

SNIE 57-67

**Significance of Cambodia to the
Vietnamese Communist War Effort**

26 January 1967

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**Significance of Cambodia to the
Vietnamese Communist War Effort**

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Concurred in by the
UNITED STATES INTELLIGENCE BOARD

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26 January 1967

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SIGNIFICANCE OF CAMBODIA TO THE VIETNAMESE COMMUNIST WAR EFFORT

CONCLUSIONS

A. Denying the Communists the use of Cambodian territory and supplies would make life more difficult for them; it would not constitute a decisive element in their ability to conduct military operations in South Vietnam.

B. The availability of Cambodian territory is of considerable psychological and military advantage to the Communists. They use it as sanctuary to evade allied forces and more permanently as a refuge for rest, training, medical care, storage of supplies, and as a convenient and secure route for the infiltration of personnel from North Vietnam.

C. Access to the Cambodian rice surplus has alleviated one of the Communists' most serious logistics problems. Movements of Cambodian rice to the Communists in the South Vietnamese highlands and Laotian Panhandle during 1966, as a result of an official Cambodian sale and some smuggling, could have reached 20,000 tons and possibly more. This quantity more than met the annual consumption requirements of Communist forces in the rice-deficit Vietnamese highlands and the Laotian Panhandle, and obviated any need to move substantial quantities of food down the Laotian route system from North Vietnam.

D. The Communists continue to smuggle small quantities of arms and other military equipment from Cambodia; some of this probably represents unauthorized diversions from the Communist arms now being imported by the Cambodian Government for its own forces. But we have no evidence of large-scale diversions of these arms or of any substantial clandestine movement of arms into Cambodia and

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thence forward to the Communists in Vietnam. Moreover, it seems unlikely that the Communist command would choose to rely in any major way on such an uncertain and indirect source of arms for its main force units, so long as the overland routes from North Vietnam are available. Some other supplies such as drugs, communications equipment, and chemicals useful in the manufacture of explosives are obtained from Cambodia, but the quantities involved are not critical to the overall Communist effort.

E. During 1967, Communist use of Cambodia will probably continue to increase, as it has over the past 18 months. The principal causes are the logistic burdens imposed on the Communists by their own military buildup and the increasing military pressures imposed by allied forces.

F. Sihanouk is probably aware of the general nature of Communist activities in Cambodia. He has shown some concern that he has leaned too far to the Communist side, and over possible US-GVN counteractions. But Cambodia lacks the military capability to close its 700-mile border with South Vietnam, and any determined effort to do so would run counter to Sihanouk's basic aims of avoiding direct involvement in the war, of avoiding too close alignment with the US, and of maintaining cordial relations with the Communists. Thus, we do not foresee any substantial change in Cambodia's posture over the next year toward the war in Vietnam.

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DISCUSSION

I. INTRODUCTION

1. For some years the Vietnamese Communists have used Cambodian territory in a variety of ways to support their insurgency in South Vietnam and have also procured various types of supplies in Cambodia. This exploitation of Cambodia by the Communists has been facilitated by chronic bad relations between the Cambodian Government (RKC) and the South Vietnamese Government (GVN). The Vietnamese Communists were using Cambodia for infiltration and movement of war material into South Vietnam from at least the early 1960's. The quantities of war material were relatively small compared with the quantities obtained from within South Vietnam or through other infiltration routes from North Vietnam.

2. We know more of how the Communists have utilized Cambodia in 1965 and 1966 because of improved agent reporting, intensified aerial photography, and increased numbers of captured documents and PWs, particularly since the US buildup of forces in mid-1965. From these sources there is convincing evidence to show that the Communists have increased their use of Cambodia over the past year or so, particularly in the northeast, to support their struggle in South Vietnam.

II. VIETNAMESE COMMUNIST USE OF CAMBODIAN TERRITORY

3. *Nature of the Border.* Communist use of Cambodian territory has been facilitated by the nature of the lightly inhabited, poorly controlled 700-mile border. The southern half of the boundary from the South Vietnamese Province of Tay Ninh to the sea is difficult to control because it is marshy, laced with waterways, and subject to extensive annual flooding. The problem is complicated by the fact that Cambodians and Vietnamese are intermingled along both sides of the border and frequent movement and trading back and forth is the traditional pattern. From Tay Ninh north, the boundary traverses a heavily forested and sparsely inhabited upland. The few inhabitants of this region on both sides of the border are mainly minority tribes who live in small villages, utilize slash and burn agricultural methods, and move their village sites fairly frequently. The Communists can move extensively in this area without detection by Cambodian authorities.

4. *Base Areas.* The Vietnamese Communists have established several important base areas in South Vietnam next to the Cambodian border.¹ There is considerable evidence, however, that some of these bases extend into Cambodia, where they form part of the logistical system for the acquisition and storage of supplies obtained from or through Cambodia. They also provide facilities for sanctuary, hospitalization, rest, and training.

¹ See map.

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5. The most important and extensive of these bases is the VC headquarters, Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), located in War Zone C in northern Tay Ninh Province. Several subsidiary bases surround it, and the entire area stretching from Lo Go in Tay Ninh to the area of Binh Long Province opposite Snuol may be viewed as one complex. For the most part, activities in this area are centered on South Vietnamese soil, but occasionally extend into Cambodian territory. In two important instances in 1966, major units of this complex sought Cambodian sanctuary: elements of the VC 9th Division following engagement by US forces in operation EL PASO, and probably other major elements during operation ATTLEBORO.

6. Further north, another important Communist base exists in the Chu Pong Mountain area of Pleiku Province. While this base area is centered on South Vietnamese territory, it makes fairly extensive use of the adjoining Cambodian Province of Ratanakiri for a variety of purposes, including sanctuary. Three NVA regiments sought refuge in Cambodia following the battle of Ia Drang Valley with US forces in late 1965.

7. Along the southern part of the border, the most important Communist base is probably the so-called Kas Kok Base which, we believe, is centered on Cambodian territory near the junction of the Mekong River with the border. There are other areas where use is made of Cambodian territory, mostly in the remote northeastern provinces of Ratanakiri and Mondolkiri. It is perhaps significant that in three cases, notably the Kas Kok and Chu Pong base areas and the base area at the extreme northeastern tip of Cambodia near Tasseing, the Communists use areas where the boundary is in dispute. In the Kas Kok and Chu Pong areas, however, the Communists appear to use Cambodian territory beyond the extent of the Vietnamese claim.²

8. *Sanctuary.* Sanctuary is probably the most important use made of Cambodia by the Vietnamese Communists in their combat operations. As the war has intensified, VC and NVA units have resorted more frequently to border crossing to avoid detection by or combat with US-ARVN forces. Most such use involves only shallow penetration, and the frequency and nature of the use vary with the area involved. Along the more populous southern half of the border, company size or smaller VC units frequently move into Cambodia to avoid ARVN or Special Forces patrols, although occasionally larger VC units are involved. Further to the north, where large NVA and VC main force units are concentrated, resort to sanctuary may be less frequent, but it has involved large numbers of Communist troops.

9. *Infiltration of Personnel.* Some important Vietnamese Communist leaders and cadres and occasional foreign Communists fly into Phnom Penh and travel to Viet Cong headquarters in Tay Ninh Province. But the main use of Cambodian territory for infiltration is by North Vietnamese Army personnel who normally walk all the way to South Vietnam. In general, the main infiltration

² See map.

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trails run on Vietnamese territory after leaving the Laotian Panhandle, but they follow close to the border and cross into Cambodia in many places, in one instance utilizing Cambodian territory for some 50 kilometers or so. There is some evidence that Communist groups may have been making more extensive use of the trails in Ratanakiri and Mondolkiri Provinces over the past year.

10. *Routes of Supply.* There are numerous roads, trails, and waterways by which supplies move from Cambodia across the border into South Vietnam. But the most interesting development in the past two years has occurred in the northeast. The Cambodian Government has been improving the roads in this remote area as part of a long range development program, and probably to provide access to the border and better communication between the isolated military outposts in the area. Some of the route improvement has also served to facilitate the delivery of Cambodian rice to the Communists in the Laotian Panhandle and in the South Vietnamese highlands. Indeed, there is some evidence that Communist work gangs assisted in the improvement of the road from Siem Pang north to the Laotian border, where it connects with Route 110 in Laos.³ In any event, these road improvements would facilitate the movement of trucks during the dry season from the Laotian Panhandle through northeastern Cambodia all the way to the southern border of Mondolkiri Province.

11. Whether or not the Communists used these routes to move military supplies south during the last dry season (December 1965-May 1966) is not clear. If they did, the use was probably small relative to the established routes entering South Vietnam from Laos further north.

12. At the same time, there is good evidence of increased traffic on the waterways in this area. Three rivers flow out of the northeast into the Mekong at Stung Treng: the Tonle Kong from Laos,⁴ the Tonle San from Ratanakiri Province, and the Srepok. The Tonle Kong is navigable by motorized craft, and there is considerable evidence that it is being used to ship food and possibly other items into the Laotian Panhandle. The Tonle San may also be in use for rice shipments eastward towards the Vietnamese highlands, although the extent to which it can be used by motorized craft is not clear. But the more general significance of these waterways is that, in conjunction with the Mekong, they provide a potentially secure route from Laos well to the south in Cambodia, where transfers can be made to existing roads and trails, as in the vicinity of Kratie, leading to the border of South Vietnam. As yet, however, we have no intelligence reports which indicate that the Mekong is being used for southward shipment of Communist military supplies.

³ This is Route 97, sometimes referred to either alone or in conjunction with Route 110 as the "Sihanouk Trail." (Route 110 alone is also sometimes called the "Sihanouk Trail.") Other road improvements include what appears in photography to be concealed truck parks along Route 194 which runs generally southeast from Siem Pang to a junction with Route 19 near Bokheo. See map.

⁴ This river is called the Tonle Kong in Cambodia and the Se Kong in Laos.

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III. CAMBODIA AS A SOURCE OF SUPPLIES

13. *Vietnamese Communist Apparatus in Cambodia.* Communist acquisition of supplies in and through Cambodia is facilitated by a clandestine Communist Party apparatus which exists within the ethnic Vietnamese community of some 300,000 who live in Cambodia; it is also aided by Chinese merchants. Most of this Vietnamese minority originally came from South Vietnam, but their sympathies are largely with Hanoi. The party controls several useful front organizations in the community. The primary mission of this apparatus is to support the Vietnamese Communist war effort. It collects money, purchases drugs, medicines, communications equipment, batteries, and other materials, and delivers these supplies clandestinely to various Communist bases in South Vietnam along the Cambodian border. It also does some small-scale recruiting of Vietnamese youths to fight with the Viet Cong, but indications are that this has not been very successful. The apparatus is concerned that its activities do not attract undue attention from the Cambodian Government. While we feel reasonably sure that the Cambodian authorities are aware of its existence, we are not confident that they have any detailed knowledge of the extent of its activities.

14. *Food.* There has always been a good deal of private trading and smuggling of rice back and forth across the Cambodian-South Vietnamese border, particularly in the delta region. In 1965, however, coincident with the buildup of North Vietnamese Army units in the rice-deficit South Vietnamese highlands, the Communists began extensive private purchase of rice in Cambodia, a rice-surplus country, and this rice was smuggled to Communist forces through north-eastern Cambodia. We are not sure how much this additional smuggling amounted to in 1965, but we believe the total was probably around 5,000 tons. We do know that this smuggling was on a large enough scale to disturb Sihanouk because of the loss of tax revenues and foreign exchange earnings involved, and there are reliable reports that he made a deal late that year for an official sale of as much as 20,000 and possibly 30,000 tons of rice for delivery to the Vietnamese Communists in 1966.

15. Intelligence confirming the total deliveries of Cambodian rice to the Communists in 1966 is quite limited. We do not know to what extent the official sale was implemented. Moreover, some smuggling and private sales continued. There are some reports that indicate large quantities of rice were shipped to the Communists in the highlands of South Vietnam and the Laotian Panhandle. Projecting the limited evidence on actual deliveries reported during a few months, we estimate that the total amount delivered could have reached 20,000 tons, and possibly more.⁶ Other food supplies obtained from Cambodia include dried fish, salt, beef, pork, and milk, but the quantities of these items were not large.

⁶ These computations assume that the reported truck traffic continued daily during the dry season, and that small movements on the main water route continued throughout the year.

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16. *Chemicals.* Some drugs, medical supplies, and chemicals useful in the manufacture of explosives are imported into Cambodia through normal commercial channels and smuggled forward into South Vietnam to the Communists. These goods can be relatively easily smuggled over the border and then moved about the delta waterways on small sampans by paying bribes to local customs and district officials. Shipments of potassium chlorate into Cambodia jumped remarkably in 1962.

	1959	1960	1961	1962	1963	1964 ^a
Cambodian Imports of Potassium Chlorate (Tons)	34	10	12	129	183	138

While some of this increase can be attributed to greater needs connected with the establishment of fertilizer, textile processing, paper, and match manufacturing plants which use this chemical, and to increased production of explosives used in road and other construction, some of it is being smuggled to the Vietnamese Communists. The quantities obtained by the Communists are very difficult to establish; we do know that between March 1963 and February 1964 about 23 tons of explosive chemicals, 95 percent of which was potassium chlorate, were captured on delta waterways near the Cambodian border, some with Cambodian markings and obtained in Cambodia.⁷ In addition, small quantities were seized in 1966 which clearly came from Cambodian sources. On the other hand, bulk chemicals, including potassium chlorate, are available in Saigon, which would generally be a more readily accessible source than would Cambodia. One hundred tons of potassium chlorate were imported into South Vietnam under quotas for 1965, all by one firm and all ostensibly for match production. Controls are inadequate to assure that quantities are not diverted to the Viet Cong.

17. *Arms.* Since Cambodia manufactures no arms, they are all obtained from outside sources, almost entirely through the port of Sihanoukville. No Communist flag ships and no cargoes loaded in Communist ports have been permitted to come up the Mekong to Phnom Penh for the past two years. In any event, South Vietnamese control of shipping on the river appears to have prevented the introduction of any substantial amount of arms and ammunition to Cambodia by this route. Since late 1963 nearly all Cambodian imports of military equipment have been delivered under aid agreements with Communist China and the Soviet Union. The quantities involved do not exceed the planned requirements for the modernization and expansion of the Cambodian Armed Forces. Though some of this equipment probably reaches the hands of the Vietnamese Communists, we have no evidence of large-scale diversions, and it seems unlikely that they would rely in any major way on such an uncertain and indirect source.

^a These figures were obtained from statistics published by the Cambodian Government. We do not have figures for the years since 1964.

⁷ If, for example, the Communists obtained 50 tons of potassium chlorate per year, this would be sufficient for the manufacture of about 10,000 claymore-type antipersonnel mines of average size, or 100,000 to 200,000 hand grenades.

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18. There are also large quantities of previously imported US and French and other miscellaneous arms in Cambodia, and we believe that there is some small-scale traffic in these weapons. It is also possible that the Communist apparatus in Cambodia is engaged in smuggling new shipments of arms into Cambodia for movement to the VC. Ocean-going vessels could offload arms clandestinely along the Cambodian coast whence they could be smuggled to the VC overland, via inland waterways, or along the coast. But we have no convincing evidence of such activities, and since the advent of operation MARKET-TIME in this area, any quantities of supplies currently being delivered via coastal routes are almost certainly small.

IV. EVALUATION OF THE IMPORTANCE OF CAMBODIA

19. *As a Source of Supply.* In the past, the Viet Cong made self-sufficiency a basic principle, and they established a large and generally effective organization which supplied most of their needs from sources in South Vietnam. Over the past two years, however, the expansion of Communist forces in South Vietnam and the increased pressures from allied forces have placed increasing burdens on the Communist logistic system and have substantially increased their requirements for external supplies.

20. Apart from the matter of food, denial of supplies obtained in or through Cambodia would complicate Communist logistic problems, but the quantities involved are neither great nor critical to the overall Communist effort, and they could be shipped from North Vietnam. Denial of Cambodian food would be more serious. Food is probably one of the Vietnamese Communists' more critical problems in the highlands area from northern Tay Ninh through Kontum. Not only is this a rice-deficit area, but allied operations are making access to South Vietnamese rice in other areas increasingly difficult. Without Cambodian rice it would be much more difficult for the Communists to provide food to their forces here and in the southern Laotian Panhandle. Communist requirements in 1966 for consumption in these areas may have totaled 10,000 tons, but we do not know what their stockpiling needs or intentions would have been.

21. If the supply of Cambodian rice were cut off, the Communists would probably step up their efforts to obtain rice within South Vietnam through increased taxation and forced purchases. But these resources probably would not meet Communist needs completely. Depending upon the success of allied denial operations, the Communists might be forced to move a substantial proportion of the resulting requirement from North Vietnam, thus substantially increasing the daily tonnage moved on the Laotian infiltration routes during the dry season. The increased movement required would be within their capabilities, but the movement would be more vulnerable to interruption and delay by US-ARVN operations, and food shortages might develop among Communist forces in these areas.

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22. *Use of Territory.* It is exceedingly difficult to measure the overall importance of the use of Cambodia for infiltration, sanctuary, and base area activities. Communist strategy has always been based on the maintenance of secure base areas in swamps, jungles, and mountains. Some of these base areas appear to have been constructed deliberately to gain added security by locating them next to the border of Cambodia and the Laotian Panhandle where sanctuary is available. Captured VC documents attest to the importance which the Communists attach to Cambodia, particularly for sanctuary. One of these documents expresses the view that this importance will increase. But the documents also exhibit considerable concern over maintaining good relations with Cambodia and a fear of jeopardizing their present position through irresponsible actions by Communist troops while on Cambodian territory.

23. Even so, we do not believe that use of Cambodian territory constitutes a decisive element in the ability of Communist forces to conduct military operations in South Vietnam. It has not proven much easier to fix and destroy Communist troops in areas of Vietnam far removed from Cambodian sanctuary. Base areas such as War Zone D which lack adjacent sanctuary have not proved any easier to penetrate, clear, and hold than areas like War Zone C in Tay Ninh, next to the Cambodian border. The denial of Cambodian territory to the Communists would involve the loss of the psychological and material advantages of sanctuary, and it would make life more difficult for them. But they would probably be able to adapt their military operations to these circumstances, and to carry on.

V. THE ROLE OF THE CAMBODIAN GOVERNMENT⁸

24. *Extent of RKG Knowledge.* [] other senior Cambodian officials almost certainly have a general knowledge of Vietnamese Communist military activities in Cambodia, although perhaps not of their full extent. Communist activities are probably better known along the more populous and politically sensitive southern half of the frontier, where Cambodian border posts are concentrated. The RKG is probably much less informed of Communist activities in the desolate and unsettled northeast.

25. *The RKG View.* []

[] we believe that Cambodian border forces have on occasion skirmished with the VC, but there has been no determined effort to police the border.

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26. [REDACTED]

27. Businessmen in Cambodia, particularly Chinese merchants, have been quick to take advantage of this situation. Aside from the official rice sales, most of the support obtained by the Communists in Cambodia is in fact accomplished through commercial and private transactions, handled primarily by Chinese and Vietnamese businessmen in Cambodia who import materials, smuggle rice, and even on occasion use Cambodian Army trucks to effect deliveries.

28. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] The Cambodian Army, security forces, and local officials are poorly paid, and dealing with the Vietnamese Communists represents the chance of a life time to make money. As a result, there is much local collusion along the border, including the sale of supplies to the Communists and the occasional use of army trucks to deliver them. In the case of Communist border crossings, the Cambodian border guards generally prefer to accept bribes or look the other way rather than run the risk of getting killed opposing entry. [REDACTED] senior officials in Phnom Penh probably know in general what is going on, they have apparently chosen generally to close their eyes to it.

29. *RKG Capabilities.* In any event, Cambodia's Armed Forces are far too small to close its borders and effectively deny Communist use of Cambodian territory. The Cambodian Army totals some 32,000 men with a nucleus of some 50 active battalions. This includes 19 new battalions organized in 1966, the majority of which have been deployed along the Thai border; this reorganization has not substantially increased the army's capability to deal with any sizable force at the South Vietnamese border. Deployments along the troubled border with Thailand and in the southern central part of the country leave less than 5,000 regular troops along the entire 700-mile border with South Vietnam. There are only 1,300 Cambodian regular soldiers, deployed in three locations, to cover some 300 miles of wild and inaccessible border in the northeastern provinces of Ratanakiri and Mondolkiri. There are over 20,000 Communist main force troops on the South Vietnamese side of this border region. While a firmer attitude and increased vigilance by the Cambodians might serve to discourage Communist use of Cambodian territory, Cambodia's capability to detect and resist

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sizable Communist forces or inhibit Communist activities, particularly in the northeast, is extremely limited.

30. If the Cambodian Government chose to, it could probably do more to limit the shipment of rice, chemicals, and other goods to the Communists. [redacted] the bureaucratic and military apparatus could exert tighter controls over rice shipments and the import of goods from abroad. At best, however, smuggling, false manifesting, bribery, and other tricks of the trade would serve to permit a fair amount of goods to move.

VI. OUTLOOK

31. Assuming that hostilities in South Vietnam continue at or above 1966 levels, the Communists will probably feel compelled to increase their use of Cambodia in 1967 for infiltration, sanctuary, and perhaps for the acquisition of food and other supplies. [redacted]

32. [redacted]

33. On the other hand, [redacted] apprehensions over possible US-GVN counteraction to increasing Communist use of Cambodia will mount. [redacted]

[redacted] Perhaps these fears, a reappraisal of the war, and annoyance at the failure to conclude a border agreement with the NLF, are responsible for what appears to be a tougher Cambodian attitude recently toward VC-NVA border crossing.

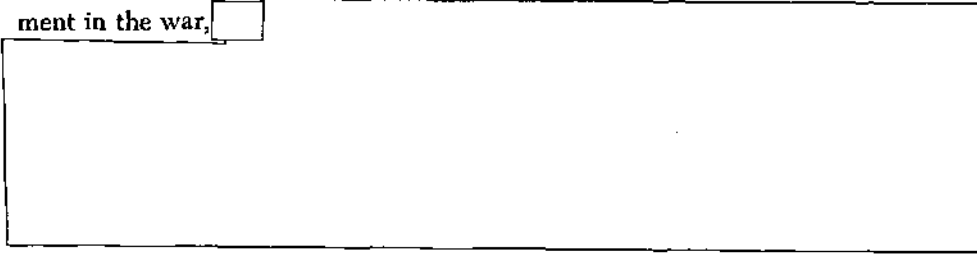
34. [redacted]

35. But more drastic measures appear unlikely because of certain basic considerations, including the lack of real Cambodian capability, the fear of involve-

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ment in the war,



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