

When Foreign Peacekeeping Contests Sovereignty: Cambodia and UNTAC

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Cambodia in the wake of UNTAC

Sovereignty is a core principle regarding responsibility for domestic affairs. Sovereignty was first defined in the Westphalia treaty, which indicates that each state has exclusive authority over its own rules and within its territory (Amjad, 2022, p. 60), implying a precondition of non-intervention by external actors. However, in the past, peacekeeping activities and the authorisation of their mandates have posed external interference in other sovereign states' domestic affairs.

Cambodia and the engagement of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) vividly illustrated this dynamic in 1992, when the Cambodian government allowed the UN's interference over its domestic affairs.

Based on the Westphalian understanding of sovereignty, the case of UNTAC raises the following questions over Cambodia's authorities within

its territory: why did Cambodia agree to UN involvement in the implementation of the Paris Peace Agreements, and to what extent did UNTAC have the authority to monitor the agreements despite the principle of state sovereignty?

This essay argues that Cambodia accepted UNTAC's interference because its sovereignty had been significantly weakened by the time of the signing of the Paris Peace Agreement. Additionally, it will analyse the extent to which UNTAC's authority was constrained despite being authorised by its mandate to exercise its authority in Cambodia.

To address this question, the analysis will assess the Cambodian government's capacity by examining institutional and operational limitations. Consequently, it will examine the limitations of UNTAC in conducting its missions to disclose the extent of its authority during the operation.

Background

The Cambodian civil war was triggered when Vietnam invaded Cambodia and toppled the former government of the Khmer Rouge (Barma, 2017, pp. 74-75). After the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge, the new government, "the People's Republic of Kampuchea" (PRK), was established with a unitary party, the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party. However, the PRK was highly affiliated with Vietnam, as Vietnam supported a Khmer Rouge faction, Heng Samrin, later the leader of the PRK, to topple the Khmer Rouge and provoked strong opposition in Cambodia, particularly from three anti-governmental bodies (Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF), the Khmer Rouge, and FUNCINPEC) (Barma, 2017, pp. 74-75). This friction between the PRK and opposition parties caused the civil war in Cambodia, which lasted more than a decade, since it started in 1979. (Barma, 2017, p. 75)

The Paris Peace Agreement was signed to pave the way for an end to the long-lasting civil war between the PRK and the three anti-government bodies (Barma, 2017, p. 75). At the time, the PRK's political system was also significantly weakened, with the aim of establishing a more democratic and stable governmental system (United Nations, n.d.; Barma, 2017, p. 75). Amid the situation, the UN mission, UNTAC, received its mandate to monitor the implementation of the Paris Peace Agreement and to oversee Cambodia's administration (United Nations, n.d.).

The governing capacity of the Cambodian state

After the Khmer Rouge destroyed all governmental and public functions that were crucial to provide public services, the PRK managed to reconstruct its political institutions (Blunt & Turner, 2005, p. 76). Until the establishment of the Council of State in 1981, the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party (KPRG), led by Heng, worked as the main governing body of the PRK (Ross, 1990, pp. 208-211). When the constitution of the PRK was proclaimed in 1981, it replaced KPRG with newly established

governmental bodies (the National Assembly, the Council of State, and the Council of Ministers) (Ross, 1990, pp. 209–213). It is undeniable that the PRK intended to stabilise the country by establishing its formal political institutions; however, it did not function as envisaged. Consequently, failing to strengthen its capacity to overcome domestic issues.

One of the key problems was continuous shortages at the PRK, especially outside of Phnom Penh. Inter alia, a very selective recruitment process that required candidates' credibility and loyalty to the party led to a massive shortage of members in the PRK (Kolnberger, 2015, p. 381). Insufficient manpower prevented the tackling of fundamental issues that needed to be settled to stabilise Cambodian society.

Additionally, the system failed to ensure accountability in its administrative body due to patronage and clientelism (Kolnberger, 2015, pp. 383–384). When the PRK reconstructed its political system in 1979, it utilised its patronage network, which linked different segments of society (military, ministry, and provincial spheres), to effectively deploy necessary resources and even extend its influence over villages (Blunt & Turner, 2005, p. 76). As a result, patronage and clientelism persisted in the political dimension, leading to a lack of accountability in its apparatus. This corrupted environment allowed politicians to deploy and extract resources whenever they wanted. Therefore, in the case of Cambodia, it disrupted the PRK's ability to utilise resources to manage its national affairs.

Dependence on external actors eroded the PRK's capability to govern the country. In the middle of the 1980s, Soviet support to the PRK gradually declined, and Vietnam withdrew its military in 1989 (Barma, 2017, pp. 75, 77). Cambodia had been dependent on external support, especially Vietnam in its administration (Kiernan, 1982, p. 167). During its reconstruction, Vietnam also had substantial influence in shaping the PRK's political system. This underscores a significant reliance on external actors and implies that the PRK faced difficulties managing the country autonomously. Continuous dependence on the Soviet Union and Vietnam proved Cambodia's inability to govern the country as a sovereign state. Aware of its shortcomings, the Cambodian government accepted UNTAC's influence to stabilise the country, despite the implications for its sovereignty.

Dimension of UNTAC's authority over Cambodia

As an administrative body, UNTAC had legal authority to conduct its missions in Cambodia after signing the Paris Peace Agreement. UNTAC was granted executive and administrative authorisation to conduct its mission; however, its main objective was to oversee the Cambodian government in five areas: information, foreign affairs, finance, and defence (Croissant, 2008, p. 657). At that time, the Cambodian government was not dismantled and still existed by changing its party name to the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) under the State of Cambodia (SOC) (Croissant, 2008,

p. 657; Ross, 1990, p. 117; von Billerbeck et al., 2025, p. 59). This proves that UNTAC did not exist as a replacement body deployed by the UN, but rather as a supervisory body over the Cambodian government, even though it was granted executive and administrative powers to carry out its missions. Therefore, UNTAC did not seize authority to implement policies over the CCP and was meant only to supervise the Cambodian government.

Under the Paris Peace Agreement, a Supreme National Council (SNC), composed of four rival parties in the civil war, was also formed as a semi-sovereign coalition government (Croissant, 2008, p. 657). However, unlike UNTAC, it did not retain decision-making authority, as it was established only as a ceremonial head (Croissant, 2008, p. 657). While there was a movement urging the inclusion of the SNC in decision-making under certain circumstances, it usually did not have the corresponding responsibility for the presented proposals (Croissant, 2008, p. 657). This, once again, highlights the UNTAC's substantial influence in supervising the Cambodian government, with little presence of the SNC.

Despite the formal authority given to UNTAC, it could not utilise its full power to achieve its mission objectives. To respect Cambodia's sovereignty, UNTAC was required to consult carefully with various factions (von Billerbeck et al., 2025, p. 64). Additionally, working closely with the SOC was an important requirement, as the SOC provided decades of experience in governing Cambodia and wielded power at the local level. Nevertheless, the lack of UNTAC's civilian staff and the delay in its deployment resulted in an operation unable to successfully manage these complex situations (von Billerbeck et al., 2025, pp. 64-65). In addition, UNTAC needed to avoid any confrontation with the SOC due to the possibility that the SOC would withdraw its agreement and consent to host the UN's operation (von Billerbeck et al., 2025, pp. 64-65). This lack of firm commitment and UNTAC's inability to deploy necessary resources on time led to a reduction in its authority in practice, despite its stated objectives.

Conclusion

Before UNTAC's operation, Cambodia had weak and limited authority to govern the country. Although there was a formal, institutionalised political system under the PRK, it lacked the institutional and operational capacity to successfully manage the civil war and critical domestic issues. A severe deficit stemming from a shortage of bureaucrats in the PRK, corruption by Cambodian politicians, and a significant reliance on external actors. Subsequently, the Cambodian government's limited capacity in domestic affairs enabled the operation of UNTAC despite the Westphalian understanding of sovereignty.

Especially the interplay with the SOC became a crucial dynamic regarding the protection of Cambodia's sovereignty, as UNTAC was granted broad authorisations to govern Cambodia during the postwar transition. However, although UNTAC retained executive and administrative authorities

to address its mission's objectives, it mainly ended up operating as the supervisory organ to the SOC. Admittedly, the shift in UNTAC's approach from controlling the SOC to negotiating with it paved the way for crucial developments, like the May 1993 elections. Nevertheless, the contest with the SOC and its persistent influence over the state's military and bureaucracy – which ultimately outlasted UNTAC's intervention – illustrates the fine line between a well-intentioned peacekeeping effort and an engagement perceived as a breach of sovereignty.

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