CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

According to the Webster's dictionary, conflict has been defined as contending in warfare, showing antagonism or irreconcilability. A continued state of conflict results in distortions at various levels of human and national development.

The preceding chapters have looked at and reflected upon certain issues which had led to the emergence of conflict in Cambodia and the factors which were responsible for its continuation. In conclusion, it is necessary to comprehend certain determinants which contributed to the growth of the political uncertainty in Cambodia and the issues which kept this situation in a state of flux.

The Cambodian conflict is two dimensional - internal and external. The internal factors shaped the external ramifications. Ever since the ouster of Prince Norodom Sihanouk in 1970, Cambodia had entered into a phase of political instability. This was further worsened during the Lon Nol regime, with the intensification and extension of the Vietnam war. In an attempt to create a society and polity totally dissimilar to the previous one, the Khmer Rouge implemented changes which were too sudden and
seemingly ultra revolutionary. The measures which the Khmer Rouge introduced sowed the seeds for political and societal conflict in the country. The period of transition from the old to the new system occurred abruptly. In a country which had already been torn and ravaged by war and political instability, there remained no shock absorbing capacity which could take in the policies of the Khmer Rouge. Both the internal and external policies of Democratic Kampuchea worsened this condition, finally resulting in the Vietnamese military action.

This is when the angle of the conflict shifted from the internal to the external. The Vietnamese military action clearly defined the warring factions within the domestic scene and led to polarisation at the international level along cold war lines. At the regional level the conflict included Vietnam, China and the ASEAN. Here the main elements that determined the stance of each actor were their individual security perceptions which were dependent upon geopolitical realities and historical relationships. What was evident, however, was that with conflicting interests, the responses evoked, were naturally diverse.

First, Vietnam was seen by some as an aggressor in Cambodia and was to be isolated at all costs. While others
believed that, Vietnam saved the Cambodian people from further genocidal killings by the Pol Pot clique. Vietnam perceived that, its security interests were threatened by China. This view was further strengthened when the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia proved only too willing to serve Chinese interests. Vietnam's prolonged stay in Cambodia and its halting responses to negotiation in the early eighties were not conducive to a peaceful resolution of the conflict in Cambodia. Subsequently, with the changed international environment Vietnam's position altered and its attitude became less rigid and more amenable to persuasion.

Second, China's role in the conflict was most debatable. The actual threat to its national interest was minimal. However, the conflict in Cambodia provided China with an opportunity it had hitherto never had — that of weakening its oldest rival, Vietnam. Its support to the Khmer Rouge, before and after the Vietnamese intervention, was ample proof of this objective.

Vietnam had always been 'a thorn in the Chinese flesh' and China had always exhibited a patronising attitude towards its Indochinese neighbours. In the period after the Vietnamese intervention, the Chinese policy was two-pronged. It supported the resistance with military and financial aid
and also continued to maintain military pressure on Vietnam along their common border which culminated in a full-scale war against Vietnam in February 1979. Vietnam's resources, both financial and military, were constantly drained by this dual attack. Further, China gave support to Thailand which had become a frontline state.

The only disadvantage for China was that it supported a regime that had been guilty of genocide. For China the emergence of the CGDK was a significant step in consolidating a viable opposition to the Heng Samrin regime, even though it was a marriage of convenience among largely incompatible partners. Also, the Chinese insistence on the inclusion of the Khmer Rouge in the peace process, was because it would act as a natural check to the Vietnamese influence. The shift in Chinese policy occurred only after the easing of the Sino-Soviet tensions in the post-1985 period. This was followed by an improvement of ties with Vietnam. What was fundamental to the change in the Chinese approach was, possibly, the shift in American policy since 1990 which showed a willingness to negotiate directly with Vietnam. Another factor was the world opinion against China after the Tiananmen Square incident. In an attempt to 'repair' its global image, China was willing to dump the
Khmer Rouge. Hence, China's responses seem to emanate more from its role as a regional power, rather than any perceptions of direct threat to its interests.

Third, for ASEAN, the Cambodian conflict proved to be both its greatest challenge and its finest hour. The most obvious challenge to ASEAN's unity and cohesiveness as a regional organisation emerged from the Cambodian conflict. The ASEAN countries differed in their views as to the intensity of pressure that was to be applied on Vietnam, the reality and extent of the threat which Vietnam posed, and the reliance upon great power support, to influence a change in Vietnam's policy. Another area of discord was with the individual members perceptions of China. Thus the ASEAN view of Vietnam and China varied in the light of the geopolitical situation in the region.

The most affected among the ASEAN members was Thailand. Here, geography played a role since Thailand had to bear the brunt of the Cambodian problem as it resulted in not only the mass movement of refugees along the Thai-Cambodian border but also the setting up of the resistance in this area which further contributed to the instability.

Thailand being a close ally of the West believed in the possibility of the Domino theory. Thus, in the post-1975
period, Thai policy welcomed the presence of a chauvinistic regime which acted as a deterrent to Vietnam's ambitions over Thailand. However, with Cambodia falling to Vietnam, Thailand's own existence was at stake; a belief shared by both Singapore and Philippines. Singapore was critical of the Vietnamese action and considered it a menace to regional security. Philippines accepted the notion of 'containing communism' and its close alliance with the West made it more sympathetic to the Thai position.

At the other end of the spectrum were Malaysia and Indonesia. Both were committed to the unity of ASEAN and therefore felt the need to demonstrate their solidarity with Thailand. However, they could appreciate Hanoi's fears and understood the factors which led to the Vietnamese military action in Cambodia. Moreover, they viewed China as the region's premier long term threat, which consequently contributed to reducing the significance of the Soviet presence in the region.

Despite these divergent views, Thailand's interests remained in the forefront of the ASEAN policy. Inspite of the diversity of security interests which dominated the ASEAN viewpoint, Thailand was finally able to persuade the other members to accept its position on Cambodia. The
significance of ASEAN as a regional organisation was put to test during the last years of the Cambodian conflict. Its adherence to regional unity and persuance of a peaceful settlement, has proved its maturity and standing as a regional organisation. Thus the ASEAN's efforts towards a settlement are commendable.

The variety of interests and views at the regional level had global ramifications. At the extra-regional level, the conflict can best be explained as an application of the balance of power principles. The superpowers were involved in the conflict through their respective belligerents.

For the United States, its policy dilemmas were dominated by its experiences in the aftermath of the Vietnam war and the recognition of China as a regional player. The US could not openly back the Khmer Rouge as this would have made its stance blatantly partisan. If the United States intended to marginalise the Khmer Rouge, then why was its aid package to the FUNCINPEC and the KPNLF much less as compared to China's aid to the Khmer Rouge? For the United States, Cambodia was to be 'Vietnam's Vietnam' and the survival and strength of the political factions would not only contribute to the instability of the PRK government but also effectively 'bleed Vietnam white'.

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Soviet interests and involvement led to its acquisition of base facilities. At a time when Sino-Soviet relations were at a low ebb and the cold war was at its height, Vietnam's dependence upon the USSR increased with its isolation by a large portion of the international community, which proved to be of advantage to the Soviet Union.

What is significant however, is that despite the involvement of several nations, the conflict remained localised within Cambodia along the Thai-Cambodian border, where the resistance was based. Along the Sino-Vietnamese borders, the Chinese kept constant pressure upon the Vietnamese defence in order to weaken the latter's position in Cambodia and prevent the consolidation of the Heng Samrin regime. Thus, the conflict was over the issue as to which group would govern Cambodia.

Though the intransigence of the internally warring groups as well as the external support to the various factions were responsible for the continuation of the conflict, efforts were also on to try and resolve the issue. In this, ASEAN was extensively involved, but could not be wholly successful since its collective interest was linked to that of Thailand. With the gradual change in the global scenario in the post-1985 period, several extra-regional
actors emerged as peace brokers in Cambodia which included Japan and Australia. India, which had earlier been engaged in the peace making efforts in Indochina in 1954, also played a role in the post-1985 period in which it utilised its diplomatic skills.

Finally, it is important to reflect upon the role played by the United Nations. It is imperative to recognise that the shifting paradigms in the post-cold war era have led to the emergence of a new security system with the authority being vested in the United Nations which has resulted in the UN emerging as the peace keeper in several regions. Thus, in the Cambodian case, the United Nations role was also significant so far as the restoration of democracy was concerned. Though there has been criticism that the UN plan for Cambodia was flawed in design and compromised in its implementation, the actual areas in which it succeeded can never be underestimated.

As such, nobody is a loser or victor in this conflict. In the Cambodian conflict everyone involved lost in some way or the other. The greatest sufferers are the people of the country. The conflict has not yet been fully resolved, but only contained. The post-election government in Cambodia is still not in full control of the situation, the Khmer
Rouge continues to pose a threat; the Cambodian army is yet to be equal to the task before it and the economy is far from being promising. The presence of mines constantly threatens the lives of the common man. Inspite of this, there is a change for the better. The maturity of the political leaders in the coalition government and its strength are important factors which will fashion the future political course of the country. Though the situation is still critical, the country has embarked upon a journey of reconstruction and development.