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Cambodian Quandary

The fundamental decision that confronts President Nixon in Cambodia is not whether to send further arms aid at this time but whether to pursue a military mirage.

Some Pentagon officials are arguing that an all-out allied attack could smash Vietnamese Communist troops in Cambodia, close down their sanctuary there and turn the tide of battle decisively in South Vietnam. As a preliminary, they urge rapid, large-scale arms aid to Pnompenh accompanied by American advisers. This aid would be designed to shore up the new regime.

The effect of such an effort might well be to provoke a major Communist effort to bring down the new Pnompenh Government and return Prince Sihanouk to power. The Cambodian Army of 35,000 lacks trained officers for rapid expansion into an effective military force. The Cambodian Government lacks the political and administrative strength to make much of a contribution, if it could take the strain at all. Opposition in the American Congress would be intense, especially if a South Vietnamese effort were aided by American troops or American advisers—or even by major shipments of American arms to Pnompenh.

Moreover, whatever chances remain of negotiating an Indochina settlement in Paris or Geneva would be compromised. De-escalation and Vietnamization of the war might give way to a wider conflict, probably halting American military withdrawal—the heart of the Nixon policy—if it did not reverse it and revive antiwar protests in the United States.

Military victory in Indochina has always been a mirage, receding as rapidly as it is pursued. Lyndon Johnson learned that to his sorrow and it is inconceivable that President Nixon would set off at this late date on a similar chase. For once it is perceived that neither the Vietnam war nor the Communist sanctuary can be finished off in Cambodia, the stakes there can be seen to be marginal and hardly worthy of major risks.

There are risks for North Vietnam, too, in a wider war and in the new association with Prince Sihanouk who has never been an easy partner for the Communists. Hanoi might prefer to let Cambodia simmer down, if Pnompenh were prepared to make a live-and-let-live arrangement similar to that in the past.

The situation remains fluid. The Communists have made a feint or two but no serious attempt to march on Pnompenh in force. Saigon's troops have made a number of shallow cross-border raids into Communist-held areas. Saigon's shipment of several thousand captured Communist weapons to Pnompenh is a further warning to Hanoi and a morale-builder for the Cambodian Army and Government, but it also keeps open the option of a neutral Cambodia. Shipments of American arms, on the contrary, would raise the possibility of piecemeal American involvement by creating a continuing need for American ammunition, spare parts and technicians.

The American interest is less likely to be served by such arms shipments now than by the efforts of Indonesia, France and other intermediaries to seek to restore a modus vivendi between Pnompenh and Hanoi.