

South Vietnam's Survival

NEW YORK — On a chill winter evening in Paris recently, an influential South Vietnamese diplomat was asked whether his nation could defend itself once U.S. troops are withdrawn from Indochina.

The diplomat, talking with a small group of American newsmen, replied in the affirmative. With continued outside assistance, he said, South Vietnam should be strong enough to defend itself against Communist encroachment by the time we pull out our last forces, probably sometime late in 1972.

WHEN THE CONVERSATION then turned to the future of Laos and Cambodia, the diplomat was far less optimistic. If anything, his mood suddenly became pessimistic.

He shook his head somberly when asked about the two neighboring countries that now are under Communist assault and expressed grave apprehension as to whether they could survive free and independently.

The President recently pointed out that there are some 100,000 North Vietnamese in South Vietnam, more than 90,000 in Laos and in excess of 50,000 North Vietnamese and Viet Cong in Cambodia.

"These troops challenge the legitimate governments of Laos and Cambodia and they menace South Vietnam from within and without," said Mr. Nixon. "... If Hanoi were to gain control of Laos and Cambodia a large portion of the more than 140,000 Communist troops now engaged in these countries would be freed to fight in South Vietnam."

The same day that the President made his comments, a letter written by Eugene V. Rostow, who served as undersecretary of state in the Johnson Administration, appeared in the Times of London. Rostow, whose brother, Walt W. Rostow, was Pres-

ident Johnson's national security advisor in the White House, made a persuasive argument. He pointed out that it was North Vietnam that violated the Geneva Agreements of 1954 and 1962 by refusing to withdraw troops from neighboring nations. He also expressed his conviction that North Vietnam never would have agreed to free elections under international supervision in 1956, although the Communists have had a propaganda field day protesting that such elections never were held.

Finally Rostow came to the fundamental question that now confronts us and will confront us in the future. "A glance at the map shows that South Vietnam cannot be defended unless Laos and Cambodia are at least neutral," said the former state department official. He added that the "South Vietnamese tragedy stems from President Kennedy's failure to insist on the enforcement of the Russian promise that Hanoi would withdraw from Laos in 1962."

So, what Americans once regarded as the war in Vietnam is now truly the war of Southeast Asia. We may be able to leave a relatively strong and stable South Vietnam when we withdraw but how long can it remain strong and stable if Laos and Cambodia fall to the Communists?

It is my personal view that Lyndon Johnson had no recourse but to commit our troops to the defense of South Vietnam in 1965. It also is my personal view that Richard Nixon made the right decision in decreeing the phased withdrawal of our forces from South Vietnam.

BUT WE ARE FACED with a situation that seems fraught with futility. We are seeking desperately to extricate ourselves from Southeast Asia. But in the years ahead will we be able to look back and say that our monumental efforts in that area have proved meaningful?