

Austria's Role in the Cambodia Conflict - an Indonesian Initiative

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1989 –1994 and Cambodia**

It is almost forgotten that, at the request of ASEAN and especially Indonesia, Austria in 1981 assumed an important role as a mediator in the attempt to resolve the Cambodia Conflict. The International Conference on Kampuchea (ICK) was convened in New York in July 1981 under the auspices of the Secretary General, Kurt Waldheim - a former Foreign Minister of Austria. Upon an initiative proposed by the 5 ASEAN countries, this Conference voted Willibald Pahr, then Austrian Foreign Minister, to become President of the ICK. Successive Austrian Foreign Ministers (Leopold Gratz, Alois Mock) fulfilled this task throughout a decade. Why Austria and not just Sweden, France or maybe Australia? At this stage, some events of the Cambodia Conflict and the ensuing political process ought to be recalled.

Shortly after the evacuation of the US Ambassador to Cambodia by helicopter, the Khmer Rouge invaded Phnom Penh on 17th April 1975. For a few more days while some foreign media were still able to report from Phnom Penh, the world was witnessing with silence and inaction the start of a murderous era, an immense, unparalleled human tragedy. The Khmer Rouge forced the entire urban population to leave barehanded and right on the spot into the wilderness; pushing the sick in hospital beds to their certain death in the country side. However, the tragic media reports did not arouse controversy over the legitimacy of the new government of Phnom Penh and its representation in New York nor the urgency for a humanitarian intervention. After the expulsion of all foreigners from Cambodia, a curtain of silence covered the ongoing extermination. As if there had never been a holocaust, no country moved a finger to stop the genocide of 2 million innocent people by the Khmer Rouge. On the contrary, most Western and other countries (except the communist block) were promptly extending recognition to the Democratic Kampuchea of Pol Pot; Austria too did so on August 30, 1976.

On Christmas Day 1978, Vietnam invaded Cambodia, toppled the murderous Khmer Rouge Regime of Pol Pot, installed a pro-Vietnamese Government and ended the US-Vietnamese talks on normalisation of relations. Shortly before, on 3rd November 1978, Vietnam had signed a 15-year Friendship Treaty with the Soviet Union in Moscow, turning Vietnam into a new Soviet satellite and giving the Soviet Union a new foothold in Southeast Asia with naval and air bases of geostrategic importance that threatened regional stability.¹

In the period from 1975 to 1979, the Soviets and their proxies were on the offensive in the Third World from Angola to Afghanistan. The Vietnamese were seen as the “Cuban threat from Asia”, because there was fear that Vietnam would dominate not only Cambodia, but also Thailand and the Malaysian peninsula.

China viewed the Soviet build-up in Asia with alarm and the Vietnamese victory in Cambodia meant a nightmare for both China and Thailand² Furthermore, China was angered by Vietnam’s “ingratitude” for the decisive Chinese support in the war against the United States and Vietnam’s anti-Chinese actions after 1975 including the reunification of North- and South Vietnam. Bangkok saw its traditional buffer zone occupied by its historic adversary. China and Thailand made the nearly devastated Pol Pot forces their instrument for removing Vietnam from Cambodia.

In an immediate response in February 1979, China “taught Vietnam a lesson” by staging a three-week punitive military invasion which was costly but not mentionably successful. However, China succeeded in forging a broad international coalition against Vietnam. The US, Japan, Western Europe and ASEAN all lined up on Cambodia and closed their ranks after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late 1979. For a majority of countries the situations in Cambodia and Afghanistan had as “a common denominator the imposition of the will of large foreign powers on small independent states by the use of force in open violation of international law”³. This strategy was hampered by a dilemma: the need to publicly support the toppled and tainted Pol Pot Regime.

¹ Keith Richburg, Back to Vietnam, Foreign Affairs, Fall 1991, p.111

² Stephen J. Solarz, Cambodia and the International Community, Foreign Affairs, Spring 1990, p.102

³ Joint communique issued by the 13th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, Kuala Lumpur, 25/26 June 1980

The International Conference on Kampuchea (ICK)

The ASEAN-sponsored Cambodia Resolution 35/6 of the General Assembly was adopted on 22 October 1980⁴ and brought about the United Nations' involvement in the Cambodia Conflict. In accordance with the mandate specified in operative paragraph 4 of this Resolution, the Secretary General was requested to convene an international conference on Kampuchea. It was recognized that the Cambodian problem was an international problem requiring an international solution. The UN has never endorsed any proposal for a regional conference of Southeast Asian countries, although such an idea had been floated at both the 34th, and 35th sessions of the UNGA.

Shortly after the adoption of UNGA Res. 35/6, the Austrian Foreign Minister Willibald Pahr paid official visits to Indonesia and Malaysia. Answering in a press conference in Jakarta whether Austria would be ready to host the ICK in Vienna, he said: "Yes, provided there is general agreement". A few weeks after Pahr's visit, a high-ranking collaborator of the Indonesian Foreign Minister Mochtar Kusumaatmadja told me - I was then Counsellor at the Austrian Embassy in Jakarta and directly involved in a regular dialogue on the Cambodia issue - that his Minister would like to see the ICK chaired by the Austrian Foreign Minister. The ASEAN Foreign Ministers in their meeting in Manila in February 1981 took a decision to that effect and the Philippine Foreign Minister, Carlos P. Romulo, as Chairman of the ASEAN Standing Committee formally asked Pahr to accept the ASEAN proposal. At the same time, there was still a plan to hold the ICK in Vienna.

The International Conference on Kampuchea under Austrian Chairmanship took place in New York in July 1981 and produced a Declaration which became the basis for pertinent UN-Resolutions during the following years. However, the Conference was not able to achieve progress, due to the frozen political situation. Vietnam and its supporters boycotted the ICK because the Phnom-Penh Regime (PM Hun Sen) was not allowed to participate as the seat in the UN was allotted to Democratic

⁴ Außenpolitischer Bericht 1980, BMAA, Wien, p 29

Kampuchea. The conflict appeared intractable and Cambodia seemed to be condemned to live under Vietnamese occupation forever. Hanoi even refused to acknowledge that there was a Cambodian problem. China continued to support Pol Pot diplomatically and militarily, just like the Soviets did with Vietnam and Hun Sen. Thailand and ASEAN as a whole disclaimed any military support for the Pol Pot forces.

The significance of the International Conference on Kampuchea was summarized by ICK Chairman Pahr in his closing statement as follows:

“Your attendance here clearly testifies to the sincere desire of the overwhelming majority of nations to seek a peaceful and negotiated political settlement of the Kampuchean problem, involving the participation of all conflicting parties and others concerned. This high attendance is further impressive demonstration of the general belief that the use of force against the political independence and territorial integrity of any state – wherever it may occur – has a serious and global impact on international affairs as a whole. It cannot be confined to a particular area or retain a regional character.”

The situation began to change when Moscow’s readiness for continued support of Vietnam waned under Gorbachev⁵. Cambodia had become Vietnam’s “Vietnam”, a constant drain on Soviet resources and had forged the US, China and Japan into a front against the Soviets and their proxies. Vietnam could not ignore Soviet policy changes in Cuba or Afghanistan and that Sino-Soviet relations shifted from enmity to almost normal relations. A clear sign of change was the first direct proposal from Vietnam for formal negotiations through the Austrian Mission to the United Nations in October, 1986. It was a secret offer to the Chinese for a meeting between the CGDK (three Resistance Factions) and the Phnom Penh regime. The offer suggested that Hanoi was prepared to accept at least some Khmer Rouge representation in the settlement and, by implication, even in a future joint government⁶.

⁵ Stephen J. Solarz, Cambodia and the International Community, Foreign Affairs, Spring 1990, p101

⁶ Gareth Porter, Cambodia: Sihanouk’s Initiative, Foreign Affairs, Spring 1988, p 820

Indonesian considerations to involve Austria

While publicly supporting ASEANs formal position that all Vietnamese troops must be withdrawn from Cambodia and that a legitimate government must replace the regime set up by occupying Vietnamese forces, Indonesia in fact had a different perception of the Indochina equation and took a more understanding stance towards Hanoi than the ASEAN position inspired by Thailand. Because of past experience with China, Indonesia was suspicious of increased Chinese influence in the region and considered a strong Vietnam as a security guarantee. Therefore, the Chairman of the International Conference on Kampuchea should be able to adequately deal also with the Soviet Union and its new proxy Vietnam. In Indonesia, Austria generally enjoyed respect as an honest broker, as a country belonging firmly to the West, but bordering on Warsaw Pact countries and therefore being used to give Soviet views or interests a fair consideration. Already in 1979, Austria abstained in the vote on who should take the Cambodian seat at the United Nations.

Though Austria had no power to enforce peace agreements, but she succeeded in having the partners sit down and talk. In 1981, Austria succeeded by a joint initiative with Mexico to organize a North-South Summit in Cancún. Another point in Indonesian considerations to promote an Austrian Chairman for the ICK was the fact that the UN Secretary General Kurt Waldheim had been an Austrian Foreign Minister and that was deemed helpful. Furthermore Waldheim after his visit in Vietnam in August, 1980, was considered siding with Vietnam. The Bangkok Post criticised Waldheim on August 6, 1980 that he “seemed to be more sympathetic to Hanoi. The possibility has also to be taken into account that the UN Secretary-General is concerned about his re-election and his objectivity may be blurred by the need to obtain the votes of Soviet Russia and the bloc that it controls - a bloc that includes Vietnam.”

Another reason for Indonesia to promote an Austrian ICK Chairman might have been Austria’s status of permanent neutrality in view of ASEAN efforts to establish a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality in South East Asia, including Indochina. At times there was a plan to “neutralise” Cambodia to make it easier for Vietnam to withdraw

its troops. Prince Sihanouk told the Thai newspaper “Nation” on June 11, 1981⁷, that a compromise must give every party a chance and therefore he would favour the “neutralisation of Cambodia. Austria is a neutral country and a good example that works very well.”

There seem to also have been more general reasons for Indonesia to favour Austria. Austria enjoys a specific reputation in Indonesia, in some other Asian countries, in Eastern Europe and in the Middle East as an international meeting place and as an organiser of religious dialogues. Austria is viewed as a country with a long history, a great tradition of diplomacy, and above all an established culture of dialogue. Dialogue (in common Indonesian language: musjawarah) has a great tradition in Indonesian culture as well. Because of historic experience and of geography, Austria is deeply convinced that it is better to maintain dialogue with a difficult partner rather than to resort to unilateralism or force. Notions like “incompatibility”, “in total contradiction”, “diametrically opposed” are to be avoided just like “black and white” attitudes and simplistic divisions into friends and foes, because these are almost never true, but mostly wrong. A culture of dialogue does not sacrifice diversity to uniformity nor does it comply automatically with the will of the most powerful. On the contrary, dialogue is not at the expense of diversity; it ideally leads to unity in diversity. In that sense unity in diversity is an Austrian credo linking up with Indonesia’s State motto written in its coat of arms “Bhinneka Tunggal ika” meaning exactly “unity in diversity”. It is no coincidence that the European Union is now considering a draft Convention Agreement for adoption under the motto “united in diversity”.

The Austrian Peace Plan for Cambodia

Foreign Minister Pahr developed extremely close relations with all ASEAN countries and major players in the Cambodia conflict. In July 1982 Pahr succeeded to convince the Vietnamese Foreign Minister Co Tach to accompany him to Thailand for a first meeting with the Foreign Minister of Thailand Savetsila Siddhi. The approach rested on one basic tenet: Austria always considered Prince Sihanouk to be the pivot in any

⁷ The Nation, Exclusive interview: Sihanouk unwilling but „forced“ to lead front, 11 June 1981

negotiated settlement, even at times when he was declared “a finished man” as e.g. by his long time friend, the Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Van Dong who then even refused to acknowledge his letters.

At the invitation of Minister Pahr the Foreign Ministers of Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia and several other ministers from ASEAN countries gathered for a dialogue conference “Western Europe – ASEAN“ in the remote Alpbach village in Tyrol in September 1982. The Indonesian Foreign Minister asked ICK Chairman Pahr to develop a concrete peace plan for Cambodia, which was transmitted to Minister Mochtar Kusumaatmadja in February 1983 and which consisted of the 10 points below.

**Austrian Peace Plan of Action
for the Settlement of the Kampuchean Problem
3rd February, 1983**

The following outline contains a number of concrete steps which would be required to bring about the restoration of a free and independent Kampuchea in accordance with the Declaration on Kampuchea adopted by the International Conference on Kampuchea. The implementation of such a plan of action, its date and timeframe will depend on the consensus to be reached among all interested parties, especially the Kampuchean factions.

1. Cessation of all hostilities

2. Establishment of a demilitarised zone under UN-control

A demilitarised zone supervised by UN-troops shall be established on the Kampuchean side of the border between Kampuchea and its neighbouring-countries and along Kampuchea’s seashore. The purpose of this measure is to prevent the uncontrolled entry of arms and armed personnel into Kampuchea. Any armed forces remaining in the demilitarised zone shall be disarmed.

3. Withdrawal of foreign troops from Kampuchean territory or restriction to base

For the purpose of achieving control over armed forces in Kampuchea, all foreign troops and other armed forces remaining in Kampuchea shall be restricted to base. This process will be supervised by UN-troops, which will identify the armed groups, monitor their concentration in specific zones and finally their restriction to an appropriate number of base camps.

4. Interim Administration

The purpose of the Interim Administration shall be to ensure the continuation of the administrative process in the country and the maintenance of law and order during the electoral period. This task shall be entrusted to a strong civilian component of the United Nations headed by an Administrator General or a Special Representative of the Secretary General with the assistance of an Advisory Council of representatives of all Kampuchean factions.

5. Withdrawal of remaining foreign troops and disarmament of all other armed forces

All armed forces remaining in Kampuchea shall be disarmed. They may leave the base camps and return to their homelands.

6. Return of refugees and exiles

Arrangements shall be made for a voluntary and peaceful return of refugees and exiles to Kampuchea to allow their free participation in the electoral process.

7. Elections

The people of Kampuchea shall exercise their right to self-determination in free elections under UN-supervision. Every adult Kampuchean shall be eligible, without discrimination or fear of intimidation from any source, to participate in the elections. No faction or political party shall receive an advantage or be placed at any disadvantage and all outside influence shall be excluded. The Interim Administration will take the necessary decisions with regard to the electoral campaign, the date of the elections and other aspects of the electoral process.

8. Establishment of a new Government

The new Government of Kampuchea shall be established on the basis of the results of the elections.

9. Adoption of a status of nonalignment and neutrality

It will be up to the new Government to decide on the adoption of a non-aligned and neutral status of Kampuchea.

10. Program of assistance

Following the peaceful settlement of the Kampuchean problem an intergovernmental committee under the auspices of the United Nations shall be established to consider a programme of economic assistance to Kampuchea.

From a political and historic perspective, it is notable that the Austrian Peace Plan of 1983 includes and already spells out clearly all crucial elements of the Paris Agreement of October 23, 1991.

1. **Power sharing.** The disagreement over quadripartite power sharing that derailed the 1989 Paris Conference had already been translated into a strong UN framework in point 4 of the Austrian Peace Plan:

“...This task shall be entrusted to a strong civilian component of the UN headed by a Special Representative of the Secretary General with the assistance of an Advisory Council of representatives of all Kampuchean factions.

Only an enhanced UN role supervising an interim Cambodian administration circumvented Hun Sen's objection to the inclusion of the Khmer Rouge in a coalition government and the CGDK's objection to recognising the Hun Sen regime as the basis for a settlement⁸

⁸ Stephen J. Solarz, Cambodia and the International Community, Foreign Affairs, Spring 1990, p 108/109

2. **Elections.** Point 7 of the Austrian Peace Plan stipulated free elections under UN-supervision (according to the Paris Agreement “under UN auspices”) and the right to participate for all political parties.

”No faction or political party shall receive an advantage or be placed at any disadvantage and all outside influence shall be excluded. The Interim Administration will take the necessary decisions with regard to the electoral campaign, the date of the elections and other aspects of the electoral process.”

3. **Disarmament of all armed forces.** Point 2, 3 and 5 refer to the supervision of UN-troops of the withdrawal of all foreign troops, the disarmament of all armed forces remaining in Cambodia and the establishment of a demilitarised zone along all Cambodian borders, even along the seashore. This last provision reinforces the need for disarming all armed forces. A contiguous demilitarised zone along all borders within Cambodia is not foreseen in the Paris Agreement and is meant to prevent the uncontrolled entry of arms and soldiers into Cambodia. At the same time, it becomes very clear that a significant number of UN-troops would be required for that purpose. In retrospect this appears to be a foresighted provision that might have allowed UNTAC to verify effectively the withdrawal of foreign troops and probably to ensure disarmament of all armed forces in Cambodia, which UNTAC was unable to achieve.

Paris Agreement follows basic elements of Austrian Peace Plan 1983

It is remarkable, however, that while the ICK became politically obsolete, the original 10 point Austrian Peace Plan of 1983 seems to have clearly shown the right way, as it in fact became the operative substance of the Paris Conference in October 1991. Vietnam and the Phnom Penh regime held the view that the ICK and the UN had shown themselves to be biased by passing resolutions hostile to them and by continuing to seat the CGDK in the UN. Therefore, Vietnam and PM Hun Sen were both opposing a broad UN involvement before and during the Jakarta Informal Meetings (JIM), the first Paris Conference in 1989 and my meeting with Prime

Minister Hun Sen in Phnom Penh on March 17, 1990. In the end, however, it was the strong UN involvement outlined in the Austrian Peace Plan which allowed for a political settlement.

It is evident that the ICK with its sustained mobilisation of world public opinion kept alive the Cambodia issue despite many diplomatic setbacks and prolonged stalemates in the battlefield. Over the years, it prevented a creeping acceptance by the international community of an unacceptable *fait accompli* created by outside military forces or an eventual partitioning of Cambodia. So when the global configuration of forces changed at the end of the Cold War, there was still a Cambodia issue in its integrity to be solved. However, the first and also the second Paris Conference avoided any references to the long-lasting efforts of the ICK nor was Austria asked to participate. Although it were the United Nations who had to pay for and to implement the Paris Agreement, procedures and format of the Paris Conference including its artificially restricted participation resembled rather a post-colonial manifestation. This aim was even admitted when the French Foreign Minister Dumas declared regarding the envisaged Paris Conference: “France wants to reclaim her role in Indochina” (June 1989). Indonesia had to fight for its role as a Co-President. Initially, France had offered only the Vice-Presidency to Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas despite his crucial role as “ASEAN-Interlocutor for Cambodia”.

King Sihanouk recognised Austria’s role when he wrote in a letter to the Austrian Federal President on November 6, 1993:

“La République d’Autriche a joué un rôle historique dans la recherche d’une solution équitable et durable à apporter au tragique problème du Cambodge et a apporté une contribution très importante au processus de paix, de démocratisation, de réhabilitation et de reconstruction du Cambodge. Je l’en remercie infiniment.”

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