

# The Cambodian Genocide

## Theoretical Limitations in International Humanitarian Responses

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The Cambodian genocide exposes the gaps between International Relations (IR) theory and humanitarian practice, revealing how global power politics can undermine commitments to protecting human rights. Understanding why the international community failed to intervene in the Cambodian genocide calls for a layered analysis that brings multiple IR approaches into conversation. Realism, liberal institutionalism, and postcolonial Global IR approaches each highlight different aspects of the international response, particularly the extent to which Cold War geopolitical priorities overshadowed humanitarian concerns. Together, these perspectives reveal how theoretical blind spots shaped global inaction and contributed to devastating consequences for Cambodia, setting the stage for the atrocities that unfolded.

Between 1975 and 1979, Cambodia endured a period of extreme violence, as the Khmer Rouge regime under Pol Pot sought to remake Cambodian society through an extreme agrarian revolution. After capturing Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, in April 1975, they “want[ed] to enforce the ideology of communism” into Cambodian culture, “destroying family, religion, education, the fabrication of” culture, targeting perceived enemies ranging from intellectuals to ethnic minorities.<sup>1</sup> These ideological and coercive policies produced mass famine, disease, forced labor, and systematic execution, all of which constitute humanitarian and human rights violations. By the time the Vietnamese forces toppled the regime in

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1 Channy Chhi Laux, “Voices for Freedom: Surviving the Cambodian Genocide,” Virtual conversation, streamed April 19, 2022, hosted by Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation, 3:30, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0lEoZWmlh0k>; David P. Chandler, *A History of Cambodia* (London: Routledge, 2018), 458-60.

January 1979, roughly a quarter of the population had died.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the magnitude of these atrocities, the international community took no meaningful steps to intervene or even publicly condemn the violence as genocide while it unfolded. Cold War dynamics constrained political will and shaped how states handled the humanitarian crisis, directly influencing global inaction. Within this broader Cold War framework, superpower rivalry and anti-communist containment priorities meant that strategic alignment often outweighed humanitarian concerns, leading some Western states to tolerate, or even diplomatically support, the Khmer Rouge as a counterweight to Vietnamese and Soviet influence. The United States, still reeling from the Vietnam War, was reluctant to re-engage militarily in Southeast Asia and struggled to assess the scale of violence due to Cambodia's profound isolation.<sup>3</sup> China's backing of the Khmer Rouge as a strategic counterweight to Soviet-supported Vietnam further protected the regime from unified international pressure.<sup>4</sup> When Vietnam invaded Cambodia in 1978-79, driven by broader conflict and national security concerns, many Western and regional states condemned the action less as a humanitarian intervention than as a violation of sovereignty.<sup>5</sup>

Strong sovereignty norms, particularly toward revolutionary postcolonial governments, hindered attempts to classify the atrocities as genocide or mobilize collective action.<sup>6</sup> Cambodia's marginal standing within the Global South further obscured Cambodian voices and limited international awareness of their suffering during the genocide.<sup>7</sup> These intersecting geopolitical, institutional, and structural factors help account for the global community's inaction during the genocide, and analyzing this pattern requires explanations offered by major IR approaches, which demonstrate the factors that contributed to the global response.

Realism provides the most direct explanation for international inaction during the Cambodian genocide by emphasizing power politics, national interest, and the structure of the international system. According to classical realists, states prioritize survival and strategic advantage above moral considerations.<sup>8</sup>

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2 Ben Kiernan, *Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 458-460.

3 William Shawcross, *Sideshow* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979), 353.

4 Chenyi Wang, "The Chinese Communist Party's Relationship with the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s: An Ideological Victory and a Strategic Failure," CWIHP Working Paper 88 (Wilson Center, December 13, 2018).

5 James Lutfy, "Humanitarian Intervention: The Invasion of Cambodia," *NYLS Journal of International and Comparative Law* 2, no. 1 (1980): 144.

6 Craig Etcheson, *After the Killing Fields: Lessons from the Cambodian Genocide* (Westport: Praeger, 2005), 89.

7 Donald W. Beachler, "Arguing about Cambodia: Genocide and Political Interest," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 23, no. 2 (2009): 224, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hgs/dcp034>.

8 Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 3rd ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), 5.

Structural realists like Kenneth Waltz argue that the anarchic international system compels states to act according to the logic of the balance of power.<sup>9</sup> These principles are clearly reflected in the global response to Cambodia between 1975 and 1979.

For the United States, China, and their allies, the overriding priority was countering Soviet influence in Southeast Asia. Although the Khmer Rouge was a violent and unpredictable regime, it was also strongly anti-Vietnamese and aligned with China, making it a useful strategic actor in the regional balance of power. Vietnam's 1978 intervention, which toppled the Khmer Rouge and ended the genocide, was viewed primarily through this geopolitical lens. Because Vietnam was allied with the Soviet Union, Western and Chinese policymakers interpreted the invasion as an act of regional expansion rather than a potentially humanitarian act.<sup>10</sup> Realism predicts such behavior: humanitarian concerns are subordinate to preventing adversaries from gaining influence.

This logic also explains the United States and China's joint decision to support the Khmer Rouge's continued representation at the United Nations after 1979.<sup>11</sup> Keeping Democratic Kampuchea's seat served to delegitimize Vietnam's new client government in Phnom Penh and weaken Soviet regional power. Even when evidence of genocide was publicly available, major powers had little incentive to intervene militarily or diplomatically. From a realist perspective, the international community's failure was not an anomaly but a predictable consequence of strategic competition. Realism thus identifies the Cold War power structure, not moral failure, as the primary driver of global inaction.

While Realism highlights strategic motivations, Liberal institutionalism explains the procedural and structural failures of the international system to mobilize a coordinated humanitarian response. Liberal institutionalist theorists such as Robert Keohane argue that international institutions facilitate cooperation by reducing uncertainty and creating shared norms, but their effectiveness depends on state consent and enforcement mechanisms.<sup>12</sup> The Cambodian case underscores the inherent limitations of institutions that lack independent authority. During the genocide, the United Nations had minimal capacity to verify reports of atrocities, and Cold War divisions effectively paralyzed any effort to respond. Cold War politics often turned discussions of genocide into political rhet-

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9 Kenneth Waltz, "The Anarchic Structure of World Politics," in *International Politics: Enduring Concepts and Contemporary Issues*, 8th ed., ed. Robert J. Art and Robert Jervis (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2007), 31.

10 Casey Elmhirst, "Delayed Justice: How US Actions Paved the Way for the Khmer Rouge and Prevented Justice in Cambodia" (Undergraduate thesis, Chapman University, 2023), 21, <https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1159&context=vocesnovae>.

11 Bernard Nossiter, "U.N. Assembly, Rebuffing Soviet, Seats Cambodia Regime of Pol Pot," *New York Times*, September 22, 1979, <https://www.nytimes.com/1979/09/22/archives/un-assembly-rebuffing-soviet-seats-cambodia-regime-of-pol-pot-the.html>.

12 Robert Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the Political Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 85.

oric rather than concrete action, as accusations were filtered through ideological rivalry and concerns about setting precedents that might later be used against powerful states or their allies. Competing geopolitical interests, particularly the reluctance of major powers to legitimize Vietnamese intervention or alienate strategic partners, further prevented the Genocide Convention from being effectively invoked or enforced in any meaningful way.<sup>13</sup> Decades later, the UN's mandate "for the assistance of the United Nations and the international community in bringing to justice those persons responsible for the genocide and crimes against humanity during the rule of the Khmer Rouge from 1975 to 1979" stands as a stark reminder of that earlier inaction.<sup>14</sup>

From a liberal institutionalist perspective, international institutions exist to establish and enforce norms. Human rights norms during this period were too underdeveloped to meaningfully challenge the primacy of state sovereignty, even in the face of atrocities. As Amnesty International emphasized, "serious human rights violations have taken place in the country... Under international standards, it is the responsibility of the governmental authorities... to bring to justice according to international standards for fairness those against whom there is credible evidence that they perpetrated political killings or torture."<sup>15</sup> Despite this, the international community largely condemned Vietnam's removal of the Khmer Rouge. The prevailing norm of non-intervention took precedence over humanitarian concerns, highlighting how state sovereignty was institutionally prioritized. "The international outcry against the Khmer Rouge in the United Nations corridors in New York was muffled by diplomatic maneuverings. Incredibly, big power machinations awarded Cambodia's contested seat in the United Nations to the regime of Pol Pot," revealing institutions structurally incapable of responding to mass atrocities even when credible evidence and principled demands for justice existed.<sup>16</sup> The case of Cambodia demonstrates a gap between the normative goals of liberal institutionalism, protecting human rights and promoting cooperation, and the practical limitations of institutions that prioritize state sovereignty over humanitarian protection.

Postcolonial and Global IR perspectives provide a deeper critique by highlighting how historical hierarchies and Western-centric knowledge struc-

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13 Suzanne Hill, "The Cold War and the Genocide Convention: A History of the United States' Refusal to Ratify," *The Macksey Journal* 1, article 193 (2020): 15, <https://mackseyjournal.scholasticahq.com/article/21856>.

14 Hans Corell, "Agreement between the United Nations and the Royal Government of Cambodia Concerning the Prosecution under Cambodian Law of Crimes Committed during the Period of Democratic Kampuchea," *Audiovisual Library of International Law*, June 6, 2003, <https://legal.un.org/avl/ha/abunac/abunac.html>.

15 "Kingdom of Cambodia: Amnesty International's Position and Concerns Regarding the Proposed "Khmer Rouge" Tribunal," Amnesty International, April 24, 2003, <https://www.amnesty.org/es/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/asa230052003en.pdf>.

16 Benny Widyono, "The Spectre of the Khmer Rouge over Cambodia," United Nations, April 1, 2008, <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/spectre-khmer-rouge-over-cambodia>.

tures shaped global indifference to Cambodian suffering. Postcolonial theorists such as Edward Said argue that dominant narratives in international politics devalue non-Western lives and prioritize Western strategic interpretations of Events.<sup>17</sup> In Cambodia, evidence of mass killings was filtered through Cold War discourse, which reduced the genocide to a regional proxy conflict rather than a human catastrophe requiring urgent action. A central insight from Postcolonial IR is that not all states' voices carry equal weight. Vietnam, a Global South actor with direct knowledge of Khmer Rouge crimes, was dismissed as a Soviet puppet when it attempted to justify its intervention.<sup>18</sup> This delegitimization reflects broader patterns of epistemic inequality, which Western states define as acceptable parameters of international action.

Amitav Acharya critiques traditional IR frameworks for erasing regional perspectives and global pluralism.<sup>19</sup> The Cambodian genocide illustrates this problem: although Southeast Asian states like Vietnam and Laos raised early concerns about Khmer Rouge brutality, their assessments were largely ignored in favor of great-power interpretations. Moreover, humanitarian suffering in the Global South often receives less moral urgency due to colonial legacies that categorize certain populations as peripheral or less politically relevant. This theoretical approach reveals that inaction was not simply the outcome of strategic or institutional limitations but also the result of racialized and colonial hierarchies embedded within global politics. Postcolonial and Global IR thus reframe Cambodia not merely as a Cold War casualty but as a case of structural neglect rooted in unequal global power relations.

The international failure to prevent or intervene in the Cambodian genocide cannot be explained by a single theoretical approach. Realism exposes the strategic motivations that led major powers to tolerate the Khmer Rouge rule and oppose Vietnam's removal of the regime. Liberal institutionalism highlights the weakness of international organizations, which lack both consensus and enforcement mechanisms to respond to mass atrocities. Postcolonial and Global IR perspectives reveal deeper structural hierarchies that rendered Cambodian suffering politically invisible within dominant Western frameworks. Together, these approaches show that global inaction resulted from the convergence of geopolitical rivalry, institutional paralysis, and systematic marginalization of Global South voices.

The genocide had devastating consequences of the Cambodian people, leaving lasting social, economic, and psychological scars. Cambodia continues to

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17 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 291, [https://monoskop.org/images/4/4e/Said\\_Edward\\_Orientalism\\_1979.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/4/4e/Said_Edward_Orientalism_1979.pdf).

18 Wang, "Chinese Communist Party's Relationship with the Khmer Rouge."

19 Amitav Acharya, *The End of American World Order* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014); Amitav Acharya, "Towards a Global International Relations?" in *International Relations Theory*, ed. Stephen McGlinchey, Rosie Walters, and Christian Scheinpflug (Bristol: E-International Relations Publishing, 2017).

confront the long-term consequences of this legacy, reflected in persistent poverty, inequality, and continuing political challenges. International institutions, though stronger than in 1975, still struggle to consistently uphold humanitarian norms, as seen in uneven responses to crises elsewhere in the world. Cambodia's tragedy thus illustrates the limits of humanitarian norms in a world structured by power and inequality. The complicity, or inaction, of the international community during the Khmer Rouge atrocities underscores the need for an inclusive, equitable, and enforceable framework for preventing future atrocities.