Kenneth Quinn
Interview
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which presents a $250,000 prize each year

Kenneth Quinn has had a long, distinguished diplomatic career, spending nearly 32 years in the American Foreign Service and becoming one of the most decorated officers of his generation. He is regarded as one of the foremost experts on Indochina in the United States and is widely acknowledged to have been the first person to discover and report on the genocidal policies and practices of the Khmer Rouge in 1974. Twenty-five years later, while serving as US Ambassador to Cambodia, he played a pivotal role in the 1999 capture of the last remaining Khmer Rouge general. He is currently President of the World Food Prize Foundation, an organization ~~devoted~~ to recognizing and rewarding advancements in the quality, quantity, and availability of food in order to relieve poverty and malnutrition throughout the world (WorldFoodPrize.org). Senior Editor Gina Kramer recently spoke with former Ambassador Quinn about US-Cambodian relations, the behind-the-scenes workings of diplomacy, and the challenges posed by policies of engagement with Southeast Asian nations.

Throughout most of your career, your area of specialization has been Southeast Asia. You were, in fact, the United States' ambassador to Cambodia for many years. What is the nature of the United States' engagement and relations with Cambodia?

Right now the United States' aim is to do what it can to support the process that has helped Cambodia turn away from several decades of genocide, mass murder, and killings—severe traumas unlike those undergone by almost any other country in recent history. The United States also aims to help Cambodians rebuild their society and pick up the broken pieces of their political and social systems. It has been a long and arduous process, but one in which I think the American people can feel that the money they have contributed in terms of support for UN peacekeeping, humanitarian and economic development assistance, infrastructure-building activities, and support for human rights has really paid off. Cambodia is a very different country today from what it was 10 years ago, and its society is certainly much different from that which the Khmer Rouge almost destroyed in the 1970s.

Prior to your diplomatic service, you worked extensively on rural development projects in Vietnam. Similar programs, when created by the United States and implemented in developing nations have, in the past, drawn criticism for being imperialistic. How can developed nations best extend assistance?

An open mind is crucial for all foreign service officers; I learned many lessons about cultural differences, learned the local language, and spent much time talking to villagers. I came away with the understanding that the various systems of commitment, family structures, and obligations in a village could be very different from those in the United States. We must always do work in another country with the certainty, not that we know what is best for them, but with the certainty that we are prepared to share the benefits we have in a collaborative manner to create a partnership. All too often, it is easy to be the ugly American, to seem overbearing and to assert that "we know what's best." That leads to antagonism, but collaborative work is possible and mutual respect is the crucial ingredient.

There was discussion at one point of tying the United States' aid to Cambodia to certain terms of conditionality—protection of human rights, development of democratic governance, allowance of the free market system, and toleration of opposition figures. You voiced opposition to this conditionality—in your view, what are the benefits and drawbacks of conditional aid?

Sometimes when aid is made conditionally—when we publicly say, "you have to do this and if you don't do this, we aren't going to give you aid"—you may be working against your goals. Often this stance may be perceived by the target government as a kind of threat. The approach of both the Bush and Clinton administrations—and I think that it has paid off—was to influence the government so that it did those things necessary to support human rights and the arrest of Khmer Rouge members responsible for genocide; to build human-rights organizations; to address the most pressing social problems; to install open markets; to allow the opposition to operate; and to maintain freedom of the press. And in fact, Cambodia now has probably the most open economic market and investment system in all of Southeast Asia, as well as a free press.

I did favor conditioning aid and other improvements in our diplomatic relations with both Cambodia and Vietnam to human rights improvements in both countries. In fact, I personally included this conditionality in our "Roadmap to Normalization" policy, which we presented to both countries in 1991. This policy resulted in over 2,000 political prisoners being freed in Cambodia and a number of high-profile political prisoners being freed and allowed to leave Vietnam. Once our Agency for International Development (AID) mission was set up inside Cambodia, all of the programs it

carried out were humanitarian in nature, and none went through the government. Any withholding or conditioning of that aid only meant that we would be taking assistance away from the Cambodian people who had already suffered enormously and, in my view, did not deserve to be further deprived of what little help we were providing. I did not think we should do anything that would further harm these unfortunate people. I did support halting and conditioning our non-lethal assistance to the Cambodian military and police following the 1997 fighting, until such time as the political opposition could return and internationally monitored and approved elections could be held in an acceptable environment. That was the policy we did follow. Other types of assistance, such as Cambodia receiving Most Favored Nation (MFN) status, were also made contingent on the government's adoption of an internationally approved labor code. Once again this approach succeeded in achieving its desired result, and today over 100,000 workers are employed in new factories that are subject to international monitoring, thanks to the conditional terms we utilized.

The system of interaction that you describe between the US and Cambodian governments is one of influence. What form does such a tactic assume? Who are the parties responsible for wielding this influence?

Influence takes place in several ways. Sometimes it comes from high-level players: the US Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, participated, for example, on several occasions in meetings and negotiations. Sometimes it comes from the United Nations and UN organizations; sometimes it comes from joint efforts with other nations. Other times it originates in quiet, private meetings. In 1997, for instance, there was a serious question in Cambodia: would the political opposition be allowed to return to the country? Would it be able to stand and participate in elections? It appeared that that was not going to happen, despite having many SENIOR Diplomatic emissaries come and despite discussion of the issue at the United Nations. Then ~~diplomats from such nation had~~ WE ~~[illegible]~~ in PHNOMPENH ~~[illegible]~~ HAd some very private conversations with the government during which the implications of banning the opposition party were made very clear. As a result, the political opposition was allowed to return, its members were allowed to participate in the election, and, in fact, they got more votes than the ruling party.

Are private meetings, then, the backbone of policy formation?

Sometimes private negotiations will work, and sometimes they won't. Some negotiations need to be conducted publicly, but the judgment of what is most effective needs to be made for each situation as it arises. It may be that private meetings will yield no results; then you have to turn to something else. My experience in Cambodia and Vietnam was that I could be most effective working out of the public view. The Cambodian and Vietnamese officials tended to think that if the United States went public, we weren't really interested in negotiations, but instead in scoring points with popular opinion or making the other side look bad. That was their prior experience. Yet if US officials could speak clearly and privately, progress could be made. I negotiated the first US entry into a prison camp in Vietnam to look for American prisoners of war (POWs) and men listed as missing in action (MIAs). This was done outside the glare of the cameras by explaining the situation and what the United States' goals were. Our views were taken into account and the Vietnamese government allowed us into the prisons.

Cambodia's current government, although a notable improvement over the Khmer Rouge regime, has often been labeled as merely the lesser of the two evils. There has also been criticism leveled at the United States for not taking a stronger stance against the coup that occurred in 1997. How have perceptions of Cambodia's government changed in recent years, and should there be active work to create a better system?

Cambodia in 1990 seemed without hope. The political opposition had not been back in the country for 20 years; the king and the queen ~~had fled~~ were in exile. The Khmer Rouge had probably 15,000 troops with which they controlled huge portions of the country. In Phnom Penh, the Cambodian People's Party, the communist party, had installed a system under which there was no respect for human rights, no political freedoms, and several thousand political prisoners. There was little press freedom, no non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or human-rights organizations. But the UN agreement and the UN-supervised elections produced a dramatic transformation; all of these things changed quickly. Suddenly the opposition was back in the country and they won the most votes when the election was held. They took leadership positions in government, the king was able to return, political prisoners were freed, and newspapers could be reopened. There was a euphoria in the international community about that, but then the situation deteriorated in 1996 and 1997. When I arrived in Cambodia in 1996 as ambassador, after just 30 days I asked the State Department to let me return to Washington. ~~I told them~~ THE MESSAGE I CARRIED BACK WAS that the situation was likely to result in violence, because there were these two opposing factions that increasingly mistrusted one another. Violence did come about in July 1997, although I would not describe it as a coup, but as a return to civil war. Essentially you had two sides, each in

Phnom Penh, fully armed, with sandbag bunkers around the houses of their leaders. One weekend, they started shooting each other. My own house was hit with a rocket, with my family inside, and most Americans had to be evacuated from the city. That was heartbreaking for all of us who had worked on the Cambodian peace agreement. It left the sense that all our effort had been lost. We entered into a period of about year and a half of negotiations, pressure, and cajoling to finally push the Cambodian government to hold another internationally supervised election in which the political opposition could return with their safety assured. That has been the start of a sort of second beginning or second chance for Cambodia. It has been a slow, step-by-step process since then of trying to move in a positive direction. We no longer have that sense of euphoria, but I think now we have recouped much of what was lost in the first round of fighting in 1997.

There have been calls in the international community urging the formation of tribunals in Cambodia, whether to make legal judgments on war crimes, prosecute offenders, or hear testimony from victims of Khmer Rouge policies. Meanwhile, efforts such as South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which aims at healing rather than prosecution, have been criticized by many as toothless. What should a tribunal attempt to do in the Cambodian situation?

There are several roles: one is bringing senior leaders of the Khmer Rouge who were responsible for crimes in the 1970s to trial. That should be a primary goal. The United States played a significant role in bringing about the arrest of Ta Mok, the last remaining Khmer Rouge military commander. Also, before Pol Pot died, he was being tracked down in an attempt to capture him so that he could be taken to an international tribunal for trial. The United States was intimately involved in that effort, even making the arrangements for Pol Pot's transportation out of the country.

Beyond that, the question of how Cambodians come to deal with the tragedies that have happened, and whether they have a truth commission or some other type of process is something that needs to be done carefully, with the Cambodians themselves taking the lead. Almost every Westerner with whom I ever had a conversation while I was in Cambodia came away very surprised by the fact that the Western reaction to what should be done in Cambodia seemed to be different from what Cambodians were thinking. Having gone through this terrible experience in which upwards of two million people, or one quarter of the population, may have died, virtually every family is affected; it has left a very deep scar. Moreover, it is easy to have that trauma return. I remember one day when there was an explosion at the edge of Phnom Penh—some old mines were being detonated by the Cambodian

Mine Action Center to get rid of them. This set off a panic downtown because people heard the noise and thought it was 1975 again and that the city was about to be retaken by the Khmer Rouge. Markets were closed, schools emptied, and people raced to find their families and get to safety, whatever safety meant in that situation. The impact on Cambodians has been very dramatic. Whatever is decided needs to be based on what Cambodians from all levels of society want to have happen, and not something that is fore-ordained by outsiders.

You seem to strongly favor policies of engagement that involve cooperation and partnerships between Cambodia and the United States. Also in Southeast Asia, the notion of normalizing relations with Vietnam highlights a similar sort of alliance relationship. Is the US/Vietnam relationship similar to that between the United States and Cambodia? Should policies be similar in terms of partnership and engagement?

Obviously the geographic proximity of Vietnam and Cambodia tends to make one think the policies should be somewhat parallel. I always start out by asking what our national interest is. What are we hoping to achieve? Whom do we have to deal with? In Cambodia, my sense was that first and foremost, we should feel an obligation to the people of Cambodia who were worthy of assistance, even though the government might not be as worthy. In Vietnam, the overriding interest that was articulated in America for many years was getting the full and complete accounting for our POW/MIAs, since thousands of men were unaccounted for after the war. That was articulated by all US presidents as our highest national interest in Vietnam; ~~for a long time, that is what drove our policy~~. Vietnam is a much more difficult environment in which to work; there are not the same political freedoms there as in Cambodia. There is just one political party, so you have to deal differently with the Vietnamese government than the Cambodian. All our assistance programs in Cambodia, for instance, went through NGOs, not the government. You probably can't do that in Vietnam~~ because the government would not permit it~~. So, we have a different environment in which to work. At the same time, Vietnam has an interest in improving relations with the United States, and we certainly have felt some obligation to the Vietnamese people. After the war we were involved in humanitarian projects in terms of mine clearing, assisting Vietnam in finding its own missing men, and ~~getting~~ providing humanitarian assistance. We haven't had the open environment that we have had in Cambodia; our policy must be more nuanced, but basically we are hoping to move toward a relationship that is increasingly normal. Obviously it will be generations before the war is removed from the forefront of American thinking about Vietnam, and vice versa, but

we have taken some important steps. Certainly the relationship the United States has with Vietnam now, compared to 10 years ago, is much improved.

How would you distill your many years of foreign service—in Southeast Asia, with the Department of State, and as Ambassador—into several salient lessons for other diplomats?

Number one: don't assume that in the country you are dealing with that people think or act the same way or work out of the same set of historical precedents that we do in the United States. One of the great mistakes is to assume that the leaders or people of another country view a problem or an issue in the same way as we do in the United States. You must make the effort to breach the cultural and linguistic barriers to understand how people in another country or society view issues, how they view the US approach, and how they view the United States as a whole.

Second, it is terribly important to speak with clarity ~~in a way~~ so that other nations understand so as to give a clear impression of *who* is speaking with authority. The United States is an open society, in which many citizens travel around the world and interact with other governments and political leaders; determining which messages come from the US government can sometimes be muddled as a result. It is very important to have clarity. For example, with Vietnam in 1990, we weren't getting anywhere in terms of POW/MIA accounting until I was able to convey to my Vietnamese counterparts a message directly from President Bush, making clear what exactly our policy was and assuring them that this was the approach the United States would take. Once they understood, then we could work to enact reciprocal actions in terms of POW/MIAs.

A third lesson I take away at the end of my career is a sense of concern that the United States is increasingly seen abroad as arrogant and, in some instances, as a bully toward smaller countries. I worry that we are going to be seen, not as a country that has sacrificed much or assisted nations in rebuilding after World War II or contributed much through aid programs, but as a country that is pressing and pushing its positions, often for its own domestic political considerations.