents a direct threat to China."<sup>57</sup> Though the US was not as alarmed about Soviet hegemony as China was, it was willing to entertain China's concerns in order to achieve closer relations. The US, however, did not want to enter into an outright military alliance with China, which would have caused the Soviets to feel threatened and encircled, because it placed a high priority on the ratification of the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT) II and had every intention of keeping détente alive. Recognizing that the Soviets needed to be contained, but not encircled, the US sought to keep relations with China and the USSR balanced through the use of "triangular diplomacy," which was based upon the process of normalizing relations with China and the successful negotiation of SALT II.

The Carter administration also utilized a new approach to deal with Vietnam that focused on normalizing relations, which it felt would help to curb the perceived growth of Soviet power. The US, according to Vance, was "prepared to establish normal relations with Vietnam" because he believed that "normal diplomatic relations with Hanoi . . . could increase our influence with Vietnam and offer it alternatives to excessive political, economic, and military dependence on the Soviet Union or China."<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, the American public had been traumatized by the debacle in Vietnam and of the unrest it caused at home, prompting many to want nothing to do with Southeast Asia by the time Carter took office. If the administration could quickly, and without much ruckus, establish relations with Vietnam, Vietnam would become a non-issue with the American public. Brzezinski writes in his memoir that he signed onto Vance's plan for normalization because he saw it as a way to soothe "the psychologically searing impact of

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<sup>57</sup> NLC-4-38-4-6-6, Jimmy Carter Library.

<sup>58</sup> Vance, *Hard Choices*, 122.

Vietnamese war tragedy," but he "could never quite understand from a policy standpoint"<sup>59</sup> the reasons for initiating such a policy with Vietnam.

Taking a decidedly more realist approach than Vance, Brzezinski felt that the advantage of establishing relations with China outweighed any gain that would have come from doing the same with Vietnam. Good relations with China would accomplish exactly what they would with Vietnam, just more so. China was bigger, both militarily and economically, than Vietnam and harbored a deep distrust for the Soviet Union. Brzezinski believed, therefore, that normalizing relations with China should take precedence over establishing relations with Vietnam. His position was strengthened further by the fact that Vietnam, unlike China, was firmly embedded as a Soviet ally. Brzezinski's insistence that talks with Hanoi should not be allowed to derail negotiations for normalization with the PRC eventually took hold within the administration. With regard to normalization with Vietnam, Brzezinski "found that such an initiative [was] untimely, especially given the extremely sensitive state of our negotiations with Chinese."<sup>60</sup> Brzezinski pressured the President, Vance, and Holbrooke to put off establishing relations with Vietnam until diplomatic ties with China were secured. Brzezinski recalls that his strategy "did slow things down, indeed, and in mid-October [1978] the President decided to defer the Vietnam normalization . . . In fact, in the middle of November the President instructed Vance to condemn the Vietnamese for their deliberate promotion of the refugee exodus from Vietnam."<sup>61</sup> Following Brzezinski's lead, the administration eventually deferred the process of normalization with Vietnam, which was not revived and completed until 1995, in favor of cultivating its relationship with China.

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<sup>59</sup> Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 228.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

In his memoir, Brzezinski reflects on the importance the administration gave to China: "we wanted to initiate talks with the PRC and . . . to establish full diplomatic relations by 1979."<sup>62</sup> Vance, though he was less concerned with the geopolitical benefits of normalizing relations with China than Brzezinski was, still argued "that China constituted a political, economic, and cultural weight in the world that the United States could not ignore."<sup>63</sup> Completing normalization was a priority, but it was complicated by the relationship between China and Democratic Kampuchea, which often forced the US to reconsider its relationship with the Soviet Union and other Southeast Asian nations.

Some felt normalization should have been contingent upon China's using its influence in Southeast Asia to coax Democratic Kampuchea into improving its human rights record. A chance came for the administration to link the two issues when Brzezinski visited China in May 1978. Carter instructed the National Security Advisor to talk about the issue of human rights with the Chinese Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping and told Brzezinski to read to the Chinese his statement from April 21, 1978, which called Cambodia "the worst violator of human rights today." Feeling that this was not enough, in July 1978 a bipartisan group of eighteen congressional representatives urged Carter to integrate Cambodia into the discussions aimed at normalizing relations with China.<sup>64</sup> Resistance from the administration came not only from Brzezinski but also from the State Department. With support from Brzezinski, the State Department responded to the congressmen: "we believe our responsibility remains to speak out on Cambodia . . . but that it would be a serious mistake to inject the Cambodian human rights violations into future US-PRC bilateral negotiations on normalization" since that would "seriously complicate this process without significant positive impact on the situation in

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<sup>62</sup> Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 54.

<sup>63</sup> Vance, *Hard Choices*, 78-79.

<sup>64</sup> Clymer, *The United States and Cambodia*, 117.



Cambodia.”<sup>65</sup> This indicates there was consensus among administration officials to keep the process of normalization untangled from the mess in Cambodia.

The administration’s unwillingness to press the Chinese about the human rights violations in Cambodia reveals the extent to which it wanted to normalize relations, for the administration had to turn its back on its commitment to human rights in the process. As Clymer notes, “to give first priority to the geopolitical advantages inherent in normalizing relations with China . . . belied the Carter administration’s insistence that concern for human rights was the primary determinant in its foreign policy.”<sup>66</sup> Balancing Soviet power in Asia, through the normalization of relations with China, was paramount and would not be derailed by a crusade to protect human rights in Cambodia. Yet, as the congressmen who wrote Carter in 1978 pointed out, it was hypocritical for the Carter administration not to try to enlist the help of the one country in Southeast Asia capable of pressuring the Khmer Rouge into ending their streak of human rights violations.

Even if the Carter administration had supported linking the process of normalization to ending the misery in Cambodia any such effort would have been complicated by the relationship between China and Democratic Kampuchea. In February 1976 Pol Pot and PRC representatives signed a secret military agreement at the behest of Pol Pot, who paranoically believed that the establishment of a “special relationship” between Laos and Vietnam earlier that month presaged an assertion of Vietnamese hegemonism.<sup>67</sup> The military agreement secured the sale of arms from the PRC to Democratic Kampuchea, but more importantly it established a relationship based upon geostrategic considerations. Also, territorial disputes and threats from Hanoi against

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<sup>65</sup> Bennet to Hanley et al., 8/17/78, “Carter Papers” folder, WHCF-CO 81, Box CO-40, Jimmy Carter Library.

<sup>66</sup> Clymer, *The United States and Cambodia*, 118.

<sup>67</sup> Haas, *Genocide by Proxy*, 22.



its ethnic Chinese population magnified the rift between the two communist neighbors that emerged at the end of the Vietnam War.<sup>68</sup>

Territorial disputes of a different nature also existed between Vietnam and Cambodia; Pol Pot wanted to recover land long lost to neighboring countries. Vietnam was prepared to entertain Pol Pot's requests and reconsider frontiers arbitrarily drawn by imperialist French cartographers, but only through negotiations.<sup>69</sup> Disregarding the Vietnamese offer for negotiations, the Revolutionary Army of Kampuchea initiated border raids against Vietnam in April 1976, "ostensibly to evict Vietnamese from enclaves once used to infiltrate South Vietnam that were allegedly still occupied by"<sup>70</sup> troops from the People's Army of Vietnam. Hanoi still sought a diplomatic resolution to the border dispute, and in April it requested another meeting with Democratic Kampuchea. However, negotiations were mired in a catch-22; Hanoi refused to evacuate the disputed areas until new borders were agreed upon, but Phnom Penh would not negotiate until Vietnam withdrew to a line drawn by France in 1939.<sup>71</sup> The best opportunity for resolving the situation came in October 1976, when the Vietnamese Premier Pham Van Dong asked China to mediate a diplomatic solution. China refused, citing its military agreement with Democratic Kampuchea, thereby cementing itself as a staunch ally of Democratic Kampuchea.

The split between Vietnam and its two communist neighbors was irreparable. As of 1977, Beijing was still unwilling to mediate negotiations, and the army from Democratic Kampuchea persisted in incursions to drive the Vietnamese out of what they considered Cambodian territory. In response, Hanoi began to lean toward Moscow and joined the International Bank for Economic Cooperation and the International Investment Bank, two Soviet

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<sup>68</sup> Neuringer, *The Agony of Cambodia*, 32.

<sup>69</sup> Haas, *Genocide by Proxy*, 22.

<sup>70</sup> Haas, *Genocide by Proxy*, 22-23.

<sup>71</sup> Haas, *Genocide by Proxy*, 23.

bloc organizations, in 1977.<sup>72</sup> By the summer of 1978, with hostilities between Democratic Kampuchea and Vietnam escalating into a major conflict, the Soviet Union began to supply military aid to Vietnam. Fearing Soviet expansion into East Asia, China moved closer to Cambodia.<sup>73</sup> Securing an alliance with Democratic Kampuchea gave China a foothold in Southeast Asia and a way to offset Vietnamese and Soviet influence in the region.

While appealing to China for a resolution of the human rights violations in Cambodia might have given officials from the Carter administration a way to overcome its professed lack of leverage in Cambodia, it seems unlikely that China would have agreed to such a request. Just as the Carter administration's decision to reject linking normalization with China to the human rights situation in Cambodia was guided by *realpolitik*, so too was Chinese policy towards Democratic Kampuchea. It is doubtful the Chinese would have discussed human rights with Phnom Penh, for the same reason the Carter administration did not make normalization contingent upon China's doing so; neither country wanted to risk losing a strategic partnership it had worked so hard to cultivate. The Carter administration chose to give the geopolitical advantages inherent in the normalization of relations with China precedence over human rights concerns in Cambodia; balancing Soviet power in Asia was more important than trying to save lives in Cambodia. Carter's policy towards Democratic Kampuchea is more defensible when considering the strategic relationship China shared with them, for it now appears that Carter was dealt quite a tough hand.

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<sup>72</sup> Haas, *Genocide by Proxy*, 57.

<sup>73</sup> Neuringer, *The Agony of Cambodia*, 32.

## *Vietnam Invades Cambodia*

The intensifying border war between Democratic Kampuchea and Vietnam in late 1978, with the prospect of a Vietnamese takeover, gave hope to Cambodians yearning to get rid of the Khmer Rouge. Ironically, it was Vietnam, a historical rival of the Khmer people, which forced Pol Pot to flee Phnom Penh on January 7, 1979, and liberated Cambodians from three-and-a-half years of tyranny. The next day, Vietnam installed and backed a new government, the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), led by Heng Samrin.

Following their victory, Vietnam made it a point to expose and publicize as much of the horrific activity perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge as possible with the hope of giving their invasion a sense of legitimacy. Actually, much of what came to be known about Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge during the final years of Carter's presidency resulted from Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia, which effectively lifted the veil of silence surrounding Democratic Kampuchea. One of the facilities the Vietnamese helped uncover was S-21, also known as Tuol Sleng, an interrogation center in Phnom Penh. The Khmer Rouge kept careful records on each prisoner, even noting the process of torture. These records were used to determine that of 14,449 persons who entered the prison over the course of three years, only six survived. The victims were children, foreigners, peasants, workers, teachers, students, doctors, engineers, "and even high officials of Pol Pot's own government."<sup>74</sup>

The Carter administration should have rejoiced at the overthrow of Khmer Rouge for the alleviation it brought Cambodians. Instead, the administration condemned Vietnam, arguing that even the atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge did not justify Vietnam's violation of

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<sup>74</sup> Doug Hostetter, "S 21: Asian Auschwitz," *Los Angeles Times*, September 22, 1980, C5.

Kampuchean sovereignty.<sup>75</sup> Citing the UN Charter, which prohibits a military invasion of one country by another to settle international disputes, the US supported a UN Security Council resolution calling for the withdrawal of foreign forces from Cambodia, and asked for the non-involvement of China and the Soviet Union.<sup>76</sup> The Carter administration could not simply embrace the ouster of the Khmer Rouge for the beneficial effect it had on human rights in Cambodia because it was concerned with the deleterious effect the event could have on the conflict between China and the Soviet Union.

Neither the Soviet Union nor China instigated the war between Vietnam and Democratic Kampuchea; in fact both were keen to end it. Yet by the time Pol Pot was driven from Phnom Penh, both powers “felt obliged to ‘assist’ their own particular ‘friend’ in what could be described as a local quarrel fanned by ideological rivalry. The battle lines had been drawn and allegiances confirmed.”<sup>77</sup> The “proxy war” over Cambodia was fueled by China’s desire to recover its lost power and prestige in Southeast Asia and by the Soviet Union’s determination to opportunistically expand its sphere of influence and defend its important ally, in Vietnam. China believed that Moscow had somehow orchestrated Vietnam’s takeover of Cambodia, when the reality was that Hanoi had acted on its own. Even so, the Soviet Union supported the new Vietnamese-installed government in Cambodia and was eager to show that the defeat of the Pol Pot regime was a setback for China. On January 8, 1979, Lev Delyusin, an embassy officer and Soviet expert on China, commented that “the Chinese must assume that the Soviets will continue to support Vietnam” and that “Kampuchea falls within Vietnam’s, and not China’s, sphere of influence and the fall of Pol Pot’s regime will make it harder for China to exert influence in the

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<sup>75</sup> Clymer, *The United States and Cambodia*, 119.

<sup>76</sup> Neuringer, *The Agony of Cambodia*, 50.

<sup>77</sup> Christopher Brady, *United States Foreign Policy towards Cambodia, 1977-92: A Question of Realities* (Houndmills: MacMillan, 1999), 39.

area."<sup>78</sup> Delyusin was right and China knew it. Chinese power in Southeast Asia was predicated on the existence of its proxy, Democratic Kampuchea, which had fallen under Vietnamese control. Though Moscow did not necessarily have expansionist designs on Southeast Asia, it was certainly willing to take advantage of an easy opportunity to enlarge its sphere of influence and embarrass China.

The fall of Democratic Kampuchea dealt a major blow to the Chinese, who sought to reassert their influence in the region by launching attacks against Vietnam in February 1979. China's invasion of Vietnam was primarily an exercise in regaining lost prestige. According to a State Department memo of January 8, 1979, "the outcome has shown that China is strong enough neither to intimidate a small country (Vietnam) with one-twentieth of China's population, nor to protect a weak client state within a region where Chinese influence has long been significant."<sup>79</sup> The State Department assessment was on the mark. In a January 25, 1979, memo to the president, Vance quoted the Chinese ambassador as saying "that it was essential that China's enemies not get the mistaken impression that it was soft."<sup>80</sup> So, when on February 17 the Chinese sent 170,000 troops into the northern provinces of Vietnam, their main objective was not to force Vietnam to abandon Cambodia, though that would have been nice for Peking. Rather, the invasion was devised to teach Hanoi a lesson about Chinese power, which it did to the tune of 50,000 Vietnamese casualties.<sup>81</sup>

The Carter administration's prompt censure of Vietnamese aggression in Cambodia and the formal establishment of diplomatic relations with China on January 1, 1979, largely

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<sup>78</sup> NLC-4-17-1-5-3, Jimmy Carter Library.

<sup>79</sup> Memo, David Mark to Cyrus Vance, "Roles, Gains, and Losses of Vietnam, China, and the Soviet Union in the Vietnam-Kampuchea Conflict," Declassified Documents Reference System, January 1, 1979.

<sup>80</sup> Memo, Cyrus Vance to President Carter, 1/25/79, "State Department Evening Reports 1/79" folder, Plains Subject File, Box-39, Jimmy Carter Library.

<sup>81</sup> Clymer, *The United States and Cambodia*, 119 and Neuringer, *The Agony of Cambodia*, 55.

determined how the US would react to China's vengeful attacks in northern Vietnam before it even happened. The US response to China's military foray, which was the first test of strength for Sino-American diplomatic relations, was to appear neutral. The US did not want to goad the Soviet Union into trying to protect its southern ally, so the State Department offered a solution that called for the withdrawal of Chinese forces from Vietnam but that would be linked to a parallel demand for Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia.<sup>82</sup> This was actually a nod in favor of China, because it would have restored Chinese influence in Cambodia. Still, the Carter administration attempted to placate the Soviet Union by sending a message "to Moscow, urging . . . restraint and hinting, according to Brzezinski, that a suitable reaction would have a beneficial effect on the ongoing SALT talks."<sup>83</sup>

China's "lesson" for Vietnam and the ensuing proxy war over Cambodia exposed an interesting difference between Chinese and American thinking about the Soviet Union, for the US did not share China's interpretation of events. Unlike the Chinese, the Carter administration did not believe the formation of the PRK foreshadowed Soviet hegemony in Southeast Asia. This was made clear to Deng Xiaoping during his visit to the US in late January 1979, when Carter stated frankly to the Vice Premier that the US "position was not based on fear of the Soviet Union."<sup>84</sup> Carter's position was backed by the State Department, which remarked in an internal memo on January 8, 1979, that "Vietnam's 1978/9 war in Cambodia is not likely to lead to any major geopolitical changes in Southeast Asia."<sup>85</sup> The US already had in China its counterweight to Soviet dominance in Asia, so its decision to oppose the PRK was done to help China restore Cambodia as a counterweight to Russo-Vietnamese supremacy in Southeast Asia.

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<sup>82</sup> Brady, *United States Foreign Policy Toward Cambodia*, 42.

<sup>83</sup> Neuringer, *The Agony of Cambodia*, 54.

<sup>84</sup> Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 410.

<sup>85</sup> Memo, David Mark to Cyrus Vance, "Roles, Gains, and Losses of Vietnam, China, and the Soviet Union in the Vietnam-Kampuchea Conflict," Declassified Documents Reference System, January 1, 1979.

In other words, the US sided with China because China thought Cambodia was an important strategic ally, not because the United States did.

The other major determinant in the Carter administration's decision to align itself with China was the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). ASEAN had been founded in 1967 to promote regional cooperation on diplomatic and economic matters among the five non-communist member states of Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and the Philippines.<sup>86</sup> These states emerged from the Vietnam War as one of the fastest growing economic regions in the world and were staunchly anti-communist, which was why the Carter administration valued its relationship with ASEAN as beneficial to the economic and political interests of the US in East Asia.<sup>87</sup>

Vietnam's presence in Cambodia called for the United States to give special attention to its allies in Southeast Asia. Secretary of State Vance recalled in his memoir, "as Sino-American relations flourished, we also recognized that our old friends in Southeast Asia, with their long-standing fear of being dominated by their giant neighbor [China], would be greatly concerned if we did not attempt to match Sino-American progress with special attention to their concerns."<sup>88</sup> On December 3, 1979, Brzezinski sent a memo to the President describing the importance of US relations with ASEAN, which were hinged upon a strong relationship with Thailand. It stated, "Thailand is the cornerstone of ASEAN" and that "ASEAN unity is fragile . . . and will disintegrate in the face of a Vietnamese victory in Thailand."<sup>89</sup> The Carter administration needed to show ASEAN and Vietnam that it was serious about preventing the conflict in Cambodia from spreading into Thailand, whose proximity to Cambodia made a border war with

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<sup>86</sup> Neuringer, *The Agony of Cambodia*, 51.

<sup>87</sup> *AFP*, document 557.

<sup>88</sup> Vance, *Hard Choices*, 125.

<sup>89</sup> Memo, Nick Platt to Brzezinski, 12/3/79, "12/79" folder, National Security Affairs tab-26, Box-68, Jimmy Carter Library.



Vietnamese troops likely. On September 7, 1979, the US warned the Vietnamese and the Soviets that if tensions spread into Thailand the US would give its full support to Thailand, which also had the support of the Chinese.<sup>90</sup> Christopher Brady writes, “the United States, then, had settled into a matrix of geopolitical alliances at various levels with China, ASEAN and the Khmer Rouge.”<sup>91</sup>

The Carter administration’s search for a cease-fire and withdrawal of Vietnamese forces was exactly what China and ASEAN had in mind for Cambodia. But because China and ASEAN also wanted to reinstall the Khmer Rouge, which was less of a threat to their national sovereignty than Vietnam, the US was drawn into another awkward situation; the Carter administration’s alliance with China and ASEAN entailed implicit support for the return of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge, a fact Carter administration officials seldom discussed. Yet one of the most candid conversations about US support for Pol Pot occurred between Carter and the US Ambassador to Thailand, Mort Abramowitz, on February 1, 1979. “I admit that I have been hoping that the Vietnamese will be driven out of Kampuchea,” Carter said, “with the belief that there would be substantial changes in Pol Pot’s programs, should he return to power.”<sup>92</sup> For Carter to express the hope that a reinstated Pol Pot would somehow shed his propensity for killing innocent people was truly remarkable. One can only assume that Carter had no intention of disregarding the merciless killing of Cambodians, but that the geopolitical and economic advantages of aligning the US with China and ASEAN outweighed his immediate concern for human rights in Cambodia.

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<sup>90</sup> Brady, *United States Foreign Policy Toward Cambodia*, 43.

<sup>91</sup> Brady, *United States Foreign Policy Toward Cambodia*, 44.

<sup>92</sup> Summary of President’s meeting with Ambassador Mort Abramowitz, 2/1/79, “2/1-13/79” folder, National Security Affairs tab-26, Box-66, Jimmy Carter Library.



When the UN General Assembly reconvened in late 1979, Cambodia's seat in the General Assembly was disputed between two factions, those who favored awarding UN credentials to Democratic Kampuchea (Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge) and those who favored the PRK. The US had already tilted toward Pol Pot in early 1979, so by that fall, when the vote for Cambodia's credentials came up in the General Assembly, the Carter administration had little choice but to vote for Pol Pot's regime to retain Cambodia's seat in the UN. As Brady's notes accurately, "in essence the US support for ASEAN, with its enormous trade potential, was unconditional and, therefore, the ASEAN principle of non-intervention, coupled with its anti-Vietnamese stance, meant that implicit support for the Khmer Rouge, by the United States, was inevitable."<sup>93</sup>

### *Controversy in the UN*

By the time the UN General Assembly reconvened in the fall of 1979 the Pol Pot government had lost control of Cambodia to the Vietnamese, who seized power militarily and established the PRK as a puppet state. With Phnom Penh under new leadership, Pol Pot and his band of 30,000 guerilla fighters struggled for survival against a superior force of 200,000 Vietnamese troops. Controversy in the UN circled over which party should be awarded Cambodia's seat in the UN; the choice was between the Pol Pot regime, which was backed by China and ASEAN but controlled only a small bit of territory at the fringe of Cambodia's border, and the PRK, which garnered support from Vietnam and the Soviet Union but had violated international law in its seizure of power.

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<sup>93</sup> Brady, *United States Foreign Policy Toward Cambodia*, 30.

From a human rights viewpoint, the Vietnamese had done the Carter administration a huge favor by putting an end to genocide in Cambodia and expelling the Khmer Rouge. Even so, the Carter administration felt it could not abandon its economic interests in East Asia, which were anchored by rapidly expanding markets in China and among the ASEAN. Sustaining solid political ties was most vital, though, because of the counterweight to Soviet and Vietnamese power that China and ASEAN provided. These factors ultimately led Carter to endorse voting to seat the Pol Pot government in the UN. As Vance saw it, it was one of those “times when your obligations as a senior government official force you to take a position which, although essential for our national security interests, is at the same time extremely distasteful. Fortunately, such dilemmas are rare, but when they arise they are wrenching, even when there is little choice in the matter.”<sup>94</sup>

On September 21, 1979, UN delegates voted 71 to 35, with 34 abstentions and 12 nations absent, to keep the Pol Pot representatives in place.<sup>95</sup> The US, along with China and the five member states of ASEAN, voted in favor of Pol Pot. In an attempt to highlight the hypocrisy of US support for Pol Pot the *New York Times* reported, “the Russians and the Vietnamese argued not only that Mr. Pol Pot’s Government was a murderous one, but also that it did not sit in Phnom Penh and had no subjects.” China and its “Asian neighbors retorted that no matter how outrageous Mr. Pol Pot was, the United Nations could not reward a Government installed at the point of foreign arms.” Echoing the rhetoric of its Asian allies, Richard Petree, of the United States delegation, argued that Pol Pot’s “rival had been imposed by Vietnam’s military force and had, therefore, no superior claim to the seat.”<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Vance, *Hard Choices*, 124.

<sup>95</sup> Bernard Nossiter, “U.N. Assembly, Rebuffing Soviet, Seats Cambodia Regime of Pol Pot,” *New York Times*, September 22, 1979, 1.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

The US tried to divorce itself from Pol Pot's genocidal policies by focusing on the technical question of credentials. Officials from the Carter administration repeatedly claimed that its vote for Pol Pot "in no way implies any degree of support or recognition of the Pol Pot regime itself or approval of its atrocious practices."<sup>97</sup> Even though Vietnam's actions in Cambodia, from a human rights perspective, were quite commendable, the US held that "the United Nations cannot condone the action of one nation to invade, occupy, and control the internal political life of another."<sup>98</sup> Listening to the US would give the impression that the principle at stake was sovereign independence, not human rights. However, the *New York Times* reported that "privately, diplomats said there was something less than consistency in all the talk of principle. They said that if Idi Amin showed up tomorrow, nobody would dream of giving him a seat, although he was pushed out of Uganda by Tanzania's army."<sup>99</sup>

Idi Amin ruled Uganda from 1971 to 1979, and, according to Gaddis Smith, "in his eight years of megalomaniacal and genocidal rule, he murdered tens of thousands of the country's citizens, killing for sport, it seemed, as well as for political advantage."<sup>100</sup> Overthrown by Tanzanian forces in January 1979, he fled the country and was replaced a new government that the US recognized and began supplying with aid. The administration accepted the argument that Amin's ruthless behavior justified Tanzania's invasion because it served American interests in Africa to have Amin out of power, but Vietnam's invasion was a setback for US policy in the Southeast Asia, so the ousting of the Khmer Rouge was summarily condemned. It seems when vital US interests were at stake geopolitics, rather than human rights, dictated whom the Carter administration would or would not consider as an ally.

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<sup>97</sup> *AFP*, document 551.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> Bernard Nossiter, "Soviet Loses U.N. Skirmish Over Cambodia's Seat," *New York Times*, September 20, 1979, 7.

<sup>100</sup> Smith, *Morality, Reason, and Power*, 150.

The Carter administration did not come to its decision easily. In his memoir, Vance laments that he spent weeks weighing the pros and cons of a US vote in favor of seating the Pol Pot government. He heard passionate arguments from administration officials who were concerned that a vote for Democratic Kampuchea's retaining the Cambodian seat was inconsistent with American values.<sup>101</sup> Vance sympathized with their concerns but came "to the conclusion that, unpleasant as it was to contemplate voting, even implicitly, for the Khmer Rouge, we could not afford the far-reaching consequences of a vote that would isolate us from all of ASEAN, . . . China, . . . and most of our European allies, and put us in a losing minority with Moscow, Hanoi, and Havana."<sup>102</sup> Vance's statement here is interesting because it reveals that the administration's public admonishments of Vietnam's violation of Cambodian sovereignty were a façade. The real issue at stake for the Carter administration was its relationship with China and ASEAN, which was viewed as essential for counter balancing Soviet and Vietnamese influence in Asia.

By leaving the Cambodian seat in the UN vacant, the Carter administration seemed to have a way out of voting for Pol Pot that did not commit the US to backing Vietnam. This was an option that was considered by administration officials but never taken seriously. The Chinese wanted no part of such a plan, and the US shied away "despite a sustained campaign by the Soviet bloc and Vietnam"<sup>103</sup> to leave the seat vacant. Moscow and Hanoi pushed for vacating the seat as a way to appear neutral in the debate, a tactic that appealed to those with a strong distaste for the Pol Pot regime. It was a clever maneuver because even if Cambodia's seat had been left vacant, Vietnam still would have retained control of Cambodia, which what was

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<sup>101</sup> Vance, *Hard Choices*, 126.

<sup>102</sup> Vance, *Hard Choices*, 127.

<sup>103</sup> Don Shannon, "Pol Pot Retains Cambodia Seat in U.N.," *Los Angeles Times*, September 22, 1979, A2.

ultimately most important. Though the practical result would have been the same had the Carter administration voted to leave the seat vacant, anything other than voting for the Khmer Rouge in the UN by the US would have been interpreted by China and ASEAN as a threat to relations, which is why the administration did not pursue such a course of action. The US was steadfast in its commitment to China and ASEAN, insofar as that commitment continued to serve American interests in Asia, and had no interest in a resolution that would have left the Cambodian seat in the UN vacant. Even if the Carter administration had wanted to leave the seat vacant, "the assembly rejected efforts to bar both Cambodian regimes"<sup>104</sup> in early September, just before the General Assembly voted for the Pol Pot government to retain its seat in the UN.

The contradiction between Carter's human rights rhetoric and US support for Pol Pot did not go unnoticed. On February 15, 1980, Lincoln Bloomfield, an Area Specialist on Global Affairs, confessed to Brzezinski in a memo that he had "become increasingly uneasy about the fact that the Pol Pot regime, for tactical diplomatic reasons, retains its seat in the United Nations and other international bodies." Bloomfield felt "our unjust identification with that universally condemned regime seems to me an unnecessary burden for the President to have to continue to carry if any feasible alternatives can be found." The administration, however, was caught between a rock and a hard place because the choice between Vietnam and Pol Pot was, "in effect, [like] Stalin invading Hitler's Germany."<sup>105</sup> There were not any obvious alternatives and all that Bloomfield could suggest was a strategy to vacate the Pol Pot seat without opening the door to the Heng Samrin regime. But none of the other major non-communist nations warmed to the idea of leaving the seat vacant because they did not want to fall out of favor with the US nor did they want to align themselves with the Soviet Union or Vietnam. The proposal for vacating

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<sup>104</sup> Don Shannon, "Pol Pot Retains Cambodia Seat in U.N.," *Los Angeles Times*, September 22, 1979, A2.

<sup>105</sup> NLC-6-43-1-2-5, Jimmy Carter Library.

Cambodia's seat failed to muster enough support in the UN, so it appeared as though there was very little the US could do but vote for Pol Pot again.

The prospect of another US vote for Pol Pot's representatives caused a stir. Neuringer points out that in the summer of 1980 "a number of congressmen along with representatives from American organizations involved in Cambodian relief work urged the Carter administration either to abstain or support the vacant seat formula."<sup>106</sup> These people wanted to see the credentials issue dictated by morality, not by a complex geopolitical calculus. Similarly, Bloomfield recognized that the administration's public stance on human rights was being undermined by its simultaneous support for the Pol Pot regime in the UN and that something needed to be done to correct the situation. In a June 16, 1980, memo to Brzezinski, Bloomfield noticed that "there is just too great a gulf between our expedient policy on the one hand, and the moral posture frequently enunciated by the President, featuring frequent denunciations of the Pol Pot-Khmer Rouge as the most genocidal since Adolf Hitler."<sup>107</sup> He argued for leaving the Cambodian seat vacant, which he saw as a way to free the US from its geostrategic ties with China and ASEAN in the UN. However, Carter and his foreign policy team ruled out vacating the seat because it would have made the US appear indecisive at time when its allies in Southeast Asia were looking for solidarity.

That same day Roger Sullivan, an NSC staff member, sent a memo to Brzezinski emphasizing the importance of US relations with ASEAN vis-à-vis Thailand. He wrote, "the Thais have therefore concluded that ASEAN and its Allies must maintain a firm and united stand. The UN credentials issue will be seen as the litmus test of our firmness."<sup>108</sup> Just as in

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<sup>106</sup> Neuringer, *The Agony of Cambodia*, 79.

<sup>107</sup> Memo, Roger Sullivan to Brzezinski, 6/17/80, "[Meetings-Muskie/Brown/Brzezinski: 5/80-6/80]" folder, Box-23, Brzezinski Donated Historical Materials, Jimmy Carter Library.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid*, 6/16/80.

1979, Thailand looked for the US to reconfirm its interest in the peace and security of Southeast Asia with a vote for Pol Pot.

The strategic constraints of voting for Pol Pot again were intensified by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1980, which, as Neuringer puts it, reinforced "the need to thwart Moscow and its 'proxy' in Southeast Asia [with] even greater urgency than before."<sup>109</sup> The invasion of Afghanistan signaled the end of détente and stimulated a renewed effort among Americans to stop the expansion of Soviet power. The invasion also indicated to China that their fears about Soviet hegemony were real and needed countering, which was why resurrecting a friendly regime in Cambodia was so important to them. Throughout 1980 Vietnam and the Soviet Union gave no indication they were willing to make concessions in Cambodia, thus the stage was set for another geopolitical battle over Cambodia in the UN.

When the General Assembly met again in the fall of 1980 the issue was the same as before; China and ASEAN led the drive for Pol Pot's representatives to retain their seat UN, while Vietnam and the Soviet Union pushed for the PRK to be seated. If Carter had second thoughts about his prior endorsement of Pol Pot, then the vote over Cambodia's credentials in September 1980 gave him the chance to rectify that decision and renew his dedication to the protection of universal human rights. The race to win reelection in November 1980 was in full swing and "American officials, from Secretary of State Edmund S. Muskie on down, [sidestepped] direct questions on how the United States" would vote. Some speculated, with good reason, "that in the midst of a Presidential election campaign the White House would not publicly commit itself to backing so unpopular a regime."<sup>110</sup> Despite internal doubt and public criticism, the US quietly decided to vote to seat the Pol Pot government again. The Pol Pot

<sup>109</sup> Neuringer, *The Agony of Cambodia*, 79.

<sup>110</sup> Henry Kamm, "Thais Back Pol Pot Force in U.N.," *New York Times*, August 19, 1980, 4.



delegation earned Cambodia's credentials with a vote of 74, including the US, to 34.<sup>111</sup> The Carter administration's vote for Pol Pot was guided by the same principles of *realpolitik* that led it to vote for the dictator in 1979, whose importance as a strategic ally was given even greater importance after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

### ***Concluding Remarks***

Carter's outspoken support for the protection of human rights loses some of its sincerity once his lackluster performance in Cambodia is taken into consideration. However, there is nothing to suggest that Carter's record in Cambodia is indicative of some greater shift in his morality or personal devotion to human rights. It appears that Carter's human rights policy failed in Cambodia, at least in part, because he projected an oversimplified version of global politics and conflict at the beginning of his time in office. Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia and the ensuing geopolitical chess match were unforeseen and derailed Carter's plan for using human rights as the primary determinant in foreign policy. Moreover, before Carter became president the US had already embarked upon the path toward normalizing relations with China, a policy that he and his staff continued to execute. There were strong reasons for getting closer to China, especially after *détente* came to a crashing halt when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, which overshadowed the ongoing human rights catastrophe in Cambodia. The pattern of cultivating closer ties with China was too well entrenched for Carter to use the process of normalization as a way to improve the lot of Cambodians, or later to avoid voting for the Pol Pot regime in the UN. Doing so would have been interpreted by the Chinese as a withdrawal from their previous relationship and been a significant set back for relations.

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<sup>111</sup> "Cambodia's U.N. Seat to Stay With Pol Pot." *Los Angeles Times*, October 14, 1980, B10.



Carter's way out of the dilemma between balancing relations with China and standing firm against human rights violators would have been to give less importance to Beijing's position. Even though it was unlikely the Chinese would have responded to pressure from Carter to force the Khmer Rouge to reverse its genocidal policies, it still seems conceivable that Carter could have dismissed China and ASEAN's insistence that the US vote to seat Pol Pot's representatives in the UN. Carter could have given less importance to the geopolitical fight for Cambodia's credentials by being bold and denying the seat to Pol Pot. Such action would have been incongruent with his administration's prevailing attitude towards China and would undoubtedly have triggered sharp criticism from US allies in the region, but at least Carter could have restored a bit of the luster to his human rights platform. China was undoubtedly an important strategic ally but it is hard to imagine that a UN vote alone would have unraveled US power abroad and undermined the parity of power it held with the Soviet Union.

Most authors attribute the Carter administration's tilt toward China to Brzezinski's fervent anti-Sovietism. It is often written that Brzezinski saw the proxy war as a chance to build a stronger alliance with China and isolate the Soviet Union. The Carter administration's backing of China is said to have stemmed from Brzezinski's determination to capitalize on the geopolitical advantages built into supporting China. It is clear that US policy was dictated by geopolitical considerations, not a commitment to upholding human rights, but it seems like a stretch to attribute the fruition of that policy solely to Brzezinski. The Carter administration already set a precedent of giving priority to geopolitics over human rights when it chose, with the consent of the State Department, not to link the normalization of relations with China to the human rights calamity in Cambodia. The actions of the Carter administration in 1979 were merely consistent with its prior policy towards Southeast Asia. The administrations support for

China and ASEAN and relative silence about Pol Pot before the ousting of the Khmer Rouge set a precedent that eventually determined the decision to vote for Pol Pot's representatives in the UN. Thus, the Carter administration had a policy that mirrored Brzezinski's worldview but was not shaped by it alone.

It is because most scholars describe insufficiently the sequence of events that transpired both in Cambodia and within the Carter administration that premature and incomplete assessments of Carter's foreign policy toward Cambodia arise. Understanding that Carter was aware of the human rights catastrophe in Cambodia and that numerous advisors wrangled with the decision to vote for Pol Pot in the UN is essential for analyzing the culpability of their decision to set aside human rights and back Pol Pot. The fact that the administration was aware of the mass murder of Cambodians and still decided to cater to China, at the expense of its commitment to human rights, demonstrates that *realpolitik* guided its decisions. However, that is a brief explanation and fails to convey the complexity of the problem Carter faced; the politics involved with normalizing relations with China, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the lack of viable options all contributed to his decision to give precedence to America's strategic relationship with China and ASEAN over a principled commitment to human rights in Cambodia.

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