

Ranald T. Adams IV
HIS 492 – Seminar: Cultural Revolution
Term Paper

12/16/21
Prof. Harris

The Red Prince

Norodom Sihanouk, China, and the Worst Buddy-Cop Movie Pitch of 2021

Introduction

For the better part of two decades, between 1970 and 1991, the Communist strongholds of Beijing and Pyongyang had a curious guest: the intermittently exiled former prime minister, once king, of Cambodia, Prince Norodom Sihanouk. Sihanouk, prince and former king, who would become king of Cambodia once more in the 90s, was not merely a passive sideshow in the Communist courts of Asia; he was an active partner, the unifying figurehead and rallying cry for Chinese-backed guerrillas in Cambodia. Literal royalty, Prince Sihanouk possessed estates in or near both cities; his estate near Pyongyang was palatial, with 40 rooms and grand ballrooms for receiving dignitaries, fitting for a government in exile. Indeed, following the 1970 Cambodian coup which sent Sihanouk into exile, he would lead multiple exile governments backed by the People's Republic of China, receiving dignitaries on behalf of Cambodian rebel umbrella organizations that included groups like the notorious Khmer Rouge.

How did literal royalty become the face for Communist Chinese geopolitics in Cambodia? How much of an active participant was the Prince in this partnership? And how did the two partners, Sihanouk and China, justify this partnership ideologically? In answering these questions, this paper will argue that while the partnership was not inevitable, it was understandable based on the convergent interests – real and perceived – of both parties, and that Sihanouk's royalty – while awkward for China – was in fact a selling point for the relationship. This paper will explore how conditions in the 50s and 60s shaped mutual perceptions of convergent interests; how the events of the 1970 coup allowed for Sihanouk's perception of

Communist China as a safe haven; and how the ideological justifications, while necessitating compromises, were not necessarily unusual for either party.

Historiography and Method

In asking about China's support for Sihanouk in the wake of the 1970 Cambodian coup, we run into a problem: the relationship with Sihanouk is rarely the central focus. In the sources discussing Sino-Cambodian relations during the period in question, Sihanouk emerges as a figurehead, a symbol, a proxy for broader questions of great power conflict and anti-colonialism. To the extent that we *can* understand Chinese support for Sihanouk, we must do so through the interplay between sources of divergent focus and interpretation: divergent focus, insofar as Chinese motivations regarding Cambodia are often discussed in light of other Chinese interests; divergent interpretation, insofar as those motivations vary between authors as well as audience.

In order to understand the interplay between sources, this section will look at three broad sets of sources. First, we will look at primary sources, looking at the distinction between public and private statements on the Sino-Sihanouk relationship. Second, we will look at secondary sources analyzing Chinese and Cambodian foreign policy prior to the coup, when Sihanouk was in power, with an eye towards overlapping interests and motivations between the PRC and Sihanouk. Finally, we will look at secondary sources analyzing Indochina during and after the 1970, and how these sources fit Cambodia into a broader analysis of geopolitics in Southeast Asia.

In the available primary sources, a division quickly emerges between public-facing sources aimed at justifying Chinese policy, and private-facing sources that deal in policy analysis. Two sources are representative of this first tendency: first, a speech delivered by Chiao-Kuan-hua of the PRC to the UN General Assembly in 1972. In this speech, Chiao situates

Cambodia within the broader efforts against “the United States war of aggression against Indo-China,” with China being “duty bound to support” the “three Indo-Chinese countries” of Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia.¹ Within this context, Sihanouk’s “Royal Government of National Union” is held up as “the sole legal representative of the Khmer people,” contrasted against the “Lon Nol regime,” which Chiao accuses of being “imposed on the Khmer people by” implicitly American “foreign forces.”² The ideological composition of that Royal Government is left unmentioned; the salient fact of the Cambodian case, according to the speech, is the framing of Sihanouk as an indigenous leader fighting American imperialism with Chinese support.

Likewise, in a 1970 issue of the *Peking Review*, an article putatively authored by Sihanouk himself in the immediate aftermath of the coup presents a similar logic. The coup is framed as an attack by a “new fascist power which serves U.S. imperialism,” with a prediction of “certain victory over [... the] reactionary oppressors and their masters – the U.S. Imperialists.”³ In both cases, the emphasis is less on Sihanouk’s ideological bona fides than on Lon Nol’s alleged position as a stalking horse for American imperialism. A possible explanation for this is in audience: where Chiao’s speech was addressed to diplomats, the *Peking Review* is an English language publication aimed at Western bodies politic.

By contrast, a telegram between the American Consulate in Hong Kong and the American Secretary of State, from 1973, is emblematic of the distance between public proclamations and private calculus. The American Consulate summarizes China’s support for Sihanouk as being motivated by a desire for “a stable and neutral Cambodia,” with Sihanouk providing a point of Chinese influence that prevents their rivals in the USSR from gaining a

¹ Chiao 14

² Chiao 14

³ Sihanouk, et. al 13-14

foothold.⁴ Rather than a grand ideological contest between American Imperialism and Chinese-backed local nationalism, the Consulate's report frames Chinese involvement as directed at its broader interest in a neutral Indochina devoid of American and Soviet presence. This disconnect between public pronouncements and private analysis is made more severe by the availability of sources: the opacity of internal Chinese foreign policy deliberations, when compared to American diplomatic cable declassification, means that while public Chinese statements are plentiful, any unvarnished views must be extracted second-hand through foreign sources like the Consulate. These unvarnished views present difficulties in that they are both second-hand, and may not accurately represent real internal Chinese views, as well as in their necessary coloration by the policy goals of their origin – in this case, the American diplomatic apparatus.

In the first set of secondary literature, focused on Chinese and Cambodian foreign policy prior to the coup, we find a confluence between Chinese and Sihanouk's geopolitical motivations. Two sources – Huisken and Shao – deal with Chinese policy in the 50s, and one – Pradhan – with Sihanouk over the same period. In the first set, Huisken describes China as disillusioned with the Soviets as a consequence of the Korean War, noting that it provided “confirmation [...] that the Soviet Union was a calculating friend, not one to rely on in difficult circumstances,” and that Zhou Enlai felt that it had been “used as a pawn” in the Korean War.⁵ Shao describes Zhou Enlai's work in Indochina in the 50s as motivated, in part, by “apprehension of another Korea-type war in a vital area immediately adjacent to China's southern frontiers.”⁶ His attempts at “transformation of the three Indo-Chinese states into ‘an area of peace and neutrality’ would” hopefully avoid both “a war with the Western Powers and

⁴ Consulate 01

⁵ Huisken 34

⁶ Shao 487

China's military involvement in Indo-China" at a time when China was working to rebuild domestically.⁷ Taken together, these sources present an image of China wary of military entanglements in the south, especially given the costs of the Korean War, and wary of allowing Soviet foreign policy to push China into another costly foreign war.

The Pradhan source complements these sources with an analysis of Sihanouk's foreign policy during his time as Cambodia's head of state. He describes Sihanouk as motivated, chiefly, by Cambodia's "traditional fear of her neighbors, Thailand and South Vietnam," which "for four centuries" had used Cambodia as a battleground.⁸ Pradhan notes that Sihanouk viewed these neighbors as being "under the umbrella of the western bloc," and sought through a policy of "neutralism" to avoid entanglement in broader cold war conflicts.⁹ When added to the sources on Chinese foreign policy, this source presents the Sino-Sihanouk relationship as a natural confluence of desires to avoid turning Indochina into another Cold War conflict zone. Less obvious from these sources is the extent to which the Sino-Sihanouk relationship was justified ideologically by China. One notable contradiction that could be explored is between Chinese support for the North Vietnamese, later, and the seeming desire in these sources to keep Indochina off the table. Moreover, by focusing so heavily on foreign policy, these sources – with the limited exception of Pradhan's work – avoid talking about domestic politics that might explain decisions during the period, or cast doubt on the narrative of a confluence of interests.

The final set of sources, secondary sources dealing with the period of the coup and its aftermath, suffer from an emphasis on Cambodia as a side-hustle for Sino-Vietnamese and Sino-Soviet relations. In the Ojha article from 1972, for instance, Chinese support for Sihanouk after

⁷ Shao 487

⁸ Pradhan 458

⁹ Pradhan 458

the coup is framed as a way of adjusting “the Chinese position vis-à-vis the Soviet Union in Indochina,” with their quick action swinging “the balance of power, which had heretofore existed between Moscow and Peking, in favor of the Chinese.”¹⁰ The 1980 Buszynski article on the Vietnamese perspective of the Sino-Vietnamese conflict in 1979 describes the Sino-Cambodian relationship primarily in terms of alignment *against* Vietnam, describing the Khmer Rouge “[accusing] the Vietnamese of attempting to turn their country into a ‘satellite in an Indo-China federation.’”¹¹ Likewise, the chapter from the RAND Corporation-published book, “China’s Punitive War,” describes Chinese support for Cambodia in terms of broader strategic goals – in particular, the efforts of Moscow to “limit China’s influence in Southeast Asia” using Vietnam.¹² These sources are less useful for analysis of the Sino-Sihanouk relationship in-and-of-itself – the latter two do not even mention Sihanouk – but are useful in explaining the geopolitical context in which that relationship emerged. This can, in turn, help shed light on the primary sources, particularly in determining the extent to which public or private accounts of the relationship ought to be trusted.

One source, though, provides an exception to this latter focus on Cambodia as a side-hustle. In R.B. Smith’s 1996 article on “the International Setting of the Cambodia Crisis, 1969-1970,” we get a more granular view of the decisions leading up to the coup that overthrew Sihanouk. Interestingly, Smith notes that the “government of salvation” appointed by Sihanouk in 1969, including “Lon Nol” and “right-wing Prince Sirik Matak,” was established as part of a rapprochement with the United States.¹³ That the new, more western-aligned government would come to overthrow Sihanouk can help explain why Sihanouk would choose China for his

¹⁰ Ojha 139

¹¹ Buszynski 834

¹² Gompert, et al., 119

¹³ Smith 313-314

government-in-exile. This secondary source, then, helps establish an explanation for Sihanouk's actions that introduces Cambodian domestic politics, and the interaction between those politics and the international setting. In that way, it helps fill in some of the gaps left by the prior three sources, which are predominantly focused on explanations outside of Cambodia itself.

With this source base, there still remains a gap. The choice of Sihanouk as proxy is taken, in many cases, as a given; to the extent that it is questioned, a conclusive answer is hard to find, with some mix of historical accidents and nebulous geopolitical forces giving a vague answer. This paper hopes to cross-examine the body of sources to fill in that gap, looking at the contradictions of the primary sources, the common interests indicated by the first set of secondary sources, as well as the context-setting of the latter secondary sources. To conduct this cross-examination, this paper will use the two categories of secondary sources as a scaffold, with sections on the pre- and post-coup Sino-Sihanouk relationship; primary sources will serve to add depth and color to these two sections. In the third section, this paper will mostly engage with the primary sources to explore the rhetorical and ideological aspect of the relationship, to gain a better understanding of the ways in which the relationship was justified, and the compromises used to do so. In the process, this paper will hopefully achieve a more direct account of why, exactly, China chose a playboy Prince as its standard-bearer in Cambodia.

Reconstructing Asia:

World War 2 broke the world. The decade following 1945 saw the international system rearranged in a number of ways: the collapse of multipolarity into the bipolar framework of the Cold War, the decolonization of the great European maritime empires, and the birth of globe-spanning institutions like the United Nations. In mainland China, 1949 saw the final victory of the Chinese Communist Party with the Nationalists' retreat to Taiwan, resulting in the

declaration of the People's Republic. In Southeast Asia, the early 1950s saw France lose its colonial holdings, resulting in the independence of Laos, Cambodia, and a (divided) Vietnam. In all of these cases, new states confronted the twin problems of post-war rebuilding, and establishing their place in the new global order. In this context we find the beginning of a decades-long relationship between two unlikely partners: Prince Norodom Sihanouk, leader of newly independent Cambodia; and the Chinese Communist Party under Mao Zedong and, particularly, Premier Zhou Enlai.

Between Prince Sihanouk's 1955 election as Cambodian Premier and the 1970 coup which deposed him, the Sino-Sihanouk relationship was characterized by an increasing convergence in foreign policy interests. This convergence, as this section will demonstrate, emerged out of the unique geopolitical perspectives of the two parties, and set the stage for the Sino-Sihanouk relationship to become one of patron and proxy following the Prince's exile. In order to demonstrate this, we will first look at the nascent Chinese foreign policy of the 50s, with an eye towards the Bandung Conference and the Sino-Soviet Split, before moving to Sihanouk's geopolitics and his relation with China.

The People's Republic of China, following its 1949 victory, faced the problem of rebuilding from the chaos of civil war, the warlord period, and the war against Japan. Writing about Premier Zhou Enlai's Indochina policy in the 50s, Shao Kuo-kang notes that the overwhelming priority was "modernizing the domestic economy," with Zhou "[anticipating] that it would take at least three five-year plans to transform China from an agricultural nation into an industrial one."¹⁴ This domestic focus emerged from Zhou's awareness of "the limits of China's military and economic capabilities," leading to a desire to "avoid direct military confrontation

¹⁴ Shao Kuo-kang, "Zhou Enlai's Diplomacy" 486, 487

with the Western Powers, particularly the United States.”¹⁵ Put simply, the People’s Republic could not walk and chew gum at the same time; in order to build military strength, it first needed time to build up its economy and industrial base.

The military limits of the People’s Republic were underlined by its experiences in the 1950-1953 Korean War. Writing about early Chinese foreign policy, Ron Huisken describes how Stalin provided Kim Il-Sung “authorisation [sic] and support to invade South Korea, on the condition that North Korea and, if necessary, do all the fighting,” eventually pressuring Mao into committing to the conflict with “promises of indirect assistance, including the sale of air support equipment.”¹⁶ Effectively, Stalin pressured Mao into providing the boots on the ground against a coalition of Western powers, paying the cost of the Korean war in blood while the Soviets watched. This left Mao and Zhou Enlai with the impression that the Soviet Union “was a calculating friend, not one to rely on in difficult circumstances,” as well as leading to Zhou’s belief “that China should never again allow itself to be used as a pawn by the Soviet Union.”¹⁷ Even beyond military affairs, “Moscow was exceedingly careful with its economic and technical assistance,” using it as a way to subordinate the People’s Republic and to “exploit, as fully as possible, the dependencies this assistance generated.”¹⁸ Taken together, CCP leadership – even before the Sino-Soviet Split – had reason to be deeply ambivalent about their ability to rely on the Soviets.

The experience in Korea, and the unreliability of the Soviets, clarifies Zhou Enlai’s policies in Indochina in 1954 and 1955. Shao notes that “the explicit threats of the United States to ‘intervene’” in Indochina in 1954 “heightened Zhou’s apprehension of another Korea-type war

¹⁵ Shao 486

¹⁶ Huisken, Ron, “The People’s Republic of China: Early Foreign Policy and Security Choices” 32-33

¹⁷ Huisken 34

¹⁸ Huisken 35

in a vital area immediately adjacent to China's southern frontiers."¹⁹ Only a year before, the People's Republic had already paid the butcher's bill in a war against America; the thought of a similar debacle on their southern border threatened to derail the much-needed economic modernization plans. That being said, "under foreign dominion the Indo-Chinese countries would provide bases for possible military action against China," forcing the People's Republic to find a way to "secure her southern borders through diplomatic channels."²⁰ Zhou Enlai first "sought to detach the three Indo-Chinese countries from the western system of military alignments," as part of a "larger scale" vision of "the formation of [an] 'area of peace' composed of all the non-aligned states in South Asia."²¹ The "application" of "neutralization to Indo-China was to lay the foundation" for this larger vision, as a first step towards creating a group of nations excluded from the bitter Cold War proxy fights.²² For Zhou Enlai, and the People's Republic, Indochinese policy represented the beginning of an effort to chart a course outside of both the Soviet and American spheres. In addition to securing the territorial integrity of the People's Republic for its long-delayed economic reconstruction, this course would present China as an alternative to the bipolar system – a Third World.

The principles of this Third World emerge in Zhou Enlai's comments at the 1955 Asian-African Conference in Bandung, Indonesia. In two speeches, Zhou lays out the Chinese perspective. In his main address to the plenary session, Zhou Enlai calls for "the destiny of Asian and African countries" to be "taken into the hands of the peoples themselves," describing "the days when the Western powers controlled [their] destiny" as "already past."²³ He cites the 1954

¹⁹ Shao 487

²⁰ Shao 486-7

²¹ Shao 487-8

²² Shao 488

²³ Zhou Enlai "Main Speech by Premier Zhou Enlai," hereafter "Main Speech," 2

Geneva agreements in Indochina as a positive example, describing provisions “that the Indo-Chinese states shall not join any military alliance and that no foreign military bases should be established in these states” as key to creating “favourable [sic] conditions for the establishment of an area of peace,” before lamenting failures to uphold these agreements.²⁴ Notably, this neutrality stands apart from *all* military alliances – Soviet and American – and Zhou would see this replicated across South Asia and Africa.

It is in this broader context that Prince Sihanouk established Cambodia’s early foreign policy. Two major factors led Sihanouk, early on, to pursue a policy of neutrality. As P.C. Pradhan writes, the first was Cambodia’s “traditional fear of her neighbours, Thailand and South Vietnam,” which had “fought on Cambodian territory” for “four centuries.”²⁵ With both aligned with the West, and “the whole region of Southeast Asia” trapped in “the vortex of cold war politics [...] Sihanouk had seen the danger of power bloc involvement in Vietnam and Laos.”²⁶ The geographic position of Cambodia, in between larger powers, in the middle of a Cold War flashpoint, caused Sihanouk to believe that “the best measure of averting cold war tension in Cambodia and guaranteeing Cambodian security would be to adopt policy [sic] of neutrality and balance.”²⁷ Sihanouk was, by this logic, forced towards neutrality so as to avoid the chaos on its borders. Getting involved with one side or the other risked the security of his fledgling nation, which had only achieved independence in 1953.

The second factor leading Sihanouk to neutrality mirrors a problem facing the People’s Republic: the need for economic development. Pradhan notes that Sihanouk’s “main concern [...] after independence, was to reconstruct the Cambodian economy” and increase the standard

²⁴ “Main Speech” 3

²⁵ Pradhan, P.C. “Sihanouk and the Formulation of Cambodian Foreign Policy” 458

²⁶ Pradhan 458

²⁷ Pradhan 459

of living.²⁸ In order to achieve this, Cambodia needed foreign aid, and “in turn needed steadfast neutrality, because if a neutral country receives aid from both the blocs, the risks of endangering its freedom is lessened.”²⁹ Put another way, Cambodia did not have the luxury of pulling itself up by its own bootstraps, but relying on only one power bloc for aid would result in a relationship of economic dependence, which could undermine the political independence of the country.

Diplomatic neutrality, then, served not only to protect the security of Cambodia, but also allowed vital economic aid without the specter of domestic political interference – the sort of interference which might pull Cambodia into the conflicts on its borders.

Both China and Sihanouk’s Cambodia, then, wanted something very similar – albeit for different reasons. Both wanted Cambodia taken off the table of Cold War proxy conflicts, a neutral Cambodia independent of the major power blocs. This convergence manifested in both practical commitments, as well as rhetorical compromises akin to those in Zhou Enlai’s supplementary speech. In the first category, one example emerges in a 1960 report from the People’s Republic’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in which the Vietnamese Communist Party “seeks advice from the Communist Parties of both the Soviet Union and China” on a proposal, by Sihanouk, to keep Cambodia and Laos neutral.³⁰ Both the Ministry and the Vietnamese support such a proposal, but the Vietnamese express a desire that Sihanouk show “strong opposition” to American interference “with [the internal affairs of] Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia” all together.³¹ China, in effect, is facilitating Vietnamese agreement to Cambodian and Laotian neutrality.

²⁸ Pradhan 459

²⁹ Pradhan 459

³⁰ Chinese Foreign Ministry, “Report on the Matter of the Proposal” 1

³¹ Chinese Foreign Ministry 1

On Sihanouk's end, the Cambodian government would go on to recognize the North Vietnamese as the legitimate state. In one 1969 speech before the United Nations, Cambodian representative Huot Sambath calls for "the total and unconditional withdrawal of foreign troops and bases from South Viet-Nam," asserting their support "not for ideological reasons as some allege, but because that position is a just one and consistent with United Nations principles."³² Just as China supports Cambodian neutrality, Cambodia repays that support by advocating for North Vietnam; convergent interests produce concrete policy commitments between both parties. In other words, convergent interests created a relationship that, even if it was not always perfect, was functional, and established a pattern of cooperation and understanding between Sihanouk and the CCP's leadership. When Sihanouk was overthrown, in 1970, this pattern helps explain why he would choose exile in China – and why the People's Republic would welcome a Prince.

The Little Matter of a Coup:

In the Peking Review issue of March 27th, 1970, little more than a week after the March 18th coup in Cambodia, one word appears repeatedly: Samdech. A Khmer word for lord, or prince, Samdech appears before every instance of the deposed Prince Norodom Sihanouk's name, in an issue partly devoted to his coup. The English-language, foreign-oriented Chinese Communist Party journal, spends page after page lauding a prince and condemning the republicans who deposed him, using the Khmer word for prince rather than the English. This rhetorical curiosity gets at the heart of this section's question: of all the places for a deposed Cambodian prince to land, why Communist China? In the prior section, we explored the convergent interests which enabled a productive partnership between Prince Sihanouk and the

³² Sambath, Huot "Speech (Cambodia)" 15

CCP while the Prince ruled Cambodia: there is a difference, though, between productive diplomatic relations and the choice to host a government-in-exile.

This section, then, will attempt to bridge the gap between the Sino-Sihanouk diplomatic relationship and the Sino-Sihanouk relationship after the coup. In order to do so, this section will first look at the events leading up to the coup to explain why Sihanouk would choose China; after, a discussion of the geopolitics that made Sihanouk a good proxy for Chinese interests in Cambodia. In the process, this section will also look at public rhetorical and ideological justifications for the relationship, as in the Peking Review issue.

In the summer of 1969, Sihanouk faced a number of domestic problems: the Communist Vietnamese were using Cambodian borderlands as base areas, inviting a concurrent American bombing campaign; an economic crisis, with a lack of foreign aid to solve it. R.B. Smith, in his account of the coup's international setting, describes Sihanouk's solution. The Americans, he notes, took "steps towards re-establishing diplomatic relations with Cambodia," wanting to "preserve" the neutral Sihanouk government "rather than risk further destabilization leading to a possible Communist takeover."³³ Sihanouk, for his part, welcomed the rapprochement. The "only logical solution" to Cambodia's economic crisis "lay in restoring economic ties with the West in the hope of increasing government revenues."³⁴ In addition to reopening relations with the US, he formed a "new 'government of salvation'" which was "headed by Lon Nol [...] and included as first deputy premier the right-wing Prince Sirik Matak, Sihanouk's cousin and rival within the royal family," with solving the crisis as the "first task."³⁵ This new government was

³³ Smith, R.B. "The International Setting of the Cambodia Crisis, 1969-1970" 313

³⁴ Smith 314

³⁵ Smith 314

significantly more US-friendly and right-wing, and Prince Sirik Matak in particular took a hardline approach towards Communist Vietnamese troops in Cambodia.

Prince Sirik Matak, and Lon Nol, gradually escalated this hardline shift in Sihanouk's absence. During Sihanouk's January trip to France, Sirik Matak "arranged live broadcasts [...] at which critical statements were made about the 40,000-60,000 Vietnamese Communist troops on Cambodian soil and about" a trade agreement to supply the Viet Cong with rice; once Lon Nol had returned from abroad, the two "announced that all 500-riel notes would be replaced [...] making the old ones no longer legal tender, and that diplomatic bags would be searched [...] to prevent the smuggling of counterfeit notes," in the hopes of degrading the Vietnamese ability to purchase goods in Cambodia.³⁶ On March 16th, with Sihanouk's return alleged to be close at hand, a number of "'rightist' deputies" accused "'leftist' ministers Oum Manoline and Sosthene Fernandez" of "illegally importing cloth from Hong Kong," persuading the assembly to "reconvene on the 18th to vote" on their expulsion from office; Smith notes that "Oum Manoline's only means of defending himself lay in using his control over the police to stage a coup of his own before the next meeting of the assembly."³⁷ When, that night, Oum Manoline "tried to do so, and to arrest Lon Nol and Sirik Matak," he failed and was himself arrested; in the aftermath, on the 18th the pair successfully pushed a resolution "removing Sihanouk as head of state," with Sihanouk learning "of the decision from [Soviet Premier] Kosygin as he was being driven to the airport in Moscow."³⁸ In essence, Sihanouk was faced with a coup by a government he had appointed; a government which, in his absence, attacked his policies and publicly agitated against Vietnamese troops that, around the same time, were being bombed by Americans.

³⁶ Smith 321-322

³⁷ Smith 326

³⁸ Smith 326

Moreover, this was a government appointed with the express intent of signaling rapprochement with the United States; that rapprochement had cost him his country, and Sihanouk seems to have quickly apportioned blame. In the previously mentioned March 27th, 1970 issue of Peking Review, a number of responses to the coup are attributed to Sihanouk, with additional commentary from Albanians, Vietnamese, and anonymous officials. In one statement, Sihanouk accuses Lon Nol and Sirik Matak as having “cynically and deliberately created” a crisis “entirely to meet the needs of their personal ambitions and greed and those of the Central Intelligence Agency of the U.S.A.”³⁹ He describes them as “lackeys of the American imperialists,” as “treacherous princes” with “American masters.”⁴⁰ He claims that identical “leaflets, posters, and banners” appeared simultaneously at demonstrations, “even in English, a language which is unknown to the mass of [his] Khmer-speaking and French-speaking compatriots,” implying that any alleged “popular” demonstrations were artificially concocted by America.⁴¹ Regardless of whether this is an accurate assessment of the coup and its causes, and with the caveat that the Peking Review is a CCP outlet meant to sway foreign audiences, the thrust of the immediate response from Sihanouk’s government in exile is that the Americans were responsible.

Even if the Peking Review statements exaggerate Sihanouk’s suspicions, this would provide a reasonable motivation for Sihanouk to seek refuge in China, and dovetails with other secondary literature on Sihanouk’s suspicions. Ben Kiernan, in his book *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, notes that the 1963 coup and assassination of South Vietnamese leader Ngo Dinh Diem impacted deeply: Kiernan writes that the “US role in the assassination of its own protégé,

³⁹ Sihanouk, Samdech Norodom, et. al., “Message to Compatriots” 13

⁴⁰ Sihanouk, et. al. 19

⁴¹ Sihanouk, et. al., 13

President Ngo Dinh Diem, [...] caused Sihanouk to speculate fearfully about the plans the Americans might have in store for militant neutralist figures such as himself.”⁴² Rightly or wrongly, the conclusion Sihanouk drew from the 1963 South Vietnamese coup was that the Americans might come for him as well. Shortly thereafter, while accusing the Americans of backing right-wing Khmer Serei revolutionaries, Sihanouk’s government voted “to expel the US military mission from the country and to terminate all US aid.”⁴³ It was this expulsion which Sihanouk reversed with the appointment of Lon Nol and Sirik Matak in 1969; when Lon Nol deposed Sihanouk, it may have seemed to be a vindication of his earlier anti-American suspicions. In that light, China would be a natural choice for refuge.

This is especially true given his history of productive, personal relations with CCP leadership: as discussed in the prior section, Sihanouk had close to a decade and a half of consistent engagement with Zhou Enlai, as well as memoranda of conversations with Mao in which Mao expressed support for his continued rule. Moreover, Julia Lovell notes in her paper on “The Uses of Foreigners in Mao-era China” that this sort of personal relationship was an explicit policy of the People’s Republic as part of a practice of “‘hospitality’ as a technique for making individuals feel guiltily indebted to their Chinese hosts and inclined to reciprocate favorably.”⁴⁴ Guests were wined and dined, not merely for the pageantry, but also to inculcate feelings of personal identification and obligation, creating strong psychological ties between Chinese leadership and foreign figures. She describes how Zhou Enlai engaged in “careful hosting” of the prince “through the 1950s and 1960s” along these lines, attributing Sihanouk’s decision to “[take] refuge in China” at least partly to this practice.⁴⁵ Sihanouk would have felt

⁴² Kiernan, Ben *How Pol Pot Came to Power* 205

⁴³ Kiernan 206

⁴⁴ Lovell, Julia “The Uses of Foreigners in the Mao Era” 146

⁴⁵ Lovell 153

not only comfortable, but welcome, as if he were crashing on an old friend's house due to problems at home – and this was likely the intended effect. In addition to the personal factors, the last Cambodian UN address prior to the coup, discussed in the previous section, includes a call for UN recognition and a voting seat for the People's Republic of China, and a condemnation of continued American presence in South Vietnam.⁴⁶ Taken together, China represents a relatively friendly safe harbor for Sihanouk, with both personal *and* practical ties of reciprocity, one which – with its interest in Indochina, and its historical support for his policies in Cambodia – could feasibly serve as a platform for retaking his home country.

If Sihanouk's motivations are clear, the reasons for Chinese support are less obvious. After all, the Chinese already had proxies in the Khmer Rouge, and their allies among the Communist Vietnamese already controlled border territories within Cambodia. One possible explanation comes from previous doctrine: Lon Nol's regime in Cambodia represented a possible collapse of perhaps the only "neutralized" Indochinese state. Subsequent coordination between the South Vietnamese and Lon Nol's government against Viet Cong base areas in late march would have been a signal that Cambodian neutrality was no longer operative.⁴⁷ When it became clear that Lon Nol "would be [unable] to cope with" Vietnamese Communist forces without support, Nixon expanded American operations to include Cambodia.⁴⁸ According to Ishwer C. Ojha, this had the effect of "vastly [increasing] the insecurity of Asian communists," leaving an opening for China to demonstrate leadership.⁴⁹ Ojha writes that over the month of April, China "obtained [North Korea's] endorsement for Sihanouk's" cause, and "hosted a communist summit [...] intended to coordinate the Cambodian [resistance] with other Indochinese organizations,"

⁴⁶ Sambath, 14-15

⁴⁷ Smith 330-331

⁴⁸ Smith 335

⁴⁹ Ojha 139

concluding that the American invasion “seems to have convinced the North Vietnamese, North Koreans, the Pathet Lao, and the NLF to accept the Chinese lead,” effectively shifting leadership in Indochina “in favor of the Chinese” at the Soviets’ expense.⁵⁰ With Lon Nol’s coup against Sihanouk, the Chinese had lost the neutrality of Cambodia; as Indochina was a key strategic interest, the logic goes, action of some sort was necessary. By quickly rallying behind Sihanouk, they were able to unify Asian communist groups and seize leadership from the Soviets. The question remains, though, why Sihanouk was chosen over preexisting Cambodian proxies.

One answer emerges in a word: legitimacy. In writing about Chinese diplomacy during Sihanouk’s second exile government, following the 1978 Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, Steven Hood writes that Sihanouk possessed “international recognition of Sihanouk as the leader of the Cambodian opposition to the Vietnamese invasion,” allowing the People’s Republic to present itself as acting multilaterally against a regional bad actor.⁵¹ Sihanouk’s presence allowed the People’s Republic to frame its arming of the Khmer Rouge within a broader context of condemnation of the Vietnamese invasion, rather than as a mere puppet. Brought back to the coup of 1970, Sihanouk’s Beijing-backed government-in-exile likewise had “international recognition [for Sihanouk] as leader of Cambodia,” with the Khmer Rouge supported within the broader umbrella of the “National United Front of Kampuchea.”⁵² In both cases, China saw in Sihanouk an opportunity to lend their actions an imprimatur of international legitimacy and, thereby, access a broader base of support – both internationally and within Cambodia itself – than they would if they had supported the Khmer Rouge alone. Sihanouk’s presence differentiated Chinese proxy policies from other Cold War proxy policies by due to Sihanouk’s

⁵⁰ Ojha 139

⁵¹ Hood, Steven “China’s Cambodia Gamble” 980

⁵² Hood 979

pre-coup policies of neutrality; as his regime was part of neither Western nor Soviet blocs, China's support for Sihanouk (and, by extension, the Khmer Rouge) could be framed outside of the polarizing Cold War binary.

Another answer emerges in the problem of influence. While China had supported the Khmer Rouge, Sihanouk – with his dependence on Chinese support, and unlikely to receive support from the Soviets or Americans – was solely a Chinese partner. We see this echoed in a private analysis of Chinese motives in Cambodia, delivered in 1973 to the US Secretary of State by the American Consulate in Hong Kong. In the declassified diplomatic cable, the Consulate describes how the People's Republic “[views] Sihanouk as its best hope of achieving strong influence in post-war Cambodia and of preventing its domination by Moscow and Hanoi,” with the worst outcome being “any solution [to the conflict] which would allow the Soviets a dominant role,” identified as a settlement “with no participation by Sihanouk or his loyalists”.⁵³ The North Vietnamese, and the communist Khmer Rouge, could claim support from the Soviets if necessary; Sihanouk did not have that recourse, and so provided the Chinese with the best option for keeping the Soviets out and the North Vietnamese in their corner.

This comes, also, in a context where China feared Soviet influence in Southeast Asia, not only as a violation of their Indochinese neutralization policy, but because of active Soviet efforts. As the RAND corporation book *Blinders, Blunders and Wars*, authored by Gompert, et al., notes, conflict with communist Vietnam in the late 70s was enabled in part by Moscow's support for Vietnamese encroachment in Cambodia, which Moscow saw “as useful for containing Chinese influence” and “[illustrating] that China was a ‘paper dragon.’”⁵⁴ Likewise, Les Buszynski, in his paper “Vietnam Confronts China,” identifies communist Vietnamese ambitions towards

⁵³ Consulate Hong Kong 02

⁵⁴ Gompert, et. al., “China's Punitive War Against Vietnam,” in *Blinders, Blunders and Wars*, 119

“domination over Indochina” as “a goal inseparable from [Vietnamese] reunification,” a necessary part of “the consolidation of the security of the country.”⁵⁵ This would have meant the emergence of a consolidated regional power in Indochina; worse, one which could provide a foothold for the Soviets. Given Chinese policy towards the neutralization of Indochina, and the prevention of consolidated threats on their southern border, keeping an independent – and China-aligned – Cambodia was a policy imperative. In that light, Sihanouk – solely dependent on China, and with a history of cold war neutrality – gave China the best opportunity to realize its Indochinese strategic aims.

For both Sihanouk, and China, then, their mutual partnership after the coup seemed a logical continuance of the shared interests that had driven their relationship previously. More, these interests were driven into stark relief by the deteriorating situation: for Sihanouk, the need for old friends was clarified by the failure of his American rapprochement; for China, the exile of Sihanouk threatened their Indochina policy, but presented the opportunity to more closely control Cambodia’s fate. While not perfect, closer partnership was the best option for both Sihanouk and China; the question that remained was its public justification.

Ideological (in)Flexibility:

Despite – or perhaps, because of – these realpolitik justifications for the Sino-Sihanouk relationship, there remain uncomfortable ideological questions that the two parties would have to address. Prince Sihanouk, formerly King, would need a framework to justify partnership with Communists who are putatively anti-royalist. Likewise China, whose Communist Party was formed shortly after the collapse of the last Imperial Chinese dynasty – a dynasty still in living

⁵⁵ Buszynski 831

memory at the time, for some – needed a way to justify partnership with an individual their Marxist framework would describe as reactionary.

The need for good justifications emerges, most clearly, from those who condemned the partnership. In the first Cambodian UN address after Lon Nol's coup, in September of 1970, Koun Wick relays Lon Nol's accusation that Sihanouk "intended to transform Cambodia into a communist country," describing Sihanouk's government-in-exile as "only a screen used by the North Viet-Nameese, the Viet-Cong and the Pathet-Lao to camouflage and continue their deliberate aggression," and concluding that "the phantom Government of Prince Sihanouk can under no circumstances claim to be neutral."⁵⁶ Sihanouk's opponents portrayed his partnership with China as a stalking-horse for Communism, a thin veneer over foreign invasion. So, in addition to needing domestic justifications, Sihanouk and China would need a way to justify that partnership in a way that avoided accusations which compromised the usefulness of the partnership.

This was arguably easier for Sihanouk; his balancing neutrality was not framed in capitalist or communist ideological terms, but in nationalist ones. In Huot Sambath's 1969 UN speech, representing Sihanouk's government, their recognition of Communist North Vietnam is framed as "not for ideological reasons," but as a matter of self-determination "consistent with United Nations Principles."⁵⁷ Sihanouk's representative argues that "claims to a representative character and legitimacy" on the part of the South Vietnamese are "absurd" as their state is only "kept in place by a foreign military occupation force."⁵⁸ Put another way, their recognition of North Vietnam – a concrete commitment given to the People's Republic of China – is framed as

⁵⁶ Wick, Koun "Speech" 2-3

⁵⁷ Sambath 15

⁵⁸ Sambath 15

a belief that South Vietnam, whose existence is predicated on foreign military occupation, cannot claim to be representative of Vietnamese self-determination. Whether correct or incorrect in that assessment, this allows Cambodia to simultaneously recognize North Vietnam at the same time as it proclaims “the re-establishment of Khmer-American diplomatic relations.”⁵⁹ The two are not mutually exclusive because, as Sambath says, the former action does not constitute staking out an ideological position in the broader Cold War debate. This rhetorical flexibility – simultaneously asserting neutrality, endorsing North Vietnam, calling for American departure and hailing the normalization of relations with America – is characteristic of Sihanouk’s maneuvering during the period.

However, Sihanouk was not alone in this flexibility. In a supplementary speech at the 1955 Bandung Conference, Zhou Enlai concedes that “among our Asian and African countries, we do have different ideologies and social systems,” but that both communist and nationalist countries “have become independent of the colonial rule and are still continuing their struggle for complete independence.”⁶⁰ Regardless of the ideological commitments of Asian and African countries, Zhou describes a trans-ideological commitment to anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism: a common ground for mutual vigilance against Western encroachment. Like in the case of Huot Sambath, Sihanouk’s UN representative, Zhou is staking a position that certain ideological claims – anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, self-determination – do not require shared positions in the broader Cold War binary. In this way, domestic ideological concerns which *do* stake such an ideological position could be subordinated to foreign policy pragmatism through the invocation of colonialism and imperialism. The rhetorical nuance was not Zhou’s alone, though: we see a similar move in a 1963 memorandum of a conversation between Prince

⁵⁹ Sambath 15

⁶⁰ Zhou Enlai, “Supplementary Speech by Premier Zhou Enlai,” hereafter “Supplementary Speech” 1

Sihanouk and Mao Zedong, the arch-ideologue himself. After Sihanouk thanks Mao for Chinese support, Mao observes that “it is imperialism, these reactionaries of various countries and revisionists [...] that engage in subversion and wreckage.”⁶¹ He goes on to observe that “[Cambodia is] a kingdom, and Nepal and Afghanistan are also kingdoms, and all are friendly with us,” while republican states like the US and India are hostile; he concludes, “as I see it, the problem isn’t form, but substance.”⁶² Three years before Mao would upend Chinese politics in the Cultural Revolution, Mao declares his comfort with monarchies – as long as they are not imperialists. Like with Zhou’s supplementary speech, ideological differences can be sublimated when the question is the West versus the rest.

This sublimation emerges relatively clearly in two closely related UN speeches. First, a September 1970 speech from the delegate for Communist Albania, Nesti Nase. Albania, a close ally of the People’s Republic of China, essentially serves here as a proxy voice for the People’s Republic, which would not take China’s seat at the UN – then occupied by the Republic of China (Taiwan) – until 1972. Taking place a few days before Koun Wick’s speech against Sihanouk, Wick would describe Nase’s speech as relaying falsehoods “on behalf of an absent party,” that party being the People’s Republic.⁶³ In Nase’s address, he explicitly frames the Cambodian conflict as one of “American aggression against Cambodia,” a war of national liberation in which victories of the “United Front of Cambodia, presided over by [Prince Sihanouk, ...] constitute a harsh blow to American imperialism.”⁶⁴ Likewise, we also see China’s advocacy for a third position outside the Cold War binaries in Albania’s description of the “Yankee invader”

⁶¹ Sihanouk, Samdech Norodom & Mao Zedong, “Memorandum of Chairman Mao Zedong’s Conversation with Prince Sihanouk,” hereafter “Memorandum” 1

⁶² “Memorandum” 1-2

⁶³ Wick 3

⁶⁴ Nase, Nesti “Speech” 10

and “Soviet social-imperialists.”⁶⁵ The Albanians, echoing China at Bandung, are drawing the moral line between indigenous anti-colonialism *regardless* of specific ideology on the one hand, and Western imperialism and chauvinism *regardless* of ideology on the other. Likewise the People’s Republic, in the person of Chiao Kuan-hua, would devote part of their first official UN address to Cambodia in 1972, after they took China’s seat at the UN. Chiao describes Lon Nol’s government as “imposed on the Khmer people by foreign forces,” a puppet of foreign imperialism.⁶⁶ More interestingly, Chiao, in citing Sihanouk’s government-in-exile, uses their full official name – the “Royal Government of National Union of Cambodia.”⁶⁷ China, in its inaugural speech, is backing Sihanouk’s explicitly royalist government; even Albania only went so far as to call it the United Front. The rhetorical line is clear; China will back indigenous anti-imperialism, even if that anti-imperialism is royalist. In a certain sense, then, Sihanouk’s inconvenient royalty was actually a rhetorical selling point for the partnership from the Chinese perspective, because it enabled China to draw the sort of stark contrast that demonstrated the seriousness of its commitment to anti-imperialism.

Conclusion

Altogether, a picture emerges of the Sino-Sihanouk relationship that makes sense of its idiosyncrasies. Over the 50s and 60s, shared interests fostered a relationship of mutual commitment and persistent engagement, particularly on the part of the Chinese. When, in 1970, crisis struck, that preexisting relationship formed a safety net for Sihanouk, giving him a place from which to rebuild, and giving China an opportunity to pursue its Indochinese interests independently of Soviet influence. Any rhetorical discomfort that may have existed was avoided

⁶⁵ Nase 10

⁶⁶ Chiao Kuan-hua “Speech” 14

⁶⁷ Chiao 14

through Sihanouk's own ideological flexibility, and China's work in the 50s and 60s establishing an ideological position in favor of third world anti-colonialism that transcended Cold War ideological disputes. Beyond that, though, the ideological problems of the relationship were treated as the cost of doing business – a price to be paid for the material benefits that relationship entailed. In some cases, that ideological dissonance could even be helpful, as in the way Sihanouk's royalty legitimized the Chinese anti-imperialist commitments. Regardless, the ideological problems were treated as subordinate to the hard realpolitik interests of both parties, something to work through rather than walk away from. China had its Red Prince, and Sihanouk would once more have his throne.

Bibliography

Primary Sources:

Chiao, Kuan-hua. "Speech (China)" U.N. GAOR, 27th Sess., 2051st plen. mtg., U.N. Doc A/PV.2051 (Oct. 03, 1972), available from undocs.org/en/A/PV.2051

Chinese Foreign Ministry. "Cable from the Chinese Foreign Ministry, 'Report on the Matter of the Proposal by the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Workers' Party to Neutralize Cambodia and Laos by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China'," November 26, 1960, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, PRC FMA 106-00553-04, 12-14. Obtained by Yiming Feng and translated by Marian Rosenberg.
<https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/120869>

Consulate Hong Kong to Secretary of State, Telegram 02532, March 15, 1973, 1973HONGK02532, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1973-79/Electronic Telegrams, RG59: General Records of the Department of State, U.S. National Archives (accessed 10/3/21)

- Nase, Nesti. "Speech (Albania)" U.N. GAOR, 25th Sess., 1851st plen. mtg., U.N. Doc A/PV.1851 (Sept. 28, 1970), available from undocs.org/en/A/PV.1851
- Sambath, Huot. "Speech (Cambodia)" U.N. GAOR, 24th Sess., 1780th plen. mtg., U.N. Doc A/PV.1780 (Oct. 06, 1969), available from undocs.org/en/A/PV.1780
- Sihanouk, Samdech Norodom et. al, "Message to Compatriots and Solemn Declaration." *Peking Review* 13, no. 13 (March 27, 1970): 13-28. massline.org/PekingReview/PR1970/PR1970-13.pdf
- Sihanouk, Samdech Norodom & Mao Zedong. "Memorandum of Chairman Mao Zedong's Conversation with Prince Sihanouk," February 15, 1963, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, PRC FMA 204-01509-03, 70-74. Translated by Neil Silver. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/117953>
- Wick, Koun. "Speech (Cambodia)" U.N. GAOR, 25th Sess. 1855th plen. mtg., U.N. Doc A/PV.1855 (Sept. 30, 1970), available from undocs.org/en/A/PV.1855
- Zhou, Enlai "Main Speech by Premier Zhou Enlai, Head of the Delegation of the People's Republic of China, Distributed at the Plenary Session of the Asian-African Conference," April 19, 1955, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Translation from China and the Asian-African Conference (Documents) (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1955), 9-20. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/121623>
- Zhou, Enlai "Supplementary Speech of Premier Zhou Enlai at the Plenary Session of the Asian African-Conference," April 19, 1955, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, PRC FMA 207-00006-02, 1-13. Translation from China and the Asian-African Conference (Documents) (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1955), 21-27. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114673>

Secondary Sources:

- Buszynski, Les. "Vietnam Confronts China." *Asian Survey* 20, no. 8 (1980): 829–43. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2643637>.
- Gompert, David C., Hans Binnendijk, and Bonny Lin. "China's Punitive War Against Vietnam, 1979." In *Blinders, Blunders, and Wars: What America and China Can Learn*, 117–28. RAND Corporation, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt1287m9t.17>.
- Hood, Steven J. "Beijing's Cambodia Gamble and the Prospects for Peace in Indochina: The Khmer Rouge or Sihanouk?" *Asian Survey* 30, no. 10 (1990): 977–91. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2644784>.
- HUISKEN, RON. "The People's Republic of China: Early Foreign and Security Policy Choices." In *Introducing China: The World's Oldest Great Power Charts Its Next Comeback*, 176:31–68. ANU Press, 2010. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt24h9vf.9>.
- Kiernan, Ben. *How Pol Pot Came to Power: Colonialism, Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, 1930-1975*, 2nd ed. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004.
- Lovell, Julia. "THE USES OF FOREIGNERS IN MAO-ERA CHINA: 'TECHNIQUES OF HOSPITALITY' AND INTERNATIONAL IMAGE-BUILDING IN THE PEOPLE'S

- REPUBLIC, 1949–1976.” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 25 (2015): 135–58. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26360595>.
- Ojha, Ishwer C. “Recent Trends in Chinese Foreign Policy.” *Social Science* 47, no. 3 (1972): 134–44. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41959564>.
- Pradhan, P.C. “SIHANOUK AND THE FORMULATION OF CAMBODIAN FOREIGN POLICY.” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 37 (1976): 457–63. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44139010>.
- Shao, Kuo-kang. “Zhou Enlai’s Diplomacy and the Neutralization of Indo-China, 1954-55.” *The China Quarterly*, no. 107 (1986): 483–504. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/653465>.
- Smith, R. B. “The International Setting of the Cambodia Crisis, 1969-1970.” *The International History Review* 18, no. 2 (1996): 303–35. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40107708>.