

Cambodia in the Southeast Asian War

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Chapter 5

A Gamble That Failed: Sihanouk and the Cambodian Right (1969–March 1970)

It is extraordinarily difficult to disentangle in an intelligible fashion the complex events of 1969 and the first four months of 1970, culminating in the Lon Nol–Sirik Matak coup and the American invasion. For convenience, we will follow certain strands in the story thematically, rather than undertake a straight chronology. It seems logical to start with Cambodian–American relations, for 1969 saw the reopening of formal diplomatic relations. The “affairists” were eager to see this for reasons consistent both with their own economic and financial self-interest and with their anticommunism. Sihanouk also wanted a resumption of diplomatic relations. We have seen that he had come to the realization that Cambodia could not emerge from its economic stagnation without economic aid, and that he believed he could obtain this without tarnishing his country’s neutrality and independence by approaching international multilateral agencies. As these are dominated by the United States, American good will—even if direct American aid were eschewed—would insure that any application for aid would be more favorably received than would otherwise be the case. It was also suggested late in the year that the Prince was ready to accept direct U.S. economic assistance again. In any case, reopening the American embassy clearly greatly improved prospects for attracting American dollars via investment and tourism.

Sihanouk also seems to have seen political advantages in the resumption of diplomatic relations. With a growing Russian presence in Cambodia and the arrival of a new Chinese ambassador in June 1969—the post having been vacant for two years—a third great power represented would

show the communists that he has significant international support, and that by causing trouble for Cambodia, they could also cause

trouble for themselves . . . the Vietnamese are reminded that an increase of their activity against Cambodia would antagonise a country which has powerful friends not only in the western bloc but in the communist bloc as well.¹

Sihanouk had miscalculated very badly in thinking he could allow the Americans back “inside the castle walls” with impunity. From the end of 1967 and the beginning of 1968, the avowedly pro-American people in Cambodian politics had been on the ascendant and had been actively making preparations for taking power on a program “entirely devoted to American policies.”² The leaders of the Khmer Rouge had been warning Cambodians for some time of the right-wing intention to stage a coup d’état and “sell their country to the Americans.” Reopening the American embassy simplified problems of communication and coordination; as we noted, Chau Beng regarded the act as “political suicide” for Sihanouk.

The year started with a trial balloon in Washington. Professor E. S. Monteiro, formerly Singaporean ambassador to Phnom Penh and newly appointed ambassador to Washington, said in February that if America would accept the formula recognizing Cambodia’s frontiers accepted by other countries, Cambodia might be willing to reopen ties. This signal must have originated with Sihanouk himself.

On April 16, the Australian ambassador to Phnom Penh gave Sihanouk a message on behalf of the United States. It read: “In conformity with the UN Charter, the USA recognizes and respects the sovereignty, independence, neutrality and territorial integrity of the Kingdom of Cambodia within its present frontiers.”³ Sihanouk promptly announced that diplomatic relations could be resumed on this basis. But he retracted his offer at the end of April, detecting in American pronouncements and reports an implicit reservation that the borders Washington recognized were not those recognized by Phnom Penh. He sought reassurance, which was apparently forthcoming, for June 11 saw a formal announcement of resumption of diplomatic relations at chargé d’affaires level.

The American appointee, Lloyd Rives, arrived in Cambodia in July and in October told reporters that he expected to have two military attachés appointed to the mission soon: “That, of course,

was an important point in the resumption of relations, that we should be able to provide on-scene inspection of the border incidents." It seems reasonable to assume that a secondary—if not the primary—function of the military attachés was to collect intelligence relevant to the coming South Vietnamese and American invasion. In any event, the American embassy did not lack facilities for intelligence gathering and contact with the Cambodian officials: Indonesian "counterrevolutionary" specialists were often seen in the streets of Phnom Penh; Filipino, Thai, and Vietnamese agents directly connected with the CIA were plentiful; and it has recently been revealed that Japanese agents disguised as businessmen with their "secret societies" played more important roles in Cambodian politics than expected, and continue to do so.* When questioned about U.S. violations of the Cambodian frontier, Rives said he was "too busy" to investigate such charges, but it was clear from his answers that he had plenty of time to work on behalf of American investors interested in Cambodia.

American aggression continued despite the reopening of diplomatic relations, though below the peak levels of 1967 and 1968. Cambodian casualties from attacks in 1969 were down to 33 dead and 114 wounded, compared with 85 dead and 184 wounded the previous year. Both ground and air border violations were fewer and maritime violations showed only a slight rise.⁴ Sihanouk claimed in March that the Americans never bombed those parts of Cambodia where he admitted there were DRV and NLF units—particularly the provinces of Rattanakiri and Mondulakiri—but only areas where there were only Cambodians.

A particularly vicious and damaging form of attack was defoliation. Between April 18 and May 14, 1969, U.S. spray planes destroyed nearly 40,000 acres of rubber—about a third of the total—causing millions of dollars of damage to the trees and the loss of valuable rubber, a stay of the Cambodian export economy. Four American scientists were permitted to enter the country to verify and study the damage and reported to the State Department. Their findings forced departmental spokesmen to concede that de-

* Both in Cambodia and in South Vietnam, as their economic imperialism requires.

foliation of Cambodian rubber and other crops had been confirmed. This published evidence supported the Cambodian authorities' accusations against the United States.⁵

Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield later warned that the continuing bombardment of Cambodia by the American armed forces might still spread the Vietnam war, despite the opening of diplomatic relations. "It does not appear to me," he said, "that the way to restore friendly relations with Cambodia or the orderly way out of Vietnam is to be found in placing U.S. forces where the war has to be spread into Cambodia for their safety."⁶ Right through to the end of December American jets kept blasting Cambodian targets. In November they leveled the Cambodian outpost at Dak Dam in Mondulakiri province, killing twenty-five Cambodian soldiers. The American excuse was that artillery from Dak Dam was shelling their forces at Bu Prang inside South Vietnam, but this did not square with their further excuse for using jets, namely, that their own artillery could not reach Dak Dam from Bu Prang.

This and a number of other revealing incidents were fully reported by T. D. Allman in an article entitled "Cracking a Smile," in *Far Eastern Economic Review*, on February 26, 1970. Allman made it quite clear that in his opinion, based on experience of the border regions, there could be no mistaking the dividing line between crater-pocked South Vietnam and the relatively untouched Cambodia. Moreover, he reported that he could not imagine the Vietcong finding hiding places in the open terrain of Svay Rieng province (the Parrot's Beak), far less constructing "sanctuaries." The story of his trip to Svay Rieng makes somber reading: the following extracts are indicative of the arrogant American attitude toward Cambodia.

Of the countless territorial violations, Allman quotes a Cambodian official as saying: "I think they do it to remind us how weak we are." All Cambodian protests to the American embassy in Phnom Penh were simply ignored. A European resident of Phnom Penh told him that he once had lunch with the governor of Svay Rieng:

During lunch, an American plane came over and looped the loop over the Governor's house. The plane kept diving at a Cambodian flag which was flying in the front garden. A policeman took out his pistol