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***The Third Indochina War: An International History*. By Ang Cheng Guan. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2025. Soft cover: 215pp.**

It is said that history gives each person, no matter how important, only one sentence: Lincoln freed the slaves; Churchill saved Western civilization from fascism. So, too, are most conflicts memorable because of their colloquialism. If the First Indochina War was the region's fight for independence, the Second Indochina War was its struggle to assert that independence to determine its own systems of government. These gross oversimplifications would vex the average historian, yet it is difficult to contest that they are wholly inaccurate. But what about the Third Indochina War? Vietnam's war against the Khmer Rouge? A struggle between China and Vietnam for hegemony in mainland Southeast Asia? Foreign powers' failure to stop themselves from being dragged into Cambodia's civil war? The swift demonstration of communism's internal contradictions? The conflict (or conflicts) defies simplicity, which is probably one reason why the Third Indochina War has received much less scholarly attention than the First or Second. Thankfully, Ang Cheng Guan has now provided arguably the most useful and comprehensive account to date.

Within a matter of weeks in April 1975, the communist Khmer Rouge marched into Phnom Penh, setting up its four-year genocidal rule, while North Vietnamese forces captured Saigon and reunified the country. Laos' communists would take nationwide power in December that year. Almost immediately, the Khmer Rouge launched incursions into Vietnam, claiming it was taking back land stolen over the previous decades. After exhausting other means, Hanoi retaliated with an invasion in December 1978 that ousted the Khmer Rouge and installed a client regime. The Khmer Rouge fled to eastern parts of the country and to Thai border camps. Beijing, the key benefactor of the Khmer Rouge, responded by launching a brief border war against Vietnam in February 1979, which quickly spluttered into a decade-long stand-off. Because of the Sino-Soviet split, Moscow sided with Vietnam, while most of the rest of the world, directed by Beijing and Washington, isolated Vietnam and continued to recognize the Khmer Rouge as Cambodia's legitimate government. The 1991 Paris Peace Agreements finally brought an end to this affair, with the United Nations assuming a peacekeeping

role in Cambodia, and China and Vietnam agreeing to put the past behind them.

None of the participants emerged from these conflicts particularly heroically, with most of the main events being driven by self-interest and colonial-like scheming. This is probably why the period has generated little nostalgia. Washington has tried to forget that it stood on the wrong side of history by supporting the genocidal Khmer Rouge. As Guan notes, it was not a chapter in Vietnam and China's history that their governments wanted to dwell on, especially given the economic and geopolitical necessity for both countries to get along since the 1990s (p. 7).

Moreover, many of the scabs are still being picked at. Opposing interpretations of the conflict—did Vietnam "invade" or "liberate" Cambodia and was 1979 really the moment of Cambodia's "salvation"?—remain the fundamental chasm in Cambodian politics. Many of the ongoing Sino-Vietnamese tensions, not least in the South China Sea, date back to that period. While the US-China rivalry makes the daily news, the China-Vietnam competition for influence in Vientiane and Phnom Penh is often overlooked. This means that the Third Indochina War remains ripe for propaganda, a hindrance to historians. In 2020, the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP), the faction installed by Hanoi in 1979, stopped marking the anniversary of the 1991 Paris Peace Agreements as a national holiday. This was Phnom Penh's attempt to rewrite history by attributing its own interventions in the late 1990s, rather than an international agreement, as the reason for peace in the region.

Conventionally, historians place the endpoint of the Third Indochina War with the 1991 accords, yet Guan extends the timeline until 1998. Aware of the political implications, he nonetheless argues convincingly that the underlying reasons for the conflicts—notably, how instability in Cambodia destabilized the region—were only really resolved when the Cambodian Civil War came to an end in 1998. That said, this reviewer is undecided whether Guan was correct to essentially bypass the region's historic national hatreds—Cambodian's deep-seated odium for the Vietnamese, and the Vietnamese enmity of the Chinese. There is "no need" to explain what is "well-documented" (pp. 18, 35), he argues, and he appears to align with scholars like Kosal Path—whose 2020 work *Vietnam's Strategic Thinking During the Third Indochina War* is another standout in the literature and much cited by Guan—that geopolitical alliances played a more causal role than national animosity in these conflicts, including

Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia. This is undoubtedly true, and some works have tended to assume a deterministic route from nineteenth-century grievances to twentieth-century warfare and genocide. Still, the average reader would benefit from a little more explanation of pre-1945 events, especially given that the historic overlap between ethnicity and social class was important for the communist parties. One would have also liked to have heard more about Laos' role in the conflict, with Vientiane typically mentioned only as a foil to the Khmer Rouge's intransigence, as well as a little more opining from Guan on why he thinks events unfolded as they did.

Although he relies primarily on secondary sources, including recent works based on archival research, this does not prevent him from examining how contemporary politicians and diplomats struggled to understand the problems before them and what they did not anticipate. Indeed, most leaders in Beijing and Hanoi spent decades trying to prevent a communist armed struggle from metastasizing in Cambodia and then struggled to know what to do when the Khmer Rouge succeeded. This is an interesting case study of how governments often do not want the allies they get. Part of the historian's task is to reconstitute past thought. This is particularly important for the Third Indochina War, which was largely driven by the whims and personal animosities of a handful of individuals. Although he avoids counterfactuals, Guan often intimates a sense of what could have been.

This is not a book for a novice on mainland Southeast Asia. At less than 180 pages, it frequently skimps on context. As explicitly a work of diplomatic history, it spends little time on events outside the corridors of power, a welcome departure (for some) from the trend of bottom-up history. Guan finds the right, dispassionate tone, and his book ought to be the first port of call for anyone interested in this confusing but seminal period of Southeast Asian history.

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