

THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, APRIL 3, 1970

The Indochinese Puzzle: U.S. Holding to

Its Policies

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, April 2—Two weeks after the overthrow of Prince Sihanouk in Cambodia, this capital does not know whether that country is drifting toward civil war or coming under solidified and "friendlier" rule.

It does not know how the coup will eventually affect the battle for South Vietnam or the diplomacy to end the war. One month after the Communist advance across the Plaine des Jarres in Laos, Washington cannot tell whether that little kingdom is doomed to conquest by the North Vietnamese or whether its unoccupied western half can muddle through until the rains interrupt the fighting in June.

Nine months after it began to give the South Vietnamese some of the combat assignments of departing American troops, the Administration thinks it detects a favorable shift in the military balance. Yet five months after President Nixon requested—and received—the nation's support for this policy of Vietnamization, he can find no evidence that Hanoi, as he predicted, would

be induced by it to negotiate a settlement.

Caught in the crosswinds of confusing events and conflicting forecasts, the Administration reports that through circumstances have changed, its policies in Southeast Asia have not.

That was the essence of four hours of secret testimony today by Secretary of State William P. Rogers before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He is said to have expressed the President's strong desire to let events unfold in Cambodia without American military or diplomatic intervention and to have reiterated the promise to keep American involvement in Laos at its present level, without the commitment of ground troops.

Presumably, Mr. Rogers also repeated his known hope that North Vietnamese incursions into Laos and Cambodia were the product of military weakness and frustration in the main arena of South Vietnam, that Vietnamization would permit further American troops withdrawals and that all developments taken together might yet lead to a significant round of negotiations.

He was praised by Democratic leaders of the committee for the restraint in Cambodia.

But the committee chairman, Senator J. W. Fulbright, simultaneously concluded that the restraint of the war critics here had lasted long enough and tried to provoke yet another sharp change of climate. He said instability in Laos and Cambodia proved the folly of seeking stability in Vietnam, and accused the President of "building castles in the sand without an eye for the incoming tide."

It is this kind of domestic pressure that appears to have persuaded Mr. Nixon and his advisers that they dare not risk a wider war in Indochina, no matter how tempting the urge to exploit the change in Cambodia.

As they showed in two ventures across the border last week, the South Vietnamese commanders and some of their American military advisers are eager to capitalize on Prince Sihanouk's departure. They want to harass and disperse the North Vietnamese troops that have been camping in Cambodia in relative security. Though the Prince's successors in Pnompenh have reasserted their "neutrality," some Cambodian officers seem to have encouraged the activity.

But senior Administration officials privately express dismay.

With the apparently energetic support of the American Embassy in Saigon, they are trying to prevent further incursions by the South Vietnamese and to restrain American attitudes in the field. They fear that the spread of the war into Cambodia might imperil an already shaky new regime in Pnompenh, provoke the North Vietnamese into larger battles in Laos and Cambodia and generate demands for American help.

U.S. Staying Clear

For the same reason, the Administration is keeping clear of Cambodia's diplomatic efforts to negotiate the withdrawal of officials doubt that much can come of these efforts, just as North Vietnamese forces. Of they doubt that a new French

proposal for another all-Indochina negotiation will serve their objectives.

For the objective of a "self-determined" and presumably non-Communist South Vietnam also remains unchanged. If Hanoi were prepared to settle on that basis, the Administration says, it could invigorate the talks in Paris on a moment's notice. If not, this view holds, no mere change of diplomatic forum will alter the situation.

The Administration calls this a reasonable, modest and minimum objective, justifying the cost of the war, past, present and future. Senator Fulbright calls it "madness" on a grand scale. As at other moments of change in Indochina, the home front may be the most precarious of all.