9 May 1973

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Hanoi's Proxy War in Cambodia

SUMMARY

As the cease-fire period enters its fourth month in South Vietnam, the level of military activity is low throughout that country. In Laos, the fighting has almost entirely died out. But in Cambodia, the war is winding on into its fourth year without any hope for a quick or easy cease-fire. Most of the fighting on the enemy side in Cambodia is now being shouldered by increasingly aggressive Khmer Communist forces. But this situation tends to obscure the fact that if it were not for Hanoi's direct involvement and support, the Khmer Communists would not exist as a viable military and political force.

Hanoi created the Khmer Communist Party, trained and equipped the Khmer Communist military machine, and launched the effort to build an extensive Communist infrastructure throughout the Cambodian countryside. Hanoi's troops did the bulk of the fighting in the first two years of the war, and indeed it was the numerous defeats that the North Vietnamese inflicted on the Cambodian Army in those early days that are largely responsible for its present low state of morale and effectiveness.

While the North Vietnamese have reduced considerably the level of their direct participation on the battlefield, they still play a number of vital roles in the war. They are the Khmer Communists' logistical lifeline; they furnish advisors who guide Khmer Communist military units; they provide artillery and occasionally infantry support for their Cambodian clients.

The North Vietnamese also provide strong direction to the Khmer Communists' military strategy, which is determined at least in part by Hanoi's objectives in South Vietnam. For the present, Hanoi is seeing to it that the war in Cambodia continues. The North Vietnamese have yet to show any interest in influencing the Khmer Communists to reduce or stop the struggle. On the contrary, they appear determined to maintain steady military pressure on Phnom Penh. Hanoi's preference for a continuation of the fighting and their uncompromising stand on negotiations are reflected in the activities and policies of the Khmer Communist leadership.

The Viet Minh Era: Laying the Groundwork

Hanoi's interest in establishing its sway over Cambodia is long-standing. In the mid-1940's, Communist Viet Minh elements from South Vietnam established contact with Cambodians seeking independence from France and subsequently organized a "Khmer Viet Minh" faction within the independence movement. This faction was controlled by the Indochina Communist Party under Ho Chi Minh's direction. When that party was scrapped in 1950 and replaced by the Vietnamese Lao Dong Party the following year, indigenous Communist parties were supposed to be set up in both Cambodia and Laos, but the Viet Minh had considerable trouble organizing the Cambodian party. (There is some evidence that the Khmer Communist Party was finally formed in Hanoi in 1961.)

The Viet Minh had a hard time gaining acceptance in Cambodia. They were handicapped by traditional Khmer antipathy toward the Vietnamese and were upstaged by Prince Sihanouk's "crusade" for independence. Still, the Viet Minh persisted and by early 1953 reportedly had assembled a 7,000-man "Cambodian Liberation Army" composed of Cambodian and Viet Minh "volunteers." The political arm of the Viet Minh effort was the "Cadre Affairs Committee," organized at the provincial level.

In late 1953, the Viet Minh were dealt a telling blow when Cambodia gained its virtual independence from France. The following year, at the Geneva Conference, they obtained no concessions on Cambodia, and the Geneva Agreement called on the Viet Minh to withdraw all its military forces from Cambodia. Most of them did withdraw, although some cadre remained behind to engage in limited covert political activities in the countryside.

While the Vietnamese departed openly, the "Khmer Viet Minh"--including a group of montagnard tribesmen from northeastern Cambodia--left in secret for North Vietnam. This force has been estimated to number some three thousand. Additional Cambodians were recruited and dispatched to North Vietnam for intensive political indoctrination and military training in the years that followed, and these

trainees are the hard-core of the current "resistance" movement in Cambodia. Some of them began to return to Cambodia in the late 1960's, while Sihanouk was still in power, and the flow steadily increased after his ouster in 1970. The total number now returned to Cambodia could be as high as 8,000.

The recent interrogation of a young Khmer Communist rallier provides a good example of the time and attention Hanoi devoted to its Cambodian charges. Along with approximately 200 other Khmer from Cambodia and South Vietnam, the rallier left for North Vietnam in late 1964. The group arrived at the "Vietnamese-Khmer Friendship School" in the Hanoi area in the fall of 1965. The school, which served as a reception and administration center, was staffed and run by Cambodians. Most of the trainees at the school were also Cambodians.

After six months of Vietnamese language training, the rallier and his 400 classmates underwent political and ideological indoctrination for a year. This was followed by two years of military training, including the use of all types of weapons and the mastery of sabotage operations. When his formal training ended, the rallier spent a year as a truck driver in China near the North Vietnam border. Before his departure from Cambodia in October 1970, he was kept busy performing onerous "socialist labor tasks" in North Vietnam. His infiltration group consisted of 800 returnees, but because of sickness and death only about 500 arrived in Cambodia's Kratie Province in March 1971.

"Peaceful" Coexistence With Sihanouk

Hanoi's clandestine training of large numbers of Cambodians was a clear sign that the North Vietnamese were planning well ahead for the day when they could no longer count on an accommodating government in Phnom Penh to permit the military use of Cambodian territory in support of aggression in South Vietnam. From 1954 until the late 1960's, Hanoi refrained from any excessive interference in the internal situation in Cambodia. In the late 1950's, the Vietnamese did lend propaganda and

financial support to the pro-Communist Pracheachon (People's) Party in Phnom Penh. This proved to be a bad investment, however, because that small front group never attained a wide popular following. Its above-ground apparatus was effectively destroyed in 1962, when Sihanouk jailed most of its leaders.

Sihanouk's power and popularity are part of the reason the Vietnamse Communists maintained a low political profile. During most of his reign they concentrated on enlisting his support, and for several years in the 1960's they were quite successful in this important undertaking. With a strong assist from Peking, for example, Hanoi saw to it that Sihanouk agreed to and abetted the movement of substantial quantities of arms and ammunition across Cambodia to Communist forces in South Vietnam. This major smuggling operation, which involved the use of the port of Sihanoukville (now renamed Kompong Som), lasted from 1966 to 1969. Sihanouk's willingness to support this operation stemmed in part from his conviction that the US would not stay the course in Indochina.

The Honeymoon Ends

But Hanoi eventually overreached itself in exploiting Cambodia. As the presence and activities of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong in Cambodia became more and more blatant, Sihanouk came under heavy pressure from the US--and to a far lesser extent from some of his more prominent countrymen--to take a tougher line with the Communists. By early 1969, Sihanouk was ready to do so, in large part because of his growing concern over Vietnamese Communist involvement in tribal dissidence in the northeast.

The unrest in that remote area actually began in 1967, when montagnard elements staged several demonstrations protesting local grievances against the government. Throughout the next year, the situation in the northeast became more volatile as the North Vietnamese began arming and training disaffected tribesmen. The Communists directed the montagnards to carry out harassing attacks against Cambodian Army units in Ratanakiri and neighboring provinces to keep them preoccupied and well away

from North Vietnamese base areas and supply and infiltration lines.

Sihanouk also contended that Hanoi had a hand in promoting insurgency in several western provinces. Like the trouble in the northeast, the unrest in the west began in 1967. It was fueled by peasant dissatisfaction over government economic policies and resulted in a series of small attacks on Cambodian Army outposts. Sihanouk attributed the dissidence to "Khmer Viet Minh" cadre who settled in the west in 1954. He also claimed that these cadre had "foreign support."

Whatever the case, the insurgency spread slowly over the following three years. At no time before Sihanouk's ouster did it pose an unmanageable threat to the government's stability, but it did contribute to a significant cooling in relations between Phnom Penh and Hanoi. In the spring of 1969, a disgruntled Sihanouk clamped an embargo on the smuggling of arms through Cambodia to South Vietnam. The embargo remained in effect until September, when Sihanouk was reassured by Hanoi that Vietnamese Communist forces in Cambodia would be more circumspect. The arms shipments to South Vietnam were resumed, but only on a limited basis to test North Vietnamese intentions.

The Vietnamese Communists also irritated Sihanouk through their practice of using Cambodian territory close to the South Vietnam border to shell allied positions in South Vietnam. These attacks were often launched near Cambodian villages in an effort to deter allied forces from retaliating. This "human shield" tactic was not always a successful deterent, however, and a number of Cambodians were killed by allied counterfire.

Sihanouk's failure to react more vigorously to the presence and activities of Vietnamese Communist forces in Cambodia contributed significantly to his downfall. When Sihanouk abruptly left Phnom Penh for France in January 1970, he left the government in the care of Sirik Matak, whose tolerance of the Vietnamese Communists--and of Sihanouk himself--had already worn very thin. To signal their concern

about the problems posed by Vietnamese Communist troops, Matak and those around him who shared his views organized destructive demonstrations in early March in Phnom Penh against the diplomatic installation of North Vietnam and the Provisional Revolutionary Government. When Sihanouk subsequently vowed to punish those responsible for the demonstrations, the political die was cast. On 18 March, Lon Nol and Sirik Matak presided over Sihanouk's ouster as chief of state. Their accession to power resulted in Cambodia's becoming directly involved in the war, and gave Hanoi the opportunity to launch the development of a strong Khmer Communist movement in Cambodia.

Building Up the Khmer Communists

At the time of Sihanouk's deposition, Khmer Communist forces operating throughout the country probably numbered no more than several thousand. By themselves, they clearly had no capabilities for challenging Phnom Penh militarily. This task fell to the Vietnamese Communists, and they responded rapidly. By early April 1970, their troops had begun to move deeper into Cambodia. At the same time that they were carrying the war to the weak and inexperienced Cambodian Army, the Viet Cong started to put out the line that they would "back Cambodian revolutionary forces in the same manner that the Democratic Republic of Vietnam has been backing the Pathet Lao." Orders soon went out to Viet Cong border provinces to prepare to administer adjacent areas in Cambodia and to send advisory groups to their Khmer counterparts in Cambodia. In places where "relations with friends" were lacking, the Viet Cong were ordered "to infiltrate the people and local government to guide them in a struggle against the reactionary gang."

Viet Cong cadre came in small teams of propagandists, security personnel, and Khmer linguists. After entering a Cambodian hamlet or village, they would set up a pro-Sihanouk front committee to govern locally and to form guerrilla and militia units. This type of activity initially was limited to the more readily accessible eastern and southeastern border areas, which already were under de facto Viet Cong influence. This activity was gradually

extended into other sections of the country. By the summer of 1970, for example, some Vietnamese Communist forces had moved as far north as Siem Reap Province, where they occupied the Angkor Wat temple complex. (To this day, the historic ruins are still occupied by a Communist regiment whose troops are predominantly North Vietnamese.)

As their drive into Cambodia proceeded, the Vietnamese Communists' need for Khmer-speaking cadre to help establish a Khmer Communist organization became more pressing. To meet this demand, "Cambodian Proselyting Sections" were sent to enlist ethnic Khmers in South Vietnam's delta area. In addition, cadre from North Vietnam infiltrated into Cambodia in late 1970 and early 1971 to serve as advisors and instructors to fledgling Khmer Communist military and political organizations.

At the outset, the Vietnamese Communists' efforts to develop the Khmer Communists stressed speed over quality. Besides the shortage of seasoned cadre, the Vietnamese had to cope with Cambodian peasants who lacked "political awareness." They also had to contend with deep-seated Khmer racial animosity, which has resulted in some physical confrontations between "teachers" and "pupils." Despite the complications, the persistent Vietnamese plugged away. Over the past two years, with the help of their Hanoi-trained Khmer cadre, they have turned out a sizable and aggressive Khmer Communist regular combat force which is now estimated to total between 40,000 and 50,000 troops.

The Military Apparatus

The development of Khmer Communist military forces deviates from the pyramidal pattern used in South Vietnam. There the Communists first established guerrilla forces at the hamlet and village level, then local force units at the district and province level, and finally units of up to regimental size at the military region level. In Cambodia, because of the pressure of time, all three echelons of the Khmer Communist force structure were created simultaneously. The North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong model served as the principal

elements around which the indigenous Communist forces were established.

Tactical command and control functions in Cambodia were originally handled by Vietnamese Communist officers, but a separate chain of command for the Khmer Communists was gradually developed. It is staffed primarily by Hanoi-trained Khmer. This arrangement not only has helped reduce racial conflict, but also has enabled many Vietnamese Communist cadre to return to South Vietnam. But even more importantly, it left the Khmer Communist fairly well prepared to operate more on their own militarily when most Vietnamese Communist infantry units in Cambodia were committed to the enemy's all-out offensive in South Vietnam last spring.

At present, the identified Khmer Communist command structure consists of the Standing Committee of the "Party Central Committee" (reportedly located near COSVN headquarters in enemy-controlled eastern Cambodia) and six regional organizations in the major geographic areas, which reputedly are responsible for the administration of all military and political affairs within their boundaries. Each region is subdivided into sectors (also known as subregions or zones), districts, and subdistricts. Special military commands have been formed at the local level to conduct specific military operations.

Logistical Support

The Khmer Communists continue to depend on their Vietnamese mentors for weapons and ammunition. Except for relatively small amounts of captured ordnance, Hanoi is the Khmer Communists' only direct source of military supplies. Since early October 1972, the North Vietnamese have moved massive amounts of weapons, ammunition, and armor southward through their logistical networks in southern Laos and eastern Cambodia. Some of these supplies reportedly were earmarked specifically for the Khmer Communists. Sihanouk himself acknowledged the importance of Vietnamese logistical support to the Khmer Communists when he stated publicly last month that his "army" had received enough military hardware via Hanoi and Peking to enable it "to keep fighting until 1975."

Although Sihanouk also stated that the Khmer Communists would not receive any more outside military assistance because such aid is banned by the Paris agreement, aerial observers and low-level sources report that Communist traffic along established water and land supply routes in several sections of Cambodia has not diminished. These supply lines are being maintained by North Vietnamese military rear service units. Other intelligence sources describe the existence of separate Khmer Communist supply lines from major Vietnamese depots in Kratie and Kompong Cham Provinces, areas of considerable enemy logistical activity. There is also fragmentary information which suggests that the Khmer Communists still maintain joint ordnance stockpiles with the North Vietnamese in areas west of the Mekong. (Given the current estimated level of such stockpiles and assuming a continuation of their present rate of expenditures, the Khmer Communists could probably continue fighting for an extended period--even if supply shipments from North Vietnam over the Ho Chi Minh trail in Laos were halted.)

The Political Base

At the same time that the Vietnamese Communists were working to field a viable Khmer Communist military force, they were also building a political organization. This was a relatively simple task in the northeast and in the other areas bordering South Vietnam where a Vietnamese Communist presence had long existed. As the war spread, the Vietnamese and their Hanoi-trained Khmer cadres extended their political influence and administration into the Cambodian interior. This process was--and still is--facilitated by Phnom Penh's failure to use its own military and political resources on a systematic or sustained basis to try to check or reverse the Communists' inroads in the countryside.

Primarily because of the early shortage of trained cadre, the Khmer Communist political apparatus had to be constructed from the top down. Regions were organized and staffed first, and then the sector, district, and lower level agencies. The process has by now reached the hamlet level. Like their military forces, the various components of

the Khmer Communists' administrative structure are modeled on Vietnamese Communist lines. At the region and sector echelons, for example, there are usually sections for finance and economy, propaganda and training, civil health, military and civilian proselyting, and security affairs. In addition to these civilian offices, there are military affairs committees which oversee the region or sector military forces, procure local supplies, and recruit and indoctrinate troops. Over the past year Khmer Communist cadre have begun increasingly to assume control of these offices from their Vietnamese tutors.

Khmer Communist expansion has met little resistance. Standard Vietnamese Communist population control measures, such as strict travel restrictions and local security committees, are used to keep villagers in line. If need be, the Khmer Communists do not hesitate to apply coercive measures on recalcitrant peasants. Uncooperative local officials have been executed, homes have been burned, and entire villages have been forcibly relocated to Khmer Communist-controlled areas.

The Party and Its Leaders

As indicated earlier, the Khmer Communist Party apparently was set up by the North Vietnamese in 1961. Although little hard information is available on the party, certain conclusions about it can be made with some confidence. It is still subservient to Hanoi and its interests on major policy matters. Furthermore, its leadership undoubtedly consists chiefly of those Cambodians who have been and still are being trained in North Vietnam.

In Cambodia, the party leadership is in the hands of three of the key "ministers" in Sihanouk's Peking-based "government." The trio consists of "defense minister" Khieu Samphan, "interior minister" Hou Yuon, and "information minister" Hu Nim. They were first surfaced by the North Vietnamese as the intended leaders of the Cambodian "resistance" on 10 April 1970. On that date, Radio Hanoi issued a statement attributed to the three in which they gave their support to Sihanouk's "five-point program" of 23 March 1970.

The three are all relatively young intellectuals, initially exposed to communism during their student days in France. Throughout much of the 1960's, they were the leaders of the anti-Sihanouk political factions in Phnom Penh. They dropped out of sight in 1967, amid widespread rumors that Sihanouk had had them killed in secret. Because of these rumors, they are frequently alluded to in Phnom Penh and elsewhere as "the three ghosts."

Sihanouk recently has gone to some lengths publicly to refute such rumors. He claims to have met with his three "ministers" during his trip to Cambodia in March. Moreover, he claims that his discussions with them have resulted in their full acceptance of him as both the political and military leader of the "resistance." Although Sihanouk has indicated that the three have also empowered him to speak and act for them on the international plane, he has subsequently stated in a press interview in Peking in late April that any decisions regarding possible peace negotiations involving the US would not be made by him but by Khieu Samphan and other members of the "resistance." This would seem to be an oblique acknowledgement that the North Vietnamese will do the real decision-making on any negotiations concerning Cambodia.

Khmer Communist interests in Peking are represented by Ieng Sary. This shadowy individual arrived in the Chinese capital from Hanoi in the summer of 1971 bearing the title of "special envoy of the interior." Like the "three ghosts," he first came under Communist influence while studying in France. He, too, drew Sihanouk's fire for his leftist activities and, in 1963, went into a long period of hiding--most likely in North Vietnam--that ended only with his emergence in Peking. He has stayed close by Sihanouk's side ever since, and the attention he has received from the North Vietnamese and the Chinese suggests that he is being groomed for future political stardom in Cambodia. Ieng Sary, for instance, has accompanied Sihanouk on all his travels--including the recent trip to Cambodia. This past February, he had a private audience in Hanoi with North Vietnamese Premier Pham Van Dong, an honor previously reserved only for Sihanouk.

Fitting in Sihanouk

Hanoi's interest in Khieu Samphan, Hou Yuon, Hu Nim, and Ieng Sary raised the question of Sihanouk's political future. The North Vietnamese surely appreciate Sihanouk's skills as a propagandist, his ability to attract some international support for his "government" and for the "resistance," and his residual following among the Cambodian peasantry. But, because of his strong nationalism and because of their past uneasy relations with Sihanouk, the North Vietnamese undoubtedly would be most reluctant to allow him to return to Cambodia in any real position of authority. For the time being, they have indicated a willingness to emphasize their backing of Sihanouk as Cambodia's "legitimate chief of state."

To be sure, Hanoi has always issued the required endorsements of Sihanouk's exile "government" and its demands for the ouster of the Lon Nol regime. But it always stopped short of using its leverage to impose Sihanouk on a Khmer Communist leadership hostile to him. This temporizing continued until the Prince's visit to Hanoi in early February. Before leaving Peking, Sihanouk publicly suggested that he was going to Hanoi armed with Chinese advice that he should reassess the situation in Cambodia, especially in view of Phnom Penh's declaration of a unilateral cease-fire. Although the communique issued at the end of Sihanouk's visit did not produce any insights into his relations with the North Vietnamese, it now seems obvious that the visit was used to make the necessary arrangements for Sihanouk's trip in March to the "liberated zone" of Cambodia.

Chinese prodding and Sihanouk's apparent willingness to agree to a circumscribed, if not ultimately expendable, role probably encouraged Hanoi to embrace Sihanouk more ardently. But the catalytic factor may have been Hanoi's own optimistic assessment of the situation in Cambodia. The North Vietnamese saw events in Cambodia developing in their favor far more rapidly than they had anticipated, and probably came to believe that it was possible that the Lon Nol government might collapse from within. With these conditions in mind, Hanoi evidently decided that a timely propaganda and political offensive,

combined with continuing military pressure, might be enough to topple Lon Nol and force negotiations on Communist terms. For Hanoi, this meant setting forth a more fully-shaped "negotiation" position with Sihanouk as a focal point and also putting the arm on those elements within the Khmer Communist movement opposed to him.

Khmer Communist opposition to Sihanouk is well-documented, and Hanoi's ability to keep it under control is another indication of the degree of North Vietnamese leverage over the "resistance." The testimony of a local Khmer Communist official from southeastern Cambodia who rallied in mid-March illustrates this. According to the rallier, the Khmer Communist Regional Committee directed in early March that propaganda in the region should switch to a pro-Sihanouk position--emphasizing that he would be returning to Cambodia as an ordinary citizen, not as a prince. The fact that the directive was issued at the regional level suggests that the pro-Sihanouk line is being peddled throughout the country. The directive's timing also supports the thesis that Hanoi had begun to implement a more positive policy on Sihanouk, shortly after his visit to North Vietnam in February.

Sihanouk's Future

There is no guarantee that Sihanouk can enjoy his present political pre-eminence indefinitely. The Chinese, whom Sihanouk has long regarded as Cambodia's primary benefactor and protector, probably would prefer a future political role for him. Both Hanoi and the Khmer Communists, however, probably would be much more inclined to deal him off if necessary in subsequent negotiations with a government in Phnom Penh. But if he should not prove to be expendable, what kind of role would the Communists allocate to Sihanouk? The Prince himself naturally has given considerable thought to his likely future position--assuming he does eventually return to Cambodia.

In his most recent book, Sihanouk writes that--after long discussions in Peking with Ieng Sary and other "young progressives"--he has agreed to stay

on as "chief of state" of Cambodia. He goes on to say that he will be a "working symbol" of the unity that has been forged between Communist and non-Communist elements of the "resistance struggle." At the same time, he insists that he will "never again take over the reins of government" nor will he "ever wield administrative power as head of state." Sihanouk's speeches since his trip to Cambodia echo these sentiments. In a speech in Pyongyang in mid-April, for example, he pointed to Khieu Samphan, Hou Yuon, and Hu Nim as "the inevitable leaders of Cambodia." This is in line with an earlier public statement that the Khmer Communists--and by inference, Hanoi--will dominate Cambodia's political future.

Despite such seemingly sincere remarks, however, Sihanouk is still Sihanouk. The Communists may fear--with good reason--that the irrepressible and politically astute Prince would try to gain a paramount position in a coalition government regardless of prior assurances that he would play second fiddle to the Khmer Communists. Thus, Sihanouk's precise role in an eventual Cambodian settlement is sure to be an issue requiring additional pulling and hauling between Hanoi and Peking, and with the Khmer Communists.

Hanoi's Short-Term Strategy

From all indications, Hanoi intends to continue to maintain military pressure against the Lon Nol government during the next few months by campaigns against Phnom Penh's lines of communication and by shellings and sapper attacks against the capital itself. These actions will be carried out primarily by Khmer Communist forces because the bulk of the Vietnamese Communist combat units still in Cambodia most likely will remain deployed along the border with South Vietnam's Military Region IV.

Vietnamese Communist combat strength in Cambodia is now at its lowest level--about 5,000 troops--since Communist operations there were initiated in 1970. There are also about 28,400 Vietnamese Communist administrative services personnel in Cambodia primarily engaged in defending and manning

the logistic network which supports Communist forces in South Vietnam. This logistic activity is centered in northeast Cambodia and in the areas bordering South Vietnam. The presence and activities of all these forces in Cambodia are in violation of the Paris Agreement.

On the political side, Hanoi--and the Khmer Communists--can be expected to keep up their present propaganda and psychological offensive against the government in Phnom Penh. Sihanouk's trips to Africa and East Europe this month and next will help fuel this offensive, as will Sihanouk's planned attendance at the non-aligned conference in Algiers later in the summer. In addition, another round of lobbying for the seating of Sihanouk's "government" at the United Nations this fall is probable, with Peking taking the lead.

In the unlikely event that there is some sudden and dramatic improvement in Phnom Penh's political and military fortunes, Hanoi could adjust its current high-pressure strategy on Cambodia. The North Vietnamese have the ability to bring the Khmer Communists to the conference table. They also have the ability to restrain the Khmer Communists militarily, through the withdrawal of logistics and other forms of support. Hanoi's decision to adopt either or both of these options would depend in part on the strength of the opposition in Phnom Penh. But such a decision hinges far more heavily on the degree of big power interest and ability in fashioning a compromise settlement. For the next few months Hanoi probably estimates that it has much to gain and comparatively little to lose by subjecting Phnom Penh's shaky political and military stability to an exacting test.