

Power Struggles And Military Interventions In 19th Century Southeast Asia: The Nguyen Dynasty's Impact On Vietnam's Regional Development And Relations With Cambodia And Siam

Bui Anh Thu

Van Lang University

No: 69/68 Dang Thuy Tram, Ward 13. Binh Thanh

District, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Email: thu.ba@vlu.edu.vn

Abstract:

Through the power interactions in the relationships between Vietnam, Cambodia, and Siam during the 19th century, the author explains the origins of the foreign policies and robust military measures of the Nguyen dynasty towards its neighboring countries in the first half of the 19th century. With primary sources from the National History Archives of the Nguyen dynasty, the author has significant historical materials to provide scientific insights in this study.

Keywords: Vietnam, Nguyen Dynasty, Cambodia, Siam, 19th century.

1. Introduce

In 1802, Nguyễn Ánh ascended to the throne and took the title Gia Long, establishing the Nguyễn dynasty. During the first half of the 19th century, this dynasty left a profound mark on the historical landscape of Southeast Asia, elevating Vietnam to become one of the strong and developed nations in the region at that time. This was indirectly reflected through the power interactions between Vietnam, Cambodia, and Siam (now Thailand) during the early 19th century.

With this study, the author focuses on elucidating the origins of Nguyen dynasty's military interventions in Cambodia and the power struggles with Siam in the Southeast Asian region during

the early 19th century. The prolonged wars inflicted deep wounds on the relationships between the three countries and became one of the reasons that eventually led these nations to lose their self-determination to Western colonialism by the end of the 19th century.

2. Research theory and methods

The author primarily relies on the theory of "dialectical materialism" by Marx-Lenin to investigate the raised issues. This theory, with its principles of universal interconnectedness and development, has enabled researchers to comprehend the common relationships among objects and phenomena based on fundamental categories such as the universal and the particular, necessity and chance, essence and appearance, cause and effect, possibility and reality, content and form, following three laws: the law of transformation from quantitative changes to qualitative changes and vice versa; the law of unity and struggle of opposites; the law of the negation of negation.

In this study, the author applied two main research methods, namely the historical method and the logical method. The historical method allows for the selection of significant historical events in the foreign relations of the Nguyen dynasty with the governments of Cambodia and Siam during the first half of the 19th century. The logical method helps identify the essence and origins of the military conflicts between the Nguyen dynasty and the Rama kings during this period. The author also utilizes the regional study method to clarify the distinct political and social characteristics of the Southeast Asian region during this time.

3. Research results

3.1. Period 1802-1819

From the 16th to the 18th century, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Siam (now Thailand) experienced significant fluctuations in their situations. After the glorious era of Angkor, the Kingdom of Cambodia fell into a state of decline and became a constant target of invasion by the Thai. During this period, Vietnam was also divided between "Đàng Trong" and "Đàng Ngoài." To resist the control of the Thai, King Chey Chetta II of Cambodia (reigning from 1618-1628) sought an alliance with Lord Nguyễn Phúc Nguyên of Vietnam. Through the marriage between the Cambodian king and Princess Ngọc Vạn, the Nguyễn lords of Đàng Trong began to establish influence with the Cambodian court. However, due to the

necessity of concentrating their forces to assert power domestically, the Nguyễn lords did not have the opportunity to expand their influence in this country during that time. Meanwhile, during the reign of King Rama I (reigning from 1782-1809), Siam had become the most powerful and developed kingdom in Southeast Asia. The Bangkok court easily controlled and completely dominated the situation in Cambodia.

In 1802, after achieving victory against the Tây Sơn forces, Nguyễn Ánh ascended to the throne, taking the title Gia Long, and established the Nguyen dynasty. The emergence of this dynasty profoundly changed the power dynamics on the Indochinese Peninsula and significantly impacted the historical relations among Vietnam, Cambodia, and Siam.

The relations between Vietnam and Siam during the reign of King Gia Long were generally amicable. The two countries regularly sent delegations to visit each other, exchanging gifts, displaying a friendly relationship and mutual respect on an "equal footing of power." According to the "Đại Nam thực lục" (The Chronicles of Đại Nam), during the time of King Gia Long, Siam sent 12 delegations to Vietnam, while the Nguyen dynasty sent 5 delegations to Siam. The good relations with Siam during King Gia Long's reign can be seen clearly in the event of 1807 when, to ensure a formal and regulated exchange of envoys between the two countries, King Gia Long assigned the Ministry of Rites to draft regulations regarding the number of personnel and the route of the delegations, and sent them to King Rama I. These regulations were accepted and approved by the Siamese court. According to these regulations, when the Vietnamese envoy went to Siam, the sea route involved 50 people, and the land route had 12 people. Diplomatic documents were conveyed through Chân Lạp (now Malaysia). When the Siamese envoy traveled to Gia Định (now Saigon), the sea route involved 50 people, while the land route had 14 people¹. The good and harmonious relationship with Siam during the reign of Gia Long stemmed from several factors. Firstly, before ascending to the throne in 1802, Nguyễn Ánh (King Gia Long) had spent many years in exile in Siam, where he received military and financial support from the country to counter the Tây Sơn movement. Secondly, right after establishing his rule, King Gia Long prioritized internal affairs, consolidating his authority across

¹ National History of the Nguyen Dynasty (1963), *Dai Nam Thuc Luc*, Volume 3, Publishing House. History, Hanoi, p. 378.

the country. Therefore, in foreign affairs, he emphasized fostering friendly relations with neighboring countries rather than expanding his influence outward. Thirdly, in terms of foreign relations, the Nguyen dynasty at that time emphasized its relationship with the Qing dynasty of China – a customary practice among Vietnamese feudal dynasties. The support and recognition of the Chinese court were seen as a way to ensure the legitimacy of the newly established dynasty.

While maintaining friendly relations with the Nguyen dynasty, Siam continued to strengthen its position in Cambodia. In 1806, the Siamese king conducted a coronation ceremony for Prince Ang Chan (also known as Nặc Ông Chân), the son of King Ang Eng, who then became the king of Cambodia. Facing Siamese dominance, Ang Chan decided to employ diplomatic measures – the "double vassalage" policy – and sent envoys to Vietnam, requesting that the Nguyen dynasty confer him the title of king (1807). The Nguyen dynasty accepted this proposal, thereby establishing an equal footing with Siam in relation to Cambodia. However, the relationship between Cambodia and Siam quickly deteriorated.

During the reign of King Rama II (reigning from 1809-1824), in an effort to regain exclusive control over Cambodia, the Siamese king unilaterally conferred royal titles to the sons of King Ang Chan and brought them back to Siam. He demanded that Ang Chan divide his land for them and also brought two high-ranking Khmer officials back to Siam as key aides. Furthermore, Siam demanded Cambodia to send 10,000 troops to help Siam fight against Myanmar². Faced with the ambitions of the Bangkok court, King Ang Chan pursued a tough policy, not only refusing to comply but also executing the officials who had returned from Bangkok. This action by King Ang Chan alarmed the pro-Siamese factions within his court, prompting them to rebel and seek help from Siam. Siam swiftly sent troops to Battambang. King Ang Chan sought assistance from the Nguyen dynasty, and King Gia Long immediately dispatched Governor of Gia Dinh, Nguyen Van Nhan, with troops to Cambodia and an additional 1,200 soldiers as reinforcement. Confronted with the resolute attitude of the Nguyen dynasty, Siam withdrew its forces. The Nguyen court then gradually withdrew their troops as well. The events of 1810

² National History of the Nguyen Dynasty (1963), *Dai Nam Thuc Luc*, Volume 4, Publishing House. History, Hanoi, p. 253 and 348.

contributed to consolidating the position of the Nguyen dynasty in Cambodia.

After the withdrawal of Siamese and Vietnamese forces, the power struggle in Cambodia continued fiercely between King Ang Chan and his brothers, particularly Ang Snguon. In 1812, in an attempt to ease tensions, King Ang Chan was compelled to cede three provinces – Krakor, Khlong, and Kray – to Ang Snguon. In response to King Ang Chan's concession, Siam sent troops back into Cambodia to reassert its influence. Faced with the strength of Siam, King Ang Chan left U Dong for Phnom Penh and then followed the Nguyen forces to Gia Dinh. Unable to subdue King Ang Chan and facing the challenge of dealing with Myanmar, Siam sent envoys to negotiate with the Nguyen dynasty for reconciliation. King Gia Long seized this opportunity, writing a letter to Rama II, requesting Siam to send envoys to Gia Dinh to accompany King Ang Chan back to Cambodia. In 1813, King Ang Chan returned to Cambodia under the escort of both Siamese and Vietnamese naval forces. The restoration of King Ang Chan to the throne helped the Nguyen dynasty gain an advantage over Siam in asserting influence in Cambodia. However, in the following years, this issue continued with even more intensity and fierceness during the reign of King Minh Mang.

3.2. Period 1820-1839

Upon ascending the throne after his father, King Minh Mang endeavored to maintain a peaceful relationship with Siam. In particular, in 1824, upon hearing about the passing of King Rama II, King Minh Mang decided to suspend court activities for three days and send an envoy to Bangkok to pay his respects to the late king. On the Siamese side, after King Rama III ascended the throne (reigning from 1824-1851), they also sent envoys to Vietnam multiple times to maintain friendly relations with the Nguyen dynasty. After reestablishing the throne for King Ang Chan, the relations among Vietnam, Cambodia, and Siam remained relatively calm for 20 years (1813-1832). This was due to the difficulties Siam faced in its prolonged war with Myanmar and the strength of the Nguyen military in Gia Dinh, which made the Siamese hesitant. However, Siam did not abandon its ambitions in Cambodia.

In 1831, after a long period of preparation, Siam brought King Ang Chan's two sons, Ang Im and Ang Đuông, from Bangkok to Battambang to garner support from the people. They also deployed a large military force to the Cambodian border and

several warships to the coastal areas adjacent to Ha Tien. The rivalry for influence in Cambodia quickly escalated into an invasion war, forcing the Nguyen dynasty to take firmer measures.

In 1833, taking advantage of Vietnam's turmoil caused by the Lê Văn Khôi uprising, King Rama III mobilized five armies to attack both Cambodia and Vietnam. As the Nguyen court had withdrawn most of its military forces stationed in Cambodia to Gia Dinh to suppress the Lê Văn Khôi rebellion, the Siamese encountered little resistance on their way into Cambodia. King Ang Chan once again abdicated the throne and fled to An Giang before being brought back by Nguyen forces to reside in Vĩnh Long³. Alongside their attack on Cambodia, the Siamese naval forces also targeted Ha Tien. Faced with the might of Siam, the Nguyen troops were unable to resist and hastily retreated. Siam easily occupied the provinces of Ha Tien and An Giang. Other Siamese forces from Laos invaded and launched incursions, looting along the borders of Central Vietnam. However, despite the initial shock and surprise, King Minh Mạng quickly stabilized the situation, reorganized the forces, and initiated a large-scale counteroffensive.

After significant victories in fierce naval battles on the Tiền River, the Nguyen forces pushed the Siamese out of the national territory. Riding on this momentum, the Nguyen forces pursued the Siamese out of Cambodia's territory as well. Faced with the strength of the Nguyen army, Siam had to withdraw from Phnom Penh and regroup in Battambang, along with the two princes, Ang Im and Ang Đuông. However, during their retreat, the Siamese wreaked havoc on the capital and plundered and destroyed Khmer villages, leaving a devastating aftermath in Cambodia and further escalating tensions and conflicts among Vietnam, Cambodia, and Siam.

King Rama III's defeat in the 1833 war severely diminished Siam's influence over Cambodia, while the Nguyen dynasty's power in the region became even more consolidated than ever. In 1834, realizing that threats from pro-Siamese factions still existed in Cambodia, King Minh Mạng implemented the following six measures: (1) establishing a series of fortresses and military outposts in Cambodia; (2) stationing troops in crucial positions; (3) stockpiling military supplies at the outposts; (4) rewarding and punishing Khmer officials; (5) suspending the sending of

³ National History of the Nguyen Dynasty (1965), *Dai Nam Thuc Luc*, Volume 13, Publishing House. History, Hanoi, p.377

Cambodian envoys to Siam; and (6) reorganizing the Cambodian army and military strategy⁴. Upon the passing of King Ang Chan in 1835, King Minh Mạng chose Ang May (his second daughter) as the head of the Cambodian court with the title of Chân Lạp quận chúa. However, the actual power was in the hands of Trương Minh Giảng (previously sent by the Nguyen dynasty). A significant decision made by King Minh Mạng in 1835 was to directly rule over Cambodia. To accomplish this, the king changed the name of Cambodia to Tây Thành province. King Minh Mạng appointed the Governor of An Giang - Hà Tiên, Trương Minh Giảng, as the Tây Thành Tướng quân and the Administrator of Tuần phủ An Giang, Lê Đại Cương, as the Tây Thành Tham tán. He also issued regulations stating that “all the county within Trấn Tây are placed under the authority of these two individuals, without the use of seals and protection Chân Lạp”⁵.

The establishment of direct rule by the Nguyen dynasty in Cambodia caused discontent among the nobility and officials of the country. This did not escape the notice of Rama III, who had not given up his intention to regain influence over Cambodia, especially with the two strategic pawns in his hands, Ang Im and Ang Đuông. From 1834 to 1838, Siam continuously deployed troops to Battambang and along the Cambodian border.

3.3. Period 1839-1847

In the year 1839, the relations among the three countries experienced new developments. Ang Im, swayed by Trương Minh Giảng's persuasion, brought back his entire family and followers to Cambodia. However, the Nguyen dynasty failed to seize this opportunity to stabilize the situation in Cambodia and instead dispatched all these forces to Huế. Faced with the risk of losing Battambang, the Bangkok court sent troops there to maintain control. Meanwhile, in Cambodia, the oppression and harassment of the Nguyen officials angered the Cambodian people. Their discontent grew further when members of the Cambodian royal family were killed (Ang Pen) or captured (Ang May, Ang Peu, Ang Sngoun...). The movement of resistance against the rule of the Nguyen dynasty quickly spread among the Cambodian people,

⁴ National History of the Nguyen Dynasty (1965), *Dai Nam Thuc Luc*, Volume 14, Publishing House. History, Hanoi, pp.55-59.

⁵ National History of the Nguyen Dynasty (1966), *Dai Nam Thuc Luc*, vol. 17, Publishing House. History, Hanoi, p.165.

even reaching Gia Định, Hà Tiên, and Định Tường⁶. The Nguyen dynasty deployed a large military force to suppress the situation but could not quell the unrest. Waiting for the right moment, in 1841, with the support of some Cambodian officials, Rama III decided to intervene in the situation in Cambodia and brought Ang Đương to establish a pro-Siamese government. At a time when the situation in Cambodia was unfavorable, King Minh Mạng passed away. At this moment, Ang Đương had gained control over U Đông, while the Nguyen troops retreated to Phnom Penh for defense. When King Thiệu Trị ascended the throne, he decided to return the captive Cambodian royalty to Cambodia in order to stabilize the situation and win over the Cambodian people⁷. However, it was too late as Ang Đương had gained widespread support from Cambodian officials and the people at that time. These difficulties forced King Thiệu Trị to make a decision to withdraw all military forces back to Vietnam, including Ang Im, Ang May, Ang Peu, and others. This created an opportunity for Ang Đương to return to Phnom Penh and take control of all of Cambodia. Thus, after a long period of setbacks, Siam regained its influence over the land of Cambodia.

However, by 1843, King Rama III had to withdraw troops from Cambodia due to difficulties in resolving food issues and the resistance of the people in the regions occupied by Siamese forces. Some Cambodian officials took this opportunity to seek help from the Nguyen dynasty. In this situation, Ang Đương promptly sent envoys to the Siamese court to request military assistance. Both the Siamese and Vietnamese dynasties quickly deployed troops to Cambodia. The conflict between Siam and Vietnam erupted again on Cambodian soil, and this time, with the military prowess of Nguyễn Tri Phương, the Nguyen forces emerged victorious, recapturing Phnom Penh in September 1845⁸. The Siamese forces and Ang Đương retreated to defend U Đông. The Nguyen troops continued their pursuit, besieging U Đông, but they were also fatigued. In this situation, Siam took the initiative to propose peace

⁶ National History of the Nguyen Dynasty (1969), Dai Nam Thuc Luc, volume 22, Publishing House. History, Hanoi, p.260

⁷ National History of the Nguyen Dynasty (2007), Dai Nam Thuc Luc, Volume 6, Publishing House. Education, Hanoi, pp.84-85

⁸ National History of the Nguyen Dynasty (2007), Dai Nam Thuc Luc, Volume 6, Publishing House. Education, Hanoi, p.759-760.

negotiations⁹. At the stalemate of the war and desired to end the conflict. Thus, the proposed ceasefire from the Siamese side was accepted by the Nguyen court.

The peace negotiations took place in December 1845, with Bôđin representing Siam and Nguyễn Tri Phương, Doãn Uẩn representing Vietnam. Ang Đuông also attended the talks. The result of the negotiations was that both countries accepted Ang Đuông as the King of Cambodia and the "viceroy to worship both nations"¹⁰. At the end of the year 1846, Ang Đuông dispatched an envoy carrying letters and ceremonial gifts to Phnom Penh, requesting the officials of the Nguyen court there to present them to King Thiệu Trị, seeking recognition and tribute submission¹¹. Upon receiving the letter, King Thiệu Trị agreed and commissioned the creation of the seal "Cao Miên Quốc vương" (King of Cambodia) to bestow upon Ang Đuông. Additionally, he sent envoys bearing the royal edict and seal to U Đông to officially proclaim Ang Đuông's kingship¹². Both sides exchanged prisoners of war in Phnom Penh. The Nguyen troops completely withdrew their military forces back to their homeland. In February 1847, the official coronation ceremony of Ang Đuông was held in U Đông, witnessed by representatives from both Siam and Vietnam¹³.

4. Some history lessons

First and foremost, autonomy in national security and defense is a crucial factor in building the independence of a country and its people. The dual vassal policy - an attempt by King Ang Chan to rely on both Vietnam and Siam to restore his country - completely failed in Cambodia. Instead, it led to conflicts and continuous wars in Cambodia during the first half of the 19th century.

Secondly, war is not the path to resolving regional disputes. Prolonged wars have devastated the lands of Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand, creating an atmosphere of constant vigilance and suspicion among them. This weakened the countries

⁹ National History of the Nguyen Dynasty (2007), Dai Nam Thuc Luc, Volume 6, Publishing House. Education, Hanoi, p. 771

¹⁰ National History of the Nguyen Dynasty (1971), Dai Nam Thuc Luc, volume 25, Publishing House. History, Hanoi, p.367.

¹¹ National History of the Nguyen Dynasty (2007), Dai Nam Thuc Luc, Volume 6, Publishing House. Education, Hanoi, p. 946

¹² National History of the Nguyen Dynasty (2007), Dai Nam Thuc Luc, Volume 6, Publishing House. Education, Hanoi, p. 948, 972

¹³ National History of the Nguyen Dynasty (2007), Dai Nam Thuc Luc, Volume 6, Publishing House. Education, Hanoi, p. 972.

in the region and paved the way for their rapid transformation into colonies and dependencies of Western colonialism in the subsequent period..

5. Conclusion:

Looking back at the power dynamics between Vietnam - Cambodia - Siam in the first half of the 19th century, it can be seen that the weakness of the Cambodian government was one of the contributing factors to the intense competition for influence between Siam and Vietnam in the region. Depending on different periods, these two countries had advantages over each other, but ultimately they had to resort to a path of peace, returning independence and autonomy to Cambodia. The consequences of prolonged warfare deeply wounded the neighborly relations among the countries in the region.

In their power relations with Cambodia and Siam, the Nguyen dynasty had different foreign policy approaches. Military intervention in Cambodia was decisive and continuous, while with Thailand, a country of equal status, the Nguyen court always prioritized diplomatic struggles, reserving military actions for necessary circumstances. The intervention of the Nguyen dynasty in Cambodia stemmed from a great awareness of protecting and firmly maintaining the country's border regions. Especially in the context of Vietnam being close to a powerful and ambitious Siamese kingdom with full potential and the desire to dominate the region.

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