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INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

CAMBODIA AND THE VIETNAMESE COMMUNISTS: A NEW PHASE?

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
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INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM*

Cambodia and the Vietnamese Communists:
A New Phase?

Summary

Cambodia's foreign policy is in another difficult period of adjustment. The impact of US military operations on the war in South Vietnam has caused Sihanouk to re-evaluate Cambodia's relations with the Vietnamese Communists and the West. His calculations have been complicated by the fact that US operations have forced the Communists to make greater use of Cambodian territory. This has significantly increased the danger that the fighting will spill over into Cambodia.

Cambodia's ambivalent course over the past year has been the result of Sihanouk's efforts to counter this threat. Despite increasingly important differences with the Vietnamese Communists, he has still been maneuvering for diplomatic leverage with them by offering political and material support. He has also, however, moved to increase contacts with the non-Communist world, while renewing long-standing proposals for internal inspection and control of Cambodian territory.

The direction of Cambodia's foreign policy over the next several months will probably continue to reflect Sihanouk's efforts to strike a safe balance between the Asian Communists and the West. He will continue to be influenced by the situation in South Vietnam, although it will take a dramatic turn of events there to cause a major realignment of Cambodia's foreign policy.

*Prepared by the Office of Current Intelligence

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1. The changing complexion of the war in South Vietnam over the past year has been accompanied by an apparent change in Cambodia's relations with the Vietnamese Communists. The direction of that change might seem surprising. At a time when Communist military fortunes have been declining, when circumstances suggest that some fence-mending with the West might be prudent, Cambodia appears to be accelerating the accommodation with Hanoi and the Viet Cong.

2. Sihanouk's course is more complicated than it looks on the surface, however. For one thing, the swing to the left in some ways has been more apparent than real. The rhetoric and tangible offerings of support have obscured but have not eliminated important differences between Cambodia and the Communists. In addition, the leftward overtures have been accompanied by a quiet but nonetheless concerted Cambodian campaign to improve relations with the non-Communist world. By indicating that Sihanouk is not yet ready to burn all his bridges to the West, these developments raise key questions concerning his view of the war in South Vietnam and the future course of Cambodia's relations with Hanoi and Peking. They also suggest that another look at the basis of Sihanouk's past and current relationship with the Communists might be important.

Cambodia's Shift Toward the Communists

3. Cambodia has been moving steadily toward the Communist camp since the early 1960s. The basic reason for the swing has been Sihanouk's belief that the political future in Southeast Asia belongs to the Communists and that he must reach an accommodation with them if Cambodia is to retain any significant degree of independence. The move has been influenced by Sihanouk's own idiosyncrasies, his elephantine memory for real and imagined insults, and his increasing suspicion of US intentions toward Cambodia.

4. It is no accident that the reorientation of Cambodia's foreign policy coincided with the recrudescence of Communist activity in South Vietnam. At an early stage in the game, Sihanouk calculated that the Diem regime would not beat the Viet Cong. He therefore launched what proved to be an involved campaign to gain a diplomatic hedge against the prospect

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of a Communist victory. From Phnom Penh's perspective, a Viet Cong triumph would drastically shift the balance of power in Indochina against Cambodia, since, with their country reunited, the Vietnamese would resume their historic encroachments onto Cambodian soil.

5. The disparity in strength between Cambodia and Vietnam meant that Phnom Penh had to look for external support. Some limited protection, Sihanouk believed, might come from the international community and the international accords and organizations to which Cambodia was a party. Sihanouk therefore began to promote a new Geneva-type conference which would recognize Cambodia's neutrality and territorial integrity. He actively pursued this for several years because he felt it would serve Cambodia's interests in two ways. First of all, a conference would cause the great powers to recognize once again the legitimacy of Cambodia's boundaries and, in a sense, its legitimate role as a nation state in Indochina.

6. The conference would also provide an opportunity for Communist China, North Vietnam, and the US to reach a settlement of the war in South Vietnam. Sihanouk believed--probably incorrectly--that Hanoi and Peking would accept a neutral and nonaligned South Vietnam, at least over the short term, as long as the Viet Cong had still not achieved a position of overwhelming power in the South.

7. While he was promoting an international agreement on Indochina, Sihanouk followed a second path aimed at strengthening Cambodia's relations with the Communists, particularly with Peking. He made it perfectly clear what lay behind his overtures to Communist China. Although not sanguine about Peking's intentions, Sihanouk hoped the Chinese leaders would calculate that it was in China's interest to exert a restraining influence on the Vietnamese. In return, Sihanouk was prepared to pay a high price. He was willing to embrace the Chinese line on a whole series of peripheral foreign policy issues. In addition, he indicated that, if forced to choose, Cambodia was prepared to become a satellite of Communist China rather than lose its national identity to the Vietnamese.

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8. The question of timing soon became the critical factor in Sihanouk's day-to-day maneuvers. Common sense indicated that it would be politic for Cambodia to come to terms with the Communists before the Viet Cong victory was in the bag. However, an imperfectly timed move could precipitate sharp retaliation from the South Vietnamese Government. By the fall of 1964, nonetheless, the Viet Cong's alarming gains in the field, the growing political dislocation in Saigon, and the dim prospects for an international conference apparently convinced Sihanouk that the time was ripe for the long-postponed negotiations with the Vietnamese Communists.

9. When Sihanouk went to Peking in October 1964, it was clear what was on his mind. In the weeks preceding the trip, he had begun to talk for the first time of extending diplomatic recognition not only to North Vietnam but also to the Viet Cong. The Vietnamese had in return only to recognize Cambodia's neutrality, its territorial integrity, and its version of their common border. From Sihanouk's point of view, Peking was the perfect place to talk with Hanoi and the Viet Cong. The Chinese, after all, figured critically in Sihanouk's plans. Peking was expected to act as an honest broker which, freely translated, meant to instruct the Vietnamese to give Cambodia exactly what it wanted.

10. Sihanouk was in for a rude awakening. When the Communists refused to accept some of his more extravagant demands, the talks broke down. To Sihanouk, the episode was but another example of Vietnamese perfidy, a fresh warning that the Vietnamese, whatever their political persuasion, were a threat to Cambodia. For their part, the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong soon learned firsthand what they had probably long suspected, that Sihanouk could be an extremely tough negotiator on matters directly affecting Cambodia's interests.

11. Disheartening as this experience in Peking was, even darker days in Sihanouk's relations with the Communists were in store. With his move toward accommodation stalled, Sihanouk turned his efforts toward organizing a political settlement in Vietnam in the form of a "neutral solution." In Sihanouk's view, such a settlement would be along lines which

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would leave the Vietnamese divided and not strong enough to threaten Cambodia. In early 1965, Sihanouk organized the Indochinese Peoples Conference (IPC) with the hope of demonstrating that there was a groundswell of opinion in Indochina for a Geneva conference to arrange a "neutral" South Vietnam. When the IPC was convened in February, Sihanouk found to his annoyance that his effort to get at least some non-Communist representation had failed.

12. During the course of the IPC, Sihanouk gave two remarkably candid speeches which revealed the peculiar duality of his statecraft and also indicated that he was coming around to a fresh appreciation of the situation in Indochina. The first speech was scheduled for delivery at the opening of the plenary session of the conference but was never presented orally because of the objections of the Communist participants. In it, Sihanouk argued dispassionately that the time had come for Hanoi and the Viet Cong to reassess their position on negotiations. He claimed that the growing US presence in South Vietnam had dramatically changed the situation, and that the Communists could no longer drive the US from South Vietnam by force of arms. Sihanouk's efforts to talk turkey with the Communists were a total failure, and he later vented his frustrations in a highly emotional speech before a Cambodian military audience in which he warned about the dangers of "Vietnamese imperialism."

13. The IPC debacle, and an equally disappointing meeting with Chou En-lai in Djakarta a month later--during which it was made plain that Peking would not support an international conference on Cambodia--represented the watershed of Phnom Penh's relations with the Asian Communists. Over the past year a certain uneasiness has crept into their relations.

Decreased Dependence on Hanoi and Peking

14. The change has been manifested in several ways. For one thing, Communist China has not been receiving quite the adulatory treatment in the Cambodian official and semiofficial press that it once enjoyed. More striking, the leading Cambodian leftist newspaper has openly and specifically criticized Peking's intransigent position on negotiations, probably the first time that it has ever spoken less than

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enthusiastically about any Chinese policy. Moreover, Sihanouk has gone out of his way in private talks with Western diplomats to emphasize the ephemeral nature of Cambodia's friendship with Communist China.

15. In practical terms, Sihanouk has also demonstrated in at least three instances over the past several months that he has no interest in making Cambodia the prime staging area for pro-Communist political sideshows. He turned down an invitation tendered by the Japanese Socialist Party to sponsor an "Asian People's Conference" to push for the withdrawal of US forces from South Vietnam. He ignored the first anniversary of the IPC, despite the fact that the anniversary was prominently publicized in the North Vietnamese and Chinese press. He also refused to permit the pro-Communist Afro-Asian Journalists Association to stage a meeting in Cambodia and has thus far turned down Peking's request that the association be permitted to make its headquarters in Phnom Penh.

16. Sihanouk has also begun to expand Cambodia's contacts with the non-Communist world. For the first time in almost two years, a Cambodian ambassador is being sent to London, and diplomats have been dispatched to fill other vacant posts abroad. Similar small, but specific, steps have been taken to decrease Cambodia's isolation and, in some measure, its dependence on Peking and Hanoi. Sihanouk's purpose in seeking a limited opening to the West probably involves a fresh attempt to reconstitute those pre-1965 conditions under which Cambodia could most effectively play both sides in Indochina while steering an erratic but generally middle course. Increasing contacts with the West, particularly with Great Britain and Australia, also serve to refurbish Cambodia's badly tarnished "neutrality" while affording Phnom Penh an opportunity to present its case with countries in a position to exert some influence on the US.

17. Sihanouk has still, however, not significantly altered bilateral relations with his Vietnamese "friends." In recent months, in fact, he has granted token gifts of medicine and foodstuffs to the Viet Cong, and has also raised the level of Hanoi's

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representation in Phnom Penh to diplomatic status, apparently without exacting a quid pro quo. He also has held out the prospect of a more far-reaching political accommodation with the Communists, referring in an April speech to a forthcoming "summit meeting" with the Vietnamese which will at last lead to a border agreement.

18. Sihanouk's ambivalent policy is in part the result of his strong reservations concerning the justice of the US presence in South Vietnam. He finds himself torn between what he views as the unjustifiable interference of a Western power in Indochina, and the dire consequences for Cambodia of a total US defeat in South Vietnam. His recent speeches, depicting the Viet Cong effort as a fight for Vietnamese independence from foreign domination, may in part represent a rationalization for Cambodia's support of the Viet Cong, but they also seem to carry the stamp of personal conviction. Sihanouk's sympathies have also been colored by circumstances attending the prosecution of the war. It has been US and South Vietnamese troops who have violated Cambodian territory and have bombed Cambodian villages over the years. If they have done so inadvertently and because the Viet Cong have purposely taken advantage of the sometimes ill-defined border to establish base areas and to mount attacks, it does not matter. For Sihanouk, this does not mitigate the wrong.

19. Sihanouk has also become a prisoner, in a way, of his own past policies. It would be not only embarrassing, but politically unwise, for him to admit that the sacrifices Cambodia has made to accommodate the Communists were premature and perhaps unnecessary.

Vietnamese Communist Presence in Cambodia

20. The key factor behind Sihanouk's current erratic course, however, is the growing impact of US military forces on the war in South Vietnam, an impact which has caused Communist troops to make greater use of Cambodian territory.

21. Sihanouk clearly knows what the Communists are doing in Cambodia, although he is probably not aware of all the details nor of the magnitude of

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their incursions. His initial reaction, revealed in an August 1965 speech which first described the illicit outflow of rice to the Viet Cong, was to limit and if possible prevent Cambodian involvement. When he found that he could not by fiat curtail an operation rooted in the cupidity of Cambodian officials, Sihanouk put the best face possible on his impotence by claiming that the rice flow was a gesture of support to the Vietnamese "brothers." He soon made his own informal deal with the Communists, so that Cambodia's depleted treasury might benefit from the inevitable transactions.

22. Far more disturbing to Sihanouk than this rice traffic, however, were indications that the Vietnamese were physically encroaching on Cambodian territory. In a widely quoted speech in late March, he referred to information that the Viet Cong had established medical facilities on Cambodian territory. Although he tried to placate his Communist "friends" by offering to treat Viet Cong wounded in Cambodian hospitals, his real message--that the insidious Vietnamese were up to their old tricks--was perfectly clear.

23. Although Sihanouk undoubtedly has his suspicions, he is probably not fully aware of the extent to which North Vietnamese Army elements are using Cambodian territory in the isolated and sparsely populated northeast area. The most important reason is that the overextended Cambodian security forces almost certainly do not report Communist activity to Phnom Penh, either because they are unaware of it or because they have made their own peace with the intruders.

24. The increasing Vietnamese Communist use of Cambodian territory poses, in the final analysis, the gravest problems for Phnom Penh. Acquiescence--the course which Sihanouk has thus far followed--opens Cambodia to a very real threat of US and South Vietnamese retaliation. The immediate alternative, a determined effort to limit the Vietnamese presence in Cambodia, is just as unpalatable to Phnom Penh. Such a course would necessitate a major realignment of Cambodia's foreign policy away from the Communists--a move which Sihanouk undoubtedly considers premature at this juncture.

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25. A concerted effort to push the Communists from Cambodian territory might also make Phnom Penh a direct participant in the war, something which Sihanouk wants at all costs to avoid. Sihanouk's equivocal response to this dilemma has in large measure caused the seemingly contradictory course of Cambodian foreign policy over the past six months. Sihanouk not only has mounted a fresh campaign to get Hanoi and the Viet Cong to sign some sort of agreement recognizing Cambodia's present borders and its territorial integrity. He has tried to appease the Communists by meeting some of their needs--apparently agreeing, for example, to the construction of the new "Sihanouk road," which extends from northern Cambodia into southern Laos. This road provides the first Cambodian link with the Viet Cong infiltration routes, and has been used principally for supplying rice to the Viet Cong.

A Bigger ICC Role

26. Sihanouk has also resurrected old proposals for an expansion of the International Control Commission (ICC) operation in Cambodia under which the ICC would be empowered to "control" Cambodia's borders with South Vietnam. Similar proposals, portrayed by Phnom Penh as tangible evidence of Cambodia's desire to remain neutral, have been used perennially by Sihanouk to counter charges that Cambodia is in league with the Viet Cong. Phnom Penh's continuing interest over the past several months in an expanded ICC, however, suggests that Sihanouk now attaches more than propaganda importance to the proposal. The reason is that an expanded ICC operation would lessen the danger of punitive US and South Vietnamese operations and might also discourage the large-scale presence of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese elements on Cambodian territory.

27. Sihanouk apparently believes that an active ICC operation along his border would go a long way toward solving Cambodia's present dilemma. This was made clear in an unusually candid article on 3 June in a semiofficial Cambodian journal, which complained that the Communists were proving as unconcerned about Cambodia's neutrality as the US. The article argued that the Communists wanted to give "active help" to their side, but that Phnom Penh had "no wish to play

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the role of pawn for either camp." It is for this reason, the article concluded, that Cambodia is continuing to demand "international control" of its territory.

Future Prospects

28. The direction of Cambodia's foreign policy over the next several months will probably continue to reflect Sihanouk's efforts to strike an appropriate balance between the Asian Communists and the West. He will continue to be influenced by the situation in South Vietnam, although it will take a dramatic turn of events there to cause a major realignment of Cambodia's foreign policy. Sihanouk will continue, however, to angle for a negotiated settlement of the war, and a recent letter to Soviet Premier Kosygin suggests that he intends to make another attempt to get an international conference convened. Although Sihanouk's everyday tactics will depend on the vagaries of his imagination, his fundamental objectives--to prevent the war from spreading to Cambodia and to ensure Cambodia's existence as a nation state no matter what the future political organization of Indochina--will remain the same.

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