

A Dominoes Expert In Peking

By C. L. Sulzberger

PARIS—The world now opens a new chapter in the bloody book of Southeast Asia and nobody can say for certain what it will disclose. China is uneasy because of pronounced Soviet influence in North Vietnam. The Kremlin has been discreet but Peking never forgets its fear of being outflanked by Moscow across India and Indochina. As for the United States, its influence in the area is at its lowest ebb in twenty years.

Eighteen months ago I had a long discussion with Prince Norodom Sihanouk, head of the émigré Cambodian Government recognized by China (and recently Russia). During this talk—in Peking—Sihanouk took what now seems to be an objective view of the probable effect of Communist victories.

"I don't believe the Indochina revolution will change all Southeast Asia just like that," he said. "There are too many contradictions. For example, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Japan and Indonesia are strongly pro-U.S.A.

"Pham Van Dong, Premier of North Vietnam, told me the Communist party in Thailand is very badly organized and won't ever be able to win. In Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge fights for Cambodia, not to export revolution.

"Anyway, what is neutrality?" he asked. "India isn't neutral; it's virtually an ally of Russia. Burma's neutrality is very special; you might call it neutralized neutrality. And Laos can never be neutral. The Pathet Lao are pro-Russian while Souvanna Phouma is a man of the right and pro-U.S.A., whatever they call him.

"All over there are fundamental contradictions between the Reds and what I call the Blues, the conservatives. After the war I know I won't be able to get on with the Khmer Rouge myself. I'm not a Marxist and you can't mix with Communism; they mix like oil and water with non-Communists. I am by inclination a democrat in the French sense, a man like Mendès-France."

The importance of these observations is that Sihanouk is a theoretical symbol of the military forces that have

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already driven Lon Nol and other pro-American chiefs out of Phnom Penh and that are bound to take over Cambodia soon.

Yet he doesn't see this event as a guarantee that all Southeast Asia will be communized under the banal dominoes theory. Nor does he envision the region becoming neutralized in the international sense, since both Russia and China contest each other's influence there, regardless of what happens to the U.S.A.

"It is better to renounce the idea of neutralization of Southeast Asia," he told me—months before this year's startlingly successful Communist offensives in Cambodia and South Vietnam. "The only solution is peaceful coexistence, like de Gaulle's idea of independence for both big and little countries and noninterference in any nation's internal affairs. After all, you don't need to have the same kind of political system."

If there are any lessons for Washington in the disaster to its Southeast Asian policy, one is surely that Asians generally understand their political future better than even the best-intended Westerners. Sihanouk had offered through Chou En-lai and Pham Van Dong to talk with President Nixon and Secretary Kissinger. But the idea was rejected, for diplomatic reasons.

Yet it is too bad that the Secretary of State who, after all, spent long hours dealing with North Vietnam's representatives, didn't find a way of talking with Sihanouk on one of his Peking picnics. He would have discovered that, despite his occasionally flamboyant personality, Sihanouk is serious and highly intelligent; also, he is if anything an ideological conservative.

"Buddha," says Sihanouk, "long before Marx found truth in the equality of man and the value of honesty. He renounced all his great wealth, his lovely wife, richness, and abandoned everything for moral values. That is better than Communism."

"Communism is not always disinterested; it has its disagreeable aspects. Many of its theories applied to nineteenth-century Europe but not to modern times. But Buddha's moral conceptions and spiritual life are always applicable.

"In the liberated zone of our country there is no Buddhism; that is real Marxist Communism. And everything is so tragic. . . . Nevertheless, between the Khmer Rouge and the Khmer Bleu [Lon Nol's 'Blues'], I respect the Khmer Rouge even if Communism is not admirable. . . . One must see things as they are. . . . What a world. . . . I won't stay as chief of state when we regain our independence. The Khmer Rouge will rule and Sihanouk will retire."