

**FOREIGN RELATIONS OF THE UNITED STATES, 1964–1968, VOLUME XXVII, MAINLAND SOUTHEAST ASIA;
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CAMBODIA'S FOREIGN POLICY

1. The often unfathomable, sometimes senseless and frequently amusing fluctuations which have characterized the day to day conduct of Cambodia's foreign policy over the past 12 years have obscured what, in fact, has been a remarkably coherent and consistent policy. The discrepancy lies in the fact that Cambodia's policy has Prince Sihanouk as both its author and chief practitioner. The confusion between style and substance, between neurotic fantasies and logically reasoned arguments, [1 line of source text not declassified] has put in question the credibility of Cambodia's foreign policy.
2. The primary motivation of Cambodia's foreign policy is the preservation of Cambodia as a nation state. Although survival is, in the final analysis, the root policy of all nations, the difference is that Cambodia feels that its continued existence is in real and constant jeopardy. In recent years this preoccupation has been in part an expression of Sihanouk's emotional response to factors beyond his control—the discrepancy in population and power between Cambodia and its neighbors Thailand and Vietnam—but it also has been based on certain historical facts which no Cambodian nationalist can ignore.
3. To Sihanouk and other Cambodians, the key factor in the modern history of the Indochina peninsula has been the unrelenting pressure exerted on Cambodia's territory from Thailand and Vietnam. Other factors, French colonialism and the shadow struggle between the US and Communist China, have been important too. In the final analysis, however, these latter are overlays to the fundamental problem of Vietnamese and Thai imperialism.
4. In fighting for its territorial integrity, Cambodia has been handicapped by its relative weakness; it simply cannot match the power of Vietnam and Thailand. The Cambodians therefore have been forced to rely on the less reliable skills of diplomatic maneuver. In the nineteenth century, with its back to the wall, Cambodia called on France to protect it from its more powerful neighbors. The French protectorate, from the Cambodian perspective, was no euphemism. If France exacted a high price for its protection, if its control impinged heavily on Cambodia's sovereignty, that was unfortunate. It was more important that Cambodia be preserved.
5. The situation changed in the 1950s. The postwar wave of nationalism which swept Indochina also claimed many young educated Cambodians, including Sihanouk. Cambodia could not continue as a French colony forever. More important, however, was the fact that the power realities in Indochina were changing. To the Cambodians, France was a spent force, and a new constellation would have to be brought into being if Cambodia's integrity was to be preserved.
6. Sihanouk is no ideologue, and when he espoused "neutralism" as the right path for Cambodia's foreign policy, it was from practical rather than theoretical considerations. "Neutralism" was a fashionable posture for the newly independent nations in the early fifties and Sihanouk undoubtedly thought it prudent to keep Cambodia in step. More importantly, in its emphasis on diplomatic rather than military solutions to problems, and its emphasis on avoiding entanglement in the cold war, "neutralism" was consonant with Cambodia's traditional position and

the realities in Indochina. Sihanouk put his own stamp on “neutralism,” however. As he viewed it, neutrality enabled the small nation to exert a disproportionate amount of influence by playing off one great power against another.

7. Sihanouk played this game adroitly for ten years. He managed to keep his relations with the US in good repair, although he felt that the US was involved with Thai and South Vietnamese plotting against his government. At the same time, however, he was slowly improving relations with Communist China. This balance began to be disrupted in the early sixties by the growing strength of the Communists in South Vietnam.
8. At some point, perhaps as early as 1961, Sihanouk became convinced that the Viet Cong were going to win in South Vietnam. He viewed with alarm what he regarded as US obtuseness to the real situation in South Vietnam and continuing US reliance on the Diem government, which he regarded as doomed to failure. His prescription was negotiation with the guerrillas while their strength was still limited. The object of the negotiations would be to “neutralize” South Vietnam, which in Sihanouk’s terms meant to keep Vietnam divided. His persistent calls for a Geneva-type conference from 1962 to the present reflect this policy.
9. Cambodia’s swing to the left, underway from at least 1961, became more pronounced in 1963. Phnom Penh’s relations with the US deteriorated, principally because the US would not support negotiations with the Communists. At the same time Sihanouk was laying the groundwork for what he was coming increasingly to believe was a necessary accommodation with Hanoi and **Peking**. The problem for Sihanouk was shaping up as one of timing—when the Diem government fell in November.
10. The reverberations in Phnom Penh were almost totally unexpected. It is still unclear why Sihanouk acted as he did. The most persuasive theory is that Sihanouk was frightened by what he regarded as the US- [\[Page 363\]](#) sanctioned murder of Diem, and his most immediate concern was to reduce drastically US presence in Cambodia. Sihanouk may also have calculated that the disruption in Saigon would shorten the time before the Viet Cong victory; hence there would be less time for Cambodia’s accommodation. At any rate, Sihanouk renounced US military and economic aid, sent home the 100-man US military advisor contingent and encouraged a cut-back in the size of the US Embassy in Phnom Penh. A 17-month period of strained relations ensued which culminated in Cambodia’s breaking relations with the US in May 1965.
11. One of the problems resulting from the termination of US aid was the necessity of finding an alternate source of military hardware. Sihanouk naturally turned to France, the one country in the West with which Cambodia has maintained good relations, to the Soviet Union, which had already supplied Cambodia with four obsolescent jet fighters, and to its new “number one friend,” Communist China. In late 1964, **Peking** agreed to supply Cambodia with enough small arms to equip 27,000 men, in effect agreeing to supplant the US as the quartermaster for the Cambodian armed forces. In the past week, **Peking** has agreed to supply small arms for an additional 10,000 men as well as some anti-aircraft weapons and 11 obsolescent planes, including a few jet fighters.
12. For Sihanouk, Chinese military aid serves two purposes. It has enabled the Cambodian armed forces to improve its defensive posture along the Thai and South Vietnamese borders. It also underscores, in a material way, **Peking**’s not entirely convincing public promises for “all-out support” if Cambodia is “invaded.” Sihanouk has been willing to pay for **Peking**’s support by taking the Chinese line on a whole series of international issues of secondary interest to Cambodia. He has been far less responsive on matters directly affecting Cambodian interests.
13. He took an exceptionally hard line with the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong, for example, during talks in **Peking** late last year. When the Communists refused to knuckle under to some of Sihanouk’s more extravagant demands, the talks broke down. To Sihanouk, the episode was but another example of Vietnamese perfidy, a warning that the Vietnamese, whatever their political persuasion, were a threat to Cambodia. In a remarkable

speech in Phnom Penh early this year, at a time when he was hosting the leftist Indochinese Peoples Conference, Sihanouk warned the Cambodian military that “Vietnamese imperialism” of whatever political coloration was the real danger to Cambodia.

14. As long as Sihanouk believes that the Viet Cong will win in South Vietnam, and that the US will be forced to negotiate its way out, we can expect Cambodia to hold to its present leftward course. By continuing to call Cambodia “neutral,” however, Sihanouk indicates that he is not yet ready to burn all his bridges. He has already discovered that breaking relations with the US and curtailing his contacts with the West have [Page 364] severely reduced his room for diplomatic maneuver. There are strong indications that Sihanouk hopes to repair some of the damage by improving Cambodia’s relations with Great Britain and Australia. A more fundamental change in Cambodia’s course will depend to a great extent on the course of the war in South Vietnam.
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1. Source: Johnson Library, National Security File, Country File, Cambodia, Vol. IV, Memos, 10/65–9/67. Secret. Drafted in the Office of Current Intelligence, Directorate of Intelligence. ↵