Epilogue, 1993–97

Since the signing of the Paris agreement in October 1991, and the subsequent UN supervised elections of May 1993, United States foreign policy towards Cambodia has primarily consisted of a commitment to promote human rights and democracy by supporting democracy assistance programmes and any efforts aimed at the establishment of a viable market economy; mostly these aims are furthered by the provision of aid. Until 1997 this low-key policy of distant involvement, which incidentally was the goal of the previous administrations, has served the Americans well. Late in 1991 the US opened a mission in Phnom Penh and shortly thereafter lifted its economic embargo. When the Royal Cambodian Government was formed in September 1993 the US resumed full diplomatic relations. From that time until quite recently there was little to concern US foreign policy-makers. The US provides sufficient aid and support such that any direct US involvement is as unnecessary as it is unthinkable. Given that remaining detached from Indochina had been the driving force of the administrations assessed in this book, the Clinton presidencies do not offer any analytical surprises. In fact, the battles Clinton has fought with Congress, coupled with the President’s own preference for domestic issues, have predictably meant that while foreign policy has become a ‘political’ issue the conduct of foreign policy in general has tended to take a back seat. If that is true in general then it is clearly all the more so with a peripheral and unthreatening issue such as Cambodia.

The new driving force for America’s Indochinese policy, although arguably it always has been, is trade. In August 1995 Secretary of State Warren Christopher visited Indochina and opened the first US Embassy in Hanoi. During that visit a State Department official is quoted as saying, ‘In the old days we wanted to make Asia safe for democracy, these days we want to make it safe for American exports.’ In two short years the Clinton view that human rights and trade could be inextricably linked had given way to a recognition that the US was merely one of many nations scrambling for the expanding markets which the growing Asian economies provided. Under enormous pressure from the US business lobby Clinton had, in May 1994, reversed his stance on Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status for China and exempted them from meeting certain requirements of the

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Jackson-Vanik Amendment much as Bush had done previously. It seems a stable business environment is more important than the need for a flourishing democratic culture. The judgement that the former will lead to the latter is still strong in the administration but more in rhetoric than in action. So the official communiqué of the Christopher visit reaffirmed:

the President’s and the Government’s continuing commitment to Cambodia’s democracy, its emerging civic organizations, and its nascent market economy. The United States continues to support efforts in Cambodia to build democratic institutions, promote human rights, foster economic development, eliminate corruption, improve security, achieve the fullest possible accounting for POW/MIA's, and to bring members of the Khmer Rouge to justice for their crimes.²

To date Cambodian democratic institutions have been suspended, the National Assembly not having met since January 1997, human rights are regularly abused, the economy is in dire straits, corruption is rife, security is only functioning as a result of a coup and is fragile at best, and the Khmer Rouge leadership are either dead or incorporated into the political hierarchy.³ Not a great record of success. Yet for the United States this lack of success is not disastrous. It enables the US to parallel the positions of the ASEAN states and parade that as policy.

ASEAN came of age politically during the period of Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia. That situation allowed the Association to exhibit a foreign policy activism for the consumption of world opinion. Since the 1993 elections, however, ASEAN had been relatively quiet on Cambodia and, until the Hun Sen putsch of July 1997, were preparing to admit Cambodia as a full member of the Association. The coup put ASEAN in an awkward position. The Association has a strict principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of either member states or other regional nations. ASEAN reacted to the coup by postponing Cambodia’s entry and confirmed that decision at the same meeting in which Laos and Myanmar were admitted. However, the difficulty of the situation was clear when the Association did not remove Cambodia’s ‘observer’ status, which is a procedural stepping-stone to full membership. This indicated that entry was only postponed. The suspension of the membership procedure and regular attempts at negotiations were ASEAN’s only possible responses to the coup. Primarily these low-level responses