

15 May 1973

THE IMPACT OF A COMMUNIST CAMBODIA

SUMMARY

A Communist takeover in Cambodia would have the following results:

- It would be very unsettling politically and psychologically to the South Vietnamese government and the South Vietnamese population. The GVN would feel increasingly isolated and beleaguered. It would regard a Communist Cambodia as evidence of U.S. determination to disengage from Indochina and a sign of U.S. unwillingness to insist on Communist compliance with the provisions of the Paris Agreements.
- The U.S. position in Thailand would also be adversely affected, because Bangkok views U.S. policy in Cambodia as a gauge of the reliability of the U.S. commitment to Thai security.
- The fall of Cambodia would markedly ease the logistic problems of the Communists in supplying their military forces in South Vietnam.
- It would in sum make it easier for Hanoi to achieve its goal of taking over South Vietnam, either by the political struggle route or by a return to military struggle.

1. Political and Psychological Implications: The most damaging consequences of a Communist victory in Cambodia would be the political and psychological fallout in South Vietnam and other neighboring countries. The immediate 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. To the GVN, Article 20 -- stating that all signing parties would refrain from using the territory of Cambodia and Laos to encroach on others' sovereignty and security -- was a central element of the agreement, without which the GVN would have been adamantly unwilling to sign an agreement that turned a blind eye to the presence of North Vietnamese forces in South Vietnam. Communist acquisition of control over Cambodia would be read in Saigon as a sign that Article 20 had been abandoned and the GVN betrayed.

2. Saigon would make no precipitate moves, but South Vietnamese leaders would be concerned that U.S. failure to prevent a Communist takeover in Cambodia would presage total U.S. disengagement from Indochina and a U.S. unwillingness

to insist on Communist compliance with the Paris Agreements. Even though the immediate military threat to South Vietnam might not be markedly increased, GVN military leaders would be very fearful about the longer term threat to a Communist-surrounded South Vietnam. On the diplomatic front, South Vietnam would almost certainly request new U.S. guarantees of economic and military assistance, and new assurances of U.S. air support in the event of a major Communist attack. Saigon would react with even greater alarm if Hanoi began to ship large amounts of heavy military equipment into Cambodia or to develop and use Cambodian air facilities.

3. The Effects in Laos and Thailand: The fall of Cambodia would clearly be discouraging to non-Communists in Laos, although the immediate impact on political events there would be fairly small. The Laos settlement agreement has already guaranteed the Communists indefinite control of eastern Laos and a major role in a new coalition government.

4. The political and psychological fallout in Thailand, however, would be much greater. For obvious reasons, Bangkok has a sizable stake in neighboring Cambodia and Laos and has

made it clear that it looks to the U.S. to prevent a Communist takeover in either country. In other words, Bangkok views U.S. policy in Cambodia as a gauge of the reliability of the U.S. commitment to Thai security. 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. and look to Washington for protection. It would not be likely to take any major military action, such as moving its forces into western Cambodia without guarantees <sup>of</sup> ~~for~~ full U.S. support.

5. A Communist Cambodia, however, would prompt a basic reexamination of Thailand's close political and military ties with the U.S. If, in Thai eyes, the U.S. "allowed" Cambodia to fall, Bangkok, for one thing, would take 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. To date, the Thai government has for the most part ignored growing domestic pressure to reconsider the U.S. alliance and move to a non-aligned policy. If, in the aftermath of a Communist victory

in Cambodia, the U.S. cannot respond sufficiently with new aid and commitments to satisfy Thai doubts, these pressures would escalate and jeopardize the existing close cooperation between Washington and Bangkok.

6. 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 supply corridor through southern Laos and Cambodia. They could begin to shift more of their logistic effort to a sea supply route through southern Cambodia. There is nothing to prevent small-scale sea supply through Cambodia at present 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 require an end to the fighting in Cambodia and the acquisition of Cambodia's port facilities.

7. The development of a Cambodian sea supply route could in time give the Communists much greater flexibility in developing and implementing their future military strategy in Vietnam.

Large amounts of war material, including the heavy weapons needed to mount a major offensive, could be brought in through the port of Kompong Som much more quickly and with much less warning than if delivered overland from the north. This was precisely the advantage that the Communists enjoyed for several years prior to Sihanouk's ouster in March 1970, when Kompong Som was the main port of entry for North Vietnamese military supplies consigned to southern South Vietnam. 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 immunity from 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 apparently 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, however, would

simplify Communist military imports and assist this effort to phase out or deemphasize their dependence on the existing Ho Chi Minh trail system. The largest part of the North Vietnamese force structure in southern Laos -- which is logistics related -- could be withdrawn without waiting for the development of overland supply routes through South Vietnam to the south.

9. Immediate Military Impact on South Vietnam: Although a Communist takeover in Cambodia would not immediately shift the balance of military power in a major way, it would still improve the position of VC/NVA forces significantly. The Vietnamese Communists currently are estimated to have about 5,000 regular combat troops in Cambodia, most of whom are already targeted against South Vietnam. (This total also includes, however, sapper and artillery elements operating with Khmer Communist units and an unknown number of advisors.) A cessation of hostilities in Cambodia would free almost all of these troops for deployment to South Vietnam. 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, this would be an augmentation of some ten percent.

10. In the longer term, the Communists would have access to a jet airbase at Phnom Penh, as well as several smaller airfields closer to the border which could be used to provide air support in South Vietnam. Moreover, the Communists might acquire a substantial inventory of Cambodian government helicopters and propeller-driven tactical aircraft, naval craft, artillery, and other hardware. 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.