

SNIE 57-73

The Short-Term Prospects for Vietnam

24 May 1973

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SPECIAL NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE

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The Short-Term Prospect for Cambodia

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The Central Intelligence Agency and the intelligence organizations of the Departments of State and Defense, the NSA, and the Treasury.

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THE SHORT-TERM PROSPECT
FOR CAMBODIA

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THE SHORT-TERM PROSPECT FOR CAMBODIA

NOTE

This Estimate considers the outlook for survival of a non-communist government in Cambodia through the end of 1973. The problem is addressed under two opposing assumptions regarding US bombing in Cambodia: (1) the bombing (B-52 and tactical air support) continues more or less at present levels; or, (2) the bombing is ended within the next few weeks as a result of Congressional action.

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PRÉCIS

The Khmer insurgents, with many communist leaders responsive to Hanoi's direction and control, have the military initiative in Cambodia; the government's military and political position has steadily eroded over the past year. US air support has been the major prop of the Cambodian Government. If US bombing continues, the chances are better than even that a non-communist government in Phnom Penh will be able to last out the year.

Obviously, if the government demonstrated an ability to come to grips with the military and political problems facing Cambodia, the odds would improve somewhat. But there is little basis for expecting any substantial improvement in the performance of FANK or the government over the next six months. Meanwhile, the insurgents will be hard at work consolidating and expanding their control throughout the countryside. Thus, even if the present government survived the year, it would probably have suffered a net decline in strength relative to the insurgents.

But if US support were to cease in the near term, the Lon Nol regime could not survive for long, perhaps no more than a month or two. Most Cambodians would believe that it was only a matter of time before the communists in one way or another gained control of the country. Pressures for a deal with the communists would increase.

The communists might decide to press for a complete military takeover of Cambodia. Their chances of accomplishing this would be good. But Hanoi at least would probably want to test other alternatives before launching an all-out military effort, in part because such an effort would not be without some risks and costs and would not automatically improve the communist position in South Vietnam—still the number one objective.

Thus, unless there were a total collapse of organized resistance, the communists would be more likely to try to arrange a coalition govern-

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ment, holding in reserve the option of seizing control by direct military action. Under the circumstances, they could more or less dictate the terms and get what they felt necessary.

However the successor regime came to power and whether or not it was headed by Sihanouk, the Khmer communists would be the predominant force, and Hanoi would be calling most of the shots. Such a regime would be hostile to the interests of Washington, Saigon, and Bangkok. The non-communist aspect of such a government would be little more than a facade.

Over time, the deep Cambodian hatred of the Vietnamese might generate some resistance to Hanoi's dictates. Sihanouk would also almost certainly attempt to maneuver to undercut the communist role in the government. The odds, however, would be against him.

A communist takeover in Cambodia would be in political and psychological terms extremely unsettling in both Saigon and Bangkok. Both capitals would be acutely concerned as to what it meant for them, particularly concerning the prospect of continued US support. Both would seek new assurances from the US and would feel increasingly isolated and beleaguered if none, or not enough, were forthcoming from Washington.

By itself, the enhanced communist position in Cambodia would not bring about a major shift in the present balance of military power in South Vietnam (a view the South Vietnamese leaders would probably share); it would, however, ease communist logistical burdens and give them greater flexibility in developing their strength and future strategies. The South Vietnamese would fear that the communists would use Cambodia as a base for organizational efforts against South Vietnam as well as a springboard for a major military offensive in South Vietnam.

In terms of overall implications for the future of South Vietnam, Laos, or even Thailand, the installation of a communist-leaning regime in Phnom Penh could be of less significance than the circumstances which brought this about. If the President were forced for the first time by the US Congress to halt military action in Indochina, this would be seen as a vital turning point, forecasting the end of any significant US military role in this area.

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THE ESTIMATE

I. THE FORCES AT WORK IN CAMBODIA AT PRESENT

1. *The Communist Position.* The Cambodian insurgents clearly have the military initiative in Cambodia. They have relatively uncontested run of most of the countryside, are able to cut the government's supply lines with little difficulty, and have several major towns effectively surrounded. There are at least 40,000-50,000 regular Khmer insurgent combat personnel, including separate company and platoon size units.¹ In addition, the Vietnamese communists are estimated to have more than 5,000 regular combat troops and some 21,000 administrative services personnel in Cambodia, though most of these are concerned with South Vietnam. There are, however, an undetermined number of North Vietnamese liaison personnel as well as some North Vietnamese artillery and sapper units

¹ There is also a large number of Cambodian insurgent guerrilla personnel. These forces are poorly armed and trained, but they do constitute a manpower pool for possible upgrading into the regular communist forces; it is possible that some upgrading may have already occurred without being detected. Thus, the regular combat strength of the insurgents in Cambodia may actually exceed the official estimate of 40,000-50,000 men.

operating with the Khmer communists. Finally, though not yet fully developed, the Khmer communists have an increasingly effective political infrastructure.

2. Despite their remarkable growth over the past few years, the Khmer communists are still heavily dependent on Hanoi for their military supplies. Further, the Khmer communist movement (historically) is virtually a North Vietnamese creation. The core of the insurgent apparatus is composed of Cambodian communists trained in North Vietnam and infiltrated into Cambodia over the past several years, in effect providing Hanoi a built-in control mechanism. Even though the Khmer insurgents have attained considerable freedom of action, Hanoi probably still sets the general guidelines governing insurgent policy in Cambodia. Further, so long as the fighting continues in Cambodia, there will be a basic commonality of interests between the Khmer insurgents and the North Vietnamese.

3. *The Government's Position.* The government's military position has deteriorated markedly over the past several months. Despite a numerical advantage and better equipment, government forces (FANK) have not been able to cope with the communists. Phnom

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Penh's efforts in its own behalf have become less and less effective since the ill-fated Chenla II campaign in the late fall of 1971, when North Vietnamese units gave FANK a drubbing from which, psychologically, it has never recovered. Hampered by poor leadership, corruption, pay problems, and repeated failures in the field, FANK has become increasingly demoralized. Incidents of units breaking under fire or refusing to fight are increasing. What little military starch FANK has recently displayed has been largely owing to the availability of US aerial support.

4. Politically, the Lon Nol government has also been ineffective, clearly unable to face the realities of the situation. Petty intrigue and personal interests have taken precedence over national survival. The situation has improved somewhat with the departure of Lon Nol's brother, Lon Non, from the scene; he had persistently connived to isolate Lon Nol and to block the participation of other Cambodian leaders in the government. The entry into the government of Sirik Matak and In Tam, both more aware than Lon Nol of Cambodia's precarious position, is a strengthening move. Even so, it remains uncertain that new leaders will be able to rise above their personal rivalries and make an effective start toward addressing the country's pressing problems. Nor would the departure of the myopic Lon Nol—a possibility that he periodically raises—necessarily result in more effective governmental action, though it would leave more capable men in charge.

II. PROSPECTS IF UNITED STATES BOMBING CONTINUES

5. *Impact of the Bombing.* US support—financial, logistical, and particularly bombing—has been the major prop of the Lon Nol government. Militarily, the bombing has helped to keep the communists forces at bay by complicating their supply problems and

making it difficult and costly for them to mass troops for major military action. Partly for this reason, they have not undertaken large-scale action to seize and hold the key areas still in government hands.

6. Politically and psychologically, the bombing has also bolstered the Lon Nol government. It has provided the regime with time in which to try to sort out its many political and organizational problems. It has also served to sustain government hopes that the military threat might be checked and the insurgent claim for a significant political voice resisted. This has led Lon Nol to believe that he need not approach the insurgents on anything but his own terms. So long as Lon Nol does not have a change of mind and remains on the scene, the odds do not favor Phnom Penh actively pursuing a negotiated end to the hostilities.

7. There are, however, those in the Cambodian Government who, unlike Lon Nol, believe that a negotiated settlement is the only way to resolve the situation. To them, the US bombing and the time that it buys gives the government a chance to improve its position so that it could enter into negotiations from something other than a position of adject weakness.

8. *Hanoi's Perspective.* Although US bombing has been instrumental in restraining communist military action in Cambodia, it is not the only factor involved. Indeed, if Hanoi and its Khmer allies were willing to commit the resources and suffer considerable losses, they could probably overrun Cambodia despite US bombing. But while there are probably some within the Khmer insurgent movement who would advocate such a course, Hanoi's perspective is Indochina-wide and South Vietnam is the number one target.

9. Hanoi controls essentially what it needs in Cambodia to protect and support its position in South Vietnam. A communist regime

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in Phnom Penh might initially complicate Hanoi's position since its maintenance and management would probably require considerable resources, especially since the Khmer insurgents are not yet organized sufficiently to run the country. In addition, Hanoi cannot be entirely sure that the US would not retaliate against North Vietnam itself in the event of a major communist military effort to take Phnom Penh. Having regard for its relations with the US, Peking would probably advise Hanoi to forego such blatant action. Finally, the communists could not be certain that they would not face stiff resistance from some FANK elements, particularly those defending the capital.

10. *In Sum.* If US bombing continues, the chances are better than even that a non-communist government in Phnom Penh will be able to last through the current rainy season and somewhat beyond. Obviously, if the government demonstrated an ability to come to grips with the military and political problems facing Cambodia, the odds would improve somewhat. But there is little basis for expecting any substantial improvement in the performance of FANK or the government over the next six months. Meanwhile, the insurgents will be hard at work consolidating and expanding their control throughout the countryside. They would probably make more headway in such an effort than would the government. Thus, even if the present government survived the year, it would probably have suffered a net decline in strength relative to the insurgents.

III. PROSPECTS IF UNITED STATES BOMBING IS ENDED IN THE NEAR TERM

11. *The Impact.* The Cambodian leaders have shown little awareness that US air support might soon be cut off. The shock would be profound. There would be little the US

could do to cushion the blow; promises of continued military and economic assistance would be mistrusted. FANK's demoralization would be accelerated, and the army would cease to pose any significant impediment to communist military action, except perhaps around Phnom Penh itself. The import of both military and civilian supplies would be severely curtailed as the communists moved to cut the major supply routes, which are now kept open primarily by the efforts of US tactical air support. Even if US air transport were available, in the absence of tactical air support, it is doubtful that FANK could long secure air fields or prevent a buildup of anti-aircraft guns around drop zones at beleaguered provincial capitals or even at Phnom Penh itself.

12. Meanwhile, a number of leading governmental figures would probably try to leave the capital, and any semblance of viable administration would soon disappear. Whatever political structure remained would be paralyzed, waiting for forces outside its control to settle Cambodia's fate. No non-communist figure on the scene would be able to rally support for a "go-it-alone" strategy. Despair would be the overwhelming reaction, accompanied by the belief that it was only a matter of time before the communists in one way or another gained predominant, if not total, control of the country.

13. In these circumstances, Hanoi and the Khmer insurgents might be sorely tempted to press for a complete military takeover. Their chances of accomplishing this would be good, and they might be able to pull it off without a significant commitment of North Vietnamese forces to the effort. Even so, in the belief that time was on their side in any event, they would probably want to test other means to achieve their ends before launching

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any all-out military push. A variety of factors would contribute to such a decision:

- They would hope to minimize the risk of US military reinvolvement or retaliation.
- Although they would not think it likely, they would want to minimize the risk of any Thai or South Vietnamese intervention.
- In light of the fact that most of their objectives could be attained by less costly means, they might calculate that the possible military losses would outweigh the gains.
- Peking would almost certainly advise Hanoi to forego such action, claiming that it was unnecessary and needlessly provocative.

14. Thus, instead of a strictly military approach to the Cambodian situation in the wake of an end to US bombing, the communists would be more likely to opt for a political solution, accompanied by considerable military pressure. Should this approach prove unproductive or unduly lengthy, the communists would be prepared to move for a military takeover. The communists, however, would be in a very strong bargaining position. The US would have little leverage and the Cambodian Government even less. With the removal of the US aerial umbrella, the non-communist position could only get worse. Pressures in Phnom Penh for some kind of a deal, however disadvantageous, to bring the fighting to an end would mount.

15. The establishment of a coalition government in which the communists would be the dominant element would probably be a satisfactory short run outcome to Hanoi. A return of Sihanouk would give the government in Phnom Penh a symbol of legitimacy. And though the North Vietnamese would still be wary about Sihanouk's reliability, they would

probably calculate that he would be beholden to them and they would have such a strong position in the government that he could be kept on a relatively tight leash. Peking, for its own ends, would also champion such a solution and would urge Hanoi to take this approach.

IV. THE CHARACTER OF A SUCCESSOR REGIME

16. No matter how a collapse of the Phnom Penh government came about—military defeat or negotiations—the successor regime would be under strong communist influence and hostile to the interests of Washington, Saigon, and Bangkok. If he had not already left the country or been pushed aside, Lon Nol would have to go; the communists will not deal with him. Even if Sihanouk became the titular head of a coalition government, the communists would be the predominant force and Hanoi would be calling most of the shots.

17. The emergence of historically deep Cambodian hatred of the Vietnamese could eventually serve to limit Hanoi's influence by leading the relatively well-organized Khmer insurgents to try to assert some degree of independence from Hanoi. Moreover, Sihanouk, despite his professions of being only a symbolic figurehead in any new government, is not a toady and he is a Khmer nationalist. It is not his style to sit meekly on the sidelines while someone else controls the levers of power. In time, he would almost certainly attempt to maneuver to undermine North Vietnam's role in the government, playing Peking off against Hanoi if possible and maneuvering in other ways among the powers to gain some independence of action. The odds would be against him but, over time, he might have some success.

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V. THE IMPACT ON SOUTH VIETNAM, LAOS, AND THAILAND

18. *In terms of overall implications for the future of South Vietnam, Laos, or even Thailand, the installation of a communist-leaning regime in Phnom Penh could be of less significance than the circumstances which brought it about. If the President were forced for the first time by the US Congress to halt military action in Indochina, this would be seen as a vital turning point, forecasting the end of any significant US military role in this area.*

19. *South Vietnam.* The existence of a communist-dominated government in Phnom Penh coming about after a cessation of US bombing would be in political and psychological terms extremely unsettling to Saigon, producing a feeling within the government of vulnerability and isolation. It would fear the growth of feeling within the population that the scales were tipping in favor of the communists in Indochina. Thieu would want to test what the turn of events in Cambodia meant for South Vietnam. A request for new US guarantees of economic and military support would be almost certain, and Saigon would press for advance assurances of US air support in the event of a communist offensive into South Vietnam from Cambodia.

20. By itself, a strong communist position in Cambodia would not bring about a major shift in the present balance of military power in South Vietnam.² Under current conditions of limited combat, the immediate impact of a fall of Cambodia would be primarily psychological, although in time it would give the

² The Director of Naval Intelligence believes this estimate understates the impact that the fall of Cambodia would have on South Vietnam, particularly the most populated portion—the Delta. It is his judgment that the impact would be substantial, and that the increased level of insurgency would be such that there would, in fact, be a major shift in the present balance of power.

communists more flexibility in working to improve their military position and in developing their future strategy. The greatest military gain accruing to the communists would be the easing of their logistical burden, particularly in South Vietnam's Military Regions 3 and 4. Hanoi would have the option of shifting more of its supply effort to a sea route using Cambodian ports. This is already possible on a small scale, but a larger effort would be easier with the access to Cambodia's port facilities. But Hanoi's ability to make extensive use of this route would depend on the willingness of Peking and Moscow to provide the material and possibly the shipping for such an effort. It would also depend on the vulnerability of the Cambodian ports to air attack or naval quarantine by the South Vietnamese.

21. The communists would also gain access to a substantial inventory of Cambodian military equipment and supplies, some of which could be made available to communist forces in South Vietnam. But unless Hanoi were contemplating major military action in South Vietnam, it already has more or less what it needs in Cambodia for continuing the struggle in South Vietnam along present lines.

22. *Laos and Thailand.* The non-communists in Laos would be discouraged by the turn of events in Cambodia, but the immediate impact on events in Laos would be minimal. The Vientiane government, however, would be concerned that the US unwillingness to support the Lon Nol regime reflected a similar attitude toward the situation in Laos.³

23. The political and psychological impact in Thailand would be greater than in Laos. Bangkok has made it clear that it looks to the US to preserve a non-communist Cam-



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bodia. As a result, Thailand tends to view US policy in Cambodia as a gauge of the reliability of the US commitment to Thailand. If Cambodia went under as a result of a lack of US support, the Thai leadership would want to obtain some new and concrete assurances from Washington. If the US did not or could not respond in a manner satis-

factory to the Thai leaders, they might be prompted to accelerate the ongoing process of searching for alternatives to the close relationship with the US. They would be very slow, however, to actually disengage from the US until they were confident that any other arrangement would in fact protect their national interests.

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