



## Kampuchea and Vietnam: When insurgents turned incumbent commit mass indiscriminate violence

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### Citation

Fockens, J. (2026). *Kampuchea and Vietnam: When insurgents turned incumbent commit mass indiscriminate violence*.

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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**Kampuchea and Vietnam:**  
When insurgents turned incumbent commit mass  
indiscriminate violence

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19/12/25

Word count: 7805

This Bachelor's thesis will be published open to the public in Leiden University's digital Student Repository



**Universiteit Leiden**

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## List of abbreviations

<i>CCP</i>	Chinese Communist Party
<i>CPK</i>	Communist Party of Kampuchea
<i>CPV</i>	Communist Party of Vietnam
<i>DK</i>	Democratic Kampuchea
<i>DRV</i>	Democratic Republic of Vietnam
<i>ECCC</i>	Extraordinary Chambers in the Court of Cambodia
<i>ICP</i>	Indochina Communist Party
<i>NLF</i>	National Liberation Front
<i>PRC</i>	People's Republic of China
<i>SRV</i>	Socialist Republic of Vietnam
<i>US</i>	United States (of America)
<i>USSR</i>	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

## Introduction

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the start of the Cambodian Genocide, during which one quarter of the Cambodian population was killed under Pol Pot's regime in the late 1970s. The legacy of this dark chapter remains prevalent in Cambodian society, as was evident, for example, in the Cambodia Tribunal. Here, lawyer Victor Koppe defended Nuon Chea, Pol Pot's second man, but he acknowledged that the Khmer Rouge's shadow in the government still influenced the case and that the Cambodians suffer a great generational trauma (NOS, 2017; Time, 2019). The current royal family and the family of the prime minister of the last 40 years both have had ties with the Khmer Rouge, which causes, as van de Wijdeven (2025) calls it, an "open wound" in contemporary Cambodia (p. 54).

In the West, most people have been taught about the Vietnam War and the corresponding victory of the communist insurgents. Significantly fewer people can sum up facts about the Cambodian Genocide. Both events occurred in the same decade, right next to each other, with insurgents originating from the same ideological group, active in countries with similar colonial histories. Yet, there never was such thing as a 'Vietnamese Genocide'.

This thesis not only aims to shed more light on the Cambodian Genocide but also to explain why insurgent violence can lead to widespread, indiscriminate killings in certain contexts. In both countries, communist insurgents seized control, but the Vietnamese government managed to create relatively stable institutions, while the Cambodian counterpart descended into chaos. Analysing the factors that contributed to this divergence can help develop theories about the emergence of genocide applicable to general, contemporary contexts.

The majority of the literature surrounding the Cambodian Genocide focuses on the relationship between ideology, in particular, communism, and violent regimes, comparing it to other communist countries like North Korea and China. The contrast between Democratic Kampuchea (DK) and the Vietnamese regime has not been as thoroughly explored, despite both being communist countries. When Vietnam is mentioned in one text together with Kampuchea, it is only for its role in fighting the Khmer Rouge and invading Cambodia in 1979. Scholars note differences in the influence that China and the Soviet Union (USSR) have had on the region, including the operation of communist organisations. The operation and structure of these organisations played a bigger role than ideology in the likelihood of mass indiscriminate violence.

By connecting and building on previous research on these two cases, the importance of organisation and historical legacies can be put in perspective. This can help us detect mechanisms that are favourable to the conception of genocides in early stages and help us understand similar phenomena. What is the determining factor that was necessary for genocide to be possible in Democratic Kampuchea under the Khmer Rouge rule, but not in unified Vietnam after the National Liberation Front (NLF) seized full power? All this combined leads to the research question: *When do insurgents who turn into incumbents commit mass violence?*

The thesis will first give an overview of the state of the debate and build on a theoretical framework, followed by a methodology describing the setup of the research. The analysis will delve deeper into the two mentioned cases and their implications in the discussion session. The conclusion gives a summary of the thesis, identifying limitations and recommendations for future research.

## Literature review

### Introduction

Both insurgent politics during conflict and post-victory insurgent incumbency are widely researched. Scholars have explored the different ways in which incumbents develop policies to consolidate power and the reasons behind it. Existing literature should contextualise the puzzle of why the Vietnamese and the Khmer Rouge rule have diverged as drastically as they have in this regard, building on two common themes: insurgent organisation and foreign influences.

### Insurgent Organisation

Scholars in the field have explained incumbent policy choices in different ways: ideology, structure, goals, and internal strength. This all falls under various aspects of insurgent organisation, although scholars differ in the degree to which they think each component contributes to the policy choices. Thaler (2025), for example, developed a theory explaining the policies of incumbent rebels after their victory through different categorisations.

He distinguishes programmatic and opportunistic ideologies, varying from inclusive to exclusive policies. Programmatic organisations aim to transform society at various levels and will seek to extend the state's power. Opportunistic counterparts will focus more on the benefits to the organisation itself and its members, and limit state power to that sphere only. The inclusiveness levels provide information on the extent to which the population benefits from the policies imposed by the new government (pp. 27-28).

Both DK and unified Vietnam can be considered more programmatic to different extents, but they differ in their inclusiveness. The Khmer Rouge can be classified as exclusive, as its regime considered city inhabitants, intellectuals, and clergy as parasites that were deemed unfavourable (Holocaust Memorial Day Trust [HMD], n.d.). Although the Vietnamese communists were also unfavourable towards intellectuals and clergy, these were not excluded from society. The new government focused on national unity between the South and the North, making it more inclusive.

According to Thaler (2025), programmatic-inclusive organisations will provide more services, such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure, to extend state control (pp. 30, 33). Keister and Slantchev (2014) explain that the provision of public services strengthens

authority and compliance (p. 7). Programmatic-exclusive organisations, however, are rarely in control, and Thaler does not provide precise characteristics of their policies.

Remarkably, he mentions Rwanda as programmatic-exclusive, only *after* the Rwandan genocide, not during (p. 40). Franco's oppressive rule in Spain is also considered programmatic-exclusive, which draws a link between oppression and the organisation's goals (p. 40). Yet, this does not explain why the Khmer Rouge became exclusive in the first place, nor why it committed genocidal atrocities later on.

Kung and Chen (2011), however, discredit the role of organisational ideology by looking at Chinese party dynamics that bolstered materialist incentives for party leaders, focusing more on personal motivations (p. 43). The article focuses only on the Great Leap Forward, but a link between Democratic Kampuchea and China is not uncommon, as will be discussed later. Van der Maat (2020) calls on their argument and argues that the ideological background or idiosyncratic motivations of leaders fall short in explaining mass killings. It does not explain the hazardous decision to commit mass indiscriminate violence, nor the disregard for using available *selective* violence to target potential rivals (pp. 776-778).

Instead, he introduces a novel idea that he calls "genocidal consolidation" (p. 774), which in principle entails the use of mass indiscriminate violence to eliminate in-group rivals. According to van der Maat, 40 per cent of mass indiscriminate violence occurs in areas that have already been brought under full territorial control, without any threat of counterinsurgents. In these cases, such as the Rwandan genocide and the Cultural Revolution, but also the Cambodian Genocide, mass killings coincide with the covert purge of adversary elites. To connect this to an insurgent organisation, mass indiscriminate violence occurs when there is internal power competition or insecure consolidation of power (p. 781).

### Foreign influence

Salehyan et al. (2014) have found that insurgents who are sponsored by a foreign power have a greater probability of committing violence against civilians. This is especially the case when foreign sponsors have low levels of democracy. Checks on the monopoly of violence are significantly weaker under local sponsorship (pp. 656-657). The research is limited to cases of civil war itself, and does not take into account insurgent groups that have turned incumbent.

In their research, Ezigoklu et al. (2025) interviewed Cambodian and Vietnamese military and bureaucratic officers in service during Pol Pot's regime, asking them the question "both China and Vietnam are communist, why did China support the Khmer

Rouge?" (pp. 26-28). Here, they integrate a common rhetoric that underlines the role that China played in Pol Pot's policies. Only one interviewee answered the question, saying that Vietnam disapproves of Maoist communism, in contrast to Kampuchea, which did not, but that is only one reason for the established bilateral relations.

The USSR, using the Vietnam War as a proxy war against the US, supplied the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) with military and financial help. The DRV had already opposed specific Maoist policies from the start, like communes and its land reforms, despite China's attempts to win Vietnam for the Maoist ideology. This led, from the late 1960s onwards, to the Vietnamese alignment with Moscow (Stuart-Fox, 2003, pp. 180-184). However, the Soviet-Vietnamese link was already influential in the 1950s. Thinh (2024) exposes the influence that the Soviets had on the Vietnamese legal system, and even on the structural arrangements and the exercise of state authority (p. 22). According to him, the USSR played a role in Vietnam's policy-making.

Ezigoklu et al. (2025) mention military, financial, and political aid to Kampuchea in the 1970s by China to gain regional influence (pp. 21-22). Kampuchea welcomed Chinese influence, "because Maoism aligned best with their ideological leanings, and they were ill-prepared to stand on their own" (Ciorciari, 2013, p. 218). Cambodian hatred towards Vietnam and its people has always been present throughout history (Mosyakov, 2006, p. 57), and this meant that whoever aided Vietnam became their enemy, namely, the USSR.

This explains the influence of the USSR and China, but Stuart-Fox (2003) also establishes and confirms a link between Chinese influence and insurgent organisation. The clandestine, guerrilla nature of the first communist movements, together with a one-party structure, fostered paranoid tendencies towards internal rivals and conspirators. According to him, this eventually became a "hallmark of the PRC's international relations culture", influencing both Kampuchea and Vietnam (pp. 157-158). Path and Kanavou (2015) add to that the similarities with Maoist thought reform procedures, although they note as well that both Mao and Pol Pot drew inspiration from Stalin's writings (p. 308). These writings are from the 1930s and do not realistically demonstrate Soviet influence on 1970s regional politics.

Kiernan (2006), however, downplays the role of foreign influences in the region by implementing another factor, cultural contribution, including racism native to Khmer society, to the genocidal aftermath (p. 4). Nevertheless, he agrees with other scholars by saying that China's domestic policies influenced Kampuchea. Yet, he underlines a more active role from

Khmer Rouge officials in adopting Chinese-inspired decisions, rather than being passively influenced by China (p. 26).

Van der Maat (2020) also mentioned the Rwandan genocide in his work and stated that the Hutu organisation was unstable. The legacy of Belgium as a colonial power in Rwanda not only created the hierarchy of Hutu and Tutsi, but also influenced the Hutu organisation. It is not, *per se*, Belgian politics that influenced the Hutu organisation, but rather the Catholic Church. Post-war liberal clergy felt oppressed by the old clergy back in Belgium. This domestic struggle eventually reproduced in Rwanda, with liberal clergy identifying with the Hutus and aiding their mobilisation (Burns, 2014, pp. 34-35; Rwigema, 2025, pp. 91-92).

Rwigema (2025) also mentions that Belgians introduced a political organisation that was unfit for the local context and that continued to be used after decolonisation. This caused an imbalance of power between ethnic groups, governance contestation and instability (p. 93). In the political turmoil that followed Rwanda's independence, Belgium provided financial and military aid to the Hutus (Burns, 2014, p. 38). The direct influence of Belgium and the Catholic Church on Hutu insurgent organisation is smaller than that of the previously mentioned cases.

The scholars have established links between China and Cambodia, and the USSR and Vietnam, but what is valuable for the research is that China and the USSR have influenced policies in Cambodia and Vietnam, respectively, including insurgent organisations. Linking both themes together and exposing a potential causal mechanism that leads to the presence of mass indiscriminate violence after insurgents have become incumbent. By conducting a more comparative analysis of these two cases, a more evident overview can be generated, extending to under-researched post-victory insurgent incumbency.

## Theoretical framework

### Van der Maat's Genocidal Consolidation Theory

For my research, I will be mainly building on van der Maat's (2020) Genocidal Consolidation Theory. His research focused on genocides after 1945 that took place in territories that are under secure political control, meaning that there are no insurgents or guerrillas. Traditionally, mass indiscriminate violence, such as genocide, has been attributed to ideology.

Van der Maat claims that this is not the case in these territories and argues that it is not ideology, but internal or elite rivalry that plays a role. Authoritarian regimes are characterised by a lack of checks and balances that are typically present in democratic regimes due to the separation of powers. Rulers and elite need each other's support, which creates systems of patronage and clientelism that contribute to unstable, volatile power dynamics.

Mass indiscriminate violence strengthens existing coalitions, undermines the monopoly of power that can be used by rival elites, and forces people involved to choose a side. The incumbents will create an apparatus of perpetrators who lie outside of the groups, like adolescents who moralise their behaviour through ideology. People who are normally opposed to violence are unable to combat it or are even forced into becoming perpetrators themselves.

This is also true of people in power. The costs of favouring the perpetrators or remaining neutral are lower than the risk of opposing them. The way elites behave demonstrates who is against the regime and who is not, which allows for selective violence amongst the elite. Van der Maat mentions that rival elites will not have an active popular support group for the same reasons as listed above. All this combined makes genocide effective in purging elite rivalry (pp. 779-785).

Van der Maat's theory does not downplay ideology as an important contributor to mass indiscriminate violence, but states that it is not a determining factor. It can be used as a tool to create a "machinery of violence", as he calls it. In the non-counter-guerrilla examples of mass indiscriminate violence, the elite rivals are effectively purged from the system through genocide. In his conclusion, van der Maat states that "elite rivalry leads to a greater likelihood of genocidal consolidation" and that "genocidal consolidation leads to a greater likelihood of elite purges" (pp. 803-805). This means that the presence of internal rivalry is likely to lead to genocide, and that the absence does not, which applies to the Kampuchea-Vietnam case.

### Tamm's Foreign Patronage Theory

The Foreign Patronage Theory is explained in Henning Tamm's (2016) work on state sponsors and insurgent cohesion. He claims that the majority of insurgent groups face internal rivalry. According to him, previous literature mainly focuses on the role of battlefield losses in the rise of internal fragmentation, which eventually leads to splits or coups. However, constant balances of power uphold the existing relationship between a leader and its internal rivals, or elite rivals. The existence of internal rivalry can only be sustained by a leader's inability to remove this group.

What is needed to remove either a leader or internal rivalry is a change in the distribution of power driven by external resources. The allocation of external resources to either the leader or internal rivalry has different effects. Directing resources to the leader will strengthen his authority and also create more internal cohesion within the group when there is a high intensity of resources. Similarly, directing resources to the internal rivalry creates a likelihood of a coup. When a more even balance of power is created, fragmentation or a split is more likely (pp. 600-603). It is important to note, however, that the presence of internal rivalry is commonplace and harder to influence than the likelihood of fragmentation. Yet, foreign patronage influences internal power dynamics that can be resolved violently or nonviolently (pp. 601-602).

Van der Maat's genocidal consolidation theory can be adapted so that the framework explains the link between an insurgent organisation and mass indiscriminate violence. The case of Kampuchea and Vietnam fits his theory and can help answer the research question. Tamm's foreign patronage framework mainly focuses on material influence, but the influence of foreign ideology can also be added to explain how China and the USSR affected Kampuchea and Vietnam, respectively.

### Argument and Hypotheses

This thesis will use a synthesis of both theories to construct the following argument: Most incumbent groups have existing internal rivalry. Foreign patronage towards the leader shifts the power distribution in incumbent groups, rendering the leader capable of removing this internal rivalry. Consequently, genocidal consolidation is a viable option when internal rivalry forms a high threat to the leader in a non-guerilla context.

Not only did China influence the Khmer Rouge ideology, including its paranoid character and Maoist structures, but it also aided the Khmer Rouge financially and militarily,

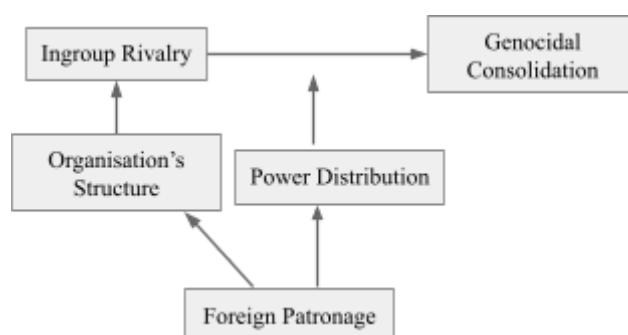
allowing Pol Pot to gain the resources needed to remove internal rivalry through the use of genocidal consolidation. The USSR increased internal cohesion in the Vietnamese incumbent organisation with more bureaucratic and centralised policies. It reduced existing internal rivalry, and Vietnam's inclusive policies created a more stable organisation that did not require internal party purges. This leads to the following hypotheses:

**H1:** Foreign patronage supporting centralised, inclusive and bureaucratic structures increases internal cohesion within the incumbent group.

**H2:** Foreign patronage supporting fragmented and exclusive structures increases internal rivalry within incumbent groups

**H3:** Foreign patronage increasing internal cohesion within incumbent groups decreases the likelihood that incumbents use mass indiscriminate violence.

The causal mechanism that combines both theories is shown in *Figure 1*. It demonstrates how foreign patronage influences internal rivalry and the likelihood of genocidal consolidation, and how the causal mechanism contains moderating and mediating variables.



**Figure 1.**

## Methodology

### Research Design

This thesis aims to explain when insurgents who turn incumbent use mass indiscriminate violence. Based on the Genocidal Consolidation Theory and Foreign Patronage Theory, the research seeks to establish a link between foreign influence and internal elite purges in territories under complete incumbent control. Cambodia and Vietnam in the 1970s serve as cases. The method uses a comparison of these two countries to explain the difference in policies, despite their shared ideological background, resulting in a qualitative Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD). Furthermore, to expose the causal mechanisms that led to both outcomes, in-case process tracing is employed to gain useful insights while still using a small-n comparison.

### Case Selection

An MSSD research requires two cases that share similar characteristics, but differ in the independent variable. The independent variable, foreign patronage, is present in both cases; however, the patron for both countries differs. Other variables listed below are held constant. The two units of analysis selected are two insurgent movements that turned incumbent in their own territory: Democratic Kampuchea (DK) under Khmer Rouge rule from 1975 to 1979, and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) unified by the NLF in 1976. Besides controlling for regional and temporal variation, the Khmer Rouge and NLF both shared the same regional communist roots. They both turned incumbent after the insurgency and civil war, and received support from two great powers: China and the USSR.

The two states shared all these similarities, yet after their incumbency, both implemented vastly different outcomes. The Khmer Rouge committed mass indiscriminate violence, murdering one fourth of the population. The Vietnamese government employed selective violence and remained relatively stable afterwards. By controlling for the common factors listed above, the influence of variation in foreign patronage can be isolated and examined.

### Conceptualisation and Data Collection

To decide upon the data collection, the important variables must first be disaggregated, so it becomes clear what will be measured before determining how it will be measured.

*Foreign patronage:* This generally stands for any type of aid a patron transfers to a supported state. Aid can be material, such as weaponry, money, resources, but it can also help set up the political systems, bureaucracy, and army organisation, categorising this as organisational. Third, a patron can, usually indirectly, transfer its ideas, culture, and norms to its supported state. This counts as ideological patronage.

*Internal rivalry:* This is harder to conceptualise, as it remains relatively covert during the relevant timeline, since any manifestation of rivalry will cause direct party destabilisation. It suggests power competition and discontent with the established order. Therefore, building on Tamm's (2016) and van der Maat's (2020) theories, internal rivalry will be defined by any form of coup, fragmentation, split, or other actions taken to remove this group. Tamm mentions that internal rivalry is present in most organisations.

*Organisational structure:* This gives information about the way insurgents who turned incumbents have shaped their state control. This can be the level of centralisation or bureaucracy, but also what Thaler (2025) describes as programmatic or opportunistic, and inclusive or exclusive organisation.

*Power distribution:* The allocation of material sources and political or ideological influences which affect the relationship between a leader or elite and the internal rivals. Due to problems in conceptualising internal rivalry, the power distribution is harder to measure, as the internal rivals are not identifiable. Therefore, the focus should shift not to individuals, but to structural proxies. It can be linked to resource flows, institutional power, stable administration, elite appointments, or organisational reforms.

*Genocidal consolidation:* This comes directly from Van der Maat's (2020) work, in which he states that it is the use of mass indiscriminate violence to purge internal rivalry. It targets, indiscriminately, a massive number of outgroup noncombatants, and in its last stages turns to the internal rivals to remove them (pp. 774-775).

Using these concepts, the data is collected from primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include official statements, testimonies, minutes and reports from governments found in national archives, but also documents from the Extraordinary Chambers in the Court of Cambodia (ECCC), also known as the Cambodia Tribunal, are used. Secondary sources consist of documentaries, research papers and other existing literature.

## Analysis

### Introduction

The following section's purpose is to demonstrate what caused the different outcomes of insurgents turning incumbent in both DK and Vietnam despite the historical and political similarities, while incorporating the theoretical framework. This will be done by providing background information on the political situation in Southeast Asia from the independence from the French (1953) up to the end of the Khmer Rouge rule and the Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea (1979). The two cases will be dissected and assessed on the foreign aid they receive, as well as on the level of cohesion, party dynamics, and use of mass indiscriminate violence. By looking at these factors, the underlying causal mechanisms will be exposed in order to make inferences on the argument and hypotheses.

### Background

Cambodia, once the most powerful state of the region during the era of the Khmer Empire (802-1431), became overshadowed by its neighbours, the kingdoms of Vietnam and Siam, in the 19th century. With the Western colonisation of Asia, Cambodia became a French protectorate in 1863. The long border between Cambodia and Vietnam disappeared in 1887 when France established the colony of French Indochina, which lasted until the mid-20th century. The two countries now consisted of the same source of profit for the French, creating discontent amongst the local nations who desired independence and self-determination (Deth, 2009, p. 27).

These sentiments planted the seed of communist ideology in the region as early as the 1920s. Communism condemned colonialism as this was seen as an extended form of capitalism. The ideology also proved to be effective in overthrowing the established order in Russia and China, serving as an inspiration for oppressed nations. These ideas manifested themselves in various national parties, such as the Indochina Communist Party (ICP). After the ICP had dissolved, its members established national communist movements in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos from 1951 onwards. Both the precursors of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) as the ruling Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) were created as a result of this dissolution (Deth, 2009, p. 28).

The power vacuum left by France's departure in 1953 led to a period of political turmoil in both Cambodia and Vietnam. The infamous Vietnam War (1954-1975) that followed served as a proxy war for great powers such as China, the USSR, and the US in the

Cold War era. The war was caused by the division of North and South Vietnam that lasted until 1975, when both were unified under one single communist rule (Blakemore, 2025). The Vietnam War also spread to neighbouring Cambodia, with Vietnamese forces seeking shelter in the Cambodian jungle. Not only did the US fear a communist domino effect in the region, but it also wanted to wipe out Vietnamese forces that hid in the border region or supplied the NLF via Cambodia (Braestrup, 1967). During this period, also known as the Second Indochina War (1954-1975), both the NLF and the Khmer Rouge employed guerrilla tactics from within the jungle. North Vietnamese communists even helped the Khmer Rouge gain support in Cambodian rural areas (Chandler, 2008; HMD, n.d.).

Coincidentally, while the world was divided into communist and capitalist blocs, Sino-Soviet relations influenced Cold War geopolitics. When the People's Republic of China (PRC) was established in 1949, it had strong ties with the USSR, as both were communist great powers in the East. However, divergences in ideology, with de-Stalinisation by the Soviets and radicalist Maoism by the Chinese, led to the deterioration of bilateral relations. While the radical Cultural Revolution raged through China, the Sino-Soviet split reached its height. As both states competed for influence in third-world countries, Cambodia and Vietnam would eventually also be pulled into the conflict as prey of both great powers (Bernstein, 2014, pp. 118-121; Iliev et al., 2015, pp. 314-315).

1970 saw a Cambodian coup committed by anti-communist Lon Nol, removing Prince Norodom Sihanouk from office, which led to a civil war. Lon Nol's ineffective government unintentionally made the Khmer Rouge gain popularity. On 17 April 1975, Khmer Rouge forces took the capital, Phnom Penh, marking the beginning of Pol Pot's Democratic Kampuchea and ending the civil war (Chandler, 2008). Only 13 days later, South Vietnam surrendered to the NLF, establishing the unified Socialist Republic of Vietnam. After two long interlinked civil wars, insurgent communists prevailed in two new Southeast Asian states.

Pol Pot's regime was subversive in all aspects to transform Cambodian society into an agrarian utopia with no class differences. Loyalty to 'Angkar', or 'the Organisation', replaced all relationships, including familial ones. The birth year of Kampuchea, 1975, was baptised 'Year Zero', during which cities were evacuated, and their inhabitants were forced into labour camps. Besides cutting itself off from the rest of the world, the regime had to purge all elements within its borders that opposed it from society. The list includes, amongst others, intellectuals (i.e., anyone wearing glasses), people who worked for the previous government, monks, Vietnamese, and people with foreign connections. Pol Pot's Kampuchea can be

categorised as programmatic exclusive. The drastic policies resulted in widespread famine, disease, and mass executions. Estimates of the number of victims lie around 2 million, or 25% of the Cambodian population during Pol Pot's rule from 1975 to 1979 (van de Wijdeven, 2025, pp. 49-50).

The SRV did not suffer such a fate and focused on the unification and integration of all Vietnamese under a socialist rule. Still, the idea that Vietnam's incumbency rule was nonviolent compared to that of the Khmer Rouge is an overstatement. From April 1975 onwards, one million people fled Vietnam over the course of two decades. They fled from the consequences of communist rule, such as the incarceration of US collaborators and South Vietnamese army leaders in special re-education camps (Sagan & Denney, 1982), but also the relocation to 'New Economic Zones' (NEZs), or uncultivated rural land, of one million 'city dwellers' (Parsons & Vezina, 2014).

Between 1975 and 1984, 2.4 million Vietnamese were resettled. This was done to solve unemployment, take pressure off big cities, but it also "provided an expedient way for the regime to solve urgent internal security problems" (Desbarats, 1987, p. 49, 61). The consequences of the harsh living conditions vary from 20.000 to 155.000 deaths. The deaths as a result of the re-education camps are 232.000 at most (Rummel, 1997). Still, with a population of 52 million people in 1980, this accounts for around 1% of the population being killed or resettled, showing a sharp contrast with the numbers in Kampuchea (World Bank Group [WBG]).

### Case 1: Democratic Kampuchea and the PRC

This case analysis will delve into the foreign patronage provided by China and how it enabled mass indiscriminate violence in Kampuchea, as well as how party organisation shaped the state's behaviour, incorporating Tamm's (2016) and van der Maat's (2020) theories.

China and the USSR's competition for influence in regions like Southeast Asia manifested itself in foreign patronage, which the two new communist states heavily relied on. Remarkably, but fitting for the Kampuchean regime, the National Congress expressed its ostensible constitutional will not to accept any foreign intervention (Extraordinary Chambers in the Court of Cambodia [ECCC], n.d.). Despite Kampuchea officially refusing any foreign aid in pursuit of an autarkic agricultural society, the PRC provided, and Kampuchea accepted. China, namely, wanted to counterbalance Vietnam with realpolitik by feeding its regional enemy (Chenyi, 2024, p. 111). Over the next few years, China would aid Kampuchea with

weaponry, food, and grants (Ciorciari, 2014, pp 218-220; SIPRI, 1976, p. 265).

Ciorciari (2014) also notes that the PRC did not limit itself to material aid, but also abstract aid, such as military training, and sending advisors for banking and infrastructure, but not for politics (pp. 228-229).

This can be explained through China's Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence: "non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, equality, mutual benefit and peaceful coexistence" (Gurtov & Hwang, 1998, p. 118). Not only the Khmer Rouge, but also Norodom Sihanouk tried to ensure Cambodia's independence and neutrality from the regional powers, naming it "the Switzerland of Asia", which China respected (Richardson, 2005, p. 48).

China's initial support for Prime Minister Sihanouk stemmed from his scepticism towards the Vietnamese, as this would decrease the likelihood of Vietnamese dominance in the region, which China opposed. While the PRC supported Sihanouk's regime and distributed resources to his government-in-exile in China from 1970 to 1975, the military successes of the Khmer Rouge against Lon Nol's anti-communist reign in Cambodia launched a shift in the dialogue about the future governance of a "liberated" Cambodia in favour of Pol Pot.

The Khmer Rouge, initially close to the North Vietnamese, cooled down its relationships with them in the early 1970s, making it a more attractive partner for China, besides Sihanouk. This, in turn, resulted in China providing the Khmer Rouge directly with military aid that would last until 1979 (Richardson, 2005, pp. 123, 130-131). Tamm's (2016) theory underlines the role of foreign patronage in influencing party cohesion and politics. However, having learned from the Cultural Revolution, the PRC warned the incumbent Khmer Rouge of political extremism. Still, no further actions were taken to directly influence their politics based on the Five Principles (p. 142). As Mao (as cited in Ciorciari, 2014, p. 220) himself told Pol Pot: "You should not completely copy China's experience, and should think for yourself".

However, this did not mean that China was not a source of inspiration for the Khmer Rouge's politics. Pol Pot launched his own replica of the Great Leap Forward, while also copying Chinese 're-education' efforts and incarceration tactics (Morris, 1999, p. 71; Richardson, 2005, p. 145). While the PRC did passively inspire Kampuchea's policies, it did not affect Kampuchea's organisational structure. Mertha (2024) notes that instead, the organisational structure of the CPK differed substantially from that of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The CCP follows a system that maintains clear subordination, resulting in a more predictable, functional, and regular governance style. The units of the

CCP all have a distinct superior unit they obey, while orders from any unit other than that superior one can be considered optional (pp. 24-26, 75-76).

In contrast, the CPK implemented a system indigenous to Cambodian society and was thus unaffected by foreign patronage. This system was built on *khsae* or ‘strings’. The *khsae* system depends heavily on patron-client networks, with existing connections, such as family, friend, and village ties, being incorporated into the official organisation’s structure. Authority and loyalty are based on individuals, rather than on rank or office. Even though the Khmer Rouge abolished familial ties, they remained present and important through *khsae* even in ministries, diplomacy with China, and subnational governance. Through this system, power and authority were prone to constant change, resulting in a fluid, fragmented, and unstable organisation (pp. 24-26, 75-76).

Still, even though the PRC and its ideology did not alter the *khsae* themselves, it did sustain and aggravate this system by providing aid to the CPK. Its money flows were distributed amongst various components, such as ministries, plantations, stocks, and ‘zones’, all ruled by various *khsae* (p. 72). Tamm’s (2016) Foreign Patronage Theory states that changes in the power distribution will affect the status quo of an organisation, resulting in splits, coups, or the removal of rivals. This can be observed in the case of the Khmer Rouge as well. Here, all aid, monetary or not, passed through the Ministry of Commerce (pp. 71, 158). However, the Standing Committee, which controlled all subordinate units, overlooked this ministry. The leaders of this Standing Committee were Pol Pot and his elite, making them ultimately responsible for the distribution of Chinese aid (Etcheson, 2009; Mertha, 2004, p. 44).

According to Tamm’s (2016) theory, resources directed towards the leader will increase his authority and create more cohesion (p. 601). However, in the case of Kampuchea, where trust for fellow party members was low, paranoia was widespread, and the organisation was unstable, cohesion was already minimal, which thus led to a different outcome. Instead, Pol Pot and his elite resorted to purging the party and its subunits from 1976 onwards based on already existing low trust (Mertha, 2004, pp. 75-76).

Nuon Chea, as well as Son Sen, both members of the Standing Committee, for example, purged Khmer Rouge cadres in the east that supposedly had ties with Vietnam or could be labelled as traitors (Murgier, 2016a). Head of the secret police, Duch, was equally responsible for killing members of Nuon Chea’s own *khsae* (Murgier, 2016b). Minister of Commerce, Koy Thuon, who was thus responsible for the distribution of Chinese goods, became a victim of these purges himself. Around 65% of the prisoners of S-21, which was

considered to be a concentration camp, were part of the Khmer Rouge, with the other 35% mostly containing family members of the detained Khmer Rouge members (ECCC, n.d.; Un, 2018, p. 12).

Van der Maat (2020) cites these purges of the eastern cadres as evidence for his genocidal consolidation theory, while the cases of Koy Thuon and S-21 further support this. He mentions:

High volatility and insecurity lock rival elites in a deadly commitment problem—even when they prefer cooperation over deadly competition—because either would be most secure without the other. Therefore, neither can commit to not remove their rival in a coup or purge at the first opportunity. (p. 780)

The Khmer *khsae* system caused this high volatility and insecurity, while the opportunity was the change in power distribution.

Tamm's (2016) theory explains how foreign aid provides a window of opportunity for genocidal consolidation. China's aid to Democratic Kampuchea increased the available resources in the power distribution, which was ultimately monitored by the Standing Committee, or Pol Pot and his elite. Fed by the instability, fragmentation, and scepticism amongst CPK units produced through the *khsae*, the new (military) resources provided by China gave Pol Pot the possibility to remove possible rivals within the distrusted strings. Actual elite rivalry did not need to be present; the perception of a potential threat to authority, such as the power the Minister of Commerce held, was enough to trigger a pre-emptive purge.

As van der Maat (2020) stipulates, the mass indiscriminate violence used against the civilian population not only has demonstrative purposes, but it also removes covert supporters for the rivals by killing them or forcing them to join the genocidal party. He mentions that, including in Kampuchea, once these support coalitions have been removed or decimated, violence can now become selective and turn inwards in the “final stages” of genocidal consolidation. This explains why the purges did not happen immediately in 1975, but one year later, as the support coalitions first had to be removed (pp. 783-785).

The case of Democratic Kampuchea shows that mass indiscriminate violence was a result of an indigenous party organisation that was based on instability, low trust, and patronage. While the PRC did not influence Kampuchean politics directly, it did provide aid that sustained the system. As Levin (2015) stated: “without China’s assistance, the Khmer Rouge regime would not have lasted a week”. In addition, China also altered the existing

power distribution, allowing Pol Pot to purge his party through genocidal consolidation as part of his programmatic exclusive policies.

### Case 2: Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the USSR

To explain why Vietnam did not resort to mass indiscriminate killing like Kampuchea, the following section will look at the foreign aid provided by the USSR, as well as the organisation of the CPV government and the link between the variables.

The bilateral relationships between (North) Vietnam and the USSR started to take shape in the 1950s with the start of the Vietnam War and the battle against American influence. Not only did the communist school of Ho Chi Minh align more closely with that of the USSR, but the Sino-Soviet split also brought the two states closer together according to the principle of ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend’. These ties led to Moscow providing the DRV with principally military, but also monetary aid during the war (Horn, 1987, p. 745; Kelemen, 1984, pp. 335-336, 343). After 1975, Vietnam wanted to be less dependent on the USSR, but in 1978 decided to turn back to the Soviets for help, amongst others, in preparation for the Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea that would take place later that year (Hoan, 1991, p. 362; Kelemen, 1984, p. 340).

Apart from the by Thinh (2024) mentioned Soviet influence on the Vietnamese legal system, the USSR would also affect Vietnam in other forms, including providing training of technicians, advisors, and education of intellectuals and military in the USSR during the 1970s (pp. 22-23). These intellectuals formed a revolutionary vanguard contributing to national unity and cohesion, but also led the reconstruction of Vietnam through a Soviet lens (Phuong & Van Sang, 2021, p. 133). Vietnam also optimistically adopted the Soviet central planning system for its economy, but it failed and caused an economic crisis till the mid-1980s. According to Andreff (1993), the Soviet model did not translate well to an ‘underdeveloped’ context with weak institutions (p. 516).

Despite failure, the Soviet model brought a heavy, centralised administration and bureaucracy, whose main goal was to recover a unified Vietnam (Nguyen, 2016, p. 133). Nevertheless, it proved to be especially economically ineffective, and additionally, CPV cadres faced corruption and weaknesses. However, the CPV reviewed these cadres in the late 1970s, leading to the membership removal of 20% of the CPV members, showing the bureaucratic capability of the party (Finkelstein, 1987, p. 984). In harmony with Tamm’s (2016) statement that most organisations experience internal rivalry, the CPV did as well. Yet, disagreements at the top of the party were met with problem-solving based on consensus to

serve the greater good of the party's image, signalling inclusion and centralism (London, 2009, p. 379).

The CPV faced many obstacles during the so-called 'Subsidy Period' (1975-1986), what also contributed to stability, cohesion, and inclusion according to Vu (2014), was the Soviet inspired use of social organisations, like the Trade Union or Women's Association that in practice were continuations of the CPV, proving efficient in implementing policy and mass mobilisation. Non-compliance was met with exclusion from these associations (pp. 34-35). Keister and Slantchev (2014) also underline the role of similar institutions in creating authority and compliance (p. 7).

The USSR proved to be crucial for the CPV's survival, which depended heavily on its economic aid (Finkelstein, 1987, p. 973). Not only did it save the SRV from economic collapse, but it also empowered the existing bureaucratic institutions that favoured cohesion and inclusion, such as checks on cadres and social organisations (Fforde, 2019, p. 674). The distribution of Soviet aid was managed through a centralised system that was inefficient, yet stable and difficult to move past (Hoan, 1991, p. 369).

Although the CPV faced internal rivalry, USSR aid and the Soviet model decreased potential fragmentation and the likelihood of genocidal consolidation by empowering bureaucratic, inclusive institutions. This resonates with Tamm's (2016) theory that whenever a foreign patron provides aid to an incumbent centralist government, he favours and fosters more centralisation, which leads to more cohesion (p. 600). Connecting this to van der Maat's (2020) theory, the increased internal cohesion and party stability did not lead to the need for genocidal consolidation. Uncertainty decreased because of the predictable, bureaucratic institutions which favoured consensus and unity.

## Discussion

The MSSD analysis of the two cases has shown how two states with similar historical and political origins have diverged so substantially based on multiple factors. Both Kampuchea and Vietnam were colonies of France until the 1950s. Communism had already taken root in the region as a result, but it grew during the Second Indochina War. The war paved the way for American, Chinese, and Soviet interference in the region as a result of a power competition in the Cold War era. Communist guerrilla fighters of the Khmer Rouge and the NLF supported each other but heavily relied on aid from the PRC and the USSR, respectively.

In April 1975, just 13 days apart, the Khmer Rouge proclaimed the founding of Democratic Kampuchea, and the Vietnamese proclaimed the unification of South and North Vietnam. Continuing until the 1980s, both parties' existence relied on foreign aid. However, the divergence starts in the degree of foreign influence the patrons had in the young communist states. While China exported food, military training, weaponry, and gave money to Kampuchea, it did not directly influence its politics.

In contrast, Vietnam adopted the government style of its patron. The Soviet model was inefficient in the newly found state, which lacked the proper resources and knowledge. But while corruption and internal rivalry were also present in the CPV, the model was highly bureaucratic, centralist, and inclusive. Internal rivalry was handled with institutional checks and by reaching consensus. The focus was on unity, not only of the country, but also of the party.

The CPK did not take over the CCP's structure with clear responsibilities and hierarchies, but decided to rule according to the indigenous *khsae* system as an act of self-reliance, built on unprofessional ties and patronage, destabilising the system and making it prone to change and corruption. In combination with Maoist ideology, this created paranoia and distrust.

Tamm's (2016) Foreign Patronage Theory describes how foreign aid influences internal rivalry and cohesion by changing the existing power distributions. He mentions that whenever a patron diverts its aid towards the leader, this increases cohesion and decreases the likelihood of fragmentation. The case of Kampuchea, however, has shown that this theory only holds under the condition that there has to be a presence of low-level cohesion, or minimal internal paranoia already present. In Kampuchea, the power distribution in favour of the leader, namely, led to genocidal consolidation in accordance with van der Maat's (2020)

theory that this phenomenon takes place under instability and high levels of perceived threat to leader incumbency. In Vietnam, as Tamm (2016) confirms, aid towards the leader leads to the strengthening of already present inclusive institutions and centralism that increased internal cohesion. This decreased the likelihood of genocidal consolidation in Vietnam.

In both countries, the patrons strengthened and sustained the existing political organisation. Still, while foreign patronage did not create governments that were inherently genocidal, it did moderate the relationship between organisational structure and internal rivalry, influencing the likelihood of genocidal consolidation. This means that organisational structure is not necessarily a product of foreign patronage. Furthermore, if it were not for the support of China and the USSR, both systems would have collapsed economically and militarily.

## Conclusion

This thesis sought to explain when insurgents who turned incumbent commit mass indiscriminate violence. The MSSD research on two cases has shown that factors as foreign patronage, and organisational structure affect the likelihood of mass indiscriminate violence directly and indirectly. Foreign patronage, namely, passively influences the inclusiveness of an organisational structure, and strengthens and sustains the existing dynamics by changing the power distributions. This means that, in accordance with H1, centralism, inclusiveness, and bureaucracy will increase together with internal cohesion as a result of foreign patronage, as shown in the case of Vietnam. Similarly, in accordance with H2, fragmentation and exclusiveness of an organisation will aggravate as a result of foreign patronage, increasing internal rivalry, as shown in the case of Cambodia.

H3 argued that, incorporating van der Maat's (2020) theory, in cases where foreign patronage increased internal cohesion, the likelihood of the use of mass indiscriminate would decrease, which has proved to be true. However, the results have shown that for internal cohesion to increase, there has to be a minimum degree of party cohesion present already, refining Tamm's theory (2016). Concluding, foreign patronage becomes a moderating variable amplifying the existing degrees of inclusion, centralism, and cohesion, which in turn affects the likelihood of mass indiscriminate violence after insurgents becoming incumbent, but in the context of new, struggling governments, foreign patronage can determine the survival of the incumbent regime.

The thesis focused only on two cases, limiting the generalisability of the research, yet it offered a more in-depth analysis of the mechanisms behind mass indiscriminate violence. However, to form a more complete image of mass indiscriminate violence committed by insurgents becoming incumbent, further research should be conducted on the role of society as a whole in enabling mass indiscriminate violence. Additionally, to further test the causal mechanisms, researchers should analyse other cases of mass indiscriminate violence, like the Rwanda case. Van der Maat's (2020) Theory only applies to contexts where incumbents have full territorial control. As a result, new research can focus on interstate contexts enabling insurgent genocide.

This research puts in perspective what factors we should be prudent to in states where insurgents came to power, but also addresses the agency of foreign patrons and their complicity to unethical regimes. In the context of a potential new bipolar world, the general

public must be aware and remain skeptical of the way great powers like the US and China, but also Russia nowadays sustain and influence foreign regimes and to what level they can be considered complicit to domestic policies, ethical or not, in these countries.

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## AI Statement

While writing this thesis, the AI writing tool ‘Grammarly’ has been used for grammar and vocabulary improvements. Additionally, AI has been used to summarise articles, as well as to determine the structure of chapters, such as what general information is necessary to include or what can be omitted (e.g. “clarify point *x* more”, or “your section should answer *y*”).