



Something to Learn In Southeast Asia

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Paris

THE ROUT in Southeast Asia is so visibly the fault of local governments and armies that no one can fairly put the primary blame on any group of Americans. But the helpless bystander role of the United States is not without lessons.

Some of the lessons are to be learned here in Paris. The highest French officials have been trying on behalf of Washington to arrange a peaceful settlement in Cambodia. This is an account, based on recent talks with French leaders, on how those efforts failed.

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THE insurgent forces moving to take over Cambodia, according to the French, comprise three different elements. First, there is a group loyal to Prince Sihanouk which entered the field after the coup that unseated the prince and installed the regime of Lon Nol in 1970.

Next, there is a group which revolted against Sihanouk's one-man rule in the late 1960s. Its chief figure is Khieu Samphang, who is commander of the rebel forces.

Finally, there is a group, in the field since the early 1960s, which includes hard-core, Hanoi-trained Communists.

Communist China has sponsored both Prince Sihanouk and Khieu Samphang. But the Chinese, very concerned about relations with Moscow, do not fancy a

visible defeat for the United States.

At one point the Chinese were even ready to intervene to head off an American defeat. According to the highest French officials, the right moment came last year when the rebels were pressing hard on the capital, Phnom Penh. But they were experiencing supply difficulties which promoted internal bickering. The Chinese hinted to the French that something might be arranged, provided the Lon Nol government was ready to step down.

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PARIS conveyed the hint to Washington. Washington, according to the French, turned a deaf ear. "There was just no interest," I was told.

The reason may have been preoccupation with Watergate. But that is not the French view. On the contrary, the French believe that President Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger were going for a different outcome. As one very high French official said:

"They kept thinking they could form a tough, anti-communist bastion — a kind of South Korea — in Cambodia. Because they were trying to do that, they could never bring themselves to see the virtue of a different course. They did not understand that a soft, neutralist regime with a broad political base could both cover up an American defeat and thwart a Communist victory."