

Malaysia's Response to the Cambodian Conflict, 1978-1991

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Abstract

In late 1978, Vietnam began its invasion in Cambodia, resulted in the overthrowing of the Khmer Rouge regime which was responsible for the Cambodian Genocide. This invasion resulting in the establishment of the People's Republic of Kampuchea, backed by Vietnam, while the Khmer Rouge and other factions continued to resist. Throughout the 1980s, Cambodia remained embroiled in civil war, with factions, including the Khmer Rouge, fighting the Vietnamese-backed government. The invasion also led to border clashes along Thailand's border, positioning Thailand as a frontline state in the Cambodian Conflict, drawing the attention of neighbouring countries like Malaysia. As the conflict escalated and threatened Thai sovereignty, Malaysia's stance on the issue began to take shape. This raises two key questions: To what extent did Thailand's position influence Malaysia's attitude? What were Malaysia's attitudes during the conflict? By analysing Malaysia's responses under Prime Ministers Hussein Onn and Mahathir Mohamad, this article examines Malaysia's foreign policies towards Indochina, its objectives in seeking a resolution, and how the conflict shaped its attitudes. The study uses qualitative research, drawing from archival documents at The National Archives in Kew and the National Archives of Malaysia, alongside newspapers, books, theses, and journal articles. Under Hussein Onn, Malaysia focused on direct security concerns, particularly regarding Thailand's position in the conflict. In contrast, Mahathir Mohamad's leadership recognised the indirect security implications of Thailand's position, framing them within a broader regional context. Malaysia's response under Mahathir sought to facilitate ASEAN cooperation to address security challenges while balancing national and regional interests.

Keywords: Cambodian Conflict; Malaysia; Thailand; Frontline State; Vietnamese Invasion of Cambodia

Introduction

During the 1970s and 1980s, Cambodia experienced a series of events and power struggles that had significant regional and international repercussions, collectively known as the Cambodian Conflict. This conflict intensified when the Khmer Rouge, led by Pol Pot, seized control of Cambodia on 17 April 1975, with the goal of establishing an agrarian socialist society. Their regime was marked by extreme violence, leading to the deaths of approximately 1.7 million people due to forced labour, starvation, and executions, an atrocity now referred to as the Cambodian Genocide. On Christmas Eve in 1978, Vietnam launched an invasion of Cambodia to overthrow Pol Pot's government, Democratic Kampuchea, which had effectively ended Pol Pot's dictatorship. On 10 January 1979, Vietnam installed a puppet government in Phnom Penh, known as the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), led by Heng Samrin, a former political commissar and army division commander of the Khmer Rouge. The establishment of the PRK marked the full occupation of Cambodia by Vietnam, which received

active support from the Soviet Union. The Vietnamese invasion resulted in border skirmishes with the Khmer Rouge and its allies, pulling Thailand into the conflict and transforming it into not only a regional conflict in Southeast Asia but also a continuation of the Cold War.

Thailand, dubbed a “frontline state” by General Sir Walter Walker, the former Commander-in-Chief of British Ground Forces in Europe,¹ was gravely threatened by the growing presence of Vietnamese troops along its border. The Vietnamese “hot pursuit” of anti-Vietnamese forces and its spillover into Thailand were perceived as Thailand bending to accommodate China.² Rungswasdisab argues that in exchange for Thailand acting as a conduit between Cambodian resistance forces and Chinese arms supplies, the Chinese government subsequently shut down the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) broadcasting station in Southern China and cut off strategic supplies to the CPT.³ Thailand encountered Vietnamese aggression and border skirmishes during Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia, not only because of its geographical proximity to Cambodia but also due to its perceived alliance with China. This jeopardised Thai security and escalated the situation into a regional conflict. Former Cambodian Chief of State Prince Norodom Sihanouk saw the Cambodian Conflict as a threat to Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore, with the Vietnamese threatening Thailand first and then swallowing Singapore and Malaysia in the interests of Vietnamese imperialism.⁴ As Thailand was regarded as a frontline state in the Cambodian Conflict, Malaysia was highly concerned that the conflict could spread to its territory, further endangering Malaysian security, which was already at risk due to the Communist threat along the Thai-Malaysian border. The ongoing battles between Vietnamese troops and the Khmer Rouge, along with their allied forces at the Thai-Cambodian border, resulted in a massive influx of Indochinese refugees into Southeast Asian countries, with Thailand being the most affected, followed by Malaysia.

Studies on the Cambodian Conflict are extensive, yet few specifically focus on Malaysia’s perspectives. Notable works by Ang (2017), Alagappa (1987), Wong (1995), Saravanamuttu (1996, 2010), Jeshurun (2007), and Zahir (2011) serve as the main reference for understanding Malaysia’s response to the conflict. Ang’s descriptive and analytical study examines the roles of Singapore and other ASEAN states in the Cambodian Conflict, highlighting Singapore’s central role in seeking a resolution, with S. Rajaratnam playing a pivotal part in advocating for ASEAN’s position. While the study acknowledges Malaysia’s proximity and regional involvement, it does not delve into Malaysia’s underlying motivations behind its actions during the conflict. Alagappa’s (1987) research suggests that Malaysia’s stance was influenced by Thailand’s position in the conflict but it overlooks a detailed nuance of Malaysia’s foreign policy towards the conflict. Wong (1995) identifies three strategies employed by Malaysia from February 1980 to June 1982 to address the conflict: acting independently, lobbying for international pressure on Vietnam to withdraw from Cambodia, and supporting the Cambodian resistance. However, the study overlooks the fact that Malaysia’s first strategy was already in use in 1979, when Prime Minister Hussein Onn sought a resolution by offering solidarity with Thailand during his official visit to Chiang Mai. Wong’s study also highlights Malaysia’s concern about Vietnam’s potential southward expansion as a driving factor behind Malaysia’s efforts which raises a question: to what extent did Thailand’s position in the conflict affected Malaysia’s urgency in seeking a resolution? Saravanamuttu (2010) discusses Malaysia’s response to the Cambodian Conflict during Mahathir’s premiership, particularly through Malaysia’s involvement in ASEAN. ASEAN’s role is also emphasised in Saravanamuttu (1996), which underscores the importance of regional mechanisms and institutions for conflict resolution. Likewise, Malaysia’s role within ASEAN is addressed, but without providing a comprehensive analysis of Malaysian officials’ perspectives on the conflict, as seen in Zahir’s (2011) study, which focuses more on Malaysia-Thailand relations. These previous studies primarily emphasise ASEAN’s collective role and perspective on the Cambodian Conflict, leaving a gap in understanding the attitudes of individual ASEAN members, like Malaysia,

which is often perceived as neutral in the conflict.

Analytical perspectives on Malaysia-Thailand relations have been provided by Zahir (2011), N. Ganesan (2010), and Panpa-nga (2010). Zahir (2011), for instance, explicates that Thailand's role as a frontline state significantly influenced Malaysia's response to the conflict. N. Ganesan (2010) argues that the conflict led to greater alignment between Malaysia and Thailand's defence and foreign policies, especially after ASEAN recognised Thailand as a frontline state. Panpa-nga (2010) highlights that the conflict also impacted Malaysia-Thailand border cooperation in suppressing the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM). Following the invasion of a Thai village in Aranyaprathet, Prachinburi, during the Cambodian Conflict, the 1970 Malaysia-Thailand border agreement was revised to prioritise Thai sovereignty over joint border cooperation with Malaysia.⁵ These previous studies highlight the significance of Thailand's position in shaping Malaysia's response to the conflict, which not only impacted Malaysia's security but also influenced Malaysia-Thailand relations. This raises another question: What was Malaysia's stance throughout the conflict? To address this, the article focuses on Kuala Lumpur's attitudes during the tenures of two Prime Ministers, Hussein Onn and Mahathir Mohamad, whose terms coincided with the height of the conflict. The article aims to elucidate Malaysia's foreign policies towards Indochina over time, analyse its objectives in seeking a resolution, and explore the nuances of its attitudes towards the conflict. By examining these two leaderships, the article highlights Malaysia's perspectives and attitudes, shifting the focus away from regional institutions like ASEAN. This approach provides a clearer understanding of Kuala Lumpur's response throughout the Cambodian Conflict.

Kuala Lumpur's Attitudes Towards Indochina (1957-1978)

During the premiership of Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia (then known as Malaya) adopted a pro-Western and anti-communist stance from 1957 to 1970. This anti-communist position aligned Malaya with the Western bloc. The external Cold War environment, with the events of Vietnam, Hungary, Cuba, Tibet, and the Sino-Indian conflict, tended to augment the existing image of communism in the Malaysian policymakers' minds.⁶ This was particularly evident during the Vietnam War, which lasted from 1955 to 1975. Malaysia played an indirect role by providing training to American and South Vietnamese troops in the Malaysian jungle. Additionally, Malaysia served as a facility for rest and recuperation for American soldiers involved in the conflict. Malaysia formally established diplomatic relations with Cambodia on 31 August 1957 the same day as Malaya's independence, and with Laos on 1 June 1966. Since Cambodia and Laos were not viewed as significant threats to Malaysia, diplomatic relations with these countries were established earlier than with Vietnam. Malaysia's perception of threats from Vietnam was influenced by Vietnam's strong alliances with the Soviet Union.

When Tun Razak succeeded Tunku Abdul Rahman as the Second Prime Minister of Malaysia (1970-1976), the country adopted a non-aligned stance, giving rise to the concept of the Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality (ZOPFAN), as articulated in the Kuala Lumpur Declaration on 27 November 1971. Despite the ongoing Vietnam War, Tun Razak dismissed any perceived threats linking the situation in Indochina to Malaysia.⁷ As a non-aligned nation, Malaysia sought to avoid involvement in regional conflicts, particularly those involving major powers and communist countries. The notion of peaceful coexistence among nations with differing and even opposing ideologies in Southeast Asia was promoted, facilitated by a mutual accommodation process led by Malaysia and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) on one side, and Communist Vietnam on the other.⁸ Tun Razak assigned his Foreign Affairs Minister, Tengku Ahmad Rithauddeen, the task of strengthening relations with all countries in the region. To achieve this goal, Tengku Ahmad Rithauddeen made several visits to Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Burma, and other ASEAN nations.⁹ Diplomatic relations between

Malaysia and Vietnam were officially established on 30 March 1973, despite the fact that Malaysian leaders had historically viewed Vietnam as a significant external threat to national security. Following the establishment of Democratic Kampuchea in 1975, Malaysia recognised Pol Pot's government as the legitimate authority in Cambodia and initiated economic relations with it. Given the reduced threat from Indochina, Malaysia sought to cultivate a new relationship with Vietnam by providing technical assistance to rehabilitate its rubber industry and develop its oil palm sector, as well as by strengthening bilateral ties with Vientiane.¹⁰

The political developments in Indochina by the end of 1975 altered Malaysia's views on the Indochinese countries. The Vietnam War, which concluded in 1975, led to an influx of Vietnamese boat people seeking asylum in neighbouring countries, including Thailand and Malaysia. Additionally, the Khmer Rouge's atrocities in Cambodia resulted in a surge of Cambodian refugees in Southeast Asian nations, with Malaysia being no exception. Kuala Lumpur provided assistance to Cham Muslim refugees by facilitating their resettlement and faced challenges in managing the large number of Vietnamese boat people arriving on its shores. The Malaysian government condemned the Cambodian Genocide perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge, which resulted in the deaths of innocent Cambodians between 1975 and 1979. Malaysia acknowledged that the Democratic Kampuchea regime was repressive, a fact that it openly opposed. However, a government's repressive policies should not serve as justification for armed intervention by an external power, as such actions would be utterly contradictory to the fundamental principles of the Non-Aligned Movement.¹¹

Kuala Lumpur's Attitudes Towards the Cambodian Conflict Under Hussein Onn's Leadership (1978-1981)

Malaysia's perceptions of Vietnam grew increasingly negative following the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in late 1978. A new government, the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), was established by Vietnam in Phnom Penh on 8 January 1979, led by Heng Samrin, a former political commissar and army division commander of the Khmer Rouge. Malaysia refused to recognise the Heng Samrin government, arguing that it violated Cambodia's sovereignty and independence. In April 1979, Vietnamese troops began invading the Cambodian-Southern Vietnam border in eastern Thailand. The Vietnamese attacks on Ban Non Mak Noon village in Prachinburi province and Ban Non-Sao E, south of Ban Non Mak Noon, marked a troubling escalation for Thailand. A significant number of Cambodian citizens and Thai villagers were killed in these incidents before the intruders were expelled.¹² Since 1979, over 140,000 Vietnamese troops had crossed into Cambodia and the Thai-Cambodian border, which was seen as a clear violation of international law and the United Nations Charter, as well as a breach of Thailand's sovereignty and territorial integrity.¹³ The Thai-Cambodian border remained under threat due to ongoing battles between Vietnamese-led forces and Khmer Rouge troops that spilled over into Thai territory.

It became evident that Vietnam played a pivotal role in shaping regional security threats as it emerged as a key player in the Soviet Union's efforts to expand its influence in Southeast Asia, which sparked a rivalry with China. The situation in Cambodia raised serious concerns for Malaysia and other ASEAN countries, which had opted to coexist with their Communist neighbours in Indochina.¹⁴ The Cambodian Conflict carried a grave threat of foreign intervention, which could have escalated into a broader and more intense confrontation. The Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia at the end of 1978 intensified Malaysia's worries about Vietnam's ambitions to dominate the Indochina peninsula and extend its influence southward.¹⁵ As Malaysia's Minister of Home Affairs, Ghazali Shafie, noted, the Soviet objective, aligned with the Marxist-Leninist doctrine of global communism centred in Moscow, aimed to control Southeast Asia through a Hanoi-dominated Indochinese Federation.¹⁶ The

concept of the Indochinese Federation was not the only significant development in the region. At the same time, China was making strategic moves to extend its influence in Southeast Asia through communism. In response, Malaysia adopted a cautious policy toward Vietnam, strategically aligning itself with ASEAN's perception of the Vietnamese threat.¹⁷

Realising that the escalating conflict could extend southward, Malaysia was concerned about Thailand's predicament. Due to the complex nature of this conflict, Hussein Onn, Malaysia's Third Prime Minister, sought a resolution to the Cambodian Conflict to prevent Malaysia from facing a similar fate. According to Wong (1995), there were three phases of seeking a solution to the conflict: Phase One occurred from early 1979 to January 1980, Phase Two from February 1980 to June 1982, and Phase Three from July 1982 to December 1986.¹⁸ From 19 to 21 February 1979, Hussein Onn met with Thai Prime Minister Kriangsak Chomanan in Chiang Mai to discuss Thailand's role as a frontline state. Hussein emphasised that events in Thailand would have had repercussions for Malaysia, and conversely, developments in Malaysia would also be felt in Thailand.¹⁹ Malaysia extended an offer to its neighbour, as described by Hussein, "What hurts the Thais will hurt us... the kind of help we can give each other depends on the situation. We always help each other to sustain the programme for resilience and the aid can be given any time and we do not need to wait for a war".²⁰ During the meeting, Hussein offered military assistance to Thailand. Although Malaysia's military was smaller than Thailand's, Hussein's offer of military assistance to Thailand represented Malaysia's intention to prevent the conflict from spreading into its own territory. The two Prime Ministers discussed regional developments since the Special Meeting of ASEAN Foreign Ministers held in Bangkok on 12 and 13 January 1979, expressing concern over the escalation of armed conflict in Southeast Asia. They urged the conflicting parties to cease all hostilities and called for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from the conflict zones in Indochina to prevent further escalation and to promote regional peace and stability. They also emphasised the need for countries outside the region to refrain from actions that could intensify or expand the conflict. In light of the protracted Cambodian Conflict, the Malaysian and Thai governments agreed to appeal to China and Vietnam to resolve their differences amicably, ensuring peace for both themselves and Southeast Asia.

The Thai leader visited Malaysia from 23 to 25 October 1979, as part of his ASEAN tour. During this visit, Kriangsak briefed Hussein on his assessment of Thai security in light of the latest developments along the Thai-Cambodian border and the influx of Cambodian refugees into Thailand. The escalation of the border conflict had heightened Thailand's concerns as a frontline state. Malaysia reaffirmed its support and solidarity with the Thai government and people in their efforts to uphold their independence, national sovereignty, and territorial integrity. Nearly two months later, during a Dewan Negara session of Malaysia's Parliament, Hussein reiterated Malaysia's readiness to provide aid to Thailand, including military assistance, if foreign forces attacked Thailand amid the ongoing Cambodian Conflict. Although neither government had formal agreements for cooperation in the event of an attack, the Malaysian Prime Minister viewed Thai independence and sovereignty as inextricably linked to Malaysia's own independence and sovereignty.²¹ This perspective was articulated by Malaysia's First Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, regarding Malaysia's willingness to assist Thailand:

"It is our duty, I say, to try to work with the Thais closely in all matters. If Thailand fell, we would be the next to be conquered. So, our first line of defence is Thailand. We must go at once to Thailand's aid if she were attacked. The other ASEAN countries are not part of the Asian landmass; we and Thailand are contiguous."²²

In light of Hussein's pledge to provide military assistance to Thailand in the event of an attack by foreign forces, Malaysia's Defence Minister, Datuk Amar Abdul Taib Mahmud, stated that the Malaysian armed forces were expanding and preparing for any potential contingencies.²³ The Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia prompted Malaysia's most significant defence buildup to date.²⁴ However, Malaysia's Deputy Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, emphasised that any assistance would be provided only at Bangkok's specific request, reflecting Malaysia's position if Thailand were attacked by an external power.

In response to Hussein's pledge, Kriangsak expressed his opinion, "Thailand strongly welcomes the gesture shown by this close neighbour".²⁵ Thailand did not formally request military assistance from Malaysia, as it already had military support from the governments of the US and China. Under the 1954 Manila Pact, the US would come to Thailand's aid in the event of direct aggression, while Thailand could request assistance from its seven co-signatories, including the US and Britain, if it faced an armed attack. According to Kriangsak, Hussein's statement did not suggest that the deteriorating situation in Indochina was pressuring Thailand. Instead, it underscored the bilateral cooperation between Malaysia and Thailand, alongside their partnership within ASEAN. The Thai Prime Minister noted that existing military cooperation within ASEAN did not involve joint military action but focused on enhancing member countries' defence preparedness through joint exercises to gain field experience. Thailand recognised that its ASEAN counterparts were grappling with internal economic and social issues, making them too weak to provide effective assistance in the event of a foreign attack on Thailand.²⁶ Military cooperation within ASEAN had been limited due to the overall military weakness of its member states, rendering a collective military effort ineffective.²⁷

In January 1980, Malaysia's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Tengku Ahmad Rithauddeen, in his role as Chairman of the ASEAN Standing Committee, visited Hanoi to meet with Vietnam's Prime Minister Phan Van Dong and Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach to convey ASEAN's position.²⁸ The meeting revealed that Tengku Ahmad Rithauddeen understood Vietnam's reluctance to withdraw from Cambodia and its aim to overthrow the Khmer Rouge.²⁹ Later, in May 1980, Tengku Ahmad Rithauddeen travelled to India on a mission to persuade this close ally of Vietnam not to recognise the Heng Samrin government. Tengku Ahmad Rithauddeen conveyed this message to Eric Gonsalves, the Secretary of the Indian External Affairs Ministry, expressing that Malaysia and ASEAN would be deeply hurt if India fulfilled its pledge in this matter.³⁰ Rithauddeen's trip did not result in the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia and was considered a failure by the Thai government.³¹

Foreign Minister of Thailand, Siddhi Savetsila, made a quick trip to Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta to persuade the Malaysian and Indonesian governments to support his country's initiative, arguing that Vietnam's attempt to gain recognition for the Heng Samrin regime would fail if conditions were created for a more acceptable Cambodian leader to lead the resistance movement.³² Although Kuala Lumpur maintained a non-aligned stance in the Cambodian Conflict and refused to recognise the Vietnamese-installed Heng Samrin government, Malaysia's support for the deposed Pol Pot regime was aimed at preventing the seat from falling into the hands of the Heng Samrin faction.³³ While Thailand aligned itself with China, Malaysia was determined not to be perceived as aligned with the communist power. Although Malaysia established official diplomatic relations with China in 1974, Kuala Lumpur's suspicion remained due to the ongoing Second Insurgency (1968-1989), with the primary adversary being the China-backed Communist Party of Malaya (CPM).

ASEAN became Malaysia's most crucial platform to avoid being drawn into a situation similar to that of Thailand. The Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia not only disrupted regional developments but also posed a significant threat to regional security. In a spirit of regionalism, Malaysia and Indonesia expressed their willingness to act as mediators in the Cambodian Conflict through the ASEAN platform. Prime Minister Kriangsak endorsed this initiative, "I fully support the principle

that ASEAN should play a role in mediating conflicts in this region because our organisation wishes to see all countries co-exist peacefully".³⁴ ASEAN countries continued to call for the withdrawal of foreign troops from Cambodian territory to prevent significant powers from interfering in the country's internal affairs. ASEAN sought to stabilise the situation through regular meetings of Foreign Ministers and by reaching out to the United Nations and the Non-Aligned Movement, which demonstrated ongoing efforts to prevent the conflict from escalating into a worst-case scenario.³⁵ It was crucial to seek assurances from the Communist and Socialist powers that had supported the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese troops and their allies. In their roles as mediators, Indonesia's President Suharto and Malaysia's Prime Minister Hussein Onn engaged with Chinese leaders. On 8 March 1979, Indonesia's *Angkatan Bersenjata* reported that Chinese forces would be withdrawn.³⁶ Malaysia and Indonesia adopted separate approaches to resolving the conflict, with both countries agreeing that Malaysia would engage diplomatically with China, while Indonesia would concentrate on its relationship with Hanoi. According to Jeshurun (2007), these actions were seen as purely symbolic.³⁷ However, Hussein Onn's efforts to address the conflict were far from symbolic. His actions reflect genuine concern about safeguarding Malaysia's security from potential threats posed by the Cambodian Conflict. This was demonstrated when Prime Minister Hussein Onn undertook an official visit to China from 2 to 6 May 1979, at the invitation of Chinese Vice-Premier Deng Xiaoping, following Deng's visit to Malaysia in 1978. Hussein seized this opportunity to articulate Malaysia's position on the Cambodian Conflict, emphasising that not only Malaysia but also ASEAN was concerned about the escalating tensions. In his speech at a welcoming banquet in Beijing, Hussein reiterated his support for the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' statement calling for the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Cambodia and for a peaceful resolution to the conflict.³⁸ This statement from the ASEAN Foreign Ministers, issued in Bangkok, reflected their concerns regarding the involvement of external parties in the conflict.³⁹ Deng Xiaoping, in his speech at the banquet, endorsed ASEAN's call for the withdrawal of foreign troops and expressed China's commitment to supporting ASEAN countries in strengthening their unity and coordination, thereby playing a greater role in safeguarding peace in Asia and Southeast Asia.⁴⁰ These remarks suggested a united front between China and ASEAN against Hanoi, but in reality, they were part of Hussein's efforts to urge foreign powers like China to withdraw from the conflict.

Hussein intensified his diplomatic efforts by visiting Moscow from 18 to 25 September 1979. During this visit, he conveyed ASEAN's concerns about the withdrawal of foreign forces from Indochina, expressing hope that the Soviet Union could persuade Vietnam to seek a resolution to the Cambodian Conflict. Leonid Brezhnev, Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, requested that Hussein inform Prime Minister Kriangsak and other ASEAN leaders that Vietnam would not attack Thailand or interfere in its affairs. Hussein positioned Malaysia as firmly opposed to the Soviet leader's stance, demonstrating a willingness for the Soviet Union to contribute to resolving the conflict. However, in a speech to the Dewan Rakyat, Malaysia's Parliament, Hussein expressed scepticism about these assurances, "I do not know if this assurance has anything to do with the stance of Malaysia and other ASEAN countries in urging the Vietnamese army's withdrawal from Kampuchea. However, Malaysia accepted President Brezhnev's assurance."⁴¹ He proposed to the Soviet Union, as a major power, to leverage its influence to help resolve the conflict. His suggestions included addressing the issues caused by illegal Vietnamese immigrants and recognizing the positive efforts of ASEAN countries toward regional cooperation and stability, including the Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) concept. Hussein reiterated the importance of the ZOPFAN concept for Southeast Asia, noting that while Soviet leaders acknowledged it, they had not clearly demonstrated their support. He also suggested that Cambodia be declared neutral to help resolve the Vietnamese-Cambodian conflict. However, his mission to secure security assurances from both China and the Soviet Union proved unsuccessful, as both powers opted to continue their support for their

respective allies.

The Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia faced condemnation not only from ASEAN but also from the UN and its eighty member countries, which recognised the Democratic Kampuchea (DK) as Cambodia's legitimate government. Only fifteen countries supported Heng Samrin's PRK, including the Soviet Union (with Romania as an exception supporting the DK) and India. In March 1979, Malaysia, Thailand, and other ASEAN nations took a united stance at the UN to maintain the DK's seat. The 6th Non-Aligned Movement Summit held in Havana, Cuba, from 3 to 9 September 1979, showcased the pro-Soviet faction supporting the PRK government, despite the determined efforts of Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia, which ultimately proved ineffective.⁴² Nevertheless, these three ASEAN countries continued to advocate for their position, urging India to convene a special debate session with the understanding that no decision would be made to declare a vacant seat, remove the DK, or recognise the Heng Samrin regime if ASEAN could garner more support than the pro-Soviet bloc.⁴³ This extensive debate led to the recognition of the Cambodian Conflict and emphasised the principles of self-determination, the establishment of an independent, neutral, non-aligned Cambodia, and the withdrawal of foreign forces from the country for the first time.⁴⁴

Following the ASEAN resolution to maintain the DK seat, it was finally granted during the 34th session of the UN General Assembly on 14 November 1979, thanks to support from major powers like China, the US, and Britain. The UN organised two significant conferences addressing the conflict: the first, held in Geneva from 21 to 22 July 1979, generated substantial international pressure on Vietnam, leading to an agreement for a moratorium on refugee departures while Western countries committed to resettling the refugees.⁴⁵ The second conference took place in New York on 5 November 1979, and successfully raised USD 125 million for Cambodian relief efforts.⁴⁶ Additionally, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution on 14 November 1979, calling for a cease-fire and the withdrawal of foreign forces from Cambodian territory.⁴⁷

Kuantan Principle and Five Plus Two

In March 1980, Hussein Onn met with Indonesia's President Suharto in Kuantan, Pahang, to discuss solutions to the ongoing Cambodian Conflict. This meeting resulted in the Kuantan Principle, which called for Vietnam's withdrawal from Cambodia and independence from Soviet influence, while urging China to refrain from intervening in Cambodia. Drawing on lessons from the Vietnam War (1954-1975), which had polarised regional politics for over two decades, the Kuantan Principle highlighted the need for restraint by major powers in the Cambodian Conflict.⁴⁸ It also aimed to ensure the security of the Thai-Cambodian border by proposing a *quid pro quo*, acceptance of the Heng Samrin regime in exchange for a reduction in Vietnamese pressures on Thailand.⁴⁹ Both the Malaysian and Indonesian governments agreed that Malaysia would diplomatically engage with China to prevent further escalation of the conflict, while Jakarta would make a symbolic appeal to Hanoi.⁵⁰ Van der Kroef suggests that the Kuantan Principle had a hidden agenda that acknowledged Vietnam's influence in Cambodia's affairs. This recognition stemmed from Thailand's internal issues and its leadership change to Prem Tinsulanonda, which made Thailand appear less capable of managing the chaotic situation along the Thai-Cambodian border.⁵¹ This situation underscored the importance of Thai security to the Malaysian leader, as it was crucial for safeguarding both Malaysia and the broader region from potential Vietnamese threats.

Vietnam rejected the Kuantan Principle, with the Foreign Minister of Vietnam, Nguyen Co Thach, citing two main reasons for this decision, "First, the Kuantan formula is not complete because the US waged aggression against Vietnam and Indochina, but the formula does not mention the US. Secondly, this formula puts the Soviet Union and China on the same footing, which is

impossible".⁵² Recognising that Australian and New Zealand troops remained in Malaysia, Nguyen Co Thach acknowledged that the Malaysian leader had explained the Kuantan Principles. However, he expressed concerns about Southeast Asia's stability, stating that it "stemmed from the US playing the China card, and this generally worked against countries in the area. The Soviet Union on the other hand, helped us in all our difficulties some time".⁵³ Nguyen Co Thach explained that the differences in peace and security perceptions between ASEAN and Vietnam arose from their divergent views on the causes and solutions to regional issues. He also emphasised that Vietnam saw China as a threat and denied that Cambodia had any problems, asserting that Vietnam would never accept the idea of a buffer state between ASEAN and the three Indochina states.

Malaysia's efforts to resolve the Cambodian Conflict through the Kuantan Principle ultimately failed, as Thailand remained skeptical about the initiative. Thailand opposed the principle due to Vietnam's strategic alliance with the Soviet Union, believing that it would be impossible to distance Vietnam from Soviet influence. According to Muthiah Alagappa, Thailand felt that only the US could provide the necessary support to counterbalance the Soviet Union's capabilities.⁵⁴ Despite the lack of a unified political stance, Malaysia engaged in a "politics of accommodation" with Thailand to preserve cooperation between the two countries.⁵⁵ However, the Kuantan Principle faced criticism from within Malaysia, particularly regarding Hussein's reluctance to use subterfuge in diplomatic efforts. Insiders at Wisma Putra expressed concern that such approaches could lead to what Hussein described as "a bottomless pit".⁵⁶ Ultimately, Malaysia recognised that its ambition to act as an honest broker was unlikely to succeed in the face of Vietnam's determined military presence in Cambodia.⁵⁷

The "Five Plus Two" proposal was another Malaysian initiative aimed at addressing the Cambodian conflict while supporting Thailand as a frontline state. Proposed by Malaysia's Foreign Minister Ghazali Shafie during an informal meeting with Nguyen Co Thach in April 1980, the formula sought to involve Vietnam and Laos in discussions with ASEAN countries, intentionally excluding both the Vietnamese-backed regime in Phnom Penh and the Khmer Rouge. However, this proposal faced immediate rejection, particularly from Thailand, which viewed it as too closely aligned with Vietnamese interests. Thai officials feared that such a dialogue could solidify Indochina's acceptance as a bloc, thereby diminishing the influence of external powers like China.⁵⁸ Recognising this setback, Malaysia understood the importance of sticking to a concerted ASEAN approach to regional security. Hussein Onn emphasised that Thailand's security was vital not only for its own stability but for the broader security of ASEAN members.⁵⁹ As a result, Malaysia focused on strengthening bilateral ties with Thailand and fostering solidarity within ASEAN to effectively counter perceived threats from Vietnam and maintain regional stability.

The ASEAN resolution called for an end to foreign interference in Cambodia's internal affairs and urged the UN Secretary-General to seek a peaceful resolution, potentially through an international meeting on the Cambodian conflict. Additionally, the resolution requested immediate humanitarian assistance for the Cambodian people. Tengku Ahmad Rithauddeen remarked that the ASEAN resolution at the UN represented a diplomatic achievement for Malaysia, leaving it to UN Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim to determine the best way to implement it.⁶⁰ In the wake of the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, which escalated following Vietnamese incursions into three Thai border villages in June 1980, Waldheim called for swift UN action. During discussions with Thai leaders Prem and Siddhi, he was informed that Thailand would view any agreement to withdraw troops from its borders as a violation of its sovereignty. Thai officials indicated that the core issue was Vietnam's refusal to accept the November 1979 UN General Assembly resolution demanding the withdrawal of the 200,000 Vietnamese troops stationed in Cambodia. Thai leaders proposed establishing demilitarised zones within Cambodia under UN supervision, with the support of allies Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and the Philippines, to ensure the safety and provision of aid to the

tens of thousands of refugees living dangerously along the border “Waldheim fails to bridge the Viet-Thai gap”, *New Straits Times*, 7 August 1980. The Cambodian Conflict was discussed at the 35th UN General Assembly in September-October 1980, during which the Democratic Kampuchea retained its UN seat, receiving three more votes than in 1979.⁶¹

Prem advocated for an international conference aimed at resolving the Cambodian Conflict, emphasising that the focus should be exclusively on humanitarian issues. He stated that “the conference would be convened under the auspices of the UN, and the countries to be invited would be determined at the discretion of the UN Secretary-General”.⁶² When the International Conference on Cambodia (ICK) was held, ASEAN’s condemnation of Vietnam’s invasion, ongoing demands for troop withdrawal, and international efforts to recognise and restore the legitimate Democratic Kampuchea (DK) government began to yield results. The ICK, which took place in New York from 13 to 17 July 1981, occurred alongside Vietnam’s reluctance to cooperate in resolving its conflict with Cambodia. Both the October 1980 ASEAN statement on the Cambodian peace resolution and the 1979 UNGA resolution were adopted during the conference.⁶³ China objected to seven points in the ASEAN draft declaration for the International Conference on Cambodia (ICK), including proposals to disarm all Khmer resistance groups and establish an interim administration.⁶⁴ China’s ultimate objective in “bleeding” Vietnam was to leverage the Khmer Rouge armed forces to restore a pro-China regime in Phnom Penh and foster a Vietnam more aligned with Chinese interests.⁶⁵ Malaysia believed that China’s strategy of weakening Vietnam would only increase Vietnam’s dependence on the Soviet Union. In contrast, Thailand supported the “bleeding Vietnam white” strategy and was unwilling to bring Vietnam to the negotiating table, fearing that Vietnam would manipulate the negotiations for its own benefit.⁶⁶ Meanwhile, Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines felt that ASEAN should not appear to yield to Chinese pressure at that time, while Thailand was more focused on accommodating China.⁶⁷

Kuala Lumpur’s Attitudes Towards the Cambodian Conflict Under Mahathir Mohamad’s Leadership (1981-1991)

During Mahathir Mohamad’s premiership (1981-2003), Malaysia’s perspective on Thailand’s role as a frontline state evolved from that of his predecessor, Hussein Onn. While the security concerns stemming from the Cambodian Conflict remained, Malaysia’s views on Vietnam shifted significantly. When the Malaysian press prompted Mahathir to clarify his statement that Vietnam was not a major threat, he responded, “We are not going to see the Vietnamese army marching into Malaysia tomorrow. We are very clear about the danger, but we do not think at this moment that they are bent on conquering Malaysia.”⁶⁸ This perspective contributed to Kuala Lumpur’s more low-key approach in addressing the Cambodian Conflict. Although Thailand faced direct threats from regular incursions by Vietnamese troops and the Khmer Rouge, Malaysia did not perceive the situation in the same light. Despite differing views on the Vietnamese threat, Mahathir continued to seek solutions and promote peace through meetings and dialogues with ASEAN, particularly with Thailand.

During Mahathir Mohamad’s two-day visit to Thailand, he and Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda emphasised the necessity of strengthening their nations’ defences to address the political challenges facing both countries and the region, as noted in their joint statement.⁶⁹ Malaysia and Thailand recognised the importance of mutual support and cooperation in navigating the uncertainties of regional political threats. Both leaders stressed the urgent need for the complete withdrawal of foreign forces from Cambodia, enabling the Cambodian people to exercise their right to self-determination with necessary guarantees from all involved parties. They also voiced serious concerns regarding the Soviet Union’s invasion and ongoing occupation of Afghanistan. Mahathir

and Prem agreed that, similar to the Cambodian situation, a viable solution could only emerge through a political settlement acceptable to all parties, allowing the indigenous population to determine their future. Mahathir stressed that the best approach to resolving these issues is through leader discussions, warning that allowing problems to escalate would make them impossible to solve.

Mahathir highlighted to Prem that their mutual decision in 1979 to jointly explore, exploit, and share minerals in a disputed area of the South China Sea should serve as a model for resolving international issues among leaders. He remarked, "an example of how international problems should be solved among international leaders. This is a unique arrangement. When disputes such as this create conflict between two nations, this is the kind of problem-solving approach that we would like to maintain".⁷⁰ In 1979, Malaysia and Thailand signed a memorandum of understanding regarding the overlapping area, leading to the establishment of the Malaysia-Thailand Joint Authority (MTJA). This cooperation over the previously disputed territory proved profitable for both nations, paving the way for further socio-economic collaborations. Consequently, Mahathir asserted that, regarding the Cambodian Conflict, solutions should be pursued through peaceful negotiations, similar to the agreement reached between Malaysia and Thailand, avoiding armed conflict that could disrupt regional stability and threaten the livelihoods of innocent civilians.

Finding a resolution to the prolonged conflict proved challenging when each party refused to participate in peace talks. Thailand's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Siddhi Savetsila, stated, "the only solution to the Cambodian problem which we believe will be durable must be a political one. I wish also to make an appeal, to all parties and countries concerned to come to the conference table and to work together for the sake of peace and stability not only of Cambodian but also of the entire region of Southeast Asia."⁷¹ While what he suggested was accurate, there needed to be a power capable of facilitating the process, and he recognised that the US could play a constructive role. Mahathir stated, "It is our hope that all those concerned, particularly the big powers, will do their best to facilitate the finding of an amicable solution."⁷² Ultimately, the major powers that had exploited Southeast Asian nations bore responsibility for seeking a peaceful resolution to the conflict they had helped to escalate. Assurances from major powers were necessary to prevent future involvement in mediating Southeast Asia's regional affairs. China reassured ASEAN, particularly Malaysia, that it did not intend to create a satellite state in Cambodia and would not jeopardise the peace and stability of ASEAN member countries.

Speaking at a dinner banquet to celebrate China's Premier Zhao Ziyang's arrival in Malaysia at the Parliament Building, Mahathir stressed that it was the responsibility of major powers not to interfere in the internal affairs of regional countries to prevent the spread of disputes in Indochina to other areas.⁷³ He asserted that peace and security in the region could only be achieved if it remained free from external influence and rivalry among major powers. In the context of the Vietnamese-Cambodian War, which impacted ASEAN and Southeast Asia, Mahathir took the opportunity to reassess China's stance on ASEAN security. Despite its persistent involvement, China assured that its presence in Indochina would not threaten the peace and stability of ASEAN members, a reassurance that relieved Mahathir. He noted that Zhao elaborated on China's position regarding Cambodia, indicating that the situation was complex and unlikely to change unless sustained pressure was applied to Vietnamese-Chinese border. Mahathir observed that if Vietnam did not commit significant forces there, it would use them to suppress Cambodia. He remarked, "China's role would be nil-provided that the Americans and the Russians have no designs in the area too. But if other people are still interested in this area, then China feels it has some justification to be involved here".⁷⁴

On 22 June 1982, three Khmer factions—the Khmer Rouge led by Khieu Samphan, the National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC) led by Sihanouk, and the Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF) led by Son Sann—united

to form the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) in Kuala Lumpur. Prince Sihanouk became the President of the CGDK, with Khieu Samphan as Vice President and Son Sann as Prime Minister. Malaysia played a crucial role in establishing the CGDK.⁷⁵ Ghazali Shafie, Malaysia's Minister of Foreign Affairs, called for support for the CGDK, believing it would bolster the coalition's efforts to eradicate Vietnamese forces in Cambodia.⁷⁶ This support was also aimed at preventing the Heng Samrin regime from securing a UN seat and ensuring that the CGDK obtained it instead. Additionally, Malaysia sought to integrate Laos and Vietnam into ASEAN's regional cooperation by promoting a cohesive Khmer group like the CGDK. Thus, Malaysia's support for the CGDK was seen as a foundational step toward advocating for the eventual inclusion of Indochina states in ASEAN once the conflict had resolved.⁷⁷

Prem noted that the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' meeting in Bangkok had urged the international community to bolster both political and military support for the Cambodians in their fight to liberate Cambodia from foreign occupation. The Cambodian Conflict led the Thai government to condemn the Vietnamese occupation as a threat to regional security, positioning Thailand as a leader in providing diplomatic support to the Cambodian resistance. Estimates suggested that the coalition forces in Cambodia included around 50,000 guerrilla fighters opposing the occupying Vietnamese troops.⁷⁸ To counter the Vietnamese and their allies in Cambodia, support was directed toward non-communist factions, including the KPNLF and Norodom Sihanouk's *Armée Nationale Sihanoukiste* (ANS). Thailand played a crucial role in facilitating the distribution of US\$3.5 million in aid to both the ANS and the KPNLF, which were factions within the CGDK.⁷⁹ By 1989, Singapore had dispatched military consignments worth US\$ 60 million to non-communist resistance groups like the ANS and KPNLF. This support included the establishment of a radio station, Samleng Khmer (Voice of Khmer), and the provision of hundreds of AK-47 automatic rifles, hand grenades, ammunition, and communication equipment in several batches.⁸⁰ This prompted Malaysia to provide training and uniforms to the resistance groups as well.⁸¹ Singapore and Malaysia actively and successfully advocated for the most favourable position for the CGDK during the Commonwealth Heads of Government Regional Meeting held in Suva, Fiji, from 14 to 18 October 1982.⁸² Norodom Ranariddh, the military commander of the ANS, expressed the group's need for US assistance in training and equipping combat surgeons. Although the ANS claimed to have 10,000 fighters, it only employed five surgeons, with 17 others in training in China. As a result, ANS combatants depended on Khmer Rouge doctors to handle severe battlefield injuries, including amputations.

During his visit to Hanoi, Tengku Rithauddeen conveyed to Vietnamese leaders that Malaysia would halt its aid for rehabilitating rubber plantations in Vietnam, signaling Malaysia's disapproval of Vietnam's continued aggression in Cambodia.⁸³ In April 1985, he also proposed the idea of "proximity talks" between the CGDK and the Heng Samrin regime. Although the proposal was introduced without prior consultation with their ASEAN counterparts, Thailand and Indonesia opposed it. In contrast, Vietnam, the Soviet Union, and the PRK expressed strong support for the initiative.⁸⁴ Thailand later amended the proposal to include Vietnam as a party in the proximity talks.⁸⁵ This revised proposal was ultimately endorsed by ASEAN during the 18th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Kuala Lumpur on 8-9 July 1985, where it was decided that the talks would take place between the CGDK and Vietnam.⁸⁶ In addition to Indonesia, which had been designated as the interlocutor at the previous ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, it was agreed that Malaysia could also engage in official secret exploratory talks with Vietnam. Kuala Lumpur had already conducted a round of talks with Vietnamese Foreign Minister Le Mai on 29 June 1985, in Kuala Lumpur.⁸⁷ Despite Vietnam's persistent refusal to respond positively to various ASEAN proposals—even after ASEAN accepted that the Heng Samrin regime could participate in the talks at some point—Tengku Ahmad Rithauddeen continued his diplomatic efforts. In October 1985, he met with India's Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, seeking India's assistance

in urging Vietnamese leaders to adhere to UN resolutions calling for the withdrawal of Vietnamese forces from Cambodia.⁸⁸ ASEAN hoped that India's influence might prompt Vietnam to reconsider its position; however, the visit did not result in any significant change, as Vietnam remained firm in its stance.⁸⁹

During his visit to Malaysia in September 1987, Thai Prime Minister Prem explained to Mahathir that any diplomatic solution to the Cambodian crisis would require Vietnam's involvement. Thailand aimed to rally other countries to support this political resolution. Mahathir assured Prem that Malaysia shared Thailand's viewpoint on these efforts. Malaysian policy regarding the Cambodian conflict was shaped by sensitivities in Thailand.⁹⁰ Both governments agreed to continue supporting Sihanouk and to maintain pressure for discussions based on the terms set by ASEAN during their summit on 16 August 1987. Prem also informed Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Ghafar Baba that Thailand had sought support from British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and former US President Jimmy Carter to persuade the Soviet Union to help resolve the Cambodian situation.⁹¹ Given the Soviet Union's influence over Vietnam, Thailand sought a constructive role from the socialist power.

In February 1986, the CGDK introduced the Eight-Point Peace Proposal, a crucial document calling for negotiations on the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops and a cease-fire to resolve the Cambodian Conflict. This proposal was based on seven consecutive UN resolutions and the 1981 ICK Declaration, marking an important step in diplomatic efforts. As the struggle intensified, Malaysia welcomed the CGDK's heightened political and diplomatic activity. Mahathir described the Eight-Point Proposal as a constructive and reasonable initiative, showcasing the organization's flexibility and sincere commitment to ending the conflict. Malaysia and other ASEAN members supported the proposal.⁹² Thailand's Deputy Foreign Minister, Arun Panupong, echoed this sentiment, viewing the proposal as a productive framework for negotiations. Siddhi also deemed the settlement plan to be thorough, reasonable, and flexible. In contrast, Hanoi rejected the proposal, advocating instead for a two-phase withdrawal of Vietnamese forces supervised by the UN and the establishment of a new government led by Heng Samrin, leader of *Front Uni National pour le Salut du Kampuchéa* (FUNSK). Malaysia interpreted Vietnam's repeated rejections of the proposal as clear evidence of its intransigence and inflexibility.

At the Informal ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting in Bangkok in August 1987, the ministers agreed to support Indonesia's proposal for a "cocktail party" of informal meetings aimed at initiating dialogue between Vietnam and Cambodia, utilizing the CGDK's Eight-Point Proposal.⁹³ However, the version endorsed by ASEAN differed from Vietnam's interpretation, which envisioned a more informal dialogue without preconditions or political labels. Ang Cheng Guan, Singapore, ASEAN and the Cambodian Conflict 1978-1991, p. 101. During the Jakarta Informal Meeting (JIM) in 1988, China advocated for discussions about the early withdrawal of Vietnamese forces from Cambodia and emphasised that Vietnam should engage in negotiations with Cambodian factions.⁹⁴ Meanwhile, Thailand expressed distrust toward the Indonesians and opposed JIM II, adopting a generally low-key role during the discussions.⁹⁵ Influenced by Thailand's stance, Malaysia similarly maintained a low-key approach, providing private support for the CGDK.⁹⁶

ASEAN imposed economic sanctions on Hanoi, with Siddhi Savetsila believing that increased international pressure would lead to an earlier-than-expected withdrawal of Vietnamese forces from Cambodia and a political settlement. Between 1988 and 1989, discussions occurred between Co Thach and the Thai government. The first meeting took place on 4 August 1988, during which the Thai government asked Vietnam to assess the outcomes of the JIM. Co Thach indicated that Vietnam proposed a deadline for the complete withdrawal of troops from Cambodia by the end of 1989 or the first quarter of 1990.⁹⁷ Prem commended this initiative, believing it would ultimately restore peace to the region. The second meeting between Co Thach and the Thai Minister of Foreign Affairs occurred

on 25 August 1988, where the Vietnamese Foreign Minister asserted that the timetable for troop withdrawal was being determined, while China would withdraw its troops within nine months.⁹⁸ The third meeting was held in Hanoi from 9 to 12 January 1989.

Vietnam's economic crisis worsened as Soviet aid diminished, a consequence of the Soviet Union's efforts to normalize relations with both the US and China. Economic restrictions imposed by the Communist Party of Vietnam allowed Hanoi to engage with all nations, including non-communist ones. When Chatichai Choonhavan became Prime Minister of Thailand in August 1988, he successfully revitalised and improved Thailand-Vietnam relations through a new approach to foreign policy in Indochina. His vision to transform Indochina "from a battlefield into a market" became a catalyst for a fresh chapter in bilateral relations and a push to resolve the Cambodian Conflict. This shift in Thai attitudes also prompted Malaysia to adopt a similar stance toward Vietnam, leading to a transformation in Malaysian perceptions—from previous hostility to viewing Vietnam as a new economic opportunity.⁹⁹ On 5 April 1989, Vietnam, Laos, and the PRK issued a joint declaration stating that all Vietnamese troops would unilaterally withdraw from Cambodia by 30 September 1989. The declaration also called for the establishment of an International Control and Supervision Commission (ICSC), comprising representatives from India, Poland, Canada, Indonesia, and a personal representative of the UN Secretary-General to oversee the withdrawal.¹⁰⁰ After a prolonged conflict lasting thirteen years, the situation finally came to a close on 24 October 1991, with a UN-sponsored peace conference in Paris between Vietnam and Cambodia. However, the influx of Indochinese refugees continued to burden Thailand and Malaysia throughout the 1990s and early 2000s.

Conclusion

The Cambodian Conflict presented significant challenges to resolution despite various efforts. As the conflict escalated due to intensified Vietnamese attacks on Cambodia, which spilled over into the Thai-Cambodian border, Thailand's geographical proximity to Indochina placed it at risk of becoming a frontline state in the conflict. This situation raised concerns in Malaysia, Thailand's close neighbour, about potential spillover threats to its own security and sovereignty, prompting then-Prime Minister Hussein Onn to seek solutions to protect Malaysia. During Hussein Onn's leadership, Kuala Lumpur closely monitored Thailand's position, fearing that Vietnam's southward invasion could jeopardise Malaysia's security. By prioritising security measures in response to the Cambodian Conflict, Malaysia committed to assisting Thailand, beginning with military support. Through the ASEAN platform, Malaysia sought assurances from Vietnam, the Soviet Union, and India, but received little in terms of concrete actions. Soviet Union strongly backed Vietnam, while India continued to recognise the Heng Samrin government. Alongside Indonesia, Malaysia advocated for the Kuantan Principle, which emphasised the need for superpower restraint in the Cambodian conflict. This principle aimed to ensure security along the Thai-Cambodian border, recognised the Heng Samrin regime to alleviate Vietnamese pressure on Thailand, and proposed a partial withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia. Another Malaysian initiative was the "Five Plus Two" proposal, which called for Vietnam and Laos to engage in discussions with ASEAN countries. However, like the Kuantan Principle, this proposal was rejected at the 16th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Bangkok. Kuala Lumpur's approach to managing the conflict differed from that of other ASEAN members such as Thailand, Singapore, and the Philippines, largely motivated by Thailand's position as a frontline state, which posed a potential threat to Malaysian security. Nevertheless, Malaysia aligned itself with ASEAN diplomacy as a hopeful platform to encourage the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia. Despite differing perspectives and strategies, Malaysia consistently demonstrated support and solidarity with

Thailand though Malaysia often adopted a more neutral tone in diplomatic rhetoric, acknowledging the security threats faced by its neighbour.

Kuala Lumpur's approach to the Cambodian Conflict evolved after Mahathir Mohamad succeeded Hussein Onn as Prime Minister. Recognising that Vietnamese troops were unlikely to pose a direct threat to Malaysia, Mahathir adopted a more low-key strategy in addressing the conflict. Under his leadership, Malaysia shifted its focus from immediate security concerns to fostering regional cooperation among Indochina states within the ASEAN framework. Mahathir emphasised that the Malaysia-Thailand Joint Authority (MTJA), established in 1979, should serve as a model for resolving conflicts through socioeconomic cooperation. This initiative inspired Malaysia to actively engage in promoting collaboration with ASEAN and its neighbouring countries for peace and stability. Malaysia also provided training and uniforms to non-communist factions, such as the KPNLF and the ANS, demonstrating its commitment to supporting these groups. One of Malaysia's notable diplomatic efforts during this period was the proposal for "proximity talks" between the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK) and the Hun Sen regime. Although the initial proposal received mixed reactions, it was ultimately endorsed after amendments were made. This willingness to facilitate dialogue illustrated Malaysia's evolving role in regional diplomacy. As Vietnam faced economic challenges, Malaysia saw an opportunity to strengthen economic ties with Indochina countries, further solidifying its proactive stance in the region. Despite the conflict's resolution, marked by the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops and the signing of the 1991 Paris Peace Agreement, the ongoing influx of Indochinese refugees remained a significant issue into the 1990s. In summary, Malaysia's stance on the Cambodian Conflict was significantly shaped by several factors: Thailand's role as a frontline state, Vietnam's expansionism, the responses of ASEAN members, and the influence of key Malaysian leaders such as Hussein Onn (Prime Minister from 1976-1981), Mahathir Mohamad (Prime Minister from 1981-2003), Tengku Ahmad Rithauddeen (Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1975-1981 and 1984-1986), and Ghazali Shafie (Minister of Home Affairs from 1973-1981 and Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1981-1984). The multifaceted approach reflected a strategic shift from immediate security concerns to a broader vision of regional cooperation and economic engagement. This study provides insight into the underlying reasons for Malaysia's neutral and low-key approach during the Cambodian Conflict. Malaysia's stance throughout the Cambodian Conflict was one of cautious diplomacy, prioritising regional stability, security, and the influence of ASEAN, while balancing its own national interests in the context of the broader Cold War dynamics.

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⁹⁰ FCO 15/4962, General Prems’ Visit to Malaysia: 18-19 September 1987, Letter from A.J. Cary to John D. Dennis, 25 September 1987, The National Archives, Kew.

⁹¹ Malaysia-Thailand Relation Vol. 23, Mr. Ghafar Baba, Deputy Prime Minister’s Official Visit to Thailand, 4-6 July 1987, ANM 2000/0002403, The National Archives of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur.

⁹² Speech Archival Collection, Dinner in Honour of HRH Prince Sihanouk, Speech by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad on 22 August 1986 at Sri Perdana, Kuala Lumpur. Accessed 20 May 2024. <https://www.pmo.gov.my/ucapan/?m=p&p=mahathir&id=1091>.

⁹³ Ang Cheng Guan, *Singapore, ASEAN and the Cambodian Conflict 1978-1991*, p. 101.

⁹⁴ FCO 21/2625, Call by Robin McLaren on Xu Dunxin, Director of the Asian Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Teleletter from A.J.G. Insall in Peking, 24 June 1988, The National Archives, Kew.

⁹⁵ Ang Cheng Guan, *Singapore, ASEAN and the Cambodian Conflict 1978-1991*, p. 121.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Surapong Chayanam, *Thailand’s Policy towards Vietnam: Foreign Policy towards Neighbouring Countries in the Cold War Era: Five Comparative Case Studies*, Siam Review, Bangkok, 2017, p. 438.

⁹⁸ Ibid, p. 440.

⁹⁹ Thailand Vol. 99, ANM 2000/0002864, 26 July 1987, The National Archives of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur.

¹⁰⁰ Ang Cheng Guan, *Singapore, ASEAN and the Cambodian Conflict 1978-1991*, p. 122.

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