

FOREIGN RELATIONS OF THE UNITED STATES, 1969–1976, VOLUME VII, VIETNAM, JULY 1970–JANUARY 1972

242. Memorandum of Conversation¹

Washington, August 10, 1971, noon–1 p.m.

PARTICIPANTS

Lt. General Sisowath Sirik Matak, Prime Ministerial Delegate of the Khmer Republic

The President

Dr. Kissinger, Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs

Mrs. Porson, Interpreter

The Prime Minister thanked the President for all the kindness shown him during his visit to the United States, and said how honored and pleased he was to see the President again. He conveyed to the President the good wishes and admiration of Chief of State Cheng Heng and Marshal Lon Nol.

The President said that we in the United States greatly admire the Cambodian people for their courage. At [\[Page 861\]](#) the time the invasion started, there were many who predicted almost every day on television and in the news (especially the AP correspondent in Phnom Penh) that Cambodia would fall. But they did not reckon with the 7,000,000 Cambodians who, although a peaceful people, were willing to make sacrifices and to fight for their independence.

It was the President's belief that Cambodia could only be saved by the Cambodians. No country could be saved without the ultimate sacrifice of its people. He thought the example of Cambodia was a good one for the world to see—the example of a peaceful people compelled to build up its military capacity so as to defend itself and to meet the challenge presented.

The Prime Minister thanked the President for his kind words. He could confirm that the Cambodians were indeed determined; after all, Cambodia had been reduced to its simplest territorial expression. Cambodia, a country with a long history, now found itself with less territory than ever before. The Cambodian people could not allow foreign aggressors to take over that territory.

As the President knew, the Prime Minister continued, at the beginning of the aggression by the North Vietnamese Communists and the Viet Cong, the Cambodian Army had practically nothing. Volunteers went to the front almost empty-handed and some went into combat without ever having fired a rifle.

The President remarked that he remembered having seen Cambodian soldiers back in 1953 engaged in rifle practice with wooden guns.

The Prime Minister said that Prince Sihanouk, under the former regime, never did anything to make the Army capable of defending the country. Sihanouk followed a policy of neutrality which he thought would enable him to maintain tranquillity and peace in Cambodia. Unfortunately, however, in later years he was unable to follow the course that the Khmer people wanted, a middle course of active neutrality. In the later years of Sihanouk regime, there was collusion with the Communists, which made it possible for foreign troops to remain on Cambodian territory and to develop the sanctuaries that were harbors for aggressors right in the Cambodian homeland.

The President asked about the morale of the population; what percentage of the 7,000,000 people supported the government, and how many tended toward the forces that the Communists and the anti-government elements were trying to build up?

The Prime Minister answered that his government had a defense plan, whereby there was a line cutting Cambodia in two. The government had decided to leave the north and northeast sectors of the country as they were for the time being. Prior to the aggression the population of that area was only about 300,000. The government drew [\[Page 862\]](#) its defense line to protect the heavily populated and much richer section of the country. And, he reported, the military situation was very much improved.

The President again asked about the people under the government's control; what percentage supported the government, and what percentage might be potential subverters of the government?

The Prime Minister replied that there were two factors to consider. First, there was a region still under Communist control where the people were not for the North Vietnamese but simply could not leave. The Prime Minister estimated that they represented about 30 percent of the population. The remainder had sought refuge in the large cities. Prior to the aggression, Phnom Penh, for example, had had a population of 600,000; at present, there were 2,000,000. This, of course, raised many problems such as shelter, water, electricity, and food.

The President asked how the Prime Minister saw the prospects for the next year. Could his government resist the North Vietnamese invaders, or was there a great, medium, or minimal risk that the North Vietnamese could launch an offensive that could succeed in defeating the Cambodian forces?

The Prime Minister answered that his government and people had just come through the most critical period, the dry season. It would be very difficult for the enemy to reorganize during the imminent rainy season. Furthermore, he placed the present North Vietnamese strength in Cambodia at 55,000–60,000. At the start of the aggression there had been 60,000. Two months later another 60,000 had come in, making a total of 120,000 well-equipped, well-armed, and seasoned troops. Now, they were back down to the number given. There were four North Vietnamese divisions in Cambodia now, including the First Division in the south. That division, however, was very tired and completely disorganized, as the Cambodians had discovered during the operation relating to National Highway 4.

The President asked whether the population of Phnom Penh was confident or fearful of the future. How was their morale? In the American press it was reported (although not as much as six months ago) that the residents of Phnom Penh feared that the North Vietnamese would inevitably overrun the country. On the other hand, one also heard that the Cambodian people were regaining confidence owing to the events of the past few months. How confident were they? Did they think the war would be won and that Cambodia would retain its independence, or did they believe that the North Vietnamese would take over completely?

The Prime Minister answered that his compatriots were confident—that they all believed the war would be won. Indeed, the Cambodians would not let the war be lost; they wanted to regain the abandoned territory in [\[Page 863\]](#) the north and northeast.

The President asked what effect the withdrawal of United States troops from Vietnam would have on the morale of the Cambodians. Would that withdrawal be interpreted in Cambodia and elsewhere as a U.S. withdrawal from Asia, and thus be very depressing on the people's morale? He solicited the Prime Minister's honest opinion.

The Prime Minister said that this was a topic that he had wanted to discuss with the President. His countrymen were very concerned, very concerned indeed, about the withdrawal of United States troops from South Vietnam, for two reasons. First, the Cambodian Army, which the government was in the process of developing, organizing, training,

and equipping, was not yet able to do its work by itself. Therefore, it still needed the air support provided by United States forces. If U.S. withdrawal were to entail the withdrawal of U.S. air support—which Cambodia needed on a daily basis—then that could disrupt the work of the Cambodian military.

The second reason the Prime Minister gave he qualified as very important and serious, and that was the matter of the cooperation of the South Vietnamese troops in Cambodia. Although the South Vietnamese had come to help the Cambodians, when they went into operation they did much harm to the population. The Prime Minister was convinced that this was not the desire or intent of the South Vietnamese Government, but it was at the lower echelons that reprehensible acts had been committed against the Cambodian people.

Therefore, U.S. withdrawal was a matter of much concern to the people and government of Cambodia.

The President asked the Prime Minister whether he shared the view of some Asians that the Nixon Doctrine was a camouflage to enable the United States to get out of Asia and to leave Asia to the devices of China, Russia, or Japan. He asked the question as the devil's advocate, because that was what some were saying, although that of course was not the purpose of the Nixon Doctrine. He asked the Prime Minister whether he and his colleagues in Asia thought that in leaving Vietnam the United States was leaving Asia to its fate and would cease to play a role in helping countries like Cambodia.

The Prime Minister said that from what he had heard, opinion about the Nixon Doctrine was very divided. For his part and on behalf of the Cambodian people, he had said and wished to reiterate that they were confident and much admired President Nixon's courage in seeking a rapprochement and a dialogue between Communist China and the United States.

In other words, asked the President, the idea of a dialogue did not worry the Prime Minister.

On the contrary, the Prime Minister replied. He and his people were for universality. Moreover, his was an [\[Page 864\]](#) Asian nation, condemned to stay on in Asia, near a China with 750,000,000 people.

President Nixon then asked whether that meant that the Prime Minister did not share the concern of some that the meeting between the leaders of the United States and the People's Republic of China would lead to the United States' selling its friends down the river.

The Prime Minister said that it was very hard for him and for his compatriots to predict the future, but, he asked, had not the President said that he would never abandon America's friends, all nations who wanted their freedom and independence?

President Nixon said that was so.

Obviously, said the Prime Minister, he was "very small" and could not predict the outcome of the President's talks with Chou En-lai or Mao Tse-tung. But he did know, on the strength of two years as Ambassador to Peking, that the Chinese felt frustrated. They were a people who thought they were entitled to something in Asia and the world. For example, in the matter of peace in Southeast Asia, the Chinese talked of "Asianization," without any reference to the Geneva Agreements. If that line of thinking were to be maintained, then that would concern the Cambodians very much.

By "Asianization," the President asked, they meant Chinese domination; yes, said the Prime Minister.

The President then asked if the United States must continue to be a Pacific power. Must it therefore continue to maintain a physical presence in Asia?

Yes, replied the Prime Minister, and that was not just his view but that of all the free Asian peoples.

The President asked whether the Prime Minister thought it would be enough for us to have sea power and air power there, or did we need to have significant ground forces in Asia?

The Prime Minister felt that he could not really reply offhand, but that he could say that the Cambodians would want both U.S. air and sea power, on the one hand, and ground power on the other. Even though there were to be no intervention, and knowing the difficulties with the U.S. Congress the Cambodians did not want American soldiers to help them, they nonetheless did need the support of the U.S. troops behind them. This, according to what the Prime Minister had heard, was a concern shared by some of Cambodia's neighbors and other Asian nations.

The President next asked about the situation of Japan. Was there concern about Japan's future role, or was it now welcome in Southeast Asia as a peaceful power?

The Prime Minister replied that Japan was accepted now as an economic leader and in the future might be [Page 865] accepted as a leader from other standpoints. The Cambodians believed that Japan must play a true role in Southeast Asia.

The President asked which, from the standpoint of Cambodia, a very important but relatively small country, the Prime Minister feared most: the possibility of Chinese domination or aggression, or the possibility of Japanese domination or aggression?

The Prime Minister completely ruled out any concern about Japan. Although Japan had had a militarist reputation and did commit aggression in Asia, it had evolved since World War II. On the other hand, China constituted a permanent danger in Asia.²

The President added that he should also have mentioned North Vietnam, to which the Prime Minister responded that North Vietnam in fact feared China even more than Cambodia; after all, North Vietnam was closer to China.

The President asked whether the Cambodians feared the U.S.S.R. The Prime Minister said that although the U.S.S.R. had helped the North Vietnamese in the war, he thought the Russians were afraid of the Chinese too.

The President then gave the Prime Minister the following assurances:

1. The United States was not getting out of Asia; the United States would maintain a presence in those areas where it was appropriate to do so. He was speaking of a naval, air, and ground presence.
2. It was necessary that the non-Communist nations of Asia threatened by their neighbors take the major burden of defending themselves, as Cambodia was doing. That was the Nixon Doctrine. The United States would help economically and militarily, but the prime responsibility had to rest with the people concerned.
3. As for our actions in regard to Vietnam, the United States withdrawal should not be misinterpreted. We had been phasing the withdrawal in such a way that when we left, the South Vietnamese would be able to defend themselves.

There were some in the United States who said we must get out of Vietnam and then out of Asia. That was not the President's view, and he disagreed with that thinking. The United States had not lost 45,000 men to then turn around and stop playing a role as a Pacific power.

The reason that we had a role as a Pacific power (and our motivation was different from that of certain [Page 866] other countries in the region) was not because of any desire for domination or economic or colonialist exploitation, but because we believed that each nation had to be able to defend and maintain its independence in the area

surrounding the heartland of Asia, China, and that was essential to peace in Asia. If Japan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, or Southeast Asia were to be swallowed up by their big neighbor, that would not serve the interests of those peoples, who wanted to be independent, nor would it serve the interests of peace.

We wanted good relations with the People's Republic of China, the President continued, but we wanted to maintain our commitments to the neighboring countries in that area. That was not meant in an aggressive or belligerent way or as a threat, but because the existence of many free Asian nations would provide a better opportunity for peace in the future than an Asia dominated solely by one country, regardless of which country that was.

The Prime Minister thanked the President for those assurances, which was what he had come for. He added that he thought that a rapprochement or talks with China could certainly help to arrive at a positive solution to the problem of world peace in general, and of peace in Southeast Asia in particular.

President Nixon then asked the Prime Minister to convey his best regards to the Chief of State, Cheng Heng, and to His Excellency Lon Nol.

As Dr. Kissinger well knew, the President had the most pleasant memories of his trip to Cambodia 18 years ago. He took away with him the remembrance of a peaceful, hospitable, and good people, a people who had the right to be free. That was why he had continued to support our economic and military assistance programs in Cambodia, many times over the strenuous objections of members of the United States Congress. He wished to assure the Prime Minister that he would continue, to the best of his ability, to support Cambodia's efforts to defend itself against the aggressors, not only because it served the interests of peace but because the Cambodian people had a special place in his heart as a result of his visit there.

The Prime Minister thanked the President for his kind words and promised to convey his greetings to his Chief of State and Marshal Lon Nol.

He assured the President that Cambodia recognized that it was a key element in the problem of Southeast Asia and that it had to make every effort to help itself with, of course, the assistance of friends such as President Nixon. The Cambodians were resolved to regain their territorial integrity and freedom. And in that connection, the Prime Minister had one parting wish to express on behalf of all his people: If peace negotiations were to [\[Page 867\]](#) eventuate, they would want to go back to the formula of the Indochina Conference, of the Geneva Agreements. The Agreements were something they could rely upon; they were valid international agreements which gave Cambodia its territorial integrity and freedom and offered the country guarantees. It was for that reason that Cambodia had taken a cautious attitude with respect to the People's Republic of China and had not committed itself diplomatically to Taiwan, knowing the PRC to be a signatory of the Geneva Agreements.³

1. Source: National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, White House Special Files, President's Office Files, Box 85, Memoranda for the President, Beginning August 8, 1971. Secret; Nodis. The meeting took place in the Oval Office. (Ibid., White House Central Files, President's Daily Diary) Kissinger forwarded the memorandum to Nixon under a covering memorandum, August 10. In an August 13 memorandum to Kissinger, Froebe informed him that pursuant to his instructions, only one copy of the original memorandum was made and that a sanitized version would be sent to the Department of State. (Ibid., NSC Files, Box 512, Country Files, Far East, Cambodia, Vol. XIII)↵

2. The version sent to the Department of State excluded this and the preceding paragraph.↵

3. Sirik Matak also met with Rogers on August 10, a report of which is in telegram 147225 to Phnom Penh, August 12. Matak met with Agnew on August 12 and a memorandum of conversation was prepared. (Both in National Archives, RG 59, Central Files 1970-73, POL 7 CAMB)↵