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The Kampuchean Third Force Alternative: Characters in Search of an Author

The Kampuchean "third force" alternative to the Pol Pot and Heng Samrin regimes consists of a number of disparate groups that operate along the Thailand-Kampuchea border. Lacking overall unity or leadership, the many movements are loosely linked

Although their search for outside patronage has so far had only limited success, third force elements may rise in importance should Pol Pot's survival be seriously in doubt.

Third force resistance is based on ethnic war against the Vietnamese. Although all of the groups are avowedly anti-Communist, a promise of support or collaboration could promote cooperation with ideologically opposed forces.



The present level of third force military activity appears fairly low as the various leaders adopt a wait-and-see attitude while continuing to proselytize.

The number of third force adherents observed in camps just over the Thai border in Kampuchea has recently been estimated as high as 150,000--including soldiers, supporters, and hangers-on. Residents of one camp, nominally under a single leader, were thought to total 20,000.

The Sihanouk Factor

The most unique figure in the third force has not even taken the field--the former Kampuchean head of

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state, Prince Norodom Sihanouk. Still in exile, the Prince formed a Confederation of Khmer Nationalists at a meeting in Pyongyang, North Korea, late in September. His supporters come from the Paris-based General Association of Khmers Abroad, an umbrella organization for non-Communist Kampuchean exile groups. Former Lon Nol officials In Tam and Cheng Heng figure prominently among Sihanouk's subordinates.

[REDACTED]

Sihanouk sees Pol Pot as his primary enemy.

[REDACTED]

Sihanouk was offered a leadership position months ago in a pro-Chinese, Democratic Kampuchean state, but rejected the Chinese-dictated terms, particularly a requirement to cooperate with Pol Pot. Sihanouk assumes that he must inevitably emerge as leader and unifier of the third force factions. He appears to count on the support of even those individuals who have remained steadfastly independent of him, assigning roles to various characters who have not yet agreed to play.

[REDACTED]

The Khmer Serei

Independently led anti-Communist groups known collectively as Khmer Serei (Free Khmer) have long been an irritant to various Kampuchean governments. Each Khmer Serei camp appears to function with near autonomy in a plethora of self-proclaimed liberation movements. Khmer Serei obtain supplies at thriving markets a short distance across the border in Thailand. Compared to the Pol Pot forces, the Khmer Serei living standard is reputedly higher, their fighting ability lower.

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In Tam, former Prime Minister under Lon Nol and Sihanouk's choice as military head, is claimed to have 6,000 armed and loyal Khmer Serei soldiers. In the absence of an effective chain of command, however, what--if any--functional power he exercises is not clear. The relationship of Sihanouk to the welter of Khmer Serei groups is also ambiguous. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Some of the latter reportedly say they are fighting for the prince even without his knowledge of their existence. [REDACTED]

The so-called Khmer Liberation Movement currently seems the most significant and cohesive among third force organizations. Its leader, Son Sann, who on 9 October declared the creation of the Khmer People's National Liberation Front, is also president of the General Association of Khmers Abroad. Dien Del, a former Lon Nol general, is military chief. Clashes with the Vietnamese have been alleged, but the movement's current strategy is to lie low, avoiding contact, and building a popular political infrastructure. The underlying tenet of the movement is that Khmer nationalism and hatred of the Vietnamese will eventually compel the invaders to withdraw. [REDACTED]

China's Game

China's fondest hopes for the third force seem predicated on the integration of Pol Pot forces and other resistance groups into a unified front. One Chinese scenario proposes close military and political cooperation between Son Sann and Pol Pot forces, with Sihanouk prominently brought into the coalition. [REDACTED]

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An attempt toward the creation of a united front was the proclamation by Pol Pot representatives in Beijing on 6 September of the Patriotic and Democratic Front of Great National Unity. [REDACTED]

Should Pol Pot's forces deteriorate beyond a certain point, his backers may consider it worthwhile to increase support to other groups so that they could function either as reinforcements or new alternatives. A promise of considerable aid could go far toward lowering existing ideological barriers. In such a case, the third force could play a critical part in keeping alive the resistance to the Heng Samrin regime and the Vietnamese. [REDACTED]

Current reports of guerrilla resistance in Kampuchea indicate few or no areas that are completely safe for the Vietnamese and Heng Samrin forces. Troops controlling major towns and roads are susceptible to ambush, and their grip on the countryside is even more tenuous. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Though the Vietnamese are not likely to be driven out, they will continue to encounter resistance that will waste and debilitate their manpower and resources. [REDACTED]

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