

Cambodia Success Would Lift Nixon

PARIS—President Nixon's decision to wipe out the Cambodian bases of Vietnam Communists has precipitated the greatest atmosphere of international alarm since the Cuban confrontation. The reasons, however, are largely tangential to Southeast Asia.

They include: Moscow's leadership crisis and a hardening of the Soviet position; the dangerously euphoric condition of China; Russia's decision to heighten Middle East tension by sending military units; a revived campaign, from Cairo, Egypt, to Cairo, Illinois, mustering opposition to Washington's policy.

Despite continuation of crucial SALT negotiations in Vienna, the parody of Vietnam negotiations in Paris, the hope of Cambodian negotiations in Jakarta and occasional Sino-American talks in Warsaw, the world has tumbled on a knife edge of uncertainty. Unless its leaders keep their cool and restrain lesser clients, anything can happen.

Dangerous events have a habit of provoking other dangerous events: viz-a-viz Poland, Hungary and Suez in 1956.

Peking announces "the Chinese people are standing on the same battle line with the three Indochinese peoples," referring to a pact between Communist leaders from Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia (supported by Prince Norodom Sihanouk).

Israel announces it will fight Soviet planes if its aircraft are attacked by them. Both extremes of Asia have reached the boiling point; the surrounding world simmers.

Nixon's announcement came as a thunderbolt but does not represent a change in fundamental policy formulated exactly a year ago. In May, 1969, he cautioned that any Vietnam settlement must "include Cambodia and Laos to insure that these countries would not be used as bases for a renewed war."

The President then began an effort to disengage without either abject humiliation or total sacrifice of friends, a program that became known as Vietnamization. He had already decided that American policy objectives should be "very modest" but we could not totally "fold."

Privately, he reasoned that a great nation sometimes has to act in a great way or otherwise it destroys its moral fiber. He believed in the Domino Theory and that other countries, start-

ing with Thailand, would crumble if our position collapsed.

Nixon had been told by Lee Kwan Yew, prime minister of Singapore, that in the latter case communism would move right down to Indonesia.

Oddly enough, just before recently leaving Cambodia for a holiday that became political exile, Sihanouk also said the Domino Theory was valid analysis. He forecast in a magazine article that Peking and Hanoi would partition all Southeast Asia, making its nations into "Asian Czechoslovakias."

But Nixon's logic was not solely concerned with the Orient. He felt then—and now—that no matter what many Americans said about ending the "dirty war" in Indochina and concentrating more on Europe, that would not be the way things happened. Sometimes a great power had to meet challenges to retain credibility elsewhere in the world.

The U.S. would destroy itself if it dropped everything and took an easy way out. The effect on its global position, including Europe, would be disastrous but the effect on the American people might be even worse.

In the end they, too, would realize what had occurred and the reaction would be terrible, shattering national morale. Already there was an obvious moral crisis. America's leaders—in industry, finance, universities—were irresolute, uncomprehending and divided. The people as a whole could only be led back to some kind of consensus if the leaders took hold of themselves.

Today Nixon faces his greatest challenge and the most difficult aspect is at home.

Nevertheless, if Nixon can swiftly smash the sanctuaries outside Vietnam without dangerous escalation or confrontations, he will ultimately emerge triumphant at home as well as overseas. Nothing succeeds like success but, if he fails, nothing fails like failure.