

On the other hand, as was noted above, the Vietnamese government had taken advantage of an opportune moment to gain the support of the Soviet Union. Thus assured of Soviet backing, Hanoi could also count on China not intervening, since the latter was too preoccupied with modernization and with restoring normal relations with other countries both in Asia and the West. Vietnam could also assume that the international community would be glad to see the end of the Khmer Rouge. In addition, since the beginning of 1978, it had been engaged in training on Vietnamese territory, a large number of Khmer rebels who had abandoned Pol Pot. It was this activity which enabled the Kampuchean National Front to be founded on 2 December at a ceremony inside Cambodia; Heng Samrin, the future president of Kampuchea and himself a former Khmer Rouge, was appointed as its leader.¹⁵ The military operation in Kampuchea was carried out swiftly, in a way which bore some resemblance to the Soviet interventions in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, and it achieved its basic objective which was to overthrow the Khmer Rouge government.

In the light of later events it is easy to claim that Vietnam made a serious mistake in underestimating the effect this humiliation would have on China. Even at a time when it was preoccupied with the modernization of its economy, Beijing could not afford to lose face in a contest with such great historical symbolism, a contest which was both ideological, since the Khmer Rouge drew their inspiration from Mao, and geopolitical, because of the Soviet Union's support for the Vietnamese initiative.

By intervening against Vietnam in February 1979, China gave the conflict new significance. From then on the antagonism between Vietnam and China would be the essential feature in any understanding of the actions of all those involved, whether directly or indirectly, in this new war.

A second error which had serious consequences for Vietnam was that it failed to establish complete control over Cambodia in the first weeks of

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, page 339.