

Cambodia's Role in Shipping Arms to Communist Forces in South Vietnam, 1966–70: Competing CIA and US Military Estimates

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From the Introduction to ER IM 70-188, December 1970.

In September 1970, this Agency [CIA] published ER IM [Economic Research Intelligence Memorandum] 70-126, New Evidence On Military Deliveries to Cambodia: December 1966 – April 1969, which presented our preliminary analysis of documentary evidence on the flow of military supplies to VC/NVA forces via the port of Kompong Som (Sihanoukville). Since the publication of IM 70-126, CIA has received and made available to the community more than 12,000 pages of additional documentation providing detailed and highly reliable data on the scope and nature of the Communists' logistic activities carried out through Cambodia to support VC/NVA forces in South Vietnam.

A special task force set up to exploit these documents has completed its validation and analysis of the new evidence, and this memorandum is the first product resulting from that effort. This memorandum presents revisions of the estimates made in IM 70-126 of the volume of military supplies delivered via Sihanoukville from December 1966 to April 1969 as well as new data on some overland deliveries via Laos.¹ (This article originally appeared in Studies in June 2024.)



With that extraordinary introduction to its revised estimates, CIA essentially signaled that it had finally lost its extended debate with the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) and other military commands about the quantities and delivery routes of ordnance shipped through Cambodia to North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Viet Cong (VC) units in South Vietnam. It was a consequential dispute, the outcome of which had the potential to influence US decisions to widen the Vietnam War to Cambodia and alter or end bombing campaigns in Laos.

At cost to CIA's credibility with the Nixon administration, its analysts

had misinterpreted the importance of the People's Republic of China's shipments into Cambodia's relatively new port, Sihanoukville, and underestimated the amount of ordnance being transported from there to communist forces in South Vietnam.

Vietnam-based military intelligence, in contrast, had consistently offered higher and—in hindsight—more accurate figures about tonnage reaching the communists through Cambodia. Gen. Bruce Palmer, a deputy commander of US Army forces in South Vietnam (1966–67), wrote in his 1984 assessment in this journal of the IC's performance during the Vietnam War that the

The views, opinions, and findings of the author expressed in this article should not be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations or representing the official positions of any component of the United States government.

failure was “one of the very few times CIA and the Washington-based IC made a major misjudgment with respect to the Vietnam War.”² This essay uses declassified CIA and military records to account for the failure while attempting to assess why MACV’s estimates were closer to the mark.

The Beginning of the Unraveling of CIA’s Position

As the introduction to ER IM 70-188 tacitly noted, CIA’s failure became apparent after improvements in human intelligence (HUMINT) reporting begun by 1968 on the so-called Sihanoukville Route led to the acquisition of more than 12,000 pages of manifests and shipping documents of Chinese merchant ships offloading arms in Sihanoukville. This material provided extraordinarily detailed and reliable evidence about the magnitude of the Sino-Cambodian transshipment effort.³

The evidence provided a new, reliable baseline for assessing the validity of MACV and CIA estimates on the flow of munitions into South Vietnam. The shipping manifests and other documents supported the conclusion that CIA analysts had repeatedly underestimated the extent of PRC arms deliveries to Sihanoukville, its relative importance, and the quantity of weapons and ammunition transshipped from there to enemy forces in South Vietnam.

For example, even in mid-1970, CIA judged that only 7,100 tons of ordnance (part of a total of 11,200 tons of all military supplies) had been delivered via Sihanoukville; MACV, by contrast, had estimated 17,800 tons of ordnance alone.⁴ ⁵ With the

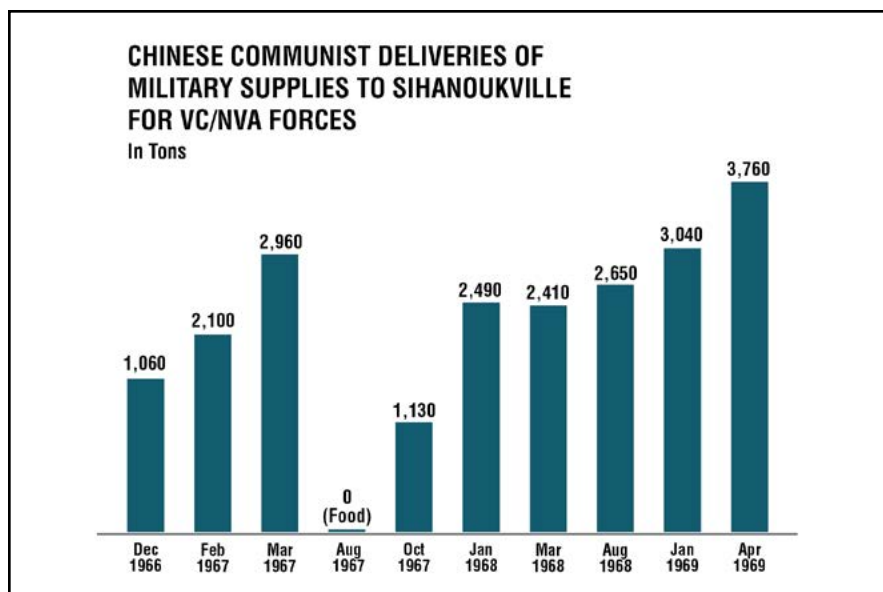
publication of ER IM 70-188 and a followup unclassified memorandum in February 1971, CIA revised its estimate to state more than 21,000 tons of munitions actually had been delivered along the Sihanoukville Route. (See bar graph below.)⁶

As we will see in this article, the divergences in CIA and MACV assessments reflected differences in how both organizations used evidence to answer key intelligence questions about the Sihanoukville Route. The questions pertained to the amount, composition, and ultimate destination for unidentified cargo delivered during at least nine port visits of PRC-flagged ships to Sihanoukville following a military agreement signed between Cambodia and China in October 1966. Subsidiary questions included the role of the alternative delivery route overland down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the amount of non-military cargo included in the Chinese deliveries, and the split in deliveries between the Cambodian

military and the NVA/VC. MACV would argue that most of the cargo was arms and ammunition intended for transshipment to enemy forces in much of South Vietnam. CIA argued that the tonnage of munitions being delivered could not be reliably estimated from the available sources, but it was likely to be much less than the amounts MACV estimated.

The Problem of Sources and Analytic Rigor

The multi-year debate between CIA (and other elements of the IC) and MACV shows that understanding the Sihanoukville issue was *not* straightforward, given major intelligence gaps and troves of human intelligence reports of questionable provenance. The suspect nature of the available evidence helps explain why a top-notch team of seasoned logistics analysts at CIA fared so poorly in assessing a critical line of communication while counterparts in MACV



This bar graph contained in the February 5, 1971, memorandum shows the 21,600 tons of total volume of PRC military supply shipments (ordnance [21,000] and non-ordnance) aboard 10 freighters unloaded in Sihanoukville from December 1966 through April 1969.

J-2 devised far more accurate tonnage estimates.

The CIA Point of View

The logistics experts in the CIA's Office of Economic Research (OER) were respected for their earlier work in analyzing the effects of the Rolling Thunder bombing campaign.⁷ They had also had a long record of evaluating the economic aspects of threats posed by the Soviet Union. According to a heavily redacted, declassified study of the Sihanoukville case by contract CIA historian Thomas Ahern in 2004,^{8, a} OER analysts displayed great trust in their technically more rigorous conceptual models and their judgment of all-source reporting than did their counterparts in military intelligence. Analysts in OER also conducted periodic internal reviews that challenged the methodologies and conclusions of their previous analyses, according to Ahern.⁹ Unfortunately, the results also revealed flawed assumptions about transportation facilities through Cambodia and about projected VC logistic requirements, according to Ahern's treatment of the subject in his recently published memoir.¹⁰

The CIA team was most vexed by the challenge of finding HUMINT sources which were deemed reliable but also offering sufficiently broad perspective for national-level finished intelligence reporting. CIA official documents and oral histories reveal the agency's high standards of analytic tradecraft for using HUMINT

a. Ahern's monograph, *Good Questions, Wrong Answers* provides a superb baseline for understanding the CIA-MACV debate. The book informed some of my conclusions here. Most of the raw reporting Ahern used has not been declassified so could not be weighed independently.

CIA Views on Reliability of Evidence

The following characterizations—relying on Ahern's study, declassified contemporaneous analytic products, and memoirs and biographies of CIA officials—reveal how fraught was the process of evaluating Sihanoukville HUMINT, particularly when trying to judge reporting from theater-controlled collection assets. Describing the difficulty of the process, Ahern wrote, "the Sihanoukville traffic required interpretation of each report, source authenticity and reliability, the access of both primary and subsources, and the inherent plausibility of content." He summarized: "Even the best reporting, up to the spring of 1969, was low-level and incomplete."^a Additional observations include the following.

Sihanoukville as an analytical problem arose in a welter of raw reports, some of them alleging an arms traffic that did not exist for a full two years after the first claims for it.

Fanciful early allegations of deliveries through Sihanoukville inevitably and, to a point, legitimately discredited agent reporting. When knowledgeable CIA sources began producing better information, some of it as early as 1967, it was at first fragmentary and always subject to inconsistencies and even contradictions.

The modest flow of well-sourced, plausible information tended to be obscured by a flood of less credible material.^b

Retired CIA Deputy Director for Intelligence R. Jack Smith would write of the challenges his analysts faced in his memoir:

Unfortunately, the intelligence reports they had to work with were of poor quality, full of hearsay from third- or fourth-hand sources. Exploiting the shoddy material to the maximum, and guided to a degree by the judgment that the flow down the Ho Chi Minh Trail was in itself almost sizeable enough to account for enemy materiel in South Vietnam, the DI analysts arrived at a figure for tonnage through South Vietnam that was approximately half of MACV's estimate.^c

An October 1969 briefing paper on reporting and CIA analysis on the subject of Sihanoukville's relative importance noted:

In recent months there has accumulated a large body of clandestine reporting that points to Cambodia as an important route for such supplies which, as it is argued, arrive by sea at the port of Sihanoukville and are transported surreptitiously . . . to the South Vietnamese border.^d

A January 1970 memo addressed to Secretary of Defense Laird observed:

Our knowledge of supply movements through Cambodia has improved markedly over the past several months. . . . Nonetheless, we are not able to quantify the "Cambodian flow" with precision to permit meaningful arithmetic comparison with the Laotian flow.^e

a. Thomas L Ahern, Jr., *Good Questions, Wrong Answers*, 18, 41.

b. All quotes are from *Good Questions, Wrong Answers*, vii, 48 and 9, respectively.

c. R. Jack Smith, *The Unknown CIA: My Three Decades with the Agency* (Pergamon-Brassey's International Defense Publishers, Inc., 1989), 34–35.

d. CIA report, "An Evaluation of Recent Clandestine Reporting on Cambodia," October 1969, iii, in [3] CIA-RDP78T02095R000200090001-8).

e. DCI Richard Helms to Secretary of Defense Laird, January 28, 1970, forwarding blind memo "Logistics Flow to the Enemy in South Vietnam," in [5] CIA-RDP78T02095R000600200001-1).

MACV admitted that many of its sources were low level but wrote that it had access to more reliable ones. Describing ordnance shipments through Sihanoukville, the Combined Intelligence Center wrote in May 1968 that they used “mostly low-level sources, many of which are unconfirmed, laced with ambiguity, and even in some cases fabricated.”

reports and skepticism about many of the reports coming in about the Sihanoukville Route. Summaries of the reporting reveal that few sources thought to be reliable were evident during much of the route’s existence. Even by late 1968, CIA reporting suggested only modest improvements in sources, although OER analysts concluded they had sufficient evidence to show complicity by elements of the Cambodian government in shipping military supplies to Vietnam.¹¹

That modest judgment, as we have seen in the late 1970 and early 1971 memorandums cited above, turned into the view that Cambodia had “acquired significance” as an arms supply channel in the last two or so years, although the alternative route through Laos continued to be the “predominant” supply channel.¹² The Sihanoukville Route by then carried as much as half of the military supplies destined for Communist forces in the southern part of South Vietnam, according to the revised CIA estimate.¹³

The MACV Point of View

In contrast, MACV and subordinate commands judged they had good sources by 1968, notwithstanding the IC’s reservations and the suspicion that theater analysts were accepting sources and reporting with unwarranted credulity. Oral histories suggested that leaders in theater had better faith in some of the sources

than their CIA counterparts, although MACV did divide some of the reports into “probable” and “possible” categories. Additionally, CIA and MACV in some instances may have been referring to the same higher-quality sources that had begun to appear in 1968.

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Under Adm. Elmo Zumwalt (Commander, Naval Forces Vietnam (CNFV)) and his deputy for intelligence, Capt. Rex Rectanus, MACV and CNFV made inroads against the Sihanoukville target in 1968. Gen. Phillip Davidson, the MACV J-2, lauded CNFV’s success in his oral history:

They had some agents working in Sihanoukville. They began to

put this stuff together, and they came up one day, and we had a big briefing and talk, and I said, “Well, it sounds really good, but I don’t think we have enough to really go public with it at this time. Let’s just keep watching it.” And we did, and they were very convincing, I thought.¹⁷

Admiral Zumwalt also praised the theater intelligence effort in his autobiography: “He (Rectanus) had a very good network of agents in Cambodia, and he had a good network within the South Vietnamese. We were getting, generally, very good intelligence.”¹⁸ Zumwalt continued, saying that Rectanus

had completed an analysis of the entire VC logistics system that proved to be more accurate than anything either CIA or DIA had. He was the first person to conclude that Cambodia had become the major logistics depot for the VC delta operations and that this depot was being reinforced by Communist shipping into Sihanoukville and then by truck to the Cambodia border.¹⁹

Even with what he considered to be good sources during his 1968–69 tour, Rectanus subsequently recalled that convincing national-level intelligence analysts of Cambodia’s logistics role in the conflict was problematic:

The analysts that they (CIA and State) sent out there on numerous occasions just couldn’t be budged. Now (I don’t know) whether it’s because the analysts themselves really didn’t believe us, didn’t believe that our analysis was good as it was (although we went over everything with

them ad nauseam), or whether they were told by Washington.²⁰

MACV's precise methodology in using each individual report is not available in the declassified documents, but the command seemed to have taken more of a statistical approach than national production centers in compiling its estimates. Implicit in some of the theater estimates seemed to be the concept that the more reports stating an event had occurred—however tactical they might be—the more probable it was. Reading the summaries from the command today almost seems like reviewing an early form of crowd-sourcing.

MACV several times referred to the number of reports as probable evidence of the reliability of an estimate. MACV Commander Gen. Creighton Abrams, for example, repeatedly used this technique in a “personal for” message transmitted to the chairman of JCS, in December 1968.²¹ He sprinkled reporting statistics throughout the message. Building a case for the complicity of the Cambodian army (known as the FARK, from the French *Forces Armées Royales Khmères*), he wrote that 29 reports of varying reliability had described enemy personnel in the act of unloading ordnance from Cambodian army vehicles. Continuing to build the argument, Abrams observed that since October 10, 1968, nine reports from fairly reliable sources had implicated senior FARK officers as active participants in the growing arms traffic. Another 33 reports depicted the delivery of ordnance to border areas in II, III, and to a lesser extent in IV Corps.²² This theme of conferring validity based on reporting volume appeared in other MACV estimates.



Map showing the four Corps Tactical Zones or Military Regions of the Vietnam War period. Source: *Studies in Intelligence* special edition, “Intelligence and the Vietnam War,” (1984).

In-Country Meetings to Resolve the Dispute Inconclusive

Senior CIA officials—including DDI Jack Smith, George Carver, and James Graham (Office of National Estimates)—and analysts visited MACV several times between 1966 and 1970 in fruitless attempts to establish common ground on the Sihanoukville question. A summary of a single case illustrates the recurring dynamics of the debate throughout the period. A well-documented exchange between IC analysts led by James Graham and MACV personnel

held in Saigon during November–December 1968 illustrated how issues of sourcing and estimates provided divergent answers to the questions of Sihanoukville’s importance. In this instance, James Graham and members of CIA, DIA, and State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research visited the Commander in Chief/Pacific in Hawaii and major commands in Saigon to address the dispute.²³

They were fully briefed in-country on collection and analysis on

arms shipments via Cambodia. They examined MACV's intelligence holdings, reviewed the methodology used to estimate munitions imports into Sihanoukville, and discussed problems relating to evaluation of intelligence reporting.²⁴ The exchanges revealed convergence on the issue of FARK complicity in the Sihanoukville Route and confirmed that CIA had access to all theater intelligence reports on Sihanoukville. At the same time, the documentation shows the gaps between their positions. The following illustrates elements of the debate.

In Graham's report of the meeting, he wrote that "essential differences" remained between the two commands:

- quantities of arms moving via Sihanoukville to Vietnam,
- the relationship between arms deliveries to Sihanoukville and Cambodian military requirements, and
- the extent to which Communist forces were denied access to other supply routes, notably the overland route through Laos.²⁵

The differences had also been addressed at about the same time in 1968, when reconsideration of US bombing strategy prompted General Abrams to send a cable to Washington strongly denouncing proposals to end US bombing. The Abrams cable led to a flurry of CIA responses, both doubting the utility of the bombing campaign and MACV judgments about the role of Cambodia as a arms supply route, for example:

In our view, MAC-V is considerably overstating Cambodia's present role in the VC/NVA logistical system. We believe their long-standing north-south overland supply routes from North Vietnam through Laos, South Vietnam and border areas of Cambodia are still the principal supply channel for Communist forces in South Vietnam. These routes not only remain capable of meeting Communist needs despite allied air strikes but actual truck traffic detected moving to southern Laos indicates that the volume being moved southward

*is sufficient to meet the external needs of Communist forces in adjacent and more southerly areas of South Vietnam.*²⁶

What's more, a formal CIA/DI Intelligence Memorandum directly challenged Abrams' assertion that a halt to bombing would drastically increase the flow of equipment to communists. In effect, the then closely held memorandum said the bombing had been making no difference:

The experience of over three and one-half years of observing the impact of the Rolling Thun-



General Creighton W. Abrams, Commander of the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, from 1968 until 1972, was a key proponent of the military's argument that the quantity of arms flows through Sihanoukville to southern South Vietnam was far higher than CIA acknowledged. Abrams appeared three times on the covers of the weekly between 1961 and 1971. © Collection Serge Mouraret/Alamy Stock Photo.

*der bombing programs shows little direct relationship between the level and nature of given interdiction campaigns and the movement of supplies from North to South Vietnam. The level of logistics activity is more directly related to the size of the enemy forces in South Vietnam, the level of combat, and enemy intentions. Hanoi seems fully capable of delivering to South Vietnam the level of men and supplies it deems necessary, even though the bombings affect the ease, speed, and cost of delivery.*²⁷

Perhaps confidence in the effects of the Rolling Thunder campaign might explain MACV's propensity at the time to see, as George Carver would explain in 1970, Sihanoukville as a "major factor" since October 1966.²⁸ He elaborated that the IC felt there was little hard evidence for serious or significant use of the Cambodia channel before mid-1968.²⁹ General Abrams summarized MACV's position by writing,

*The Cambodia option remains as the enemy's logical if not his only choice. . . . Cambodia is the primary line of communication for arms and ammunition reaching enemy forces in II, III, and IV Corps Tactical Zones (CTZ).*³⁰

Accordingly, MACV offered sharply higher estimates for ordnance being delivered to Sihanoukville than those prepared by the IC, while CIA publicly argued that it could not estimate the tonnage reliably given the available numbers, attacked MACV's methodology, and privately developed far lower estimates. General

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Abrams wrote in December 1968 that 11 probable arms shipments had delivered more than 13,000 tons of materiel to Sihanoukville.³¹ Abrams continued that, during the past year, approximately 10,668 tons of suspected ordnance had been delivered to Sihanoukville and 10,035 tons of ordnance had been delivered to NVA/VC camps along the Cambodian border.³²

Washington analysts instead argued that no one knew for certain how many tons of arms entered Sihanoukville or what the consumption, equipping and stockpile requirements of the FARK might be.³³ They saw a "considerably smaller volume" of confirmed deliveries than MACV.³⁴ Another CIA memorandum complained, "MACV classed all the military deliveries to Sihanoukville as arms and ammunition and failed to distinguish between arms and other military supplies."³⁵ George Carver later wrote in 1970 that some military supplies were not manifested as such and others were mixed with ordnance consignment assigned to FARK. His note concluded, "The spongy nature of much of this evidence has not permitted precise quantification of the supplies via this route."³⁶

Despite CIA's official position that the tonnage delivered could not be reliably calculated, CIA internal studies suggested a minimum figure of only 1,600 to 1,700 tons of arms and ammunition had been delivered during the same 21-month period for which

MACV previously cited imports over 13,000 tons.³⁷ The note added that the CIA figure was "almost certainly low, with "possible" tonnages added, it might reach 7,000 to 8,000 tons."³⁸

In his December 31, 1968, report on the visit to Vietnam noted above, senior team member Graham, citing CIA positions, admitted that in theory the tonnage of ordnance delivered to the NVA/VC might be calculated by establishing amounts off-loaded in port and subtracting Cambodian military requirements. The CIA position was, however, that there was insufficient reliable reporting to do this.³⁹ Agency analysts noted that MACV was convinced that it had sufficient intelligence to perform these calculations and to reach "firm conclusions."⁴⁰ MACV's position had been that the "bulk of these shipments" went directly to the NVA/VC.⁴¹ CIA implied that MACV's estimate that FARK required 350 tons of ordnance annually was low but did not offer an alternative.⁴²

The argument over the role of a southern extension of the Ho Chi Minh Trail overland to Cambodia was almost as fierce as the fight over Sihanoukville, since the trails were linked in the eyes of the debaters. The overland route extended overland from North Vietnam through Laos, the tri-border area, and southward on a network of trails and road segments along the Cambodian border to the III Corps. The CIA position was that the evidence for the use of the extension was more substantial than evidence

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of Sihanoukville’s importance and, in effect, proved that the North Vietnamese relied “primarily on the overland route.”⁴³

Hanoi would not need both trail systems to support its forces in southern South Vietnam since each alone had the capacity to provide this support. So, the debate focused over which system was actually being used *more* and (from CIA’s perspective) which was *more salient* to Hanoi. The debate again entailed attacks on each other’s evidence, but before 1970, CIA used indirect evidence, some of it based on an unproven assumption, to buttress its case.^{44 45 46}

CIA also argued that all the evidence—efforts to improve roads and trails, shipments south to the tri-border area, a few reports of logistic activity along the trails, and use of the trails for personnel movements—sufficed to indicate that the overland route was the “basic channel” for arms and ammunition to communist forces in I, II, and III Corps.⁴⁷ Agency analysts repeatedly argued that Hanoi would not abandon the proven overland trail for the Sihanoukville connection, a route it did not control, and which the Cambodian government could deny or obstruct without much warning—a judgment questioned in later investigations.⁴⁸

In contrast, Abrams in December 1968 argued, “The contention that enemy forces in III CTZ are receiving the majority of their ordnance via the

Laotian overland route still fails to be substantiated by the facts,” continuing that in Laos “below BA 610 there has been no change in the meager traffic flow recorded since December 1967.”^{a 49} He reported that an average of 8 tons per day was moving south of BA 610 toward the Cambodian border, and MACV judged that those shipments were primarily destined for enemy forces in southern I CTZ and local support forces in southern Laos.⁵⁰

Stalemate Continued

The result of the November–December 1968 IC-MACV meetings was a stalemate with little movement on fundamental analytic issues, although some agreement on the issue of FARK complicity was reached. CIA leadership, according to a formerly classified biography of then CIA Director Richard Helms, concluded that OER’s tonnage estimate was the best that could be established from inferior materials.⁵¹ Their judgments reflected their confidence in the high quality of the CIA’s logistics analysis in the past and their recognition of “the penchant for the military arriving at ‘worst case’ judgments,” according to the biography.⁵²

Ground Truth on Sihanoukville Route Finally Established in 1970

The major CIA intelligence breakthrough of 1970 finally answered the hotly contested questions, particularly

about the relative importance of the two trails, ordnance deliveries to Sihanoukville, long-term throughput on each trail, tonnage going to FARK, and quantities of ordnance finally reaching NVA/VC base camps along the border. According to Ahern, then assigned to CIA’s Phnom Penh Station, a Cambodian officer named Les Kosem, who had been responsible for managing the flow of supplies from China to the NVA, volunteered to give CIA the records of all Chinese munitions and supplies sent to the Vietnamese Communists through Cambodia.^b CIA headquarters sent its most knowledgeable analyst to work with Kosem’s officer to exploit the 12,000 pages of data he provided. The insights became the foundation of CIA’s reevaluations of its earlier estimates published in 1970 and excerpted above.⁵³

To establish its new baseline, CIA that December forwarded the ER IM 70-188, *Communist Deliveries to Cambodia for the VC/NVA Forces in South Vietnam, December 1966–April 1969*, December 1970, along with an attached CIA history of the Sihanoukville Route to national-level decisionmakers and theater commanders. The memo noted, “We believe the documents constitute a virtually complete set of Cambodia’s records on the supplies and materials furnished the Communists with the cooperation of the Cambodian government.”⁵⁴ Characterizing the 12,000 pages of evidence, it explained, “The circumstances of acquisition were such as to establish the authenticity of the material.”⁵⁵ The documents offered “the most conclusive available

a. The general’s comment suggest that BA 610 was located 350 kilometers north of the Cambodian border.

b. At this point, Prince Sihanouk had been ousted and shipping of Chinese weaponry to Cambodia had ended.



Table 5
Ordnance Deliveries
to Border Areas, by Province

	Tons				
	1966	1967	1968	1969	1970
Mondulkiri	20	3,090	850	380	300
Svay Rieng	--	900	2,160	700	100
Kompong Cham	70	1,480	1,120	270	90
Kratie	--	410	1,660	600	260
Ratanakiri	--	980	260	--	--
Kampot	20	440	260	200	240
Prey Veng/ Kandal/Takeo	--	260	--	200	610
Other	--	160	80	--	--
Total	110	7,740	6,390	2,360	1,600

Note: Information on border deliveries is incomplete. For this reason total tonnages delivered above do not exactly agree with tonnages delivered to Sihanoukville.

evidence of the critical importance of the Sihanoukville supply route.”⁵⁶

ER IM 70-188 pointed out that Cambodia in early 1966 had participated in PRC programs to provide mostly non-military supplies to Communists in the II, III, and IV Corps regions in South Vietnam. By December, 1966, however, the Sihanoukville Route opened with the arrival of a PRC-flag arms carrier to Sihanoukville with arms bound for South Vietnam; the route became an “elaborate and sophisticated” network.⁵⁷

Chinese merchant ships delivered 21,600 tons of military supplies to Sihanoukville from December 1966 through April 1969 as shown in the bar graph on page 24, according to the December 1970 intelligence memorandum.⁵⁸ Overall military deliveries included weapons, ammunition and explosives, radios, and engineering equipment, which were detailed in a separate memorandum summarizing some of this information in February 1971. The memo began by noting that all the figures were approximate, but were believed accurate within 10 percent.^{59, a, 60}

The Sihanoukville Route was efficient because Cambodian officials rapidly unloaded Chinese arms carriers. Under FARK supervision, truck convoys then moved the ordnance to a storage depot at Kompong Speu for transshipment to Communist forces.⁶¹ The FARK received a “cut” of supplies ranging as high as 10 percent

a. From July 1968 through May 1969, four Soviet arms carriers delivered ordnance to Cambodia under the Soviet-Cambodian military aid agreement of February 1968. CIA analysts assessed that the cargo was consigned to FARK.

Sihanoukville reinforced “the negative impression of the quality of CIA analysis held by members of the Nixon administration.”

of all deliveries entering the pipeline, or about 459 tons in addition to 822 tons of legitimate military aid.⁶² Ultimately, CIA traced 18,000 tons—85 percent of military deliveries—to NVA/VC base camps in Cambodia arrayed from the far northeast to the southern border.⁶³ These are shown in the map and table (facing page) that were included in the memorandum.

North Vietnam also occasionally used the overland route through Laos to funnel supplies directly into South Vietnam, according to the new study, but less than 4 percent of ordnance traffic to southern South Vietnam moved this way compared to the Sihanoukville Route.⁶⁴ The Vietnamese trucked ordnance down Route 110 in Laos to the Tonle Kong River where it was placed on boats and moved south to Stun Treng. There, they loaded it on trucks and delivered directly to Communist base camps along the Cambodian border as far south as Snoul and Mimot. Deliveries to Cambodia via this route totaled only about 850 tons in four shipments occurring between 1966 and 1968, according to the December 1970 memorandum.⁶⁵

Impact and Investigations

Use of the Sihanoukville Route did not alter the war’s outcome, but it provided the enemy a way of conveniently shipping large volumes of arms to South Vietnam without having to take the much longer, tortuous route down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. In the judgment of CIA analysts, North Vietnam had shipped “extremely large quantities” of ordnance via

Sihanoukville, in their estimation enough to equip on a one-time basis over 600 NVA/VC infantry battalions; the number of crew-served weapons would have equipped slightly more than 200 battalions. The deliveries included 222,000 individual weapons, more than 16,000 crew served-weapons, 173 million rounds for rifles and light machine guns, almost 11 million rounds for crew-served weapons, and over one-half million mines and hand grenades, according to the history accompanying the new baseline memorandum.^{66 67}

Misjudging the Sihanoukville Route’s role further damaged the agency’s reputation in the Nixon White House. Within two years of the autumn 1968 meetings, CIA and its masters, including Nixon and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, viewed the flawed analysis as a major intelligence failure demanding formal reviews. Richard Helms stated the failure “was an acutely embarrassing moment for Directorate of Intelligence analysts, and even more so for the Director of Central Intelligence.”⁶⁸ Sihanoukville reinforced “the negative impression of the quality of CIA analysis held by members of the Nixon administration,” according to his formerly classified biography.⁶⁹ In the eyes of the new administration, CIA was again taking a negative, anti-war line. Its delay in recognizing Sihanoukville’s importance followed its “opposition to MACV’s order of battle figures and its pessimistic assessment of the Rolling Thunder bombing program,” according to the biography.⁷⁰

For example, in a meeting with his Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board in mid-1970, President Nixon wondered, “If such mistakes could be made on a fairly straightforward issue such as this, how should we judge CIA’s assessments of more important developments such as Chinese communist military capabilities?”⁷¹

He went on to order the board to investigate the “entire background” to the IC’s “misreading of the importance of Sihanoukville.”⁷² He closed that session by calling for the board to give “very close attention to the case,” which represented “one of the worst records ever compiled by the intelligence community.”⁷³ Adding, that he

*simply cannot put up with people lying to the President of the United States about intelligence. If intelligence is inadequate or if the intelligence depicts a bad situation, he wants to know it and he will not stand being served warped evaluations.*⁷⁴

Kissinger subsequently cited methodological problems as being at the heart of the failure, during a staff meeting in February 1971.⁷⁵ He said that Sihanoukville was “one of our greatest intelligence failures,” and added, “After all, it isn’t Outer Mongolia.”⁷⁶ Kissinger wrote to Nixon that he was working with DCI Richard Helms on “appropriate personnel changes in the Agency.”⁷⁷ Nixon responded, “I want a real shakeup in CIA, not just symbolism.”⁷⁸

Helms, however, backed his team, and CIA avoided a personnel purge, and rather than punish his analysts he would praise them for their forthrightness in revisiting their analysis

with the acquisition of reliable data.⁷⁹ But the damage to CIA's relationship with the Nixon administration had been done. George Carver commented that Helms was "vulnerable because in any future major controversy where he really held the line, he would have been vulnerable to: 'Yes, but that's what you said about Sihanoukville.'" ⁸⁰

The CIA itself and the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board both completed investigations, the details of which remain largely classified. The CIA teams working on the Sihanoukville connection were criticized for failing to fully adjust their model of arms transfers to reflect the wealth of evidence beginning to arrive to support the Sihanoukville assessment. They also were criticized for being insensitive to the lack of direct reporting proving that the overland routes through Laos to Cambodia were actively and currently being used to transport ordnance into southern South Vietnam.

To provide perspective on the postmortems, historian Tom Ahern concluded that there were "substantial flaws" in CIA analysis of the Sihanoukville Route, which emerged as a failure "only after the bulk of the empirical evidence, gradually increasing in volume and improving in source authenticity, began contradicting Agency estimates." Ahern concluded the problem in part was a "failure to modify conventional wisdom." CIA analysts failed to recognize they were applying a double standard as they attempted to compare the usage and relative importance of the Sihanoukville Route against the Laos overland trail. Instead, the analysts were more rigorous in attacking evidence that might

A CIA internal review of its finished intelligence reporting published in 1972 also questioned an underlying assumption that biased analysts against the Sihanoukville Route.

support the Sihanoukville Route hypothesis; Ahern noted, "Even the best agent reporting on quantities of munitions through Sihanoukville had inconsistencies and gaps that the orthodox school invoked to justify skepticism about the maritime route."⁸¹

In contrast, the same rigor was never applied to estimates of ordnance asserted to be coming overland south from the Laotian triborder area, about which there was little if any reporting. The lack of human sources below the triborder area allowed continuing faith in the overland thesis, but faith is what it was, according to Ahern. He concluded, "When the overland intelligence vacuum persisted as evidence for Sihanoukville grew, faith required rationalization to survive."⁸²

A CIA internal review of its finished intelligence reporting published in 1972 also questioned an underlying assumption that biased analysts against the Sihanoukville Route—the premise that Hanoi would be unwilling to risk relying heavily on a trail not under its control, even if it had an entirely reliable trail system as a fallback. The Office of National Estimates wrote that Sihanoukville did not "surface in all its vigor" until 1968, but two Special National Intelligence Estimates published in 1967 had a "clearly conservative view" of Cambodia's role—current and potential—as a funnel for arms to NVA/VC forces in South Vietnam.⁸³ The study questioned the reasoning in the January 1967 estimate that "it seems unlikely that they [the

Vietnamese communists] would rely in any major way on such an important and indirect source [as the Sihanoukville Route]."⁸⁴

George Carver judged in November 1970 that the CIA had been led astray by "capability judgments which became controlling assumptions that took conscious or unconscious precedence over judgments regarding intentions or actual performance." He elaborated that those conclusions probably caused OER's analysts "to be a shade more critically rigorous in weighing evidence that contravened these assumptions than evidence which tended to support them."⁸⁵ He also noted that a CIA analytic model of Sihanoukville's cargo-handling capacity was "ingenious and logically impeccable," but "it bore little relationship to concrete reality."⁸⁶

In 1984, General Palmer summarized the CIA key judgments of the post-mortem, which concluded that the fact that Hanoi could service all its needs via the overland route did not necessarily mean that the regime would actually rely on the overland route. The low estimates on ordnance transshipment via Sihanoukville, coupled with the valid capability estimate on the overland route, "resulted in a mindset that led CIA astray in its judgments as to what North Vietnam was actually doing."⁸⁷

The Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board delivered the results of the second inquiry to the President by January 1971.⁸⁸ The report may have used harsh language because Deputy

Commenting on one of CIA's internal postmortems on the failure, CIA's George Carver wrote in November 1970 that one such document was "not entirely free of a defensive tone or the subliminal imputation that it is better to have been wrong for the right reasons than right for the wrong reasons."

Director for Intelligence Jack Smith recalled that none of its "members seemed to find our accounting convincing."⁸⁹ Kissinger summarized the board's report in a memorandum written in January 1971, telling Nixon that the IC's failure to properly assess the flow of enemy material through Sihanoukville resulted from "deficiencies in both intelligence collection and analysis."⁹⁰ Kissinger concluded that CIA was primarily responsible for the failure.⁹¹

In fairness to CIA's analysts, they had drawn attention to what they perceived as Sihanoukville's growing significance, and estimated that it could be carrying nearly half of the ordnance bound for enemy forces in southern South Vietnam.⁹² Additionally, Ahern rightly implied that the case supporting the Sihanoukville Route was not a 'slam-dunk' case even when better sourcing became available in early 1970. He refused to argue that "the DI should have assigned to Sihanoukville with the same degree of confidence—the importance that it had earlier attributed to the overland route. There were, after all, powerful circumstantial arguments against it. And if agent reporting had now proved a substantial flow of arms through Sihanoukville, exact quantification still eluded the analysts."⁹³

Closing Observations

CIA analysts attempted to apply rigorous tradecraft to analyzing the North Vietnamese logistics flow related to Sihanoukville from 1966 through 1970, but they underestimated the port's overarching importance as an arms/ammunition conduit to enemy forces in southern South Vietnam as well as the quantity of tonnage shipped through the port. It simultaneously overestimated the importance and activity over the competing overland route, but for different reasons. The analytic failure reflected intelligence gaps, the agency's determination to set a high bar for using HUMINT reporting, and adherence to an inaccurate, alternative theory of North Vietnamese logistics routes feeding into southern South Vietnam.⁹⁴

MACV estimates were closer to the truth, but they were also flawed in several ways. If the final tranche of shipping documents is indeed an accurate baseline, then MACV also made mistakes in reporting on individual arms deliveries, including misidentifying grain shipments as arms deliveries, over- and underestimating the amount of ordnance in individual deliveries, and ascribing arms deliveries bound entirely for the FARK as arms deliveries as ones destined for South Vietnam. Nevertheless, the number of reports they decided to use got them closer to the truth than CIA.

The CIA-MACV debate ultimately hinged on determinations

about which sources and raw reports could be reliably used to build their cases in Washington and Saigon.⁹⁵ Ironically, CIA's use of more rigorous tradecraft than its military counterparts in handling suspect HUMINT sources contributed to its significantly lower assessments. Commenting on one of CIA's internal postmortems on the failure, CIA's George Carver wrote in November 1970 that one such document was "not entirely free of a defensive tone or the subliminal imputation that it is better to have been wrong for the right reasons than right for the wrong reasons."⁹⁶

Lessons

What do we know about what CIA took to be the lessons of this experience to be applied in the future? Late in the Helms tenure as DCI, CIA had been under pressure to examine more effective alternative analytic techniques than those employed during the lengthy debate discussed above. Fragmented and heavily redacted archival material refers to the loss of analytic consensus within CIA (and even individual offices) on this topic by 1968. CIA offices routinely conducted periodic internal reviews that challenged the methodologies and conclusions of previous analyses. CIA did produce a lengthy scrub of clandestine reporting on the topic, and OER even attempted a version of a Team A/Team B exercise to inform the debate, though it failed to change the minds of proponents of the established analytical line.⁹⁷

Thus, despite these efforts, CIA analysis remained undermined by underlying, flawed assumptions that were only reluctantly abandoned despite a steady increase of countervailing reporting, according to Ahern. CIA continued to judge that

Hanoi would be unwilling to rely on the Sihanoukville Route because it would be vulnerable to closure by the neutralist Prince Sihanouk. In fact, there was little cost in relying heavily on the route, which offered an easier way of shipping munitions to southern South Vietnam than did use of the overland route through Laos. When Sihanouk was ousted in March 1970 and Cambodia's arrangement with China ended, North Vietnam readily returned to the overland route to transport ordnance to South Vietnam, according to Ahern's account, which he focused on "a failure to modify conventional wisdom."⁹⁸

Such shortfalls called for CIA to deploy more rigorous alternative analytic techniques, such as the implementation of the "challenge

mechanism" that DCI William Colby attempted to create after the intelligence surprise of the October 1973 Arab-Israeli War. Although the declassified record simply does not reveal what reforms—if any—were implemented following the Sihanoukville failure, contemporary records reveal that CIA was considering such techniques as early as during the Lyndon B. Johnson administration, when in 1966 it produced a report on the Vietnamese communist will to persist that employed a red team approach, according to James Marchio's recent study on devil's advocacy in IC analysis.⁹⁹ Analysts had used "solid alternative analysis techniques (red team, devil's advocate, and competing hypotheses),"

according to a CIA history of the Directorate of Intelligence.¹⁰⁰

The CIA's experiments with alternative analysis continued during the Nixon administration, despite the stormy relationship between the Nixon and CIA. By 1970, CIA had drafted alternative analysis on Soviet strategic weapons programs for the White House, according to Marchio. The effort demonstrated a tentative interest in alternative analysis, which ultimately became institutionalized in so-called "Structured Analytical Techniques" as discussed by Heuer and others and addressed in a monograph, *A Tradecraft Primer: Structured Analytic Techniques for Improving Intelligence Analysis*, published by CIA's Center for the Study of Intelligence in March 2009.¹⁰¹



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Endnotes

All released documents can be found in CIA.GOV's Freedom of Information Act Reading Room (<https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/search/site/>) by inserting the complete released document number in the search field at the top of the search page. For example the intelligence memorandum cited in endnote 1 below would be searched by inserting "CIA-RDP78T02095R000200050001-1" into the search field. (N.b. Do not include the bracketed numbers found below in front of document numbers. Those are intended for ease of reference in the following bibliography.) In most cases, each released item contains more than one document, along with transmittal slips and memos. The documents contained in the released packages are listed, along with release information, in the bibliography following these notes. The URLs for all documents available in CIA.GOV are shown in the bibliography.

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