



The Cambodian wars: clashing armies and CIA covert operations

Nathaniel L. Moir

To cite this article: Nathaniel L. Moir (2016): The Cambodian wars: clashing armies and CIA covert operations, *Intelligence and National Security*

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2016.1162983>



Published online: 30 Mar 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

BOOK REVIEW

The Cambodian wars: clashing armies and CIA covert operations, Kenneth Conboy, Lawrence, KS, University of Kansas Press, 2013, 401 pp., US\$39.95 (hardback), ISBN: 978-0-7006-1900-9

Among contemporary experts of Southeast Asia, Kenneth Conboy's extensive research on the Central Intelligence Agency's involvement in Tibet, Laos, Indonesia, and now Cambodia is distinguished. Currently the Country Manager for Risk Management Advisory in Indonesia, Conboy's career includes service as a Southeast Asian policy analyst in Washington DC in addition to substantive knowledge of the field as a former Deputy Director for the Asian Studies Center. A life-time of experience, inquiry, and competency would likely comprise the required blocks of a check-list, were one to exist for scholars undertaking an account of Cambodia between 1959 and 1991. On all accounts, Conboy checks those blocks and *The Cambodian Wars: Clashing Armies and CIA Covert Operations* delivers.

Through 18 chapters, *The Cambodia Wars* presents a compelling and well-organized narrative of a confounding country wracked by civil war, insurgency, genocide, proxy-war, and just about anything else that could geo-politically and internally go awry between 1956 and 1997. Historians and analysts familiar with twentieth-century Cambodian history may gain many new insights from Conboy's focus as it is the first book that specifically examines the CIA's role in Cambodia. In the preface, his stated goal is to recount the 'CIA's involvement in Cambodia during the Khmer Republic and then after the Vietnamese invasion when it was largely channeled through the non-communist resistance' (p.xii). Those unfamiliar with Cambodia may still gain a great deal. However, prior background and reading is advised due to the expeditious pace Conboy maintains throughout the book.

Chapters one and two provide a helpful background which recounts Cambodia's development from a French protectorate in 1863 to its independence in 1953, ahead of its Indochinese peers. A key figure in that transition was Prince Sihanouk, the Khmer Monarch, who exemplified political collusion. While under Sihanouk's hapless leadership, early chapters describe how Cambodia looked the other way in the early 1960s while the Peoples' Army of Vietnam (PAVN) staged attacks against Republic of Vietnam (RVN) forces, particularly in the provinces comprising the Mekong Delta, from positions based in Cambodia. Importantly, the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam consisted of a large population of Khmer Krom (ethnic Cambodians) which would later constitute the Khmer Krom Liberation Front, a faction opposed to the Saigon regime, led by General Lon Nol prior to his later support of, and from, the United States.

Lieutenant General Lon Nol served in the Cambodian Army as a staunch royalist although he would later become Prime Minister of Cambodia in 1969 through a legislatively-sanctioned *coup*. This coup essentially consisted of Sihanouk receiving a vote of no confidence (p.15). Lon Nol, like Sihanouk, did not possess Cambodia's most orderly mind. Reportedly, because of his obsession with mysticism and the occult, Nol spent '\$20,000 every month on astrological consultations' (p.41). These funds were skimmed from shipping transactions after Lon Nol hammered out a secret treaty with the Chinese for the transport of Chinese supplies through the port of Sihanoukville along the Gulf of Thailand for distribution to the Viet-Cong. Considering that the United States had financially supported Sihanouk's government between 1955 and 1965, aid was summarily pulled (pp.4–5).

Through this background, Conboy deftly weaves the CIA into the context of a highly complicated Cambodia as it moved towards war with Vietnam, genocide, and civil war among competing Cambodian factions. With US aid withdrawn, the CIA was at a disadvantage in its capacity to assess events in the

country. Earlier, between 1959 and 1962, these setbacks consisted of not only Sihanouk's preferred alliance with China but also because of his propensity to obstruct any initiative not self-created. This was compounded by a mercurial temperament characterized by an inability to achieve even a semblance of assertive, political consistency, all expressed through a shrill and shrieking voice. Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's prime minister remarked of him, 'Sihanouk is a cracked jar, expect it to leak' (p.159). Not surprisingly, Sihanouk was best buddies with Kim Il Sung with whom he bonded 'through the 1970s' (p.269).

In a continuation of Cambodia's misfortunes in key leadership, and despite his own shortcomings of which there were many, Lon Nol's ascendancy to Prime Minister in 1969 was welcomed by the United States. Nol was supported because he, of course, accepted its financial support which the United States took as an ostensible indication of Nol's political concurrence with US policy. Deputy Premier Sirik Matak also advocated a not surprising welcome of American largesse. However, the CIA's presence still remained insufficient between 1965 and 1969 and inadequately collected on Chinese and North-Vietnamese logistical corridors for Viet-Cong supplies. The CIA contended that the Ho Chi Minh trail, which worked its way through the Laotian panhandle, was the dominant supply corridor while, in an alternate view, the Department of Defense believed the port of Sihanoukville served as a primary channel. The interdiction efforts that ensued against the Ho Chi Minh trail clearly belied the United States' assessments and demonstrated frustration with inadequate intelligence. Conboy describes this problem in Chapter 2, 'Finger in the Dike':

Rather than the trickle claimed by the CIA analysts, Sihanoukville had handled 70 percent of the arms funneled to the lower provinces of South Vietnam. This revelation turned on its head the common wisdom about the role played by the Ho Chi Minh Trail corridor, and obviously it called into question U.S. military strategy that centered on disrupting the logistical flow down the Laotian panhandle. When informed of this critical, prolonged misreading, Nixon was livid, and in front of his Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board he called it one of the 'worst records ever compiled by the intelligence community' (p.33)

Certainly, Laos presented a number of problems for the United States, particularly as it related to interdiction efforts which required considerable resources. In the late 1960s, the Pentagon continued to financially support the Laotian armed forces while 'the CIA paid for, trained, and advised a parallel, robust guerrilla army that arguably represented the agency's largest paramilitary operation to that time' (p.29). With regard to the inability to correctly assess the port of Sihanoukville's importance, Conboy tactfully and convincingly explains how this intelligence failure potentially contributed to Nixon's overreach through later operations in Cambodia and his support for Lon Nol. In an attempt to stop the flow of arms through Sihanoukville, CIA director Richard Helms would later tell Henry Kissinger that bribing Cambodian officials to stop transport of supplies through Sihanoukville was unlikely to work. Such attempts would fail because any bribe would 'likely pale in comparison to the profits they were reaping from smuggling' supplies (p.27).

The middle chapters of the book gain in complexity as the neighboring Second Indochina War in Vietnam concluded in April 1975. Prior to this, the Vietnamese had implemented an infrastructure that came to be dominated by the Khmer Rouge in its fight against Lon Nol's regime. Through Pol Pot and others, genocide was carried out between 1975 and 1979 with its countless horrors. Conboy does not delve into details of the genocide itself but remains focused upon the onset of war between Vietnam and the Khmer Rouge. He especially details the intricate personalities, factions, and maneuvering between anti-Vietnamese resistance groups both within Cambodia and in exile. Understandably, numerous important details of Cambodian history are necessarily glossed over here but Conboy contextualizes both major and minor events through a remarkably accessible narrative.

Additionally, first-hand interviews supply detail about groups such as the Khmer Rouge and other personalities which are difficult to incorporate for less capable or less-advantageously placed and experienced scholars. In this regard, it is helpful to point out that once Vietnam invaded Cambodia, a series of non-communist factions fitfully allied with the Khmer Rouge to confront the Socialist Republic of Vietnam's (SRV) might. Many of these former leaders were interviewed by Conboy and inclusion of their comments adds dimension and depth to his work. For example, one non-communist faction of

this shaky alliance was the Sihanoukist National Army (the ANS) led by General Toan Chay. With regard to the genocidal fanaticism of the Khmer Rouge, the General trenchantly observed that 'The Khmer Rouge do not eat rice, they eat ideology' (p.274).

Nonetheless, the Khmer Rouge were the most capable and powerful component of the anti-Vietnam resistance. This alliance was known, collectively, as the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK). Due to the Khmer Rouge's participation in the CGDK, the CIA had to tread carefully as it worked to arm and financially support the non-communist components of the CGDK. Obviously, the last thing the CIA needed was a connection to the Khmer Rouge. Therefore, it diligently avoided this possibility and carefully channeled support to the non-Khmer Rouge allies in the Cambodian conflict with Vietnam. These non-communist and non-Khmer Rouge factions included the ANS, as well as the Khmer Peoples' National Liberation Front (the KPNLF).

Importantly, Conboy delves into Thailand's support for the non-communist factions as well. The Royal Thai Army (RTA) significantly contributed to the CIA's efforts while also achieving its goals that, not exclusively, included limiting Vietnamese hegemony. Like the United States, Thailand walked a fine line in covert support to the CGDK. This was adeptly managed by the Royal Thai Army's General Chavalit Yongchaiyud, a fascinating figure who later would become the RTA Chief of Staff. The interplay between the RTA, CIA, and the CGDK make up the main body of the work and is fascinating. Readers are advised to keep notes, however, since the alliances, individuals, and political events are complex and not always easy to track.

An example of this level of detail is described in chapter 10, entitled 'Event Horizon'. The chapter focuses on the war between the Socialist Republic of Vietnam's (SRV) PAVN and the politically creaking coalition of Cambodian forces (the CGDK). In November 1984, PAVN's 5th Division, 9th Division, and elements of its 307th Division conducted operations against non-communist factions, the KPNLF and Prince Sihanouk's non-communist resistance faction, the Sihanoukist National Army (ANS) (pp.199–200). Later in January 1985, PAVN zeroed in on the Khmer Rouge's 320th Division along the Northeast Thai/Cambodia Border in the provinces of Battambang and Oddar Meanchey (p.201). Conboy provides a commendable description of PAVN and how its forces were led by an irrepressible Vietnamese Officer, Le Duc Anh. This officer consistently confronted the Cambodians along the Thai border and, although he had been fired for earlier failures against the Khmer Rouge, Le Duc Anh evidently rose to the challenge set by the SRV leaders Le Duc Tho and Le Duan, and would crush PAVN opposition in Cambodia. The PAVN operations were notable for the Vietnamese because it was only the second combined arms force to engage in battle since the 1972 Easter Offensive.

Conboy's traditional military history account then incorporates an intriguing intercession on the part of New York Representative Stephen Solarz. Solarz gained the chair of the House Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs in 1981 but demonstrated interest – most likely stemming from disgust with the Khmer Rouge genocide – in Cambodia earlier in 1977 (p.209). Solarz worked in a manner similar to his fellow Democrat Charlie Wilson, champion of the Mujahideen cause in Afghanistan. In chapter nine, 'Pyrrhic Victories', Conboy describes how a great deal of discrepancy existed in the United States regarding its support for anti-communist activity in the world. 'By late 1984, CIA Director Casey was looking to increase the total amount of nonlethal support (for the noncommunist Cambodian factions) to \$12 million a year. In comparison, the CIA was handling \$250 million in covert aid for the Afghan Mujahideen during that fiscal year' (p.182). Solarz's efforts eventually paid off and President Reagan signed a bill that directly authorized lethal aid to non-Khmer Rouge factions, the KPNLF and ANS which along with the Khmer Rouge, as we have seen, were collectively known as the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK).

Again, Conboy skillfully weaves descriptions of military operations and political maneuvering by US officials and mixes them with anecdotes from CIA personnel serving in Thailand to support the CGDK. These stories are compelling and, at times, helpfully wry considering his overall subject matter of war in Cambodia. A telling example includes his account of a US envoy from the White House who visited the CIA's base in Aranyaprathet, Thailand. This camp included a number of 'pets' such as birds and a variety of primates purchased from nearby local Cambodian refugee camps:

Staying for dinner, the envoy was on hand when one of the female macaques monkeys escaped from its enclosure and leapt to the lamp chain above the table. She hit the hot metal shade and immediately fell into a big bowl of spaghetti sauce. CIA officer Gary Fleischer grabbed the primate, cleaned her off, and placed her back in the cage. The special representative was appalled, however, when the base personnel continued ladling out sauce on their pasta. 'Doesn't monkey add flavor?' queried Fleischer (pp.213–4)

Returning to more serious matters, the dynamic shifts of political and military allegiances are carefully described throughout the book. Conboy delineates how different groups altered their views and actions depending on either local, tactical considerations or, when required, depending on larger, strategic circumstances. Chapter seven, 'Fratricide', for example, describes how several Cambodian factions eventually merged to confront the Vietnamese PAVN. Earlier, PAVN not only mauled the Khmer Rouge in 1978 and 1979 but increasingly alarmed the Thai monarchy and the Royal Thai Army (RTA) commander, Prem Tinsulanonda. Again, as we have seen, the Cambodian factions broke down primarily into the communist Khmer Rouge and anti-communist elements known as the ANS and the KPRLF, the Khmer People's National Liberation Armed Forces. Other factions existed and included the Moulinaka and the National Movement for the Liberation of Kampuchea.

The Royal Thai Army, meanwhile, sought a united Khmer resistance to confront PAVN, but this meant joining non-communist and often virulently anti-communist members with the infamously violent, ultra-communist Khmer Rouge. Conboy guides the reader through a labyrinth of backroom deals as well as high-level negotiations where a generally agreed upon merger of Cambodian unity was temporarily achieved. As we have seen, RTA Major General Chavalit was a key figure, among many, in forging these agreements. China, also, eventually threw its weight behind these events through significant military supplies to help achieve its own goals of mitigating the Socialist Republic of Vietnam's (SRV) strength. Necessarily, Conboy commendably references the Sino-Vietnamese conflict, along with the larger Sino-Soviet divide. These larger, geo-political considerations provide strategic context for *The Cambodian Wars* but are kept in check and not over examined.

The Cambodian Wars, altogether, is highly compelling and engaging but simultaneously and necessarily intricate. In addition to the more formal anti-Vietnamese factions, a bizarre constellation of warlords, mystics, guerrilla leaders, smugglers, and gangs of bandits made up the patchwork of resistance forces in the period of 1978 to 1980 especially. At times, Conboy's record of how this amalgamation changed shape is like keeping track of a kaleidoscope. However, in terms of relating difficult subject matter Conboy performs admirably. His ability to manage complexity, as related in *The Cambodian Wars*, may remind readers of Christopher Clark's demonstrated capability in *The Sleepwalkers*, which documented the fascinating but incredibly complicated steps that led to World War One. In addition to top notch research on Cambodia, historians and analysts seeking a model which exemplifies organization may find much to emulate in Conboy's outstanding book. Through its well-written narrative – on a remarkably difficult and disordered period of history – much stands to be gained.

Nathaniel L. Moir
State University of New York, Albany, NY
✉ nmoir@albany.edu

© 2016 Nathaniel L. Moir
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2016.1162983>