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Cambodia's International Orientation

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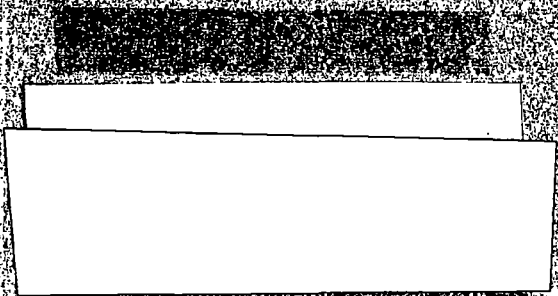
**CAMBODIA'S INTERNATIONAL
ORIENTATION**

Submitted by the
DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

The following intelligence organizations participated in the preparation of this estimate. The Central Intelligence Agency and the intelligence organizations of the Departments of State, the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, and The Joint Staff

Concurred in by the
UNITED STATES INTELLIGENCE BOARD

on 26 May 1959. Concurring were The Director of Intelligence and Research, Department of State, the Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army, the Assistant Chief of Naval Operations for Intelligence, Department of the Navy, the Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence USAF, and the Director for Intelligence, The Joint Staff. The Atomic Energy Commission Representative to the USIB, the Assistant to the Secretary of Defense, Special Operations, the Director of the National Security Agency, and the Assistant Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, abstained, the subject being outside of their jurisdiction.



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CAMBODIA'S INTERNATIONAL ORIENTATION

THE PROBLEM

To estimate probable developments in Cambodia's international orientation over the next year or so.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Cambodia's orientation and political future rest essentially on Prince Norodom Sihanouk, who will almost certainly continue to be the dominant figure in the Cambodian scene. Although his government has increased its relations with the Bloc and Communist influence in Cambodia has markedly increased in the past three years, his international policy, widely supported by his compatriots, remains one of neutrality between East and West. (*Paras. 6-7, 9-10, 20*)
2. The increased Communist presence has been in large part both the cause and the result of Cambodia's poor relations with Vietnam and, to a lesser extent, Thailand. These neighbors, fearing that Sihanouk's policies may result in a Communist Cambodia, have supported dissident Cambodian plots against him and have thus increased his suspicions of them. In the process, US-Cambodian relations have become strained. (*Paras. 6, 17-19*)
3. The counterbalancing of Communist influence in Cambodia has suffered because the French and the US have sometimes worked at cross purposes. The achievement of better French-US cooperation will be hindered by the determination of the French to preserve their present special position in Cambodia and their suspicion that the US is attempting to encroach on that position. (*Paras. 14-15*)
4. We believe that Sihanouk will seek to continue Cambodia's neutral course. The actual nature of his course will probably depend to a large degree on his relations with Vietnam. The deep suspicions on both sides will probably continue, as will Sihanouk's belief that the US could moderate Vietnam's hostility toward him. A Thai or Vietnamese-sponsored move against the impulsive Sihanouk might drive him to some hasty action which could damage US interests in Southeast Asia. (*Paras. 20-22*)
5. Over the next year or so Sihanouk will almost certainly continue to have the power to check any increase in Communist influence. However, unless Sihanouk uses his power to this end, the time may come when he might not be strong enough to take the necessary steps to preserve Cambodia's neutral status. (*Paras. 23-24*)

DISCUSSION

I. INTRODUCTION

6. The Communist presence in Cambodia has markedly increased over the course of the past three years. During this period, which began with Prince Norodom Sihanouk's February 1956 trip to Peiping, neutral Cambodia has relaxed its earlier unfriendliness towards the Bloc, accepted \$34 million in economic aid from it, and recognized Communist China. These developments are in large part both the cause and the result of a deterioration in relations with Thailand, and especially with Vietnam. As these two countries have increased their efforts to arrest what they believe to be a sliding of Cambodia towards communism, Sihanouk has become more convinced that Saigon and Bangkok are plotting his overthrow, and his resulting receptivity to Bloc expressions of support has in turn deepened their suspicions. The intensity of their suspicions was recently reflected in their support of the abortive anti-Sihanouk plots of Sam Sary and Dap Chhuon.

II. FACTORS AFFECTING CAMBODIA'S INTERNATIONAL ORIENTATION

A. Sihanouk's Power

7. Prime Minister Sihanouk's control over Cambodia's internal political situation and foreign policy is virtually complete. It is based upon his prestige as a member of the royal family and his skill and popularity as a politician, upon his control of the principal sources of power (including the military and security forces), and upon his demonstrated readiness to use force when necessary. Within Cambodia's small elite, there is some dissatisfaction with the government's corruption, inefficiency, and flirtation with the Communists. However, the failure of the recent plots has enhanced Sihanouk's stature and removed the only figure, Dap Chhuon, who had any significant source of independent power. Thus there is at present no effective

political opposition or alternative to Sihanouk; practically speaking, Cambodia is Sihanouk.

8. The political system which Sihanouk dominates is technically a constitutional monarchy, in actuality a benevolent if rather ramshackle dictatorship. Major decisions and many minor ones must await Sihanouk's action. That action is often impetuous, though not as irrational in the Cambodian context as it sometimes appears to outsiders. The dearth of trained personnel necessitates reliance upon French bureaucrats in key positions. Yet Sihanouk is hesitant to delegate authority and thus complicates Cambodia's development of able administrators and leaders. He has a general desire to create a more modern country with greater prosperity and self-sufficiency, but has no well-articulated economic philosophy or program. Long-term economic growth consequently suffers, even though Cambodia's economic situation is fairly good at present.

B. Cambodia's Neutral Foreign Policy

9. Since Cambodia gained its independence in 1953, Sihanouk has consistently held that the key to domestic stability and international security lies in a policy of neutrality. This view is supported by virtually all politically conscious Cambodians. Sihanouk's basic belief is that, in view of Cambodia's weakness and exposed strategic position, national survival can come only from a neutral status which both the Bloc and the West will find advantageous to respect. It is possible that Sihanouk sees Chinese Communist hegemony in Southeast Asia as inevitable; we think it more likely that Sihanouk regards good relations with Peiping to be a matter of simple prudence. Sihanouk is apparently confident that he can safely follow a course of alternately favoring one side and then the other, garnering economic benefits from both in the

process. In addition, an independent role tends to highlight Cambodia's position in world affairs and to feed Sihanouk's vanity.

10. The trend since 1956 toward increased relations with the Bloc appears to be chiefly the result of Sihanouk's reactions to the fact of Chinese Communist power and to the hostility of Thailand and especially Vietnam. He has been susceptible to Chinese Communist flattery and to the "friendliness" of Chinese behavior toward Cambodia. He has also been impressed with Peiping's success in marshaling China's resources, and apparently believes that certain of Peiping's methods might have some relevance for Cambodia's economic needs. His recognition of Communist China in July 1958, however, was probably less immediately the result of such underlying considerations than of angry reaction to a border encroachment by Vietnam. Had the Vietnamese provocation not been present, Sihanouk would probably not have recognized Communist China at that time, though he probably would have done so in time in any case.

11. Despite its increased relations with the Bloc, Cambodia still retains many close ties with the West, France in particular. Cambodia's foreign cultural ties are almost exclusively French. It has refused military aid from the Bloc; its military forces are equipped by the US and trained by France. Most of its aid is from the West.¹ Virtually all its trade is with the West. Sihanouk's surgeons are Parisian, not Muscovite.

C. Communist Influence in Cambodia

12. The growth of Communist influence in Cambodia has been chiefly the result of the Communists' adeptness in exploiting the opportunities offered by Cambodia's neutral foreign policy, Cambodia's difficulties with its Free World neighbors, and Sihanouk's de-

¹ Western economic aid commitments have totaled about \$200 million, as follows: US—\$170 million; France—\$25 million; Colombo Plan sources—\$2 million; Japan—\$4.3 million. By comparison, Bloc aid commitments have totaled about \$34 million, of which \$28 million has been Chinese Communist, and \$6 million Soviet.

sire to hedge against the prospect of Communist China's growing strength. Internally, the Communists profit from their influence in the fields of information and education and among minorities, and to a lesser extent from the impact of Bloc economic aid. Communist influence is largely exerted from Peiping. It is greatest among Cambodia's Chinese population, almost exclusively urban, of some 300,000 (of the country's total population of about 4.7 million). Pro-Communist elements dominate the Chinese-language schools, newspapers, and motion pictures. Pro-Kuomintang groups have been demoralized and disrupted. The Chinese community's traditional systems of organization have been abolished, so that Cambodia's Chinese are now largely at the mercy of pro-Communist pressures and of a rather inefficient and corrupt Cambodian officialdom. Communist China has been the source of the major part of the \$34 million in Bloc economic aid to Cambodia. Vietnamese Communist-sponsored activities have also increased among Cambodia's approximately 400,000 Vietnamese.

13. Despite sporadic efforts by Sihanouk to check Communist influence, that influence has also grown in the government itself. In the past year, certain anti-Communist newspapers have been closed down, the Ministry of Information has frequently taken pro-Communist positions, and pro-Communist officials now hold the influential posts of Secretary of State for Information and Secretary of State for Plans.

D. The French Presence in Cambodia

14. French influence is greater in Cambodia than in any of the other Indochinese states, and the French appear determined at least to retain this influence. This determination is shared both by the de Gaulle government and by the French on the spot, most of whom are businessmen and ex-colonial officials whose local influence is great and who appear to have considerable freedom of action. The leading Frenchmen in Cambodia, including Ambassador Gorce who has much influence

with Sihanouk, also apparently see in Sihanouk and his neutral course the best means of retaining French influence in Cambodia. At the same time, the French seem confident that Sihanouk's alertness and power, and their own influence with him, will keep Communist strength from getting beyond manageable proportions. Although the US is financing slightly more than half of the Cambodian military budget and is supplying most of Cambodia's military equipment, the French train the Cambodian Army. French influence with Sihanouk has been enhanced by French backing of Cambodia in its disputes with Vietnam. Most recently, the French almost certainly were of considerable help to Sihanouk in his quick defeat of the dissident Dap Chhuon.

15. The counterbalancing of Communist influence in Cambodia has suffered because the French and the US have sometimes worked at cross purposes. Many of the French, in Paris and in Phnom Penh, consider that the US elbowed them out of Vietnam and is at present in the course of doing the same in Laos. French actions in Cambodia appear at times to have been marked by a feeling that the major task at hand was to protect the French position against US encroachment. There have also been US-French differences concerning Sihanouk, the Communist danger, and Cambodian military training.

E. The US Role in Cambodia

16. The US has provided \$170 million in economic aid to Cambodia in the past five years, principally commodity aid to generate local currency for support of the military budget, although a number of development projects have been financed. In 1958, US aid financed more than 40 percent of Cambodia's imports and about one-third of its total budgetary expenditure. In addition, the US has provided military equipment to Cambodia valued cumulatively at \$63 million. However, the Cambodian Government usually has not been responsive to US advice. The Cambodians appear to be convinced that the US views Cambodia in a cold war context and consequently

would like Cambodia to change its neutralist orientation and become firmly aligned with the Free World. This conviction and the Cambodians' belief that the US favors Thailand and South Vietnam are major factors in the determination of Sihanouk's neutral stance. However, Sihanouk has on occasion turned to the US for support in his disputes with Thailand and Vietnam. Moreover, he recognizes that the US provides the only effective counterbalance to Chinese Communist power.

F. Cambodia's Relations with South Vietnam and Thailand

17. Cambodia's neutralist international outlook is to a large degree shaped by its disputes with Vietnam and Thailand, both of which have close military ties with the West. Cambodia's relations with both these neighbors have been traditionally poor, though the Cambodia-Vietnam relationship is the more bitter and has had the greater impact on Cambodia's orientation. The Cambodians are aggrieved by a past history of Vietnamese and Thai invasions, by recent border incursions, by unsettled financial claims against Vietnam growing out of the 1954 Paris accords, and by Vietnamese-Thai backing of anti-Sihanouk dissidents. There has recently been some improvement, however, in Cambodian-Thai relations.

18. The Vietnamese are aggrieved because armed groups, largely Communist-dominated, make raids into Vietnam and retire back across the border wilderness into Cambodia, where the RKG officials have appeared both unable and unwilling to control them. But the primary fear of the Vietnamese, as well as of the Thai, is that Sihanouk is taking Cambodia down a primrose path to communism which will one day result in an outflanking of Vietnam and Thailand by the Communists. Thai leaders, under US urging and discouraged over recent plot failures, have reduced their support of anti-Sihanouk activities. However, President Diem and his brother Nhu, already preoccupied with in-

ternal security, apparently continue to be convinced that Vietnam's safety requires the removal of Sihanouk.

19. Cambodian bitterness toward Vietnam, and at least until recently toward Thailand, has strained US-Cambodian relations. Sihanouk apparently believes that Diem's government is a US satellite, and that the US could if it wished moderate Vietnam's continuing hostility. The immediate cause of Sihanouk's present reserve toward the US is the fact that the US did not inform him, as did the French, the Chinese Communists, and the Soviets, that the recent Vietnamese and Thai-backed plots against him were afoot.

III. PROBABLE DEVELOPMENTS

20. Cambodia's orientation and political future will continue to rest essentially on the wisdom and whim of Prince Sihanouk. He will almost certainly attempt to continue a neutral course in which he can benefit on the one hand from the receipt of Bloc aid and from the propitiation of Communist China, and, on the other, from his receipt of Western arms and economic support without an obligation to align Cambodia with the West. Hence he will probably continue to make occasional gestures towards both sides. He will probably not, however, wish in fact to move closer to the Bloc than he now is.

21. Whether Sihanouk will seek an improvement in his relations with the Free World over the next year or so will probably depend primarily on the course of his relations with Vietnam. A major improvement in these relations appears unlikely because of the underlying suspicions on both sides, and in particular the deep animosity between Diem and Sihanouk. Moreover, Vietnam will probably continue to support various anti-Sihanouk elements in Cambodia and in exile. This will pose no serious challenge to Sihanouk, but it will continue to embitter Cambodia's relations with Vietnam and to stimulate Cambodian ill-feeling toward the US.

22. In the unlikely event that Saigon or Bangkok should invade Cambodia or back some kind of major dissident move, Sihanouk might take some precipitous step which could damage the US position in Southeast Asia, such as expulsion of the US MAAG, acceptance of military aid from Communist China, or formal recognition of the North Vietnam regime. He might also take this latter step in reaction to some lesser grievance, real or imagined, against Saigon or Bangkok.

23. Barring such action on the part of Vietnam or Thailand, however, we anticipate no great changes in the situation over the next year or so. During this period Sihanouk will probably continue to have the power to arrest any increase in Communist influence.

24. However, unless Sihanouk takes more effective counteraction than he has to date, Communist influence will continue to grow and will create dangers for the longer-run. In this event, the Communists' subversive potential will benefit primarily from Communist activity in the fields of public information and education. Cambodia's young intellectual group will probably be especially vulnerable in this regard, and they will almost certainly be the principal targets of Communist propagandists in both Cambodia and France. Another source of danger will be pro-Communist officials in the RKG who may in time gain sufficient independent power to contravene or negate Sihanouk's orders. Unless Sihanouk checks the growth of Communist influence, therefore, the time may come when he might not be strong enough to take the necessary steps to preserve Cambodia's neutral status.

25. There is no means at present for orderly transfer of power in Cambodia. In the event that Sihanouk were to die or become incapacitated during the next year or so, the army and the monarchy would probably provide a modicum of stability. Successor governments would probably attempt to continue a neutral foreign policy.