Research Notes II. Contents of Newspapers in ASEAN Countries on the Cambodian Problem

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From October 1987 to December 1990, research was conducted by the Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, into the attitude of newspapers in each of the ASEAN countries. It focused on how newspaper editorials dealt with the Cambodian problem during the period of July 1982 – December 1988. It attempted to identify whether the outlook on the Cambodian problem of each newspaper went along with, or was independent from the ASEAN collective policy and that of the respective national government towards Cambodian: to compare how far newspapers in ASEAN countries shared the same attitude towards the problem; and to compare the relative prominence granted to the problem by each of the newspapers.

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Background on the Cambodian Problem

The Cambodian problem is one of the most crucial issues facing the Southeast Asian region. The intervention of the superpowers has also given the problem a global significance. The problem has dragged on for more than 12 years now, since the invasion by Vietnamese troops into Cambodia on 25 December 1978, claiming that her forces were dispatched at the invitation of the Cambodian National Salvation Front led by Heng Samrin, to suppress the regime of Pol Pot. Hanoi maintained that the root cause of the problem was the Khmer Rouge. Shortly afterwards, the Heng Samrin led People’s Republic of Kampuchea was installed in Phnom Penh with strong support from Vietnam and fellow socialist countries. However, legally, the Khmer Rouge government of Democratic Kampuchea remained eventhough it occupied only a minor area of the country. Later in 1982, Pol Pot’s Democratic Kampuchea Party formed the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) with the Sihanoukists and Son Sann’s KPLNF as its allies. The war of “national resistance” continued throughout the period of investigation.

Meanwhile, the international community tried to help solve the problem; successive UN resolutions call for a total withdrawal of foreign forces, the exercise of self-determination and national reconciliation on essential elements for the survival of an independent and sovereign Cambodia. The UN General Assembly indeed showed increasing support for ASEAN’s policy and proposals for solving the conflict. However, this was only a diplomatic success for it could not actively bring about the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia. At the same time, although a majority of ASEAN member countries agreed on the dangers facing Southeast Asia (especially Thailand as the front-line), as a result of the invasion, divergent interpretations of the common ASEAN position existed. This was the result of the different perceptions and interests of each ASEAN member country. For instance, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia each had different views on the identity of its main antagonist. Thailand regarded Vietnam as more dangerous than China while the other two tended to think the other way around. Being located slightly further away from the Indochinese Penninsula, the Philippines was relatively less effected by the situation and hence attributed less importance to it.
The intractability of Cambodian problem is immense given the seemingly mutually incompatible positions of both sides. Although Vietnam announced that she withdrew totally her troops from Cambodia by September 1989, it was commonly alleged to be more propaganda. In the meantime, Prince Sihanouk tried to help find a solution by temporarily resigning from his presidency in order to hold talks with Hun Sen, prime minister of the PRK. However, this attempt has not gone anywhere.

It is widely perceived that attempts to solve the problem appear on both the national and international levels. However, the perceptions of the problem and its possible solutions from a general public or mass media perspective are uncovered. Therefore, the proposed project is an attempt to get into it. The study of ASEAN mass media will clearly point out viewpoints and desires at the individual level of the problem and its solution, for mass media represent and affect viewpoints of individuals. Another approach for the solution of Cambodian problem in the future may be found.

Research Methodology

The survey of ASEAN newspapers was conducted on the condition that they were printed in English, well known, issued regularly, and possessed considerable national and regional credibility. The nature and ideology of each newspaper was studied. Twelve newspapers were selected: *The Jakarta Post* (Indonesia), *The New Straits Times, The Star, Business Times* (Malaysia), *The Bulletin Today, The Time's Journal, The Manila Journal, The Journal* (The Philippines), *The Straits Times* (Singapore), *Borneo Bulletin (Brunei Darussalam), Bangkok Post* and *The Nation* (Thailand). The topic guidelines were later designed:

1. Stance in support of the Hanoi-Phnom Penh or DK/CGDK/NGC
2. Withdrawal of Vietnamese forces from Cambodia
3. Role of the United Nations in a settlement of the Cambodian problem
4. Concept of self-determination by a Cambodian people
5. Proposal for free and fair elections under UN auspices
6. Problem of the formation of a Cambodian coalition government
7. Role of Prince Sihanouk as a Khmer leader
8. Concept of an international control mechanism (ICM)
9. Question of a ceasefire: prior to or part of a comprehensive solution
10. Attitude towards USSR who backed the Hanoi-Phnom Penh
11. Attitude towards China who backed DK/CGDK/NGC
12. Concept of a neutral and non-aligned Cambodia
13. Question of how to settle the Cambodian problem: ways and means
14. Others
   14.1 Question of pulling back Vietnamese forces 30 km. away from the Thai-Cambodian border
   14.2 Establishment of demilitarized zones
   14.3 The Cambodian displaced persons along the border with Thailand
   14.4 Others
      – Escalation of fighting along the Thai-Cambodian border

To analyze the data, the editorials were categorized first by country of origin and date of issue. The topic the editorials covered was then noted. Editorials that went along with the government policy of their country of origin, those which opposed it, and those of a merely informative or factual nature were separated from one another. After the content analysis was conducted in each country study, a comparative study was carried out.

Research Finding

1. Importance Given to the Cambodian Problem by the Newspapers

   From all the editorials, the study found that Thai newspapers gave the greatest prominence to the Problem. Of all editorials in the Nation during the 7 years of July 1982 – December 1988, 7.4 percent (187 editorials) were on the Cambodian problem. This doubled the figure of the Bangkok Post (94 editorials or 3.6 percent of all editorials).
The figures for other countries were much lower. In the Malaysian case, the New Straits Times contained 30 editorials on the problem while the Business Times and the Star had 9 and 8 respectively. The Straits Times of Singapore devoted 21 editorials to Cambodia while the Jakarta Post of Indonesia devoted 14. In the case of the Philippines, 11 and 4 editorials in the Time's Journal and the Bulletin Today respectively, were identified while the Manila Journal and the Journal had only one editorial each. The Brunei newspaper was excluded from analysis since it did not devote any editorials to the problem.

2. Frequency of Coverage by Year
In the case of the Nation, who devoted the highest number of editorials to the Cambodian problem in ASEAN country, the highest frequency of coverage (43 editorials) was found in 1988, followed by 1985 (35 editorials), 1982 (20 editorials) and 1983 (19 editorials). The picture is different in the case of the Bangkok Post where editorials touched on the issue mostly in 1987 and 1983, 20 and 19 editorials respectively. There were only 10 and 8 editorials in 1982 and 1988 respectively. In the case of the Malaysian New Straits Times, the highest frequency of 15 editorials was in 1983, followed by 1985 when 6 editorials were given. The Straits Times of Singapore and its editorials on the issue mostly in 1982, 1986 and 1987-5, 4, and 4 editorials respectively. In the case of Indonesia, the Jakarta Post and the Time's Journal similarly had a maximum of 5 editorials on Cambodia in one year. 1988 was the foremost year for the former and 1985 for the Time's Journal.

In all, one can say that 1988 had the highest frequency of ASEAN editorials on the Cambodian problem.

3. Degree of Attention Paid to Each Topic
Measured in terms of frequency of appearance, the study found that ASEAN editorials discuss these following seven topics at a high rate with the first two ranking above the others:
1. Attitudes towards China who backed the DK/CGDK/NGC
2. Attitudes towards USSR who backed Hanoi/PRK
3. Withdrawal of Vietnamese forces
4. Stance in support of Hanoi or DK/CGDK/NGC
5. Question of how to settle the Cambodian problem
6. Role of Prince Sihanouk as a Cambodian leader
7. Role of the United Nations in the settlement of the Cambodian problem
The other 7 topics were also discussed, but to a much lesser extent. Of the topics above, the first one attracted most attention from the Nation with 73 editorials followed by the Jakarta Post with 8. The Nation also paid the same degree of attention to the second topic. The third topic attracts most attention from the Bangkok Post (27 editorials). The fourth topic is most commented on by the Straits Times of Singapore (14 editorials) followed by the New Straits Times of Malaysia (7 editorials). Naturally given the inter-relatedness of the issues, a number of editorial touched upon more than one topic at a time.

4. Attitudes of ASEAN Newspapers

The comparative study found that ASEAN newspapers’ approach was basically that of subscribing to the united ASEAN position and policy towards the Cambodian problem. They shared the ASEAN stance that the crux of the problem was the continuing conflict in Cambodia resulting from Vietnam’s unlawful occupation by force in violation of the principles of the non-aligned movement and those enshrined in the UN Charter. They supported and insisted upon the essential elements for a solution to the Cambodian problem as enumerated by ASEAN. They requested that the neutral and non-aligned status of Cambodia be respected. They maintained that the Khmer people should be able to exercise their inalienable right to self-determination through internationally supervised elections in which all Cambodians would participate and that all political groups in Cambodia should be encouraged to work towards the goal of national reconciliation.

Towards this end, they called for genuine withdrawal of all Vietnamese forces from Cambodia. They urged time and again the international community to isolate Vietnam diplomatically and economically by mobilizing international censure against her for the invasion of Cambodia. At the same time, they insisted upon increased support and assistance for the Cambodian resistance in their political and military struggle to liberate their homeland from Vietnamese military occupation. They also reiterated their appeals for the international community to persuade Vietnam that her security and an end to the Cambodian problem could not be achieved through military means but only through negotiations and a peaceful comprehensive political settlement.
The Vietnamese was condemned for her military occupation of Cambodia and her violation of Thailand’s sovereignty and territory integrity. Those outside the region who sided with or gave assistance to Vietnam were condemned. Those outside the region opposing ASEAN or violating the UN resolutions on the problem were also criticized.

In addition, ASEAN newspapers reaffirmed their support for a coalition government of Cambodia under Prince Sihanouk as the means for the desired goal of national reconciliation. The unity of the Khmer resistance forces was encouraged.

At the national level, the approach of the government of each ASEAN member state has been basically that of subscribing to a united ASEAN position. But this does not mean that each national government does not have its own independent view. Areas of difference and divergence in foreign policy outlook arise from diverse cultures, history, geography and internal political dynamics. Thailand and Singapore have adopted hard line position while the Philippines is rather mild since it does not share with Thailand the same degree of involvement or anxiety about the security threats posed by Vietnam. Malaysia and Indonesia are somewhat different. When the officials are not speaking for ASEAN, their statements reflect a national view point which differs to some extent from the united position. Nevertheless, all place great emphasis on ASEAN unity. Moreover, they always subordinate their own view to the goal of a united ASEAN position when dealing with Vietnam and other parties involved in the problem. The commitment to ASEAN is the first priority of their foreign policy.

The outlooks of the editorials shared to some extent the stance of their respective governments. This is particularly the case with Indonesian editorials. For example, the Indonesian editors were clearly opposed to the Khmer Rouge and the role of China in the problem. While the position of the New Straits Times was somewhat mild, other Malaysian editors kept subscribing to the united ASEAN position. Despite divergence of outlook in some areas, all ASEAN newspapers placed great importance on the solidarity of ASEAN
Remarks

1. Of the editorials under investigation, some were argumentative, others merely informative and factual. Only the former, therefore, allowed the study to determine the attitude of the newspaper towards the problem.

2. Generally, an editorial represents the idea of the newspaper. However, one must recognize that it is possible also that the idea expressed therein may belong to the writer alone, not the newspaper. Bearing this in mind, to compare the idea expressed in the editorials with other comments by the newspaper will allow for a clearer vision of the attitude of the newspaper.

3. The Cambodian problem is prolonged in nature and involves various issues. To determine the importance each topic is given in the editorials, the frequency method alone may not be the most efficient as editorials frequently deal with several issues at a time. To measure in terms of space given, together with the frequency, may solve this difficulty.

4. The study limit its scope to the period between July 1982 and December 1988. Certain adjustments have occurred since then in the foreign policy of some ASEAN member states towards the Cambodian problem. The case of Thailand is dramatic. Prime Minister Chatichai has raised the call of turning the Indochina battlefield into a marketplace and of fostering Thai-Vietnamese relations. Moreover, political talks among the 4 Khmer factions have taken place, most recently leading to the formation of a supreme national council in line with the framework document for a Cambodian settlement produced by the five permanent member of the UN Security Council.

These recent changes affect the Cambodian problem. Therefore, further study of the same nature is recommended.