

## A Relation Shaped by Geopolitical Ambitions: The United States and Cambodia during the Cold War

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### Abstract

*The diplomatic relation between the United States and Cambodia began during the Cold War, before Cambodia achieved independence from France in 1953. This article examines the political constellation between the two states during the Cold War. The United States had been an ally and a firm supporter of Cambodia at certain times, while also being controversial enemies in other moments. The relationship worsened during the Cold War, and the two countries had gone from allies to enemies. It could be argued that the relationship deteriorated due to several reasons: the US' foreign policy, which was crafted to contain communism, Cambodia's failure to be truly neutral as it was often biased to the communist bloc, and the impact of third-party states.*

**Keywords:** United States, Cambodia, Relation, Cold War, History

### Introduction

Cambodia is a sovereign state in Southeast Asia bordered by three other countries including Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. The Khmers had a long and prosperous history and it was the strongest empire in Southeast Asia at its peak in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Unfortunately, starting in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, weakness and disunity struck the Empire and as a result, it was invaded and bullied by its traditionally hostile neighbors: Thailand and Vietnam. In 1863, Cambodia was colonized by France as a part of the French Colonial Empire in Southeast Asia along with Vietnam and Laos.

The colonization has both positive and negative impacts for Cambodia; positively, it provided protection from its hostile neighbors, which preserved Cambodia's national identity. Negatively, however, it marked a period of duress as the country was under foreign control, which prevented self-made decisions and put its future under the hands of the French. Cambodia was under French colonialization for 90 years until independence was obtained in 1953. The United States which is one of the most powerful countries, is another important element of this research. The US emerged from as a global power in

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World War II, with military strength and economic power unrivaled by other countries. By the end of the war, the US held a worldwide influence in various matters such as culture, society, international politics, and global economy.

The end of World War II marked a change in the international landscape along with the emergence of a new world order. It symbolized the end of the colonialization era as the colonized countries fought for their respective independence and sovereignty, while the colonial powers were economically exhausted from the war. As a result, restoring themselves was the main priority rather than focusing on their colonies, which simply did not justify for the cost and time spent. Additionally, a new geopolitical tension arose in the form of the Cold War; the Eastern (communist) Bloc attempted to increase their influence and spread communism, while the Western Bloc aimed to contain the growth of communism. During the Cold War, the struggle for ideological domination and establishment of a new world order pushed the superpowers to further spread its influence by seeking better diplomatic relation with other states, including third-world countries.

The West supported anti-communist groups in [what] countries to increase its influence, in its ultimate purpose of communism containment. Conversely, the East countered by supporting the communist groups in those countries. When one bloc came into contact with the opposite bloc, proxy wars and regional conflicts occurred. French Indochina was a classic example of a Cold War regional conflict as it became a setting for conflict between the two Blocs because of its strategic importance.

The United States and Cambodia first established formal diplomatic relation on 29 June 1950, even before Cambodia's formal independence from France. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly during the Cold War, the relation between the two countries could be summed up as mostly inconsistent, as the US' foreign policy was mainly crafted to contain the growth of communism with anything else being secondary, the same was applied in Southeast Asia; whereas Cambodia's foreign policy was to survive as a nation and a state by any means possible. It is worthy to note how a small and weak country in Southeast Asia was able to develop an important relationship with a major superpower,

particularly in an uncertain era in history. Due to the difference in foreign policy and goals, it was clear that the two countries would not be able to have a smooth and constructive relationship. The United States had been an ally and a firm supporter of Cambodia at certain times while being its enemy in other moments.

This paper examines the evolution of the United States and Cambodia relation during the Cold War and attempts to analyze the significant elements that contribute to its deterioration. The objective of this article is to study how the relationship between the US and Cambodia evolved, to analyze how the US foreign policy affected Cambodia, and why the relationship deteriorated over time.

This paper attempts to answer how did relationship between the United States and Cambodia evolved during the Cold War. Furthermore, it also examine whether the US Cold War foreign policy had any negative impacts on Cambodia. Finally, it seeks to understand how Cambodia's failure to be neutral impacted the relation. This paper argues that the relationship deteriorated during the time period due to several reasons: the US' foreign

policy which was crafted to contain communism, Cambodia's failure to be truly neutral as it was often biased to the communist bloc, and the impact of third-party states.

Significantly, it examines the relationship between the two countries during an uncertain era in a rapidly changing world, and sometimes-controversial policies by the US to contain communism. It would also broaden the understanding of history from a neutral perception and to avoid scapegoating on one side for the tragedy that had happened. Since the US has a great influence on the global level, a remarkable effect on the future of the Indochinese countries was also apparent.

Another feature of this research would be to understand how US foreign policy shaped Cambodia's history and created its future. The US has both positive and negative influence for Cambodia, one of the many positives were assisting Cambodia in development and providing aid since its independence. Nevertheless, controversial moments had occurred when it acted in its own interest without taking Cambodia into consideration. Because, the importance is to analyze and evaluate on both side

of the narrative, the good points and the controversies of the United States.

### **Literature Review**

Academic works written on foreign policy as well as the relationship between the US and Cambodia during the Cold War are not plentiful. However, more works have been done on Cambodia in the Cold War and the History of Cambodia, as well as US Foreign Policy. Moreover, the literature on Cambodia in the Cold War by Khmer scholars from a Khmer perspective is available. Nonetheless, a few relevant secondary materials are available.

Kenton Clymer writes about the US and Cambodia relation starting from the initial contact in the 19<sup>th</sup> century up to the late 1960s. Clymer showcases how the relation with Cambodia's leader Prince Sihanouk was often strained as Cambodia tried to be neutral, even when pressured by the US to fight communism (Clymer, 2004). His next work discusses the relationship in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This work focuses on the secret US bombing of Cambodia, the coup which overthrew Prince Sihanouk, and the American invasion of Cambodia in 1970 which led to a brutal civil war, and followed by the

savage Khmer Rouge era (Clymer, 2004). The book examines the American role in these events before analyzing the American response to the Vietnamese invasion in 1978. Christopher Brady wrote a book on US Foreign Policy towards Cambodia from 1977 to 1992, although the time period of this book is beyond the scope of this paper, it provides an interesting analysis on the logic behind US foreign policy towards Cambodia from the US' point of view (Brady, 1999).

Brady's work investigates the realities the elites inhabit and the role they play in the development and implementation of foreign policy. It combines assumptions drawn from theories of foreign policy analysis, linguistics and sociology, and concentrates on public statements as to its primary units of analysis and arguing that the parameters of linguistic environments effectively create reality.

Furthermore, the US Embassy in Cambodia wrote a book in the celebration of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of diplomatic relation between the two countries (US Embassy in Cambodia, 2010). It reviews the entire history of diplomatic relation between the United States and Cambodia since

the establishment of formal relation until the present day. While the book is a good starting point to explore Cambodian and US relationship, it was written in a general overview of the relation without in-depth details or critical analysis. Moreover, the book was written through the US' vantage point, which may introduce bias.

In terms of historical work, Arthur J. Dommen's book tells the history of Indochina since the arrival of France in 1625, colonization of Indochina by the French and the local's reaction (Dommen, 2001). It showcases the struggle for national sovereignty at the end of World War II, by various nations including Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam for their respective independence. After the French left, it was the American's turn to deal with the affairs in Indochina. Although this book talks about Cambodia, the main focus is on Vietnam. Therefore, some of the related parts could be of important use in the research. David Chandler's book is considered as one of the best works on Cambodian history which provide a comprehensive view of its history, it begins from early history to modern day Cambodia (Chandler, 2008). For the period related to the topic,

Chandler examines Cambodia under the leadership of Prince Norodom Sihanouk during the Cold War, the first Kingdom's decline, and the new Pro-American regime that came into power.

Alan P. Dobson and Steve Marsh are editors of a book which introduces post World War II US foreign policy (Dobson & Marsh, 2001). It tells a historical account of US policy chronologically and explores its design, control, and effects. This work's relevance to this paper is due to its focus on the US foreign policy with Asia between 1945 and 1989 where foreign policies towards Cambodia are also included.

Andrew Johnstone and Helen Laville edited a book which shows the significant role of public opinion in the development and promotion of US foreign policy (Johnstone & Laville, 2010). The role of organizations and movements that represent public opinion, and assesses the nature of their relationship with the government. The work states that role changes, and the extent of influence varies, the American public has the power to affect foreign policy and should not be underestimated. In relation to the topic, it shows how the invasion of Cambodia by the US during the Vietnam war

provoked the American public against the president's decision. Ronald E. Powaski examines the US presidency in the last half of the twentieth century and explores the successes and failures of presidents in their foreign policy (Powaski, 2017). His book examines each president's ability to apply his skills to a foreign policy issue. In the face of opposition that comes from different sources, including Congress, the Pentagon, the US State Department, and the media. The book also covers John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and Richard Nixon foreign policy towards Cambodia. John Spanier and Joseph Noguee provide a critical look at the executive-legislative relation in the conduct of American foreign policy (Spanier & Noguee, 1981). Their book explores the capacity of American institutions to create a foreign policy that will fulfill the nation's needs. Lastly, the dilemmas of policy-making in a democracy are addressed. Asaf Siniver examines the important role of crisis management in the making of US foreign policy during the Nixon-Kissinger years (Siniver, 2008). Known for their control on the internal working of US foreign policy, the book offers a critical account of the manner in which the president and

his national security advisor dominated the structures and processes of foreign policymaking. It also includes discussion on the US bombing and invasion of Cambodia during the Vietnam War. Jussi Hanhimaki wrote on Henry Kissinger, who dominated American foreign relations like no other figure in recent history (Hanhimaki, 2004). Hanhimaki explores the White House power struggles and debates behind the Cambodia and Laos invasions, the search for a strategy in Vietnam, the breakthrough with China, and the unfolding of Soviet-American detente. As Henry Kissinger is the person behind the secret bombings of Cambodia, this book will be of great importance for this thesis. David B. MacDonald, Robert G. Patman, and Betty Mason-Parker consider the ethical aspects of foreign policy change through five interrelated dimensions: conceptual, security, economic, normative and diplomatic (MacDonald, Patman, & Mason-Parker, 2007). Defining ethics and what an ethical foreign policy should be is highly contested. This book includes many different viewpoints to show the difference of opinion on such issues as humanitarian intervention, free trade, the doctrine of preemption,

political corruption and human rights such as the case of Cambodia during the Cold War.

Bernard K. Gordon shows the importance of foreign policy for Cambodia in the early days as a newly independent country (Gordon, 1969). It shows Cambodia's foreign policy towards the two superpowers and its neighbors during the Cold War. Furthermore, it examines the significance of foreign policy for Cambodia, as it followed the non-alignment policy and was in danger of becoming entangled into the Vietnam War. Michael Leifer focuses on the extent of the Cambodian conflict internationally after the end of the first Kingdom (Leifer, 1975). It shows how the various groups in Cambodia are supported by different countries for the legitimate control of the country. Military support and diplomatic support came from the two superpowers, the People's Republic of China, and Vietnam; as they have strategic purposes for doing so. Oliver Omar examines US policy towards Cambodia, beginning with Nixon's coming to office in January 1969 until the passing of the War Powers Act of 1973 (Omar, 2016). It shows the internal workings of Nixon's policy-making process which defied the

standard. The importance is how Nixon fell from power due to his policies. Furthermore, it shows how Congress made permanent changes to presidential war powers and the resurgence of Congress in the field of foreign policy, culminating with the War Powers Act of 1973. Will H. Moore David J. Lanoue examines a claim that is broadly accepted in international relations: US foreign policy during the Cold War was influenced strongly by domestic factors (Moore & Lanoue, 2003). A hypothesis was created and analyzed, and finally, it was found that international politics, rather than domestic politics, was the primary determinant of US foreign policy behavior during the Cold War. Salah Oueslati wrote about the founding myths and ideals which have shaped US foreign policy since its beginning (Oueslati, 2014). Those concepts make up the framework within which institutional and non-institutional actors try to influence the decision-making process. The article looked into the complex factors at many levels to provide a clearer picture of the US foreign policymaking process. Douglas Joseph Snyder examines how the memories of the First Indochina War influenced disagreements between

the US and French policymakers about the American war in Vietnam (Snyder, 2014). The thesis seeks to determine why American policymakers rejected advice about Vietnam from France, and why exactly the US was so opposed to considering its guidance in the course of this problematic war. Also, it shows how the Vietnam War affected Cambodia.

### **Inconsistent Beginnings**

After obtaining independence from France in 1953, Cambodia chose to follow the non-alignment policy. In the early beginnings of the relation, the United States observed that the priority was to assist Cambodia in the training of its military which was vulnerable to communist aggression (FRUS, 1952–1954, Indochina, Volume XIII, Part 2, Doc. 1105). This led to the establishment of the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) on 16 May 1955 (FRUS, 1955–1957, East Asian Security; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XXI, Doc. 202). Initially, Cambodia was grateful for American military and economic aid which had revitalized the Cambodian economy.

Despite the United States' military assistance for Cambodia, controversy struck in February 1956 when Prince

Sihanouk who was the main leader of Cambodia made a state visit to Beijing and made a number of controversial comments that was not reassuring. First, the Prince said that the trade relationship and cultural exchanges between Cambodia and the People's Republic of China (P.R.C.) would begin shortly. Perhaps the most discouraging for the United States was the Prince's statement that the "time is ripe" to establish diplomatic relations between the two countries.

Prince Sihanouk's visit to Peking was an indication that a new phase of neutrality had been adopted in Cambodia. Previously, Cambodia's neutrality had been characterized mainly by its refusal to be drawn into the pro-Western bloc, the visit to the P.R.C. was one of the first important steps taken in a new policy designed to actively balance the influence of the West in Cambodia with that of the communist (Lasater, 1969, p. 60). The relation between the United States and Cambodia further declined in June 1956 when Cambodia and the P.R.C. signed an aid agreement which provided Cambodia with \$22.8 million over two years in economic assistance. This assistance is endowed primarily to build



factories, irrigation systems, and other kinds of infrastructure. Interestingly, this was the first aid that the P.R.C. provided to a non-communist country.

Furthermore, in July 1956, Prince Sihanouk traveled to Moscow where more additional aid was received. By the end of 1956, the Prince had traveled to other communist countries such as Poland, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia; with the last promising additional economic assistance (Cheab, 2005, p. 286). As the communist countries realized that the relation between the United States and Cambodia was somewhat strained, they pursued at the first opportunity to attract Cambodia's friendship, it is not all that surprising due to the geopolitical importance of the country.

Even with these complications, the relation could be considered as moderately stable. Although, there were expressions of gratitude by the Cambodians when the US provided military assistance to them, the US' action in aiding a small neutral Southeast Asian state remained controversial. Cambodia feared that the United States was unsatisfied with their neutrality and would end American assistance, specifically due to their decision to

accept aid from communist countries. Although it was very tempting to end the aid, policymakers in the US did not think that it was rational to terminate military assistance. The US intended to keep the Cambodians hesitant about whether or not the aid would continue, but the truth was as long as there was an internal will to resist communism, the US would continue to provide it, even if the Cambodians would show little gratitude and would not even fully cooperate with Americans officials.

This military assistance was a part of the US' strategy to keep Cambodia independent as their ultimate aim was to contain communism in Southeast Asia. For Prince Sihanouk, the non-alignment strategy was his flagship policy for the future of Cambodia. However, military assistance from the United States could compromise the perception of neutrality and might create new challenges for the Prince's authority.

Prince Sihanouk's authority in Cambodia did not come coincidentally from his successful quest for independence. The hierarchy of Cambodian society was structured in a way that the royalty, in particular, the king was viewed as the symbol of national unity, even god-like in some

cases, hence authority over the ordinary people was guaranteed from birth. Even with this, the Prince still felt uncertain about his authority, which was the reason that a referendum was held to cement his position. Due to the rising domestic perception of turning to the West, the Prince had to counter-balance the influence of the West with that of the communist so that the internal perception would remain that he was truly unbiased.

Positively, bringing home both the West and the communist aid actually provided more for Cambodia, strengthening both the economic and the military at least for the moment. However, the United States saw that Prince Sihanouk had absolute control over Cambodia and that his neutrality was beginning to position the two blocs against each other over a small neutral country. Therefore, the US began to consider other options that could be an alternative to Prince Sihanouk for the leadership of Cambodia against communism. When this was revealed, it left a strain on the relation between the two countries for many years to come.

A dangerous and sensitive problem began to arise in 1958 when a number of disputes and armed conflicts

along the border with South Vietnam increased. Prince Sihanouk and many other Cambodian officials were reported to believe that the United States had encouraged the Vietnamese to attack. Cambodia then appealed to the United States in the hope of getting the invaders out, if help was not coming it threatened to turn to the communist China for help (Cheab, 2005, p. 288). The US State Department advised both of the governments not to lean heavily on the United States to attempt to settle disputes, rather than taking action directly with other government to reduce tension. Furthermore, the State Department pointed out that South Vietnam was independent and took action which the United States has no influence over. In the end, the US refused to become involved (FRUS, 1958-1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Doc. 72).

Shockingly, on 25 July 1958, Prince Sihanouk publicly announced that Cambodia would recognize the communist government in Beijing. This was seen to be a serious critical political setback for the United States. The United States feared that Cambodia had become a victim of new colonialism represented by the

Soviet Union and Chinese expansionism to newly independent nations that are determined to maintain their independence (FRUS, 1958–1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Doc. 77).

Afterward, another sensitive matter came up as there might be a possibility of a coup in Cambodia as the South Vietnamese and perhaps the Thai would never let things follow its own course. The two actively considered attempting to remove Prince Sihanouk from power through an internal coup, and the United States' involvement in this highly sensitive matter might just be possible. The first idea of a coup emerged in August 1958 and continued to be discussed for the rest of the year with the United States evaluating the possible coup leaders (FRUS, 1958–1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Doc. 79). In early 1959, France, the U.S.S.R., and the P.R.C. informed Prince Sihanouk that there was a plot to overthrow the Cambodian government (FRUS, 1958–1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Doc. 93). The fact that the United States was not among the countries that had informed Cambodia of the

conspiracy only increased the suspicion of American involvement in the coup attempt (Cheab, 2005, p. 227).

Nevertheless, at the end of 1959, the situation in most respects was better than it was expected. Of particular importance was the absence of any further substantial moves by Cambodia toward the communist bloc. Instead, Prince Sihanouk showed signs making closer ties with other neutral countries, such as [give example]. In this situation, Prince Sihanouk may now have realized that any more moves toward the communist bloc cannot be made, without seriously compromising Cambodia's neutrality. Whereas the United States' approach to interregional problems had now been altered, initially preferring not to become involved, even while blaming Prince Sihanouk in good part for the problems; the US now had moved quickly whenever tensions developed (FRUS, 1958–1960, East Asia-Pacific Region; Cambodia; Laos, Volume XVI, Doc. 132). Perhaps, the United States now understood the importance of Cambodia for its long-term plans.

It is important to understand that the Cambodians always had a mentality of fearing the two traditionally hostile

neighbors: Thailand and Vietnam. When looking back to the past, Cambodians would be tempted to believe that Thailand and Vietnam had and would always want to invade their country and wipe this nation away from the world. With the involvement of the United States during the Cold War era, it could be seen that the perspective of the two countries was clearly conflicting from a neutral point of view. While the United States viewed Cambodia only as a part of a larger global struggle against communism, Cambodia saw the situation from a much more regional context. The fact that South Vietnam was anti-communist did not matter to Cambodia; due to historical tension, the Vietnamese would always be seen as a more dangerous and immediate threat to Cambodia than that of communist China. With both historical lessons and recent attacks by South Vietnam, Prince Sihanouk's paranoia was understandable, therefore, the aggressive reaction from the Prince would always be expected.

Prince Sihanouk's most important objective was the survival of Cambodia by any means necessary. The essential point for Cambodia was retaining its territory and identity as a nation.

Therefore, the South Vietnamese' actions and the United States' non-action was the breaking point for Cambodia, and its response was the recognition of the People's Republic of China. This could also be seen as a political counter-attack towards the United States. One could see that the United States was somewhat leaning closer towards South Vietnam, the reason was simple: South Vietnam was their ally, while Cambodia was just a small neutral country. By seeing the United States' reaction, Prince Sihanouk developed an idea, that if the West were to fail in Indochina, communist China would become Cambodia's protector from Thai and Vietnamese aggression. With this belief and the conspiracies of US involvement in a plot to remove Prince Sihanouk from leadership and destabilize Cambodia, it was clear that the relationship with the United States was always going to be strained.

### **Constant Deterioration Before the Break**

John F. Kennedy became the President of the United States on 20 January 1961, it should represent a fresh start to the relation. On 28 January 1961, Prince Sihanouk sent

a letter to President Kennedy relating to a conference on the Laos conflict. Regarding the Cambodia-Laos situation, it was clear that a communist Laos would be harmful to Cambodia, both because of dangerous subversion and because the selection between the blocs would be more imminent.

Cambodian neutrality was predicted to be on balance between the major blocs. Without such equilibrium, the Cambodians believed neutrality to be impossible and, in that case, accommodation with the winning side would be necessary. Prince Sihanouk who formulated Cambodian foreign policy had expressed convictions that the eventual communist hegemony was inevitable, and in particular that Chinese communism would be the “wave of future” in Southeast Asia. However, as long as the free world would still be present to counter-balance the communist bloc, neutrality could still be a viable policy. Prince Sihanouk’s proposals for Laos were held by the Cambodians to be noble, realistic, a disinterested attempt to salvage the situation in the interest of world peace and Cambodia’s own future. As the US delayed in acting on his suggestions, Cambodia now believed that a truly

neutral Laos is impossible (FRUS, 1961–1963, Volume XXIII, Southeast Asia, Doc. 68).

Despite all the efforts that the United States had done to reduce the tension between Cambodia and its pro-Western neighbors, Prince Sihanouk always felt that the United States could have done much more than it did. The Prince concluded that despite the United States’ efforts to control Thailand and South Vietnam, Cambodia’s security had not been greatly improved. In addition, there was a belief in the Prince that the US military aid did not and would not help ensure Cambodia’s survival as a nation and a state. All of these reasons made the Prince consider different methods of protecting Cambodia’s survival and independence.

In August 1962, Prince Sihanouk announced that letters were sent to Geneva powers, calling for an international conference to guarantee the neutrality and territorial integrity of Cambodia in the same matter as Laos (FRUS, 1961–1963, Volume XXIII, Southeast Asia, Doc. 68). In the United States, there were objections to the idea of a conference. Instead of a conference that Prince Sihanouk wanted, the

United States suggested an alternative plan which was country by country notes pledging to respect Cambodia's neutrality and territorial integrity. On 21 September 1962, the United States presented its proposal to Cambodia, but it was viewed in a negative manner by the Cambodian leadership (Clymer, 2004, p. 96). Despite Cambodia's objection to the US' proposal, it is believed that its relation with Cambodia would be compromised if the proposal was completely rejected. Thus, the United States attempted to divert attention from Prince Sihanouk's Laos-type proposal to a suggestion for the establishment of an international border commission (a British idea) and a tripartite declaration by Thailand, Cambodia, and South Vietnam that each will respect the neutrality of the others. Such a declaration might be accepted by the other states who were members of the Laos Conference. However, this suggestion disappointed Cambodia.

Generally, over these two years, border incidents with Cambodia's neighbors were the central focus of Prince Sihanouk's actions. With the conflict in Laos becoming more intense, the Prince feared that a communist victory would be a disaster for Cambodia's

neutrality. Prince Sihanouk believed that if Laos fell to the communists, South Vietnam would eventually follow. Cambodia would then need to re-adjust its posture to accommodate the new communist hegemony in Southeast Asia. While the United States viewed these developments along with the first report of Vietnamese communist usage of Cambodian land as a move away from the West by Cambodia. As border hostility increased with South Vietnam, Prince Sihanouk became suspicious of the usefulness of the US military aid, whether, in fact, it was keeping Cambodia inferior to its neighbors. Prince Sihanouk then thought of an idea to create an international conference in order to protect Cambodia's neutrality. However, the United States analyzed that the international conference proposal would be a disadvantage for its aims in the region as well as for its allies. Therefore, the US suggested a different method for Cambodia, in turn blocking the conference. This again showed that the US Cold War foreign policy's primary concern in Indochina was to contain communism which in simple terms meant helping its allies first, while Cambodia was just secondary in terms of interest.

In 1963, Prince Sihanouk strongly criticized the South Vietnamese government's attack on its Buddhist citizens and accurately predicted their expulsion in two or three months. Furthermore, after South Vietnamese planes attacked Kauk Tek, a Cambodian provincial guard post approximately five kilometers inside Cambodia, Prince Sihanouk was convinced that the attack was a deliberate provocation and broke diplomatic relations with South Vietnam on 19 August 1963 (US Embassy in Cambodia, 2010, p. 23). A Prince Sihanouk editorial strongly criticized the United States and other Western powers for losing sight of their ideals. It stated that this failure of the 'free' world would be heavy with consequences, and the Prince concluded not only for the West but also for us who are wholehearted nationalists and future victims of their monumental errors (The Norodom Sihanouk Memoirs, The Failures of the Free World, 29 August 1963).

In early September 1963, Cambodia sent a request to the United States asking for support on an appeal to the United Nations for observers to be stationed along the Cambodia-South Vietnam border. The US State

Department again analyzed a number of reasons on why agreeing on such a request was inadvisable, including the implication that it would associate the US with the Cambodian complaints against South Vietnam, and in the end, the United States refused to support it. A few weeks later, the US successfully pressured the British to shelve a draft aide-memoire on Cambodia's neutrality proposals, arguing that Prince Sihanouk would probably forget about his own proposals. But in fact, Prince Sihanouk had publicly spoken about them in a speech on 20 September 1963, as well as during an interview for a French television network. In the same speech, he again deplored the "submissive" US attitude toward South Vietnam (Clymer, 2004, p. 100).

These developments began the serious deterioration of the US-Cambodia relation. Later, Prince Sihanouk called a special meeting of the Cambodian National Assembly to appeal for termination of all US aid on 19 November 1963. The Cambodians announced the cessation of aid, asked for bilateral negotiations to bring about termination and stated that diplomatic relations would be maintained (Cheab, 2005, p. 228). President Kennedy still

hoped that there could be a resolution on the issues dividing the US and Cambodia. However, on 22 November 1963, the President was assassinated in Dallas, Texas and as a result, no action related to Cambodia was taken. Prince Sihanouk marked the tragic event with three days of national mourning, flags flew at the half, and newspapers ran front-page photographs and articles paying tribute to the late president as a man of peace and goodwill (Dommen, 2001, p. 560).

There were unexpected situations which created controversial actions that led to high tensions between the US and Cambodia. On 7 December 1963, Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat of Thailand died, Prince Sihanouk hated Sarit and called for a national celebration. On 9 December 1963, a radio in Cambodia made a controversial broadcast which disturbed the United States: "Thanks to divine protection for our Kampuchea, all the enemies of Cambodia suffer complete destruction. Ngo Dinh Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu were killed by bullets. Their friend Sarit Thanarat, who mistreated Cambodia incessantly, has just met with sudden death. Moreover, the great boss of these aggressors shared the same fate. So, we have seen that

those who want to mistreat Cambodia and who despise our venerated *Samdech Aou* will not be able to live long and will certainly be destroyed. As for traitors Son Ngoc Thanh and Sam Sary, they will certainly die a sudden death like dogs within 15 days" (FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume XXIII, Southeast Asia, Doc. 132). (explain who these people are. Give context to the readers. The United States was particularly angered by Prince Sihanouk's statement "the great boss of these aggressors shared the same fate", as it was seen as a clear reference to the late President Kennedy (FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume XXIII, Southeast Asia, Doc. 133).

The crisis deepened further as on 10 December 1963, Prince Sihanouk gave another provocative speech which once more disturbed the United States (FRUS, 1961-1963, Volume XXIII, Southeast Asia, Doc. 132). In response to the American protests, the Cambodian government rejected any intention to associate President Kennedy's death with those of Sarit and Diem. But Prince Sihanouk was reportedly "incensed" at the US protest, the Prince reminded the United States that he had declared three days of national mourning when President Kennedy was assassinated.



The year 1964 began on a low that had never been seen before in the United States-Cambodia relation. The Prince had now ended negotiations on the modalities of ending US aid and ordered all economic, military, and cultural teams to leave by 15 January 1964. Prince Sihanouk then recalled Ambassador Nong Kimny, who was reported privately distressed at the decision. After initially deciding to leave the cultural attaché in charge, Prince Sihanouk decided to close the Embassy altogether, after knowing that the US had used the term “barbaric” when Nong Kimny was called in to protest the Cambodian reaction to the deaths of the three leaders. Prince Sihanouk said that it was “contemptuous and gratuitous.” The United States likewise began to reduce its staff in Cambodia to a bare minimum and Ambassador Sprouse was ordered to return to the United States after Nong Kimny was recalled (Clymer, 2004, p. 106). This moment was the beginning of the relation break.

There were two final incidents which ultimately triggered the diplomatic relation break. In the 5 April 1965 edition of *Newsweek* magazine, Bernard Krisher’s article claimed that Queen Sisowath Kossamak, Prince Sihanouk’s mother

was “money-mad” and kept a series of brothel on the outskirts of Phnom Penh. Prince Sihanouk condemned the article in a public speech and referred the matter to the Parliament. The Cambodian Parliament also condemned the article, along with the general attitude of the US press, held the US government responsible and recommended that the diplomatic relation between the two countries be broken (Chandler, 1991, p. 146). The second incident which proved to be the final verdict for Prince Sihanouk was yet another deadly border incident. On 28 April 1965, four planes, initially believed to be South Vietnamese, but later proved to be American, bombed the villages of Phum Chantatop and Moream Tiek in Kompong Cham province. The villages were approximately four kilometers from the Vietnamese border. One thirteen-year-old child was killed and 4 other adults were seriously injured. The United States military attachés who went to the scene on the same day confirmed the death and counted there were 35 bomb and rocket craters (FRUS, 1964–1968, Volume XXVII, Mainland Southeast Asia; Regional Affairs, Doc. 155).

On 3 May 1965, Prince Sihanouk announced that Cambodia was formally breaking diplomatic relations with the

US. However, the Prince had hoped to maintain the consular relation, since the foreign exchange from American tourists was needed for the economy. However, Cambodia would not give assurances regarding the continuity of consular relations, therefore the United States decided to terminate the entire diplomatic relation. By the end of May 1965, no US officials remained in Cambodia (Cheab, 2005, p. 230). The fact remained that it was not just these two incidents, which triggered the relation break. It was rather the accumulation of various issues that gradually strained the relationship over a period of a decade (1955-1965). The most recent issue was the escalation in the Vietnam War when the United States began bombing North Vietnam in a constant manner and had sent its first troops to South Vietnam to prevent a communist victory. As the war greatly intensified, it had already spilled into Laos, therefore Prince Sihanouk feared that it would spill over into Cambodia as well. For both parties, negatively, when an opportunity came to resolve their differences, the Cambodians would make impossible demands, and the United States never seemed to put full effort to achieve this goal.

From Prince Sihanouk's perspective, the break in relation resulted from many reasons including the many border incidents with the US allies, the American support for his political enemies and their desire to remove him in one time or another, the US' disapproval for a neutrality conference, their repetitive urge to negotiate diplomatically with Thailand and Vietnam, and criticism in the US media. But perhaps more importantly, it was due to Prince Sihanouk's mentality that the future of Southeast Asia would be under the influence of communism, particularly Chinese communism.

The Prince's concern with domestic politics also played a role in this decision. Whereas the United States viewed the situation from a Cold War perspective, with communism containment as their main priority. Although the US was aware of Cambodia's regional issues, they constantly put them behind its Cold War priorities and interest. Moreover, the US believed that Cambodia was a Viet-Cong sanctuary, and the country actually had a left-leaning neutrality policy and was continuously leaning to the communists. Particularly toward Prince Sihanouk, the US saw that the Prince had total control over Cambodia

and was never going to accommodate the US policies. Putting these two conflicting perspectives together, it could be understood that it was impossible for the two countries to have a good and healthy relationship.

### **Analysis and Conclusion**

During the Cold War, the relation between the US and Cambodia could be summed up as mostly inconsistent, as the US' foreign policy was mainly crafted to contain communism; while Cambodia's foreign policy was to survive as a nation. It is worthy to note how a small and weak country in Southeast Asia was able to develop an important relationship with a major superpower, this was due to its geographical location, along with the role it played within the US' policy of containing communism in Southeast Asia. Although the United States was among the first to recognize and assist Cambodia in its quest for independence, it was done not without a clear and planned purpose.

The US wanted Cambodia to become one of its allies along with Thailand and South Vietnam to battle communism in Southeast Asia. However, Cambodia chose to follow the non-alignment policy, much to the disappointment

of the United States, but it was still acceptable if Cambodia would be truly neutral. Prince Sihanouk believed that in order for Cambodia to survive, it must resist the temptation to join any particular bloc, being neutral was supposed to keep Cambodia away from hostility by either side. The neutrality policy was also used by the Prince as a technique to outsmart and sometimes even outmaneuver the superpowers, but this action did have its consequences in the end. Until the present day, Prince Sihanouk continues to be one of the most controversial figures in Southeast Asia's chaotic and often tragic post World War history.

Cambodia's foreign policy was crafted by Prince Sihanouk based on three basic foundations: First, to guarantee Cambodia's survival; second, Cambodia's strategic location in the heart of Indochina; and third, the balance of power between the two blocs in the region. This foreign policy was particularly important considering the global geopolitical tension and Cambodia's physical location in Southeast Asia between two stronger and historically hostile neighbors: Thailand and Vietnam. However, when it came to the two neighbors who

were US allies, it could be argued that the Prince's policy could be firm and not flexible enough to compromise, which had a negative effect for the Cambodian relations with the US. On the other hand, the United States' policy in Indochina was simply to contain the growth of communism, and later winning the Vietnam War, anything else was secondary including Cambodia.

The US Cold War foreign policy prioritized communist control by providing aid, military assistance to their allies, and at times be involved in warfare themselves. In the early years, the United States provided military assistance to Cambodia with the goal of strengthening the Cambodia military for defense against communist aggression. With it, negatively came the rising domestic perception of turning to the West, hence the Prince had to counter-balance the influence of the West with the East so that the internal perception would remain that he was truly neutral and Cambodia was in balance. However, the United States saw that Prince Sihanouk's neutrality has shown tendencies towards the communists, and his policies were beginning to position the two blocs against each other in Cambodia. Annoyed by Prince

Sihanouk, the US began to consider all sort of options, including removing Prince Sihanouk from the leadership of Cambodia. When this was revealed, it left a strain on the relation between the two countries for many years to come.

As time goes on, there were continuous border incidents between Cambodia and its traditionally hostile neighbors as they became increasingly aggressive. Prince Sihanouk always believed that the United States would have an influence on both Thailand and South Vietnam, since they were allies, and would be able to protect Cambodia from their hostility. Yet, due to the South Vietnam's actions on the border and the US' non-action, the breaking point had come for Prince Sihanouk. The response was the recognition of the People's Republic of China, this was one of the turning points in relation to the United States.

One could see that the US was somewhat more leaning toward South Vietnam, the reason was simple: South Vietnam was their ally, while Cambodia was just a neutral country. By seeing the United States' reaction, Prince Sihanouk had developed an idea that if the West were to fail in Indochina and communist China would become

Cambodia's protector from Thai and Vietnamese aggression. With this belief and the conspiracies of US involvement in a plot to remove the Prince from the leadership of Cambodia, it was certain that the relation with the United States was always going to be strained.

Despite Cambodia's strained relation with the US, Prince Sihanouk still attempted to maintain its neutrality. During the early 1960s, due to numerous incidents, Prince Sihanouk eventually broke diplomatic relations with both Thailand and South Vietnam. As the conflict in Laos became more intense, the Prince feared that a communist victory would be a disaster for Cambodia's neutrality. Prince Sihanouk believed that if Laos fell to the communists, South Vietnam would eventually follow. Therefore, Cambodia would need to re-adjust its posture to accommodate the new communist hegemony in Southeast Asia. In addition, as border hostility continued to increase with South Vietnam, Prince Sihanouk became suspicious of the usefulness of the US military aid, whether, in fact, it was keeping Cambodia inferior to its neighbors. At this specific moment, Prince Sihanouk became closer to the communist. While, the United States

viewed these negative developments, including the breaking up of relations with its allies, public accusation of supporting the Cambodian dissidents, along with the first report of Viet-Cong usage of Cambodian land as moving away from the West by Cambodia and its neutrality policy had officially ended.

Overall, the relationship between the United States and Cambodia during the Cold War deteriorated from allies to enemies. The fact remained that the undesirable evolution of the relation was significantly influenced by external forces and events. Objectively, both sides had its fair share of the blame, for the United States, its foreign policy was crafted to contain communism in Southeast Asia, anything else was secondary; while Cambodia found itself constantly drifting to both the West and the East, and it failed to be neutral in an acceptable matter during the time period. There was a clear lack of trust, understanding, and compromise between the two countries; perhaps, the conditions at that time, during the Cold War and the Vietnam War, which was geographically close in the vicinity, would never allow Cambodia and the United States to be friends.

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