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14 September 1973

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MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: A Review of CIA Judgments on the Probable Situation in Cambodia after the US Bombing Halt on 15 August 1973

Summary

The CIA box-score between mid-May and mid-August shows some errors and some hits. In May, before the US bombing halt was a certainty, we were too pessimistic concerning the ability of the Cambodian Army and government to withstand the loss of US combat air support. On the other hand, subsequent judgments during June and July that questioned the Khmer Communists' capabilities for sustaining major military campaigns indefinitely stood up reasonably well. It was our failure -- in a sense our inability -- to pointedly assess in May the insurgents' military campaign potential that led us initially to take a mistakenly pessimistic line on the government's post-bombing chances. Our judgments that the Communists would not be able to launch an all-out offensive in the Phnom Penh area after 15 August proved accurate. Although yet to be fully tested, our assessments of the prospects (poor) for any significant short-term improvement in the performance of both the army and the government still appear valid.

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Discussion

A review of the analytical material prepared on the issue of the post-bombing situation in Cambodia reveals that all of the significant CIA judgments were in one Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE), several WSAG briefings prepared for the Director by the Office of Current Intelligence (OCI), and in a number of OCI Current Intelligence Bulletins (CIBs). These judgments were focused on the most critical aspects of the Cambodian problem: the ability of the Cambodian Army (FANK) to withstand Khmer Communist pressure without US combat air support; the willingness of Sihanouk and the Communists to negotiate; the political viability of the Lon Nol government; and the insurgents' ability to sustain a high level of military activity, and their capacity to win a military victory over the FANK.

SNIE 57-73, "The Short-Term Prospect for Cambodia" (24 May), was the first -- and only -- effort to make a comprehensive projection of what was likely to happen in Cambodia after a US bombing halt. The intelligence community, as well as most CIA analysts who participated in preparing the SNIE, generally agreed with the estimate on the post-bombing situation and it was not changed materially from the original draft.

The major judgments in the SNIE on this subject are contained in Section III, "Prospects if US Bombing is Ended in the Near Term." This section begins with the observation that "the shock (of a bombing halt) would be profound." It goes on to state that "FANK's demoralization would be accelerated, and the army would cease to pose any significant impediment to Communist military action, except perhaps around Phnom Penh itself. The import of both military and civilian supplies would be severely curtailed as the Communists moved to cut the major supply routes..." The impact of a bombing halt on government leaders is addressed in paragraph 12, which concludes that "Despair would be the overwhelming reaction, accompanied by the belief that it was only a matter of time before the Communists in one way or another gained predominant, if not total, control of the country."

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The SNIE's next three paragraphs estimate probable Communist intentions in light of the foregoing circumstances. Paragraph 13 leads off by stating that "Hanoi and the Khmer insurgents might be sorely tempted to press for a complete military takeover. Their chances of accomplishing this would be good, and they might be able to pull it off without a significant commitment of North Vietnamese forces to the effort. Even so, in the belief that time was on their side in any event, they would probably want to test other means to achieve their ends before launching any all-out military effort."

Paragraph 14 opens with the view that "instead of a strictly military approach to the Cambodian situation in the wake of an end to US bombing, the Communists would be more likely to opt for a political solution, accompanied by considerable military pressure. It ends by stating that "with the removal of the US aerial umbrella, the non-Communist position could only get worse. Pressures in Phnom Penh for some kind of a deal, however disadvantageous, to bring the fighting to an end would mount."

It is clear in retrospect that some of the judgments in the SNIE were in error. For example, the military capability of the FANK was underestimated; and its ability to bring in supplies was overly downgraded. Perhaps the basic mistake contributing to these misjudgments was the failure of any of the analysts, or of other elements of the intelligence community, to come specifically to grips then with the issue of insurgent military strength and sustaining power. We now know that it was not as good as the unstudied wisdom held it to be and that the insurgent strength was badly sapped by losses sustained in the last, greatly stepped-up phase of the US bombing campaign.

It is not clear in retrospect whether a pointed study of insurgent capabilities would have revealed this weakness at the time the SNIE was prepared. We doubt it. The fact that a great step-up in bombing was to take place was not revealed to the analysts involved, nor could they have judged with confidence that the insurgents would mount extensive operations in the last weeks of the bombing that would make them particularly vulnerable. As the insurgent weaknesses became evident after the SNIE, they began to be reported in CIA publications.

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Moreover, if the SNIE was unduly gloomy about Phnom Penh's prospects, it should be noted that it was written at a time when FANK's military fortunes were at a particularly low ebb. And if the SNIE seemed unduly optimistic about the prospects for a political solution, it should be noted that there still appeared to be some good arguments in late May that the other side might be willing to talk on acceptable terms. Whatever the case, the basic issue -- the survivability of the Lon Nol Government -- is still open to question.

In the weeks that elapsed between the approval of the SNIE and the mid-August bombing halt, CIA judgments and predictions on the evolving situation in Cambodia were confined almost exclusively to a number of OCI articles (primarily in the CIB) and briefings prepared for the Director (primarily for WSAG meetings). Most of these focused on Khmer Communist military capabilities, and on the declining prospects for any negotiations. A chronology of the most pertinent CIBs and briefings -- with key observations and judgments -- follows:

4 June CIB: "The significant drop-off in the level of the fighting in the past few days appears in part due to the deterioration of Khmer Communist combat capabilities. Ac-

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18 June DCI briefing:

"It remains to be seen if the Khmer Communists can maintain a high-level of combat throughout the rainy season. Many of their units have been on the offensive for over three months and have been hit hard by US air strikes."

6 July CIB:

Sihanouk's tough line on negotiations "indicates that he and the Communists have been emboldened

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by the announcement of the 15 August US combat ban and plan to stand on their present demands in the belief that the US must eventually accede to them as the price for a truce."

10 July WSAG briefing:

"It seems likely that the Vietnamese and Khmer Communists will pursue a very hard line on negotiations and defer any major military action at least until the end of the rainy season...the Communists will, however, keep up the present level of pressure against the Phnom Penh government...(but) the Communists may not be able to sustain a high level of combat indefinitely."

24 July WSAG briefing:

"The government appears unable to do much to counter Communist (military) pressure and the situation is unlikely to improve with the end of US air support...the present military situation could drag on in the Phnom Penh region for some time with only slow deterioration--since the insurgents evidently do not wish to attack the capital frontally."

3 August CIB:

The article notes that some insurgent officials in the Phnom Penh area conceded in mid-July that the US air strikes had inflicted heavy casualties, disrupted supply lines, and impeded their plans to force a collapse of the Lon Nol regime.

7 August WSAG briefing:

"The military situation in Cambodia is bleak. The Khmer Communists are seriously threatening Phnom Penh on at least two fronts."

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9 August WSAG briefing:

"The military situation around Phnom Penh has improved somewhat...some insurgent units are beginning to pull back. [REDACTED]"

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indicate the insurgents have suffered heavy losses from US air attacks, and have at least localized supply shortages...we simply do not know how quickly they will be able to mount new attacks."

13 August CIB: The article reports that military activity in the Phnom Penh area is at its lowest level since April and again calls attention to Communist manpower and supply problems. 25X1

14 August CIB: [REDACTED] judges that "a major offensive against Phnom Penh on such short notice is probably beyond their present capabilities." 25X1

15 August CIB: The article states that FANK should be able to withstand any attacks that the insurgents are likely to mount in the next few days.

16 August CIB: It reports that the planned insurgent offensive in the Phnom Penh area has been rescheduled for 21 August but observes "that it is possible that there could be further delays in the enemy's timetable."

20 August CIB: The article reports that there has been little significant military activity in the Phnom Penh area since 15 August, and notes that "insurgent plans for their new offensive have made no mention of a sudden, concerted thrust against Phnom Penh itself."

24 August CIB: This final entry reports that the insurgent offensive has been delayed until 25 August, and states that "a major coordinated effort may be beyond Communist capabilities at this time," and that "the insurgents may not be able to meet the deadline of 25 August."

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Some of these CIBs and most of the DCI briefings also included judgments about the government's political viability and FANK's chances for showing significant improvement. CIA's assessments on these two vital subjects have consistently been on the apprehensive and pessimistic side. Following are representative key judgments in these areas:

15 June Weekly
Review:

The article notes that "since the new cabinet headed by Prime Minister In Tam was installed...neither the cabinet nor the ruling High Political Council has made any significant effort to meet the country's priority military and economic problems. It concludes with the judgment that "although In Tam is willing to stay in office...the chances that he and the council will be able to provide a semblance of effective government remain poor."

18 June DCI
briefing:

"The Cambodian Army is also having its problems...it is largely a demoralized and defensive-minded force."

18 July CIB:

In reviewing the military situation over the past two months, the article states that "Prospects for any dramatic improvement in the Cambodian Army's performance are bleak." Also, "Corruption, poor tactical planning, and mismanagement of resources at command levels continue to compound lackluster field leadership, and morale--already precarious in a number of outfits--shows signs of falling even further as the bombing deadline approaches."

7 August WSAG
briefing:

"This (political) bickering illustrates what may prove to be the most serious aspect of the situation--namely, increasing stress and friction at the top levels in Phnom Penh."

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As tensions mount, the risk of a rupture within the leadership increases proportionately, and the government could fly apart with little or no warning."

15 August CIB:

The article reports that "Government and military leaders...are expressing confidence that government forces can hold their own. But if a defeatist mood develops, even moderate Communist pressure could cause FANK resistance to crumble quickly."

Despite the misgivings expressed in the above excerpts, the Lon Nol government lurches on and the FANK is still in the field. Recent events have indicated, however, that Phnom Penh's ability to survive thus far without US combat air support is due in large part to flagging insurgent military capabilities. Although it now appears quite clear that the overextension of Khmer Communist military resources and the intensive US bombing campaign has given the government a much-needed respite and some equally essential confidence, it probably has yet to be put to an acid military test by the insurgents.

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