

15 May 1973

THE IMPACT OF A COMMUNIST CAMBODIA*

SUMMARY

A Communist takeover in Cambodia would have the following results:

- The immediate effect in Saigon would be politically and psychologically unsettling. The GVN would feel vulnerable and isolated, even though the South Vietnamese leaders would probably recognize that the situation in Cambodia would have little immediate impact on the Communist military position in South Vietnam.
- The fall of Cambodia would ease the logistic problems of the Communists in supplying their military forces in South Vietnam, and it would in time give the Communists more flexibility in developing and implementing their future strategies to take over South Vietnam.
- The GVN would almost certainly request additional U.S. economic and military support, including advance assurances of U.S. air support in the event of a Communist offensive in South Vietnam.
- In Thailand, the first reaction to a Communist takeover in Cambodia would be to fall back on the U.S. alliance. The U.S. position in Thailand, however, could be adversely affected since Bangkok tends to view U.S. policy in Cambodia as a gauge of the reliability of the U.S. commitment to Thailand.

*This memorandum assumes that the Communists take over Cambodia under conditions where it is clear that the Communist regime is little more than a stooge for Hanoi and that the U.S. did not find it feasible to intervene to prevent the takeover.

1. Political and Psychological Implications: The most immediate and damaging consequences of a Communist victory in Cambodia would be the political and psychological fallout in South Vietnam and, though to a lesser degree, in other neighboring countries. The effect on Saigon would be highly unsettling, producing a feeling within the GVN of greater vulnerability and isolation. The GVN accepted the Paris Agreements with reluctance (and only under considerable U.S. pressure); Communist acquisition of control over Cambodia would be read in Saigon as a sign that an essential element of the Paris Agreements had been lost.

2. The degree of apprehension in the GVN would depend on the precise circumstances of a Communist victory in Cambodia, i.e., how much or how little the U.S. did to prevent it. The GVN would want to test what the fall of Cambodia meant for South Vietnam. A request for new U.S. guarantees of economic and military support would be almost certain, and Saigon would also press for advance assurances of U.S. air support in the event of a Communist offensive into South Vietnam

from Cambodia. The GVN would anticipate Hanoi's use of the sanctuary to position additional heavy military equipment and personnel.

3. Despite their concerns and fears over Cambodia's fall, the South Vietnamese leaders would probably also recognize the fact that the situation in Cambodia would have little short-term impact on the Communist position in South Vietnam. They would not anticipate an early weakening of their military or political strength as a result of a hostile regime in Phnom Penh, though they would probably try to convince Washington otherwise.

4. One reaction of the Thieu government, uncertain about the precise impact of a Communist Cambodia on the struggle in South Vietnam, would be to tighten its own hand. This could mean greater political restrictions at home and a less forthcoming approach to negotiations in Paris with the Viet Cong -- particularly if Saigon thinks that U.S. support is diminishing and its image in the U.S. less critical.

5. The Effects in Laos and Thailand: The fall of Cambodia would be discouraging to non-Communists in Laos,

although the immediate impact on events there would be limited. Both sides in Laos are basically observing the cease-fire and appear to be seriously negotiating in the political arena.

6. The political and psychological impact in Thailand, however, would be greater. Bangkok has made it clear that it looks to the U.S. to prevent a Communist takeover in Cambodia. As a result, Thailand tends to view U.S. policy in Cambodia as a gauge of the reliability of the U.S. commitment to Thailand. If Cambodia, shorn of U.S. support, went under to the Communists, Bangkok's first instinctive reaction would be to fall back on its alliance with the U.S. At the same time, there would be a heightened tendency in Thailand for taking a harder look at the relative advantages and disadvantages of allowing U.S. air bases to remain in Thailand. The Thai leadership would want to see some new and concrete assurances of U.S. support -- probably in the form of greatly increased economic and military aid. If, in the aftermath of a Communist victory in Cambodia, the U.S. did not respond in a manner satisfactory to the Thai leaders, they might be prompted to undertake a basic reexamination of Thailand's policy of close association with the U.S.

7. Easing of Communist Logistic Burdens: The greatest military gain accruing to the Communists from their control of Cambodia would be an easing of their heavy logistical burden. No longer would Communist fortunes in southern South Vietnam depend so heavily on the long and costly overland support corridor through southern Laos and Cambodia. They could begin to shift more of their logistic effort to a sea supply route through southern Cambodia. Small-scale sea supply through Cambodia is already possible since the Communists control or have easy access to much of the Cambodian coastline and interior adjacent to South Vietnam. A larger effort, however, would be easier with the acquisition of Cambodia's port facilities. But, Hanoi's ability to make extensive use of Kompong Som in this manner would depend, of course, on the willingness of Peking and Moscow to provide the material and possibly the shipping for such an effort. It would also depend on Kompong Som's vulnerability to air attack or naval quarantine.

8. The Communists would by no means abandon their overland routes from the north. Indeed, they have already improved their capability to resupply their forces in northern

South Vietnam directly across the DMZ, and are at work on developing routes that would allow them to resupply southern South Vietnam while bypassing Cambodia and Laos. The development of a Cambodian sea supply route would simplify Communist military imports and assist this effort to deemphasize their dependence on the Ho Chi Minh trail system. Some of the North Vietnamese logistics force structure in southern Laos and northeastern Cambodia could be released for duty elsewhere.

9. In addition to these logistical advantages, a takeover of Cambodia by the Communists might give them a substantial inventory of Cambodian government equipment, some of which could be diverted to South Vietnam. In addition, the sizable amounts of arms and ammunition stockpiled by the Communists in Cambodia, which is designated for the fighting there, could be made available to Communist forces in South Vietnam.

10. Immediate Military Impact on South Vietnam: A Communist takeover in Cambodia would not result in a major shift in the present balance of military power in South Vietnam, but could in time give the Communists more flexibility in developing and implementing their future strategy in South Vietnam. In a

strictly military sense, the Communists already have more or less what they need in Cambodia for continuing the war in South Vietnam. A Communist takeover in Cambodia, however, would permit Hanoi to divert additional military manpower to South Vietnam. The Vietnamese Communists currently are estimated to have about 5,000 regular combat troops in Cambodia, though most of those are already targetted against South Vietnam. A cessation of hostilities in Cambodia would free the remainder for deployment to South Vietnam. But the impact of such an augmentation in Communist strength would not be great, since the NVA/VC combat strength in South Vietnam's Military Regions (MR) 3 and 4 -- the areas to which the units in Cambodia most likely would be deployed -- is now estimated to total about 54,000 troops.