

Sideshow Revisited: Cambodia and the Failure of American Diplomacy, 1973

by

Philip Dunlop

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Abstract

After the Paris Peace Agreement formally ended America's involvement in the Vietnam war in January 1973, there still remained the unsettled issue of Cambodia, embroiled in a civil war between a coalition of insurgents (including the Khmer Rouge, the Cambodian communist party destined for infamy) and an American-backed regime in Phnom Penh. In the months between the Paris Agreement and the US Congress' forced cessation of American military activities in August 1973, the Nixon administration sought a diplomatic solution to its Cambodian problem, but the details of this period remain contested. Henry Kissinger, Nixon's top diplomat, has consistently maintained that he was engaged in delicate negotiations with his counterparts in Hanoi and Beijing in an attempt to broker a settlement between the warring Cambodian factions, but that Congress' actions deprived him of the necessary leverage to bring it to fruition; that Cambodia fell to the Khmer Rouge, therefore, was Congress' responsibility, and not the administration's. Using primary documents that have become available in recent years, it is now possible to test Kissinger's claims by partially reconstructing the diplomatic activity that took place in the corridors of power in Hanoi, Beijing, Paris and Washington. Examination of the available record indicates that Kissinger's claims are disingenuous at best; although he did have extended discussions with Le Duc Tho, Zhou Enlai and others about the Cambodian issue, these talks were tedious, repetitive and not conducive to any kind of breakthrough. Moreover, upon scrutiny, Kissinger's interlocutors appeared to be sending subtle messages to the Americans that the solution to the Cambodian problem was to be found through direct contact with the insurgency, rather than through Beijing or Hanoi. These signals were, however, ignored by a diplomatic crew that, despite Kissinger's reputation for strategic brilliance, proved unimaginative and obstinate, with tragic results for the Cambodian people.

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A Note on Naming Conventions and Transliteration

This work follows standard naming conventions for the various Asian societies concerned. Chinese names are written family name first (ie. Mao, Zhou) and given name second (ie. Zedong, Enlai). Southeast Asian naming conventions are a bit more complex; although family names are written first and given names second, as in the Chinese, when a person is referred to by a singular name it is by the given name, not the surname (ie. Le Duc Tho is abbreviated to Tho, the given name, rather than Le, the family name). This does not apply, however, to aliases (such as Pol Pot or Ho Chi Minh).

Also, this essay adheres to the *pinyin* romanization system currently in use in the People's Republic of China (ie. Beijing, Zhou Enlai). The archival materials cited here usually adhere to the older Wade-Giles system (ie. Peking, Chou En-lai); I have altered these to conform to *pinyin*.

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Dedication

This essay is dedicated to Betty Chiu, who has been a mother to me for many years, and whose confidence and encouragement sustained me throughout the course of this project.

Introduction

On 15 August 1973, the American military ceased its aerial bombing campaign over Cambodia. The bombing halt, effectively forced on the Nixon administration by the United States Congress nearly seven months after the Paris Peace Accord ostensibly ended the war in Vietnam, was the final act of American military activity in Indochina. The bombardment of Cambodia, begun in secret four years previously as an attempt to identify and destroy North Vietnamese and Vietcong sanctuaries in that neutral country, wreaked havoc in the United States and Cambodia alike. In America, the deliberate widening of the war caused a political and social upheaval that strained legislative-executive relations, and during the peak of the tension claimed the lives of four university students. In Cambodia, the bombing campaign destroyed that country's precariously-maintained neutrality in the Vietnam conflict, and presaged a *coup d'etat* that plunged it into a protracted and violent civil war. The American military presence in Cambodia, initially intended to be a one-off operation to tip the balance in neighbouring Vietnam, became instead an ongoing commitment of ground troops, air support and material aid to bolster the American-friendly regime in Phnom Penh against an insurgent coalition of royalists, nationalists and communists.

The Phnom Penh regime was, in fact, dependent on this American military and material support, and the abrupt bombing halt was the beginning of the end for it. Although the Khmer Republic, as it was called, held out for a year and a half after the withdrawal of America's military presence, it collapsed in April 1975. Its successor regime, Democratic Kampuchea (better known as the Khmer Rouge, after the governing

communist party), has since become infamous for implementing radical social experiments and brutalizing the Cambodian population to a degree that is perhaps unrivaled in human history.¹

It is impossible to historicize about modern Cambodia without making the Khmer Rouge its central organizational locus. Cambodia's rapid descent from stable – even prosperous – neutral nation to dystopian nightmare, via its entanglement in the Vietnam war, is fascinating for both its uniqueness and its monstrosity. It has generated a small but rich literature that grapples with the question of how this regime could have come into existence – a question that is straightforward in itself, but has no easy or short answer.² Similarly, there has been intense debate over who was responsible, so to speak, for the Khmer Rouge; again, a question that is simple to ask, but considerably more difficult to answer, and one with particularly high stakes in the court of historical opinion.

Of those stakes, perhaps none are higher than for Henry Kissinger, the Nixon administration's point man throughout the tortuous Indochina negotiation process. More than any person, excepting perhaps Nixon himself, Kissinger was responsible for the diplomatic track by which the United States sought to extricate itself militarily from the region. And indeed, when the Paris Peace Accord of January 1973 wound up the American military engagement in Vietnam, Kissinger reaped the lion's share of the credit. He was named Time's Man of the Year (Nixon was later added to the award as an

1 Estimates of the death toll under the Khmer Rouge – from execution as well as starvation and disease – vary widely. David Chandler, perhaps the pre-eminent scholar in Cambodia studies, pegs it at one million, or one in eight of the population. See *The Tragedy of Cambodian History* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1991), p. 1.

2 Some examples of this literature include Chandler's *The Tragedy of Cambodian History*, Ben Kiernan's *How Pol Pot Came to Power* (Verso, London, 1985), Philip Short's *Pol Pot: the History of a Nightmare* (John Murray, London, 2004), and Penny Edwards' *Cambodge: the Cultivation of a Nation* (University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 2007).

afterthought). An even more prestigious honour was bestowed upon him that same year in the form of the Nobel Peace Prize, in conjunction Le Duc Tho, North Vietnam's principal negotiator.³

Insofar as Henry Kissinger is personally identified with the diplomatic side of America's disengagement from Indochina, his own stakes in the historical debate over Cambodia, in light of that country's awful fate following the conclusion of its civil war, are acute indeed. Kissinger, keenly sensitive to the verdict of history, has gone to great lengths to disclaim responsibility for the outcome of the Cambodian civil war, and for the horrors of Democratic Kampuchea that followed. According to the account given in his memoirs, the Nixon administration was engaged in delicate diplomatic negotiations with China and North Vietnam in the months following the Paris Accord in order to broker a settlement between the warring factions in Cambodia. American air power, the argument runs, was the US' key bargaining chip in these talks, and Congress' imposition of a unilateral bombing halt at the end of June 1973 deprived the United States of all of its leverage in the situation. That there was no compromise settlement in Cambodia, therefore, was the fault of the United States Congress; also, Congress bore the implicit responsibility for the regime that came into being as a result of that failure to settle. Kissinger asserted that with more time and a freer hand, he could have denied total victory to the Khmer insurgency; the intrusion of the legislative branch on the foreign

³ Tho declined the award, on the grounds that there was, in fact, no peace to speak of in Vietnam. Kissinger accepted his portion of the award.

policy prerogatives of the executive, however, tied his hands, and absolved him of responsibility for the outcome in Cambodia.⁴

*

This assessment, in which Kissinger lays the blame at Congress' doorstep and washes his hands of the entire business, has not gone unchallenged. Thirty years ago, British journalist William Shawcross published *Sideshow: Nixon, Kissinger and the Destruction of Cambodia*, which to this day remains the gold standard secondary text dealing with the American military presence in Southeast Asia and its effect on Cambodia. Shawcross makes two principal charges against the Nixon administration: that its secret military operations in Cambodia destroyed that country's neutrality and laid the groundwork for the *coup d'etat*; and that its military support of the Khmer Republic, which included aerial bombardment, expanded the support base of the insurgency and radicalized it to the point of brutality. The Khmer Rouge regime, in Shawcross' formulation, is a consequence of Nixon and Kissinger's Indochina policy more than anything else.⁵

These two interpretations of Cambodia's destruction have spawned a lengthy polemic between Kissinger, Shawcross and their surrogates.⁶ The mind-boggling brutality of the Khmer Rouge regime has made the question of its genesis emotionally evocative and intense. The role of American diplomacy in the Cambodian civil war, in

4 We will parse Kissinger's argument in greater detail below, but the parts of his memoirs that deal with Cambodia in the spring of 1973, in terms of the claims made and of the general tone of his writing, are instructive: see Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval* (Little, Brown Publishing, Boston, 1982), pp. 335-369.

5 See Shawcross, *Sideshow* (rev. ed, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1987), foreword, afterword and *passim*.

6 See, for example, the lengthy polemic in the appendix to the revised edition of *Sideshow*, pp. 403-451.

particular, is a difficult subject to analyze comprehensively, as the source material has remained sparse for many years; Kissinger infamously removed all of his papers upon leaving government service, and bequeathed them to the Library of Congress on condition that they remain sealed until five years after his death. Nevertheless, although the complete story will not be known until that point, enough material has emerged from the Nixon period through declassification to permit us to formulate answers to questions that previous authors like Shawcross were only able to speculate upon.

One such question, the one that this essay seeks to address, engages Kissinger's contention that Congress undercut sensitive negotiations that could have ended the Cambodian war earlier and on more favourable terms than it did. This argument is at the heart of Kissinger's own verdict, namely that Congress bore responsibility for the outcome of the Cambodian war and of subsequent events. As the following pages will hopefully make clear, Kissinger's argument comes off as disingenuous; as the accessible record shows, there were indeed several rounds of negotiation both with Hanoi and Beijing over Cambodia between February and July of 1973, from the time the Paris Peace Accord was signed to the point where Congress intervened. The substance of these talks, though, far from being delicate or constructive, were instead marked by impasse, intransigence, and misinterpretation. The paper trail left by the Nixon administration is rich and broad, with conversations often recorded verbatim; these conversations, however, raise serious doubt about whether the diplomatic tack taken by the United States was a productive one, or if it would have born fruit had Congress not intervened.

This essay is not intended to be a trial of Henry Kissinger. That has already been done – figuratively, if not literally.⁷ Rather, what this paper seeks is to use the benefit of hindsight, and of heightened accessibility of source material, to weigh in on the unresolved question of what exactly transpired at the negotiating table during those crucial months in 1973 as a war-weary United States sued for “peace with honour”, as was fashionable to call it at the time. It hopes to shed light on the final act of America's extrication from Indochina. Perhaps most importantly, it endeavours to remove judgement on this episode from the purview of the actors themselves, and to make it the historian's domain. Finally, it seeks to prompt broader questions: not only of the culpability of historical actors, but also of the role of the legislative branch in American foreign policy, as well as the usefulness of secret diplomacy in the pursuit of international relations.

⁷ See Christopher Hitchens' *The Trial of Henry Kissinger* (Verso, London, 2001).

Background

Cambodia maintained a precarious neutrality through much of the Vietnam war, due chiefly to the efforts of Prince Norodom Sihanouk, who as the King of Cambodia and later head-of-state, was the personification of Cambodian politics before the *coup d'etat* of 1970. The dance he performed to maintain that distance from the conflict, to say nothing of his own political position, was indeed a delicate one. Domestically he alternated between co-opting the country's small but strident political left into government, and persecuting it with the aid of Cambodia's dependable political right, led by Lon Nol, one of Sihanouk's top generals and perennial high officials.⁸

These crackdowns at home, though, were counterbalanced by a prevailing moderation in Sihanouk's foreign policy, particularly toward his powerful communist neighbours to the east and the north. He cultivated friendly relations with the People's Republic of China and with Zhou Enlai personally; indeed, after his overthrow and exile, Beijing became Sihanouk's home and government seat for the following five years. And toward the two Vietnams, which had been more or less continuously at war – with France, then with each other, and with the United States – since 1945, the prince maintained a careful policy of neutrality in the conflict, while tacitly permitting NVA troops and VC guerrillas to use Cambodia's border regions as sanctuaries. He also looked the other way as weapons and supplies for the North Vietnamese were transmitted through the Cambodian port city of Sihanoukville. Finally, he frequently condemned the military presence of the United States in Southeast Asia, straining bilateral relations and

⁸ For more on Cambodia's domestic politics during the 1950s and 1960s, see Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History*, pp. 46-193.

causing several breaches throughout the 1960s. In this complicated, often contradictory fashion, the prince maintained his own position and his country's relative stability in a region that grew steadily more chaotic throughout the decade.

This delicate balance was upset in the winter of 1969, when the United States initiated a secret bombing campaign over Cambodia that lasted fourteen months, through the spring of 1970. The secret bombing of Cambodia is a narrative of its own, and has been written of extensively elsewhere; to briefly recap here, the US, in search of an elusive Central Office for South Vietnam, thought to be an NVA/VC base area located in Cambodian territory, pounded the border region with ordnance, sent reconnaissance teams over the border from South Vietnam into Cambodia, and then concealed the whole thing from Congress and from the American public.⁹

COSVN, as the objective was abbreviated, was never found, and indeed may not have actually existed. The unintended effect of the bombing campaign, apart from the destruction of vast tracts of Cambodian territory, was to drive Vietnamese communists further into Cambodia where they became considerably more disruptive, setting in motion a series of events that upset the existing balance crafted by the Sihanouk regime. Things came to a head in March 1970, when Cambodian conservatives who had been plotting against the prince took advantage of his absence on a foreign tour to depose him as head of state, replacing him with Lon Nol.

Sihanouk had been informed of this development as he was departing from Moscow en route to Beijing. Incensed at his overthrow, he arrived in the Chinese capital where he was welcomed as head of state, and given assurances by Zhou Enlai of PRC

⁹ For a more in-depth telling of the secret bombing, see Shawcross, pp. 19-35.

support should he wish to fight the usurpers in Phnom Penh. Sihanouk's response was swift and brash. On 23 March, five days after being overthrown, he issued a proclamation from Beijing declaring the establishment of a government-in-exile (Royal Khmer Government of National Union, or GRUNK in French), and calling on all anti-Lon Nol forces to join together in a united political and military front (Khmer National United Front, or FUNK in French). This meant, effectively, throwing in his lot with the Khmer Rouge communists, the largest body of the Cambodian left, and one which Sihanouk himself had violently suppressed only a short time before. This marriage of convenience, where Sihanouk reposed in Beijing as a figurehead while the Khmer Rouge conducted the in-country resistance, legitimized and helped to enlarge the previously minuscule communist party, while widening the chasm between the Phnom Penh group and the deposed prince, ending for the time being any possibility of quick reconciliation between the coup plotters and the former head of state.

The United States, meanwhile, extended recognition to Lon Nol's government immediately; so quickly, in fact, that the US was suspected of engineering the coup. Although the scholarly consensus has since largely tamped down that hypothesis, there are grounds for suspecting that America, if it did not spark the coup, nevertheless had at least foreknowledge of it and had given implied consent.¹⁰ Having thusly warmed up to the new regime in Phnom Penh, the US abruptly and unilaterally launched a ground invasion of Cambodia in May and June of 1970, again in a fruitless attempt to uproot Vietnamese communist forces from that country.

¹⁰ See Corfield, *Khmers Stand Up!* (Monash University, Clayton, 1994) pp. 52-83 and especially 57-58, and Shawcross, pp. 122-123..

This formal widening of the war was met with domestic upheaval in the US, especially on the campuses, where National Guardsmen were deployed; these latter opened fire on students at Kent State on 4 May, killing four. Congress, too, was incensed, and threatened to defund the military campaign; in the event, though, the defunding bill died in the House when the administration pulled its forces out at the end of June. The Cooper-Church amendment, however, was brought back to life at the end of 1970, and became law that December, barring the United States from directly participating in military operations on the ground in Cambodia or Laos. This, though, did not stop the US from pouring money, weapons and economic aid into the country in an attempt to buttress the Khmer Republic, as it rebranded itself in October 1970, against the Khmer Rouge-Sihanouk alliance.¹¹

This copious aid, though, didn't do much more than keep the GKR afloat, as the civil war froze into a military stalemate early on, and remained that way until the end of America's engagement three years later. Despite Lon Nol's rank of general, and his subsequent promotion of himself to the rank of marshal, his military aptitude proved wanting, and after a disastrous reversal in the autumn of 1971, was on the defensive for the remainder of the war.¹²

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11 For more on the Cambodian incursion of 1970, see Deac, *Road to the Killing Fields* (Texas A & M, College Station, 1997), pp. 70-80; Shawcross, pp. 128-149. For more on US aid to the Khmer Republic, see Shawcross, pp. 161-187, Deac, pp. 80-82 and *passim*.

12 The military history of the Cambodian civil war is beyond the scope of this essay, and not a topic in which I want to get too mired. For those so inclined, Wilfred Deac's *Road to the Killing Fields* is an excellent volume on the subject in both its depth and its relative objectivity.

The United States had always viewed Cambodia through the lens of Vietnam. The secret bombing of 1969-1970, the incursion of May-June 1970, and the extremely generous aid doled out to the GKR was done as a means of flushing out, liquidating or otherwise neutralizing Vietnamese communists who were assumed to be operating in Cambodia, and to be controlling that country's insurgency.

The former assumption was correct; the latter proved terribly erroneous. The character of the insurgency and the civil war was considerably more complex than Washington apprehended at the time. Far from the Hanoi-controlled encroachment on Phnom Penh that the Nixon administration envisaged, the Cambodian affair was a civil conflict, and not a piece of North Vietnamese puppeteering. The insurgency, rather than Hanoi's creation, was in fact a broad-based indigenous coalition of Sihanouk loyalists, Cambodian nationalists and Khmer communists, the latter of whom came to dominate the alliance only in the closing stages of the war. The GKR, by contrast, enjoyed the peak of its popularity at the outset, in the immediate aftermath of Sihanouk's ouster, and thereafter its support bled steadily away in the wake of its military incompetence, its increasing political despotism and massive corruption.

External powers were obviously engaged – on both sides – in the Cambodian mess, but the underlying fact of the conflict was that it was a civil war, based on local grievances, fought by an autonomous Cambodian insurgency with its own unique political and social vision for the country. That this truth was not properly apprehended by anyone in Washington at a time when it could have made a difference is one of the great tragedies of American diplomacy; as the following will make clear, the president's

men spent years barking up the wrong tree, while willfully ignoring the Cambodian insurgency's true power loci, to the chagrin of both their Vietnamese and Chinese interlocutors.

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It is ironic that Cambodia, originally sucked into war by covert US action in order to expedite a settlement in Vietnam, became a loose end to be tied up after, and not before, that same settlement. It is not within the scope of this essay to recount the diplomatic history of the Paris Accord which ended the war between the US and North Vietnam; that may be found elsewhere.¹³ Suffice it to say for our purposes here that after years of both open and secret meetings between Henry Kissinger, Nixon's national security advisor and chief foreign policy architect, and Le Duc Tho, North Vietnam's principal negotiator, produced in January 1973 a highly imperfect, yet workable instrument that would permit the US to withdraw from Vietnam with a decent interval before south would be conquered by north. The North Vietnamese, as well, gained their most sought-after objective: American withdrawal from South Vietnam, which would finally permit Hanoi to reunify the long-divided country.

What the Paris Accord did *not* do, however, was spell out an explicit set of objectives, obligations, or projected timeline of events regarding the sideshow wars in Cambodia or Laos. Rather, the vaguely constructed Article 20 of the accord, the one ostensibly to deal with Cambodia, called only for a ceasefire – despite neither of the warring Cambodian sides being party to the accord; and a withdrawal of foreign forces

¹³ See Pierre Asselin's *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2002) for a detailed diplomatic history of the Paris Accord.

and war materiel, without laying down a specific timeline for such a withdrawal, and without stipulating whether the withdrawal should precede the ceasefire or vice versa. Indeed, in contrast with the other articles of the accord, Article 20 makes it seem as though the Cambodian issue was glossed over by both Kissinger and Le Duc Tho in order to expedite a settlement – which does indeed appear to be the case.¹⁴

And so, at the end of January 1973, the United States had finally managed to devise an instrument by which it could extricate itself from Vietnam while still claiming to have achieved “peace with honour”. There remained, however, the thorny issue of Cambodia's civil war, in which the US, the DRV and the PRC all had a hand, to say nothing of the two Cambodian factions themselves. What follows is an account of Henry Kissinger's attempt to accomplish a similar expedient settlement of the Cambodian issue through several months of diplomatic wrangling with both Hanoi and Beijing through the winter and spring of 1973. As we shall observe, the geostrategic blinders that marred much of his career – the assumption that the road to peace in peripheral countries ran through major capitals like Beijing, Moscow and in this case Hanoi – were in full evidence in the case of Cambodia. This aloof and unimaginative diplomatic approach led to tragic results; he gained essentially nothing in his backroom negotiations, and missed a great deal. It was an epic failure of diplomacy, with disastrous results for the Cambodian people.

¹⁴ See Asselin, pp. 155-180 for an overview of the final round of talks leading up to the signing of the Paris Accord, and particularly p. 161 for a sense of the backgrounding of the Cambodian issue as they strove to complete a settlement.

Pre-emptively Claiming the High Ground

The Paris Peace Accord was signed on 27 January 1973, ending (for the Americans) the war in Vietnam. The final remaining American ground forces departed from Indochina on 28 March. On 30 June, after weeks of mounting pressure from Congress, Nixon signed Public Law 93-52, containing the provision that all US military activity over Indochina would cease on 15 August. And on that date, the last American bombs fell on Cambodia before that country was left to its fate.

The interval between January and August 1973 is a crucial period in the history of the Cambodian civil war, and also in American Indochina policy. The Paris Accord, while ostensibly settling the confrontation in Vietnam, was vague in its provisions dealing with Cambodia, containing neither specific commitments to peace nor a timetable for implementation. What started as a sideshow, then, in order for the US to bring pressure to bear on the DRV, became after January 1973 a loose end to be tied up before the Nixon administration could claim to have achieved “peace with honour”.

For the second volume of his memoirs, Henry Kissinger prepared a detailed account of the diplomatic initiatives undertaken by him with both China and North Vietnam in an attempt to broker a settlement of the Cambodian war. His account is a poignant retelling that reads like a tragedy. According to Kissinger, he and his aides “had no more fervent desire” in the spring and summer of 1973 than to end the war, and that the bombing campaign, initiated in February after a failed attempt at a US/GKR unilateral ceasefire, was “only a means to prompt resumption of negotiation” between the two

warring sides.¹⁵ Furthermore, he asserted that ever since the Paris settlement, “we were ready to negotiate with Prince Sihanouk as part of a political structure in Cambodia in which he could play a meaningful role”, and that although the North Vietnamese stymied him in this pursuit, from February onward “both Beijing and Washington were convinced that the best solution for Cambodia was some sort of coalition headed by Sihanouk”.¹⁶

In Kissinger's telling, this goal was on the verge of fruition in the spring of 1973. After inferring a series of positive overtures from Zhou Enlai as well as his subordinates at the PRC Liaison Office in Washington over the course of April and May, Kissinger approached the Chinese toward the end of May with a proposal whereby the US would stop the bombing, arrange a lengthy “medical treatment” for Lon Nol abroad, and authorize direct discussion between US Ambassador David Bruce and Sihanouk in Beijing, in return for an in-country ceasefire and negotiations between the insurgency and the remainder of the GKR. On 4 June, the PRC responded to this with a diplomatic note offering to “communicate the US tentative thinking [ie. Kissinger's May proposal] to the Cambodian side”, as soon as Sihanouk returned from his African and European tour.¹⁷

Kissinger drew the conclusion that Zhou Enlai would not have risked acting as an intermediary in such a provocative fashion if he, Zhou, had not been certain that such an action would have succeeded. Furthermore, Kissinger believed that China and the United States shared fundamentally similar interests in Cambodia during the spring and summer of 1973 – that is to say, a peaceful Cambodia not under the predominant control of the Khmer Rouge, behind which the Americans saw Hanoi pulling the strings, and

¹⁵ *Years of Upheaval*, p. 349.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 340-341, 343.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 351-352.

presumably where the PRC saw the indirect influence of the Soviet Union.¹⁸ He also inferred from this encounter that the insurgents themselves must have been ready to make a deal, as “it was inconceivable that the Chinese would expose themselves in this manner without having checked with the Khmer Rouge”.¹⁹

In this account, then, the stars were in alignment for one brief, shining moment. The United States and China, each sharing similar interests in the Cambodian situation, and each having a measure of influential capability, were prepared to act in concert in order to broker a compromise at a moment when the in-country situation was still relatively fluid. “In mid-June”, said Kissinger, “we believed for better or worse that we were on the homestretch. We could envisage a cease-fire, Sihanouk's return, and then Sihanouk's dealing with existing political forces...we nearly made it, with all that it would have meant for Cambodia's future”.²⁰ Henry Kissinger, writing in 1979, claimed that his diplomacy could have born fruit – thereby averting the horrors of Democratic Kampuchea – if only he had been given a chance to see it through.

The homestretch, though, proved ephemeral. On 18 July, just a few short weeks after this plan was hatched, China abruptly pulled out of the scheme, delivering a tersely-worded diplomatic note saying that it was no longer in a position to mediate with Sihanouk, and that “it is up to the doer to undo the knot” in Cambodia.²¹ Sihanouk, for his part, had returned from his international tour denouncing all “meddling” (read: Sino-American) attempts to induce talks, and reiterating the insurgency's goal of total

18 Ibid. pp. 343, 351.

19 Ibid. p. 353.

20 Ibid. p. 355.

21 Ibid. p. 365.

victory.²² It was at this point, Kissinger wrote in retrospect, that he “knew that Cambodia was doomed”.²³

What had happened to scuttle such a promising opportunity? Kissinger's assessment is unambiguous: the United States Congress screwed it up. Congressional opposition to the continued American military presence in Indochina – even after the Paris Accord – combined with the administration's weakness and distraction, prompted by Watergate, to produce a unique standoff that came to a head in the spring of 1973. Congress passed a series of legislative amendments cutting off funding for American military operations in Indochina, which Nixon vetoed; Congress, not having a solidly veto-proof majority, would make a new sally. This carried on until the end of June, at which point Cambodia amendments were attached to funding bills for the federal government itself, prompting a high-stakes showdown in which a shutdown of the entire government was a distinct possibility. Faced with this prospect, on 30 June Nixon agreed to an unconditional bombing cutoff – indeed, a halt of all military activity in Indochina – on 15 August.

In Kissinger's telling, Congress' intrusion into the administration's foreign affairs had three unintended effects. First, it seriously damaged the domestic position of Zhou Enlai, who “had staked ideological capital” on the Kissinger scheme, only to find that by Congress' action the US “had not been able to pay in geopolitical coin”. As the foremost advocate of detente in China's US policy, the domestic compromise of Zhou Enlai also

22 Ibid. pp. 364-365.

23 Ibid. p. 369.

indirectly damaged Sino-American relations as a whole.²⁴ Second, the congressionally mandated bombing halt effectively cut the rug out from under the administration in any future effort it might have made to broker a settlement in the civil war; as the bombing campaign was America's principal – perhaps only – bargaining chip, the legislated bombing halt removed any incentive the insurgency may have had to negotiate; “once the deadline was public”, Kissinger wrote, “our strategy was dead; the Khmer Rouge would simply wait it out”.²⁵ And finally, perhaps most importantly in Kissinger's view, the abandonment of Cambodia dealt a damaging blow to American credibility in international relations, and set a dangerous precedent: “for the first time in the postwar period, America abandoned to eventual Communist rule a friendly people who relied on us. The pattern once established did not end soon. We will have to pay for a long time for the precedent into which we stumbled that summer”.²⁶

“Our critics had passion without analysis”, wrote the former Secretary of State; “we had concept without consensus”.²⁷ Kissinger's self-portrayal in the domestic imbroglio that overshadowed foreign policy was that of conciliator. “I was desperate”, he recounted. “The negotiations now in tenuous train were our last throw of the dice. If they failed, Cambodia...would be doomed”.²⁸ In the waning days of June, Kissinger made a number of phone calls to key congressmen, in the attempt to extract a “gentleman's agreement” whereby in exchange for abandoning the legislative process, the administration would unilaterally stop bombing by 1 September in any event, provided

²⁴ *Years of Upheaval*, p. 368.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 357.

²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 369.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 356.

that that deadline remained secret. In this way, the argument went, the Kissinger-Zhou diplomatic scheme would have time to play itself out, whether successful or not.

This concession, however, was not to be had, and the very public confrontation between the legislative and executive branches ended up being resolved openly and far from amicably. Kissinger recalled Melvin Laird – former Secretary of Defense, brought back to the administration as Nixon's Counsellor for Domestic Affairs – as sanguine about the whole thing: “politically, you [Kissinger]'d be better off – I don't think Cambodia will ever work out very well anyway and I'd like to be able to blame these guys [Congress] for doing it, myself”. Kissinger, however, claimed to have been above paltry political considerations: “I was less interested in an alibi than an outcome. I was sickened to see the chances of bringing even a fragile peace to Cambodia being destroyed by a senseless orgy of partisanship and the venting of the accumulated resentments of a decade”.²⁹ Kissinger, in this narrative, sought to use his personal cachet to transcend partisan politics, being motivated solely by a desire to bring peace to the beleaguered Cambodians after four years of relentless warfare.

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In a sense, the account of Nixonian diplomacy over Cambodia given in Henry Kissinger's memoirs is powerful. The complexities of secret diplomacy are rendered into a more accessible tragic narrative, the trappings of which are easily recognizable to the reader: an opportunity carefully crafted and lost, a set of protagonists in the form of Kissinger and Zhou Enlai, and antagonists principally in the US Capitol. It highlights the two-fronted struggle waged by Kissinger against opponents both foreign and domestic. It

²⁹ Ibid. p. 358.

points the finger unambiguously away from the Nixon administration and toward its legislative nemesis, in the process drawing a line of cause and effect linking the events of summer 1973 to the horrors of Democratic Kampuchea. Finally, it has had the added advantage of not being able to be gainsaid for many years, owing to the secrecy and inaccessibility of the relevant documents.³⁰

This account, however, succinct and comprehensible though it is, has been challenged, most notably by Shawcross' own counter-narrative of the Nixon administration as reckless, duplicitous and criminally destructive in Cambodia. Published contemporaneously with *Years of Upheaval*, the two contending accounts sparked an unusual and acrimonious polemic between the two authors, and also staked out opposite poles in the historical debate over the United States' record in Indochina.

Shawcross, for his part, was skeptical of Kissinger's claim that congressional intervention had undermined delicate negotiations. At the time, however, he had no hard evidence to substantiate this disbelief; the documents being inaccessible to him at that moment, he had little to go on but personal interviews with Kissinger's former colleagues on the NSC staff and in the diplomatic corps, all of whom disclaimed any knowledge of such negotiations on Kissinger's part.³¹ Unable to positively debunk Kissinger's central thesis regarding the beginning of the end in Cambodia, Shawcross was constrained to register his skepticism and move on.³²

30 Recall, again, that one of Kissinger's last acts as Secretary of State was to remove all of his papers and donate them to the Library of Congress, on condition that they remain sealed until after his death.

31 See *Sideshow*, pp. 280-287 for his summation of American diplomatic activity in the spring and summer of 1973.

32 *Ibid.* p. 286.

In the intervening years since the Kissinger-Shawcross polemic, a vast number of documents from the Nixon period have become available. The Nixon administration, infamous for its secrecy, power hunger and paranoia, was nevertheless – perhaps paradoxically – equally meticulous about compiling a detailed record of its existence. The White House audio taping system, for example, was an unprecedented instance of historical preservation, and of course proved instrumental in the destruction of Nixon's presidency. The documentation of Nixonian foreign policy was similarly thorough; Kissinger's conversations with foreign diplomats and dignitaries are recorded verbatim – an unusual practice – and his tapping of his own telephone has yielded thousands of transcripts in which Kissinger speaks, often candidly, with Nixon, members of the administration, congressmen, journalists and friends. Diplomatic cables and other internal memoranda are often found in multiple copies in the records that are currently accessible. Wading through the paperwork of the Nixon administration is a task of several lifetimes' duration, and indeed Nixon studies is a historical field unto itself.

Armed with this flood of documentation, then, it is possible to revisit the question of what happened during those crucial months in the spring and summer of 1973 in a fashion that Shawcross was unable to do. We are now able – indeed, it behooves us – to re-examine Kissinger's account, and test it in light of what is now known, or may be inferred, from the partial record that has come to the fore. As will be seen, though Kissinger tells no outright lies, certain aspects of his narrative are disingenuous, are based on assumptions that are not apparent or proven in the record, and his pre-emptive claim to the moral high-ground, particularly the purity of his motivation, is questionable at best.

Round 1 – February: Discovering a Loose End

The Paris Peace Agreement, signed on 27 January 1973, ended – for the United States – the war in Vietnam. The tortuous process by which that treaty came into being is beyond our scope here, and has been written about by others.³³ For our purposes, it is important merely to note that the Agreement was minimal in what it envisioned for Cambodia, and even more so in what it specifically called for in that country.

The war in Cambodia (and also the one in Laos) was covered by a single article of the treaty, Article 20. Taking as its basis the 1954 Geneva Agreement on Cambodia³⁴, the US and DRV undertook to respect that country's neutrality, to refrain from using it as a transit route between the two Vietnams, to withdraw all non-Cambodian military personnel and equipment, and to permit Cambodians to settle their internal affairs “without foreign interference”. Mechanisms, and especially timetables by which these worthy goals were to be effected, were notably absent from the document.

The minimalist vision and scope for Cambodia embedded in the Paris Accord was problematic, especially as the vague injunctions for peace were underscored by practically nothing; the United States had had no contact of any kind, to say nothing of negotiations, with the Cambodian insurgency. Initially, the American strategy for bringing about a cease-fire in Cambodia was to have Lon Nol declare a cessation of hostilities, and basically just hope that the other side would reciprocate. “We can say about Cambodia”, said Kissinger at a press conference in the days leading up to the

33 See, for example, Pierre Asselin's *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi and the Making of the Paris Agreement* for an excellent diplomatic history of the Accord.

34 See Chandler, pp. 71-74, for an overview of the Geneva Conference as it pertained to Cambodia.

signing of the Agreement, “that it is our expectation that a *de facto* cease-fire will come into being within a period of time relevant to the execution of the agreement”.³⁵

On the surface, this seems like totally wishful thinking, and it is unclear why anyone on the American side would think that this could bear fruit. It seems that during the Paris talks, Kissinger, while unable to obtain any tangible commitment from Hanoi, nevertheless made a unilateral statement to Le Duc Tho to the effect that “if offensive operations occur in Cambodia [after the Paris Agreement comes into force] that upset the military balance, we would consider this a violation of the spirit of the Agreement”.³⁶ According to Alexander Haig, one of Kissinger's principal aides, Hanoi “accepted this statement and did not challenge it”, which the Americans interpreted as a hopeful sign that the DRV would exert its own influence on the Cambodian insurgents.³⁷ They may have also entertained notions that the GKR would be strong enough to defeat the insurgency in the event that the DRV withdrew its manpower and material support from Cambodia.³⁸ Perhaps, then, on balance, the idea that a unilateral cessation of hostilities could have blossomed into a *de facto* cease-fire, although fanciful, was not as hare-brained as it seemed.

In point of fact, though, this did not produce a cease-fire, and the insurgency recommenced its assault on the GKR in early February. The US responded by resuming bombardment over Cambodia on 9 February, with greater intensity than before. It was clear by this point that Cambodia needed diplomatic revisitation. The situation, at its

35 Cited in Shawcross, *Sideshow*, p. 262. See also pp. 261-265 for more on the ephemeral hope for peace in Cambodia as a corollary of the Paris Agreement.

36 Memcon, Haig & Thanom (Thai Foreign Minister), 19 January 1973. HAK Office Files, 30/4/9.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

most benign, was a nagging impediment to America's longed-for disengagement from Indochina; at worst, it threatened to unravel the Paris Agreement, and engulf the entire region in war once again. It was against this background that Kissinger made his February trip to Asia, which included stops in Hanoi and Beijing, where Cambodia was a top priority.

“The key to negotiations in Cambodia of course rests in Hanoi and Beijing”, asserted a background memo prepared for Kissinger in advance of his Asia trip.³⁹ Clearly, Kissinger and crew hoped for some kind of breakthrough as a result of the Asian tour. They thought they could get it through bombs and by prevailing upon the insurgency's big backers, the DRV and the PRC, rather than by dirtying their hands engaging the insurgency itself. This unquestioned geopolitical assumption – that the best way to deal with Cambodia's insurgency was to deal with its handlers – informed every calculation and every decision made by Kissinger and his staff throughout the winter and spring of 1973. It was as mistaken as it was unexamined.

On the basis of the available documentary record, concrete objectives prior to Kissinger's arrival in Asia were not sharply defined. He seemingly held out some hope that the bombing – intensified, as available air power from Vietnam was transferred to Cambodia rather than demobilized – would bring the resistance to heel, or at least to the negotiating table.⁴⁰ A memorandum for Kissinger containing talking points for his conference with Ambassador Swank, however, had some indicators as to the NSC's early

39 HAK Office Files, 30/4/17.

40 Kissinger attended personally to the intensification of the bombing campaign, keeping personally in touch with Admiral Moorer of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Ambassador Porter, instructing them explicitly to stay, to bomb, and to await further instructions. Telcons, DNSA, KA09274, KA09369.

thinking on the subject. The memo concurred with Swank's assessment that “the key to a local settlement [in Cambodia] lies in Hanoi”, and promised to “press North Vietnam to use the fullest possible restraint on its Cambodian cadre”.⁴¹ It inquired whether the GKR might be amenable to political overtures to the insurgency, on the understanding that Sihanouk was to be excluded from any such manoeuvre. Having suggested this, however, the memo explicitly reaffirmed its commitment to Lon Nol's government, its “strong interest in Cambodia” and intent to “continue our support levels and...reconstruction assistance”, even in the aftermath of the Vietnam withdrawal.⁴² In the immediate lead-up to the February trip, then, it is hard to detect a great deal of intention other than staying the course with the bombing, browbeating Hanoi on the assumption that it was calling the shots in Cambodia, and maybe putting out tentative feelers to the other side, while at the same time firmly excluding that side's titular head and sticking with the status quo in Phnom Penh.

The diplomatic agenda appears to have become more sharply defined by the time of Kissinger's arrival in Asia. Conferring personally with Ambassador Swank in Bangkok on 9 February as a preliminary to meeting with his interlocutors in Hanoi and Beijing, Swank informed Kissinger that the GKR was prepared to talk to the DRV, to China, even to the insurgents themselves – to anyone but Sihanouk.⁴³ Swank then opined that Hanoi was “very mild about the insurgency”, and proposed that Kissinger try to

41 HAK Office Files, 30/4/16. The perception of Hanoi as the Khmer Rouge's puppetmaster was prevalent in American diplomatic discourse throughout 1973 and beyond. Long since debunked by subsequent historical scholarship, this misperception constitutes one of the greatest tragedies of America's final withdrawal.

42 Ibid.

43 Memcon, HAK & Swank, Bangkok, 9 February 1973. HAK Office Files, 122/4.

“drive a wedge between them [DRV and GRUNK]” by reporting to Hanoi the GKR's readiness to negotiate; the idea being that the DRV, having achieved their ends in Vietnam, and therefore more anxious for immediate peace in Cambodia than the insurgents – who had recently proclaimed a policy of fighting on to total victory – would be more welcoming to overtures from Lon Nol, possibly alienating the Cambodian insurgents.⁴⁴

Kissinger took this suggestion in stride, acknowledging that it had considerable short-term merit. He was, however, wary of this option, as he read Hanoi's interest in Cambodia as using that country as a means of encircling and dominating South Vietnam. Over-reliance on Hanoi's good graces and influential capability, therefore, was “easy in the short term but could be a long-term disaster”.⁴⁵ In Kissinger's estimation, Beijing was “a more reliable reed than Hanoi” in dealing with the Cambodian situation, as China's interest was to avoid an Indochina dominated by North Vietnam – and by extension, the Soviet Union. The containment of Hanoi's regional hegemonic ambition, as Kissinger interpreted China's position to be, was more in line with Washington's long-term interest than anything the Hanoi track suggested by Swank promised to yield.⁴⁶

The principal dilemma involved with approaching China, though, was the lack of any apparent formula for doing so; notwithstanding the prevailing mood of general goodwill between Beijing and Washington in the months following the Nixon summit, the PRC was a firm and vocal proponent of Sihanouk's legitimacy in Cambodia, and was also the physical seat of GRUNK, Sihanouk's government-in-exile. The United States,

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

however, was implacably opposed to the idea of Sihanouk returning to lead Cambodia; Washington considered Sihanouk to be a relic of the past, and potentially destructive to the very fabric of the GKR.⁴⁷ The Sihanouk issue, then, was a seemingly insuperable obstacle that impeded meaningful cooperation between the US and PRC in February 1973, despite the strategic benefit that Washington would derive from it.

On the eve of Kissinger's first attempt to tie up loose ends in Cambodia, then, the envisioned American agenda had been refined into two discrete tracks: the Hanoi track, which would attempt to drive a wedge between the DRV and the insurgency by signaling Lon Nol's willingness to negotiate, and a Beijing track whereby the two outside powers might somehow coordinate their efforts to broker a peace settlement that kept Cambodia neutral and territorially integral. Both tracks were laden with pitfalls; reliance on Hanoi augured a potential DRV-controlled Cambodia that posed a threat to South Vietnam, while the Beijing option, although more aligned with American strategic interests, was ill-defined, both in terms of what exactly the Chinese and Americans could do for each other, and of how to overcome the seemingly-intractable issue of Norodom Sihanouk's role in the affair. Kissinger ended the ambassadorial conferences by asserting his willingness "to play both games simultaneously", but also asked Swank for a more detailed think piece on the practicalities of the China track before his arrival in Beijing.⁴⁸

47 Ambassador Swank, in particular, was nearly obsessive on this point, writing in one cable that "the slightest move in Sihanouk's direction would be read by them [the GKR leadership] as a betrayal of the fundamental interests of the quasi-democratic revolution which created the republic and would precipitate, in our judgement, a rapid deterioration of confidence in the survival of the GKR". State Department telegram, 4 February 1973. HAK Office Files, 29/1.

48 Memcon, HAK & Swank, Bangkok, 9 February 1973; HAK Office Files, 122/4; Memcon, HAK, Swank, Godley, Bunker, Bangkok, 9 February 1973; HAK Office Files, 122/4.

That think piece arrived at Kissinger's office a few days later, on 12 February. Swank was doubtful that they would be able to effect a fundamental change in Chinese policy at that juncture, but nevertheless suggested a demarche emphasizing both the GKR's willingness to talk and the US' "flexibility concerning a resolution" of the conflict – provided "[such a settlement] will not impose Sihanouk as chief of state". Under that single condition, the United States would "therefore be interested in studying any formula which the PRC might suggest which would permit meaningful talks" between GRUNK and the GKR. Again, the ambassador was pessimistic about the prospect for any immediate joy from these proceedings, but nevertheless considered it essential to "convey to Beijing that Sihanouk is passe", and that his absence from any peace overtures "will be an essential element of any formula we can accept".⁴⁹

Kissinger's direct response to Swank's effort, if any, is not known. Nevertheless, the talking points prepared by Winston Lord, Kissinger's principal aide, for his use during the Beijing visit closely mirrored the suggestions put forward by the ambassador. The contents of these briefing materials placed emphasis on shared interests in the outcome of the Cambodian situation: "neither of us has any incentive to see the war continue there and both would welcome peace in that country".⁵⁰ The writer also referred subtly to "other countries" and their "hegemonial designs" that may possibly have affected Cambodia should the conflict not be resolved – a coded reference to the Soviet Union,

49 Cable from Swank to Kissinger, 12 February 1973; HAK Office Files, 122/4.

50 Briefing book, Beijing trip, February 1973. HAK Office Files, 98/2.

China's *bete noire* during the 1960s and 1970s.⁵¹ The memo asserted that the United States “is not unalterably committed to any particular personalities or regimes”, but at the same time “refuses to negotiate the political future for the country or remove its present leadership”, and on those grounds refused a direct meeting between Kissinger and Sihanouk during the trip, although it left open the possibility of “listen[ing] to his views as conveyed through you [the PRC]”.⁵² Finally, the memo envisioned Kissinger asking for China's help, in the form of a number of open-ended questions: “is Sihanouk willing to tell his forces to stop firing and enter direct negotiations? What do you know of his discussions in Hanoi? How do you suggest we get the various factions in Cambodia engaged in direct negotiations?”⁵³

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Based on this internal documentary record, the picture of America's preparation for its first post-Paris peace effort in Cambodia is not particularly flattering. The failure of the administration's initial expectations, which could be called peace by default – and which certainly seems fantastical, given the circumstances – did indeed produce some sober revisitation. Nevertheless, despite the development of the dual Hanoi and Beijing diplomatic tracks outlined above, it is impossible to discern any specific vision for Cambodia, nor any plan by which to proceed. Assertions about America's flexibility about outcomes in Cambodia were belied by its consistent refusal to acknowledge the titular head of the insurgency. Similarly, the US' professed commitment to a peaceful,

51 Ibid. Incidentally, there is little evidence to suggest any actual Soviet interest or influence in Cambodia or the insurgency. Nevertheless, the Soviet menace was a convenient bugaboo that the United States sought to play to its advantage in the triangular diplomacy of detente during the Nixon period.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

stable, neutral Cambodia was counterbalanced by its refusal to involve itself directly in negotiations, insisting instead on bilateral talks between the GKR and the insurgency. Perhaps most damning, though, was the underlying assumption, pervasive throughout the record, that the key to a Cambodian solution lay elsewhere: in Hanoi and in Beijing, through the influence that they wielded over their allies. There is no evidence to suggest introspection on the part of American diplomats, or thoughtful deliberation about proactive steps – apart from dropping bombs – that the US might have embarked upon to affect the situation.

Indeed, the seemingly-unquestioned assumption that the solution was to get Hanoi and Beijing on side by cajoling and/or browbeating bespeaks a lack of diplomatic imagination that, coupled with the absence of any specific vision and the rigid refusal to get directly involved, suggests that the US' desire for peace in Cambodia was incidental to other concerns. Far from the noble, altruistic effort that the principal actors later sought to portray, the American search for peace in Cambodia in early 1973 comes off as an exercise in expediency. Nowhere here is concern for the suffering of Cambodians to be found. Similarly, there is no scorn in the record for the depredations of the Khmer Rouge; indeed, the scorn seems reserved exclusively for Norodom Sihanouk, who at his worst was a petty tyrant, whose reign over Cambodia – admittedly far from saintly – paled in comparison to what surely must have been known about the KR even at that early juncture.⁵⁴ Post facto, the principal American actors in this drama sought to portray their diplomatic effort as a noble, selfless endeavour, undertaken to bring peace to a

⁵⁴ See Francois Bizot's *The Gate* (Knopf, New York, 2003) for an early testament to the depredations of the Khmer Rouge.

country long torn asunder by war. The available documentary record, however, and the impressions derived from it – the lack of vision, the rigid aloofness, the stunted imagination – suggest a different reality: that Cambodia was simply a loose end that the Americans wanted to tie up in the most expeditious manner possible as they completed their long extrication from Indochina.

Round 1 – February: Fumbling with the Loose End

Hanoi

Against this background of preparation outlined above, Kissinger and his staff engaged their North Vietnamese and Chinese interlocutors in the attempt to tie up loose ends in Cambodia. Thanks to the documentary meticulousness of the Nixon administration, there exist verbatim records of Henry Kissinger's conversations with Le Duc Tho and Zhou Enlai. This felicity, however, is a double-edged sword, as immersion in these conversations paints a tragic picture. Kissinger's talks with Tho in Hanoi, intended to be a negotiation, quickly degenerated into a tedious palaver where the two architects of the Paris Accord traded Kissinger's browbeating and threats for Tho's barbs about American shortsightedness and hypocrisy over the Cambodian situation. In China, the atmosphere was more cordial, but equally unproductive, as the two powers were unable to proceed beyond a general statement of shared interest in the outcome of the Cambodian war. At the end of the Asian tour, the United States was no closer to a resolution than it had been beforehand, and for that reason alone if nothing else, its diplomatic sally of February must be deemed a failure.

Kissinger arrived in Hanoi on 11 February, and after an exchange of pleasantries with DRV premier Pham Van Dong, engaged with Le Duc Tho, his North Vietnamese counterpart, on the 12th. After acknowledging Kissinger's desire to discuss a Cambodian settlement, Tho immediately attempted to pre-empt the discussion by deferring the issue to the Cambodian insurgency, outside the DRV's direct purview: “naturally, regarding the questions of Laos and Cambodia, when you raise them we are prepared to discuss

them. But these questions we should also discuss with our allies and have their agreement. This is their right to do that. This is what I have been telling you all the time”.⁵⁵ Kissinger, however, was not swayed by this disclaimer, and demanded that “something must happen” in Cambodia, that “I want to talk very seriously and to get concrete”.⁵⁶ Kissinger's first line of attack was to brandish US reconstruction aid to the DRV – a provision of the Paris Accord, and money that war-torn North Vietnam rather desperately needed – as both a carrot and stick simultaneously, hinting that the delivery of this aid was contingent on Kissinger producing tangible results on Cambodia from this trip for the US Congress: “you can be sure that we [the administration] will make a very big effort [to persuade Congress to approve the funds], but there are real constraints...the political reality is that if we cannot point to some concrete performance in implementation of the Agreement, in Laos and Cambodia especially, it [reconstruction aid for the DRV] will be impossible”.⁵⁷

Having opened on this ominous note, Kissinger then played the card devised by Ambassador Swank in Bangkok: “we believe Lon Nol is ready to talk to you and we would encourage this. And we would encourage negotiations between the parties in Cambodia”.⁵⁸ The prospect of direct or indirect talks between the GKR and DRV, however, was summarily dismissed by Tho, who invoked the sovereignty of GRUNK and its purview over matters of war and peace in Cambodia, arguing that “it is up to them to decide when to talk and not to talk. *We ourselves cannot talk. This way of doing things*

55 Memcon, Kissinger and Le Duc Tho, Hanoi, 12 February 1973. HAK Office Files, 113/3.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

is impossible. It is impossible to do it this way".⁵⁹ Tho having reiterated this point a few moments later, that "our intention is that sovereignty lies with the Government of National Union [of Cambodia]", Kissinger seems to have become somewhat belligerent, replying "and therefore you say there won't be peace until Lon Nol is overthrown...you are saying that there will be a continuing civil war which you will assist. So how are you actively contributing to peace?"⁶⁰

This question, probably rhetorical, was nevertheless the crux of the matter. Contributing to peace in Laos and Cambodia was an obligation imposed on both the US and the DRV by Article 20 of the Paris agreement, yet was (intentionally) left vague, and therefore open to interpretation. It is clear from the series of conversations available to us that Kissinger's interpretation of North Vietnam's obligation in Cambodia was fairly narrow: essentially to withdraw its men and materiel immediately and to order the insurgency to settle. This vision was premised on the assumptions that the DRV had vast numbers of men and weapons in Cambodia and were firmly in control of the insurgency – premises that both turned out to be false.⁶¹ This narrow conception of what North Vietnam should and must do to end the fighting in Cambodia, however, blinded Kissinger to more subtle overtures being made with the insurgency by the DRV, and also to Le Duc Tho's efforts to communicate this to the American negotiator, as the conversation illustrates.

59 Ibid. Italics added.

60 Ibid.

61 According to Philip Short, NVA troops had begun pulling out of Cambodia as early as 1972. See *Pol Pot: the History of a Nightmare*, p. 237.

Le Duc Tho was a fascinating counterpoint to Henry Kissinger in this episode of bilateral diplomacy. Tho took a passive role in the conversations, generally responding to Kissinger's often belligerent tone with relative equanimity. Of course, with the Paris Peace Agreement having secured for the DRV what it desired most in Vietnam – American military withdrawal – Tho could probably afford to be fairly sanguine about US concerns. It is probably for this reason, more than any other, that Kissinger found Tho so frustrating, and heaped a great deal of scorn on the man retrospectively.⁶² Sanguineness notwithstanding, however, we have no reason to suppose, as the Americans evidently did, that the DRV desired continued war in Cambodia after having settled the conflicts in Vietnam and Laos. This point was, in fact, raised in so many words by Tho during the 12 February conversation. Assuming this to be the case, though – that the DRV desired peace in Cambodia as much as the Americans – returns Kissinger's question to the fore: what was the DRV doing to help bring peace about?

Tho's response to Kissinger is interesting, and worth quoting at length here:

Tho: Let me tell you about this. In my vision of the general situation, once the Vietnam problem and the Lao problem are solved, so the objective conditions will lead to a settlement of the Cambodian problem.

Kissinger: In thirty-five days.

Tho: It depends on you.

Kissinger: How?

Tho: You asked me whether the other day you should talk to Prince Sihanouk. I said you should. The settlement of the Cambodian problem will involve the return of Sihanouk because between Sihanouk and Lon Nol there is a question of life and death.

Kissinger: So you are saying we have to kill Lon Nol, or he can kill himself?

Tho: You asked me a question, and I am frankly speaking. I told you my personal views. I am just raising the real situation, the actual situation. For the solution of the Cambodian problem will depend on you and Sihanouk.⁶³

⁶² See, for example, *Years of Upheaval*, p. 372 and *passim* throughout the chapter.

⁶³ Memcon, Kissinger and Le Duc Tho, Hanoi, 12 February 1973. HAK Office Files, 113/3.

Tho responded to Kissinger's query by suggesting he talk directly to Sihanouk. This exchange, and the terms chosen by Tho, went beyond a boilerplate deferral to the sovereignty of GRUNK. Furthermore, in commending Kissinger to Sihanouk, the in-country insurgents themselves – the Khmer Rouge – were conspicuously absent from Tho's dialogue. We now know that relations between the DRV and the Cambodian communists, never harmonious even at the best of times, had become physically violent by 1973, owing to the KR's perception of being sold out by the DRV in the aftermath of Paris, and also to the increasing racial paranoia of the dominant Pol Pot faction within the party.⁶⁴ Given this reality of friction between the supposedly fraternal communist movements, Tho's “frankly” spoken “personal views” that Kissinger should talk to Sihanouk – not to GRUNK in general, not to the Khmer Rouge – were fraught with significance.

This significance, though, was lost on Kissinger, who abruptly steered the conversation to NVA troops in Cambodia, which in turn degenerated into a tedious argument about whether political settlement should precede the withdrawal of troops or vice versa. Tho frequently resurrected the Sihanouk issue, urging that Kissinger talk to the deposed prince. These entreaties were met each time with deflection, though, in favour of Kissinger's preferred themes: the obligation of the DRV to withdraw its forces from Cambodia under Article 20, the threat of withholding reparations and normalization, and miscellaneous accusations of bad faith and other recriminations, the latter of which appear to have raised Tho's hackles, and prompted him to respond in kind.

⁶⁴ See Ben Kiernan's *The Pol Pot Regime* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1996) for more on racial ideology and Cambodian communism.

The bickering continued in this fashion for some time, when about ninety minutes into the conversation, Tho evidently decided he'd had enough. His closing remarks are remarkably candid, and again bear verbatim repetition:

Tho: In Paris I told you on many occasions that you didn't put yourself in our place. You don't look at our side. We also have our difficulties. The war in Vietnam is ended. The war in Laos is ended. There is no reason for us to continue the war in Cambodia, speaking for ourselves.

Kissinger: Why don't you end it?

Tho: You speak in a very simple way. It is not so simple. We can't decide it alone. In Paris you realized it was a complex problem.

Tho pushed for Sihanouk one last time, and was rebuffed by Kissinger rather contemptuously:

Kissinger: Our judgment frankly is that Sihanouk has no following in Cambodia. The Khmer Rouge has some following, and [GRUNK Prime Minister] Penn Nouth may have some following, but Sihanouk has no following.

Tho: That is a wrong assessment.

Kissinger: But that is up to them. I see no reason why the US should conduct negotiations with Sihanouk about the internal arrangements of Cambodia.

Tho: It is up to you.

Kissinger: You are giving us impossible conditions. We favour internal negotiations in Cambodia.

Tho: We do not demand that you should talk to Sihanouk. But in Paris you asked me, and I explained my personal views, but it completely depends upon you.

The exchange that follows dramatically illustrates the chasm separating Kissinger and Tho:

Kissinger: You say then that the Civil War continues, and the troops will stay, and war materiel will go into Cambodia. All in total violation of the agreement. That is unacceptable to us.

Tho: Your logic does not conform to the logic of reality. We wonder whether you want negotiations or not. If you do there are many channels. You can find out many ways, the solutions and calculations, and put them into practice.⁶⁵

65 Memcon, Kissinger and Le Duc Tho, Hanoi, 12 February 1973. HAK Office Files, 113/3.

This exchange brings the tragedy, and the farce, of the encounter into sharp relief. Kissinger's summation of the morning's talk indicates that what he took away from the discussion was exactly what he brought into it: that the DRV had no interest in peace in Cambodia, and intended to continue flouting the Paris Accord by providing aid and comfort to the insurgency. Tho, for his part, seemed genuinely flummoxed by Kissinger's conviction that the DRV had the power to bring the insurgency to heel, by his belief that North Vietnam wanted the Cambodian war to continue, and most of all by Kissinger's refusal to even discuss talking to Sihanouk. Furthermore, what to Tho must have been clear signals that the Sihanouk channel was ripe for exploitation seem completely lost on Kissinger, while Kissinger's obsession with the NVA must have been confusing and annoying to Tho. The 12 February encounter, in the final analysis, was worse than useless; the two negotiators failed to establish a common frame of reference, let alone an understanding. When they were not hurling recriminations at each other, Kissinger was browbeating Tho using aid and normalization as cudgels, while Tho was shaking his head and chiding Kissinger for his simplicity.

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The meeting between Kissinger and Tho on the following day, 13 February, proceeded almost exactly along the lines of the previous day's encounter. Kissinger came out swinging, basically reiterating all his talking points: "We can't accept it that we must settle this with Sihanouk. Let Cambodian problems be negotiated among them...And again, if the war continues in Cambodia, and if your forces stay in Cambodia, this will make normalization [between DRV and US] very difficult". Tho was dismissive, saying

again that “the point is now how to come to negotiations in Cambodia. Then everything will be settled. The difficulty does not lie on our part but elsewhere. This is the context”. Against this disclaimer of direct influence or control, Kissinger sarcastically retorted “I have the impression that if you tell your troops to leave that they will obey your orders. Your troops are very well disciplined”. Tho, apparently exasperated by this rehash of the previous day's impasse, became candid once again, saying “you should see the situation. Look at it in a general way. We settled the Vietnam problem with you...we have a big broad program of economic reconstruction. There is no reason to keep our troops in Cambodia”.⁶⁶

And so on. The remainder of the conversation was remarkably circular. Kissinger harped on Article 20 and the threats of aid withdrawal and normalization disruption; Tho, for his part, repeatedly stressed that the DRV had no reason to want war to continue in Cambodia, while at the same time disclaiming its ability to end it without regard for the Cambodian insurgency. This segment of the Kissinger-Tho conversation ended with a sort of agreement to disagree; but despite their mutual claims to have explained and understood each other's point of view, the transcript reads much like the previous day's negotiation, where the two interlocutors ended up talking past each other.

“On Cambodia we made little progress...This is going to be very difficult to resolve”, wrote Kissinger to Nixon at the end of his stay in Hanoi. “I will discuss Cambodia in Beijing”, wrote the national security advisor at the conclusion of the memo.⁶⁷

66 Memcon, Kissinger and Le Duc Tho, Hanoi, 13 February 1973. HAK Office Files, 113/4.

67 Memorandum from Kissinger to Nixon, 14 February 1973. HAK Office Files 29/1/12.

Beijing

In a way, it made sense for the United States to expect greater joy from Beijing than from Hanoi, for a number of reasons. Sino-American relations, hostile and frozen for two decades after the revolution of 1949, had undergone a sea change during the Nixon administration. Opening relations with the PRC had been a cornerstone of Nixon's foreign policy since his presidential candidacy, when then-candidate Nixon wrote in *Foreign Affairs* that “we simply cannot afford to leave China forever outside the family of nations, there to nurture its fantasies, cherish its hates and threaten its neighbours”.⁶⁸ This theme was echoed in his inaugural address of January 1969 where he proclaimed that “we seek an open world...a world in which no people, great or small, will live in angry isolation”. And after a few years of diplomatic fits and starts, backchannel meetings and secret trips, Nixon became the first American head of state to visit the People's Republic in February 1972. That summit, and the Shanghai Communiqué that concluded the visit, laid the basis for the eventual normalization of relations between the US and the PRC in 1979.

The Sino-American rapprochement under Nixon, of course, wasn't based solely on starry-eyed idealism about international amity. By the early 1970s, each needed the other in a very meaningful sense, despite ideological and political differences. China had, by that time, become so estranged from the Soviet Union that a shooting war between the two was a distinct possibility. Furthermore, the internal social and economic dislocations wrought by the Cultural Revolution had left the country on the brink of exhaustion and collapse. In America, Nixon, facing an increasingly divided and restive

⁶⁸ Nixon, Richard M. “Asia After Viet Nam”, *Foreign Affairs* 46.1, October 1967.

population, needed some kind of foreign policy breakthrough in order to cement his reputation as an international statesman, and to bolster his re-election prospects. Also, disengagement from Indochina had proved trickier than the administration expected, and Nixon and company undoubtedly saw in improved Sino-American relations the potential for a quicker and more satisfactory conclusion to the war. For both sides, therefore, rapprochement was not merely an abstract good, but also an expedient to meet particular policy needs.

For these reasons, then, Kissinger could rightly expect a warmer reception in Beijing, and indeed the atmosphere there was a good deal cozier than in Hanoi. The American delegation was even offered a meeting with Mao himself, an extraordinary gesture given the chairman's political standing, advanced age and poor health. And indeed, the Beijing visit did produce tangible fruit, most significant of which was the agreement to establish liaison offices – embassies in all but name – in each other's capitals.⁶⁹ On Cambodia, however, despite the overall goodwill of the visit and the mutual interest in the outcome of that country's war, the two powers produced nothing other than a general agreement that the conflict should be resolved on the basis of laudable but vaguely worded principles.

Kissinger had his first substantive conversation with Zhou Enlai on 16 February. This was a cordial *tour d'horizon* of world affairs, but when the issue of Cambodia arose,

⁶⁹ Diplomacy between Beijing and Washington, of course, faced a peculiar hurdle in the form of Taiwan, which was the “China” officially recognized by the US from 1949 to 1979. The delay between establishing liaison offices and full normalization was incurred by the delicacy of the one-China situation, in which the Americans were frankly trying to play both sides while gingerly moving from Taipei to Beijing. For more background against which the Kissinger visit was set, see Burr, William, ed. *The Kissinger Transcripts* (New Press, New York, 1998), pp. 83-86, 114-115.

Zhou cut right to the chase, asking Kissinger directly “why can't you accept to have negotiations with Norodom Sihanouk as head of state?”.⁷⁰ Rather than answering the question with similar gravity, Kissinger brushed Zhou off with a joke, saying “I don't know him as well as the Prime Minister [Zhou]. I understand it is a nerve-wracking experience”. Although Zhou, ever the conscientious diplomat, laughed at Kissinger's jest, he continued to press the Sihanouk issue from another angle, suggesting that Senator Mike Mansfield might be able to act as a suitable mediator between the administration and the prince.⁷¹ This suggestion was firmly and immediately rejected by Kissinger, on the grounds that “he is not qualified to discuss that for us, and he would only confuse the situation”. He added, with perhaps a touch of malice, that “he is too emotional about this. This is not an emotional problem”.

Having deflected these obvious feelers from the Chinese premier, the conversation then veered off onto other topics, until Kissinger resurrected it to make the pitch designed by Ambassador Swank, and incorporated into his talking points. This, notably, is the first instance of earnest negotiation in the record of Kissinger's February trip, and so it bears quoting at some length:

“It [Cambodia] is obviously a very complex situation, and we have no particular interest in any one party...

we believe that there should be a political negotiation in Cambodia, and we think that all the political forces should be represented there. And that does not mean that the existing government [the GKR] must emerge as the dominant force, *but how can we, when we recognize one government [the GKR], engage in a direct negotiation with Sihanouk?*

⁷⁰ Memcon, HAK & Zhou Enlai, Beijing, 16 February 1973. DNSA, CH00255.

⁷¹ Mansfield, Democrat of Montana, was Senate Majority Leader during Nixon's second term. He was also a close friend of Sihanouk, dating back to the time of Sihanouk's reign in Cambodia. Mansfield was a strong proponent of a negotiated settlement between GRUNK and the GKR, and on several occasions offered his good offices in whatever capacity the administration saw fit. These overtures were, however, politely but firmly rebuffed every time.

This is out of the question. But if there were a ceasefire and if North Vietnamese forces were withdrawn we would encourage a political solution in which Sihanouk would play a very important role...

We believe a solution consistent with the dignity of Sihanouk is possible, and we have so far refused overtures from other countries that have different views...my difficulty in meeting with Prince Sihanouk is no reflection on Prince Sihanouk. It has to do with the situation there”.⁷²

It was actually a fairly sophisticated game that Kissinger was playing. In this passage, he asked for the PRC's help in bringing the Cambodian combatants to the bargaining table. But as in the Hanoi encounters, Kissinger made this conditional on there being a ceasefire and withdrawal of foreign forces beforehand, seemingly a top priority for the US. Also identical to the Hanoi talking points was the steadfast refusal to meet with Sihanouk; however, for Zhou's benefit, Kissinger purported to respect Sihanouk's legitimacy and to seek a solution consistent with his dignity. Absent were derisive references to the prince as a spent force, or as a figure whose time has passed, or as a deposed king with no domestic following. Instead, the national security advisor protested that despite his willingness to include Sihanouk in a possible solution (contingent on prior ceasefire conditions being imposed), American recognition of the GKR precluded the United States from doing this itself.

Whether Zhou Enlai was aware of this duplicity embedded in Kissinger's proposal is not known. What does come across is a wariness on Zhou's side that the US was trying to push a solution that would leave Lon Nol in power, an outcome as unacceptable to the PRC as it was to GRUNK: “we wouldn't [have dealings] with such a person [Lon Nol]. You should also not deal with such a man who carries on subversive activities against the King...it is not fair for you to admit Lon Nol [to the negotiating table]”. Kissinger

⁷² Italics added.

rejoined with the quid pro quo considered by the ambassadors in Bangkok, offering Lon Nol's head for Sihanouk's:

Kissinger: But I think it might be possible to find an interim solution that is acceptable to both sides and I think, for example, that the Lon Nol people would be willing to negotiate with the Chief Minister of Sihanouk here...Penn Nouth. And that might lead to an interim government which could then decide who should be chef d'etat. This possibility has also occurred to us.

Zhou: Would that do if you go without Lon Nol?

Kissinger: The end result could well be without Lon Nol.

As we can see, this notion raised a flicker of interest from the premier. Nevertheless, Zhou was ultimately dismissive of the idea, noting that “not only the Prime Minister of Sihanouk wouldn't engage in such a negotiation, but there is the Khmer resistance [Khmer Rouge] in the interior area in Cambodia” to consider.

The 16 February conversation, then, was a cordial affair in which the two men sounded each other out on certain ideas, which nevertheless came to nothing substantive. Zhou did, however, promise Kissinger that he would “tell [Sihanouk] your opinion in our wording”, with the qualification that “we have our own position on this question”. He also asked for more time to digest the ideas raised by the Americans: “we will consider [the issue] again, and next time I will tell you our ideas”.

This was a coda to the discussion that could reasonably give Kissinger some optimism that the PRC might get on board for a peace effort in Cambodia brokered jointly by the Chinese and the Americans. But when Zhou Enlai did get back to Kissinger two days later, on the 18th, presumably after having conferred with his officials and also with Sihanouk, the Chinese position was considerably more ambivalent than the

Americans might have hoped. Zhou opened the discussion with a lengthy statement, that bears full quotation:

“...it seems this time during this visit it will be difficult to make further progress. We know your ideas. You are more clear about our position...we gave you already the 5-point statement of March 23, 1970, and also the January 26, 1973⁷³...we are in agreement with Vietnam in respecting the position of the Front of National Union of Cambodia, and also the Royal Government of National Union of Cambodia [GRUNK]. Our tendency would be that you should cease your involvement in that area. Of course you would say in reply that other parties should also stop their involvement. [Kissinger: That is right.] If it was purely a civil war the matter would be relatively more simple. Of course it wouldn't be easy to immediately confine it to a civil war...but one thing can be done, that is, we can talk in various ways to make your intention known to the various responsible sides in the National United Front of Cambodia. Because the National United Front of Cambodia is not composed of only one party; it also is composed of the left, the middle and the right. Of course, Norodom Sihanouk wishes to be in a central position...and we would like to take very prudent steps, because we wish to see the final goal of Cambodia realized; that is, its peace, independence, unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity. [Kissinger: We completely agree with these objectives.]”⁷⁴

Despite the length and eloquence of Zhou's statement, there was really not much here to satisfy Kissinger's desire. Granted, they agreed with each other that a peaceful, independent, united and territorially stable Cambodia would be a pleasant outcome.

Given the situation on the ground, however, it was not immediately apparent, least of all to Kissinger or Zhou, how such a thing was to be brought about. Zhou, for his part, pledged relatively little from the PRC – probably much less than Kissinger might have hoped for from the premier – promising only to “talk in various ways” to the “various responsible sides” in the GRUNK and in the insurgency. It was hardly the harbinger of close Sino-American cooperation that US diplomats must have had in mind when

73 Statements of Sihanouk/GRUNK essentially declaring the GKR completely illegitimate, and vowing to fight without negotiation until total victory.

74 Memcon, HAK & Zhou Enlai, Beijing, 18 February 1973. DNSA CH00258.

Ambassador Swank wrote a few days earlier that the key to a solution in Cambodia lay in Beijing.

Moreover, when read carefully, Zhou's statement contained admonitions and discreet signals that Kissinger appeared not to have picked up on. Consider, for example, Zhou's invocation of Sihanouk's various bellicose statements about fighting to total victory, and his concurrence with Vietnam's position that decisions about Cambodia lay within the purview of GRUNK. In light of these statements, Zhou's lament about how it would be simpler "if it was purely a civil war" seemed directed to the American presence in Cambodia as much as it did to the North Vietnamese soldiers stationed there.

Consider, also, Zhou's reference to "various responsible sides...the left, the middle and the right" in the National United Front, coupled with Sihanouk's wish to be "in a central position" in any possible solution. Throughout the conversation, Zhou emphasized the role of Sihanouk in the situation, as well as the fact that the insurgency was neither static nor monolithic. He seemed to be suggesting that the situation – a deposed prince leading a disunited insurgent movement – was ripe for exploitation through clever diplomacy. This is in keeping with what we have observed from Zhou Enlai as well as Le Duc Tho, who repeatedly asked Kissinger, both obliquely and straight out, whether he would talk to the prince, and whyever not.

These signals, however, appeared to be lost entirely on Kissinger, who construed these requests as *pro forma*, writing as much to Nixon in two separate reports on his Asian trip.⁷⁵ Indeed, Kissinger's estimate of his gains in China, both at the time as evidenced in his reports to the president, and in retrospect through his memoirs, seemed

⁷⁵ See memos, Kissinger to Nixon, 27 February and 2 March 1973. HAK Office Files, 98/4.

to be minimal and probably mistaken. In addition to his remarks about *pro forma* requests that he rejected, he wrote that the Chinese “identified somewhat” with the American position, that the relationship between Sihanouk and the PRC appeared strained, and that he had reason to hope that the Chinese would be cooperative in helping to broker negotiations between the rival sides in the future.⁷⁶ None of this is apparent in the documents; rather, it seems to comport instead with the rather fanciful notion cherished by Kissinger and the ambassadors going into the trip that a quick fix for Cambodia could be found in Hanoi or Beijing.

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We have seen that in both of those capitals the same rather pointed message was delivered: if the United States desired a solution to the Cambodian war, it would have to engage the Cambodian insurgency itself, preferably its more moderate titular leader. The message, however, was ignored, to the extent that it was received at all; and after having acquitted himself of a hearty browbeating in Hanoi and somewhat warmer repartee in Beijing, Kissinger left Asia thinking that the onus to act lay with the Vietnamese and Chinese. In this assessment, he was sorely mistaken.

⁷⁶ Memo, Kissinger to Nixon, 2 March 1973, HAK Office Files 98/4; see also *Years of Upheaval*, pp. 339-355.

Round 2 – May-June

France

Having failed to accomplish anything substantive on Cambodia with either the DRV or the PRC in February, the civil war continued on the ground, and the American bombardment continued from the air. The military stalemate continued through the spring of 1973, until political rumblings in Washington forced a re-evaluation of the Cambodian situation. Congressional lawmakers, frustrated by the continued American military presence in Indochina despite the Paris accord, and increasingly ill-disposed toward the administration in light of the incriminating material seeping out of the Watergate scandal, were talking openly by May of forcing Nixon's hand on Cambodian operations. It was against this background of congressional mistrust and borrowed time, then, that Kissinger made a second attempt to resolve Cambodia through Hanoi and Beijing.

These demarches and their results form the crux of Kissinger's own retrospective argument about the affair. It was during this time, he wrote, that his diplomatic channels were beginning to bear fruit, until congressional intervention undermined what he had set in motion. As we shall observe, though, an independent reading of the documents does not bear out Kissinger's post facto assertions; rather, much like the failed attempt of the previous winter, it further demonstrates the mistakenness, and the lack of imagination, of the administration's entire venture.

Alexander Haig, one of Kissinger's principal aides, visited Cambodia in April. The purpose of his trip was twofold: to exert pressure on the GKR to broaden its

increasingly diminished domestic political base, and to assess the military and political situation on the ground. His report to Kissinger was both pessimistic and revealing; describing the mid-term outlook for the GKR as “gloomy”, he asserted that “the development of a militarily and politically effective Khmer government *or sufficient US pressure on Hanoi...* would appear to be the only real alternatives for any tolerable negotiated settlement of the Cambodian struggle”.⁷⁷ Fundamental restructuring of the Khmer government was a nonstarter as Haig himself acknowledged in a later memo, both because of the fractiousness in Phnom Penh as well as the clear sense that the administration would not have an indefinite blank cheque with which to work. Haig was, therefore, effectively recommending a return to the negotiating table, based on the same assumption that Hanoi was really the power that was pulling the strings.⁷⁸

Kissinger took Haig's advice and scheduled a round of follow-up talks on the Paris accord with Le Duc Tho, this time in France, from 18 through 23 May. Judging by the contents of Kissinger's briefing book, the American mood this time around was, if anything, even less collegial than during the previous winter. The document opened with a list of grievances harboured by the United States over the DRV's interpretation and implementation of the Paris accord – particularly Article 20 – and threatened “renewed confrontation” if the DRV didn't abide by the spirit of the agreement.⁷⁹ It laid out a series of objectives for a draft understanding on Cambodia that can be charitably described as

77 Memo from Haig to Kissinger, 11 April 1973. NSC Office Files, 1021/1.

78 Memo from Haig to Kissinger re: options in SE Asia, undated (mid-April 1973), NSC Files 1020/8.

79 Whatever that means, anyway. It must have been clear to everyone, most of all to Le Duc Tho, that the United States would not re-engage militarily in South Vietnam, and that complete disengagement from the region was only a matter of time. The withholding of reconstruction aid and the threat of “renewed confrontation” were the two cudgels wielded by the US, but the latter was obviously a paper tiger. Briefing book for Hanoi trip, undated (mid-May 1973), HAK Office Files 114/1.

maximalist: a supervised withdrawal of NVA personnel and arms within 60 days; a ceasefire agreed upon by both Cambodian parties (GKR and GRUNK) within 30 days; and an effective mechanism for the implementation of Article 20.⁸⁰ Perhaps most telling was the bluntly stated US position, in response to the anticipated DRV disclaimer of influence:

“we believe that the situation in Cambodia is far less complicated than you [Tho] allege. We believe that the insurgency is very responsive to your guidance. Based on your recent public statements on Prince Sihanouk's visit to Cambodia, the insurgency is presently united and the GRUNK is billed as the only legitimate government in the country. We therefore are convinced that you can no longer cite internal insurgent factionalism as an excuse for the present lack of negotiations in Cambodia”.⁸¹

Here the continuity of thought and assumption in American diplomacy between winter and spring is most clearly visible. The American position, such as it was, had not changed; rather, the conclusion they seem to have reached about the failure of February's demarche was that they did not push their position strongly enough. The precepts of the American position – namely that the Cambodians did not control their own situation, and that resolution was to be sought through the insurgency's handlers, rather than through the insurgents themselves – appear not to have undergone any re-evaluation during this time. The Kissinger plan was to make the same push as before, but harder. What remains unclear is why he would have expected success in May where he had none in February, *especially* as the administration's Indochina policy was on much shakier ground domestically than before. At any rate, what *is* clear is that there was no real

80 Ibid. In light of what the Americans actually achieved, and the contents of the understanding that actually emerged, these objectives seem ridiculously optimistic.

81 Ibid.

reflection upon, or evolution of, American Cambodia policy during the military stalemate between February and May.

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Kissinger's first meeting with Le Duc Tho on 18 May sounded a familiar refrain. Tho, unimpressed with Kissinger's implicit linkage of reconstruction aid with the resolution of the Cambodian war, among other aspects of the Paris accord, once again exasperatedly disclaimed the ability to unilaterally end the war:

“on many occasions I told you that since we have peacefully settled the Vietnam problem with you...it is our desire to contribute to the peaceful settlement of the Cambodian problem. The Cambodia question, it is a complicated question, on many aspects. And it is not we who can decide the question; we have to respect the sovereignty of our allies and friends. Before my coming here, Prince Sihanouk has stated that Vietnam has no right to settle the Cambodian problem. As for you, you are still unwilling to speak to the Cambodians. So therein lies the difficulty of the problem”.⁸²

Kissinger's reply to this barb was short and snide: “his [Sihanouk's] capacity to effect his wishes is less than his capacity to make speeches”.⁸³ They then bickered once more over whether a political settlement should precede troop withdrawal (Tho's position) or vice versa (Kissinger's position). Tho again exhorted Kissinger to talk directly to Sihanouk, obliquely referring to the prince's desire to meet with Kissinger during the latter's previous trip to Beijing, a suggestion sloughed off by his counterpart.⁸⁴ Finally, Tho laid it all out on the line with a lengthy spiel, reiterating what he had been emphasizing the previous winter:

“Now if a settlement is to be found, now I think you should talk to Sihanouk and the Khmer resistance...I have explained on many occasions this question. We do want, we earnestly want, to contribute our part to the settlement of the Cambodian problem...but

82 Memcon, Kissinger and Le Duc Tho, 18 May 1973. HAK Office Files 114/3.

83 Ibid.

84 Ibid.

the decision will be theirs...at most we can contribute our views to them...you should correctly assess the situation and discuss with the parties, and then the question may be settled”.⁸⁵

To which Kissinger replied with the standard bromides about the need to resolve Cambodia before reconstruction aid could be broached with Congress, his insistence upon the need for the two Cambodian sides to talk to each other, and his refusal to engage directly with Sihanouk or the insurgency.

Clearly, the pattern established in February – Kissinger browbeats Tho, Tho refers Kissinger to Sihanouk, Kissinger refuses, repeat – was on display again in May. Nevertheless, Kissinger felt sufficiently uplifted by this palaver to write to his boss that “I...have [the] impression he [Tho] has not yet shown his full hand”, and that “it is possible we can produce a paper by Tuesday which we will be able to define as a restoration of the Paris Agreement”.⁸⁶ Why the national security advisor would have thought this is unclear, as the subsequent meetings between the two were basically repeat performances of the opening conversation on the 18th. Tho even took Kissinger aside during a break in the formal discussion on the 21st to reiterate privately that North Vietnam's influence over the Khmer Rouge was minimal, that even much of the insurgency's war materiel was captured from the GKR rather than imported from the DRV, and that there was no reason for North Vietnam to want continued war in Indochina after settling the Vietnam problem. Kissinger's reply during this candid talk was a rejection of Tho's disclaimer, stating that the DRV had only to give the word to its “students” – meaning the Cambodian insurgents – and a ceasefire schedule would come

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Memos from Kissinger to Nixon, 18 May 1973. HAK Office Files 35/1/39, 35/1/28.

into being. Tho bristled at this, pointedly referring to the Cambodians as his “allies”, not “students” and that “schedules do not depend on us”. And so the two interlocutors ended up talking past each other again, and Kissinger's reports to Nixon became less sanguine.⁸⁷⁸⁸

The agenda for Kissinger and Tho's final meeting on 23 May was to hammer out the specifics of the communiqué and understandings to be issued as a result of the talks. When Cambodia arose, the atmosphere became hostile. Tho decried Kissinger's entire linkage of the Paris follow-up talks to the Cambodian problem, arguing once again that “the settlement of the Cambodian problem comes under the competence of the peoples of Cambodia, the competence of the Royal Khmer National Union Government...the fighters now in Cambodia are Cambodians themselves...how can you tell me to settle the Cambodian problem? This is a reality”.⁸⁹ They traded barbs again over Article 20, and how it was to be interpreted; Kissinger demanding that the DRV withdraw its forces and support from Cambodia immediately, and Tho pointing out that the US was equally engaged in Cambodia, and that Article 20 provided no specific timeline for withdrawal.⁹⁰ They each accused the other of exerting undue pressure and of acting in bad faith. Ultimately, Tho refused to sign the joint communiqué or to accept Kissinger's proposals on Cambodia outlined above. Kissinger proposed a two-week hiatus, followed by another series of meetings, to which Tho agreed. The talks adjourned on a pessimistic and hostile note, though, as Kissinger rather condescendingly told his counterpart that

87 Memcon, Kissinger and Le Duc Tho, 21 May 1973. HAK Office Files 114/4.

88 Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, 19 May 1973. HAK Office Files 35/1/24.

89 Memcon, Kissinger and Le Duc Tho, 23 May 1973. HAK Office Files 114/4.

90 Ibid.

“we must both make a very serious effort” during the break. Tho, for his part, rejoined that “we [the DRV] will make a serious effort, but not as you have proposed”.⁹¹

New York/Washington

Kissinger proposed the break in talks for a number of reasons. He appears to have taken Tho's parting shot above as an implication that the DRV may have had a new proposal by early June; also, he wrote to Nixon that the two weeks could be profitably used to buy maneuvering time from Congress, and to exert further pressure on the Vietnamese through the Soviet Union and China, both of whom were seeking good relations with the US at the time.⁹² The break was of particular use to the national security advisor, though, in order to suss out the Chinese on a peculiar overture made by Zhou Enlai while Kissinger was hectoring Le Duc Tho in France. On 18 May the Chinese premier visited David Bruce, the American ambassador stationed at the United States Liaison Office in Beijing. The conversation was long and wide-ranging, and eventually touched on the Cambodian situation in a way that the ambassador found striking:

“...Shifting conversation to Cambodia, Zhou said the only way to find a solution was for the parties concerned to implement fully all the subsidiary clauses of Article 20. We agreed that although respective viewpoints differed USG and PRC shared goal of peaceful, neutral and independent Cambodia – 'more peaceful, neutral and independent than ever before', Zhou added”.⁹³

Bruce read a great deal of subtext into Zhou's visit, commenting to Kissinger that:

91 Ibid.

92 Memo from Kissinger to Sullivan, 23 May 1973, HAK Office Files 35/1/5; memo from Kissinger to Nixon, 24 May 1973, HAK Office Files 114/3.

93 Cable from Bruce to Kissinger, 19 May 1973. HAK Office Files 94/5.

“Zhou used occasion to convey significant substantive message: there was a broad hint of inquiry as to whether I would be prepared to meet Sihanouk. I did not react. He is deeply worried about Indochina, and feels particular urgency over achieving solution in Cambodia. I do not know [the] content [of] his talks with Le Duc Tho on [the] latter's way to Paris, but he may have expressed such views to North Vietnamese. His care in designating Qiao [Guanhua, the PRC's foreign minister] as my contact (he did this three times), and Huang Zhen [head of the PRC Liaison Office in America] as PRC channel in Washington, when juxtaposed with his announcement [of] Huang's May 25 departure, *suggests that he hopes for prompt Washington-Beijing followup on items raised in this conversation*”.⁹⁴

To put emphasis on this point, Bruce sent a followup cable on the 24th, reminding Kissinger of Huang Zhen's early arrival on the 29th, and exhorting his boss to see Huang *before* departing with Nixon on the 30th to Iceland on an unrelated diplomatic matter.⁹⁵

Kissinger apparently took Bruce's advice to heart, for he sought out Huang Hua, the PRC's UN representative, in New York on the 27th, and followed up immediately with Huang Zhen in Washington on the 29th. In his talk with Huang Hua, Kissinger expressed frustration with what he viewed as Vietnam's intransigence, and hinted to Huang Hua, as he had done with Le Duc Tho, that reconstruction aid and diplomatic normalization could not move forward as long as the Cambodia war continued. He then cut to the chase, following up on Ambassador Bruce's tete-a-tete with Zhou Enlai by proposing that China and the United States had a common interest in producing a “neutral, independent and peaceful Cambodia” and by sharing America's “tentative thinking” on the issue – actually a lengthy pitch to the Chinese – which ran as follows:

“we are prepared to stop our bombing in Cambodia, and we are prepared to withdraw the very small advisory group we have there. And we are prepared to arrange for Lon Nol to leave for medical treatment in the United States. In return we would like a ceasefire...a negotiation between the Sihanouk group and the remainder of the Lon Nol group; and

⁹⁴ Ibid. Emphasis added.

⁹⁵ Cable from Bruce to Kissinger, 24 May 1973. NARA, Record Group 59/Lot 77D112/Entry 5027/Box 328/Folder “China Exchange, May 16-June 13”.

while this negotiation is going on in Cambodia, we would authorize some discussions between the staff of Ambassador Bruce and Prince Sihanouk in Beijing. And when this process is completed, in some months, we would not oppose the return of Prince Sihanouk to Cambodia. But it is a process that has to extend over some time, and it must not be conducted in a way that does not take into account our own necessities”.⁹⁶

This pitch – essentially a quid pro quo – went further than anything that Kissinger had proposed to the Vietnamese, probably owing to the warmer relations that prevailed between the US and the PRC during this period. Despite the new details inherent in this “tentative thinking” – the inclusion of direct talks between Sihanouk and Ambassador Bruce, for example, as well as the potential for the prince to return to Cambodia in some capacity – the substance of the pitch, however, remained much the same as in earlier iterations; the in-country peace talks, crucial to any lasting resolution of the Cambodia war beyond a temporary ceasefire, were to be between the GKR and the insurgency, with the US itself remaining aloof. It was also still implicitly based on the assumption that the Cambodian insurgents were susceptible to outside pressures from the DRV and possibly the PRC, an assumption that had been repeatedly dismissed by the Vietnamese and Chinese alike through the winter and spring, and one that was sorely mistaken.

It turned out that Kissinger had jumped the gun with Huang Hua, as the PRC's UN representative had come with a prepared statement of his own, presumably handed down from the highest levels in Beijing. The contrast between this statement and Kissinger's own tentative thinking is instructive. Huang Hua began by invoking Zhou Enlai himself during his conversation with Ambassador Bruce on 18 May, remarking that “the Premier mentioned the question of Cambodia could not be resolved in Paris”.⁹⁷ This

⁹⁶ Memcon, Kissinger and Huang Hua, New York, 27 May 1973. DNSA, CH00262.

⁹⁷ Memcon, Kissinger & Huang Hua, New York, 27 May 1973. DNSA, CH00262.

was a direct jab at Kissinger's ongoing attempt to impose America's diplomatic will on the DRV, based on the assumption that North Vietnam was the Cambodian insurgency's puppetmaster. Huang Hua then cut to the chase, touching on some familiar themes:

“On the Cambodian side, Prince Sihanouk as well as the resistance forces at home, are willing to conduct negotiations with the US side. The Chinese side considers that the sooner the US side stops its intervention in the affairs of Cambodia, the better...Premier Zhou Enlai also mentioned that Mr. Mansfield once asked for another visit to China, and he wondered whether he still has this desire”.⁹⁸

The contrast between Kissinger's and Huang Hua's respective statements is stark indeed. North Vietnam, to say nothing of the GKR, appeared not to be on Huang Hua's radar at all. Indeed, he advocated – once again – direct talks between the US and the insurgency, something vehemently rejected by Kissinger throughout the winter and spring. Huang identified the continued US interference in Cambodia's civil war, and not DRV or insurgency intransigence, as the cause of that country's misery. Granted that some of this could be chalked up to diplomatic boilerplate, it is clear nevertheless that based on these contrasting statements, the US and the PRC were not on the same page even at this late date.

Recall, though, the sense of urgency that brought these two interlocutors together in the first place; the significance of Zhou Enlai's visit to Ambassador Bruce in Beijing, and Bruce's exhortation to Kissinger that he meet with the PRC officials in America as soon as possible. The Americans thought, with some justification, that the Chinese had something important to convey beyond its longstanding position on the Cambodian war. Huang Hua's invocation of Mike Mansfield – whom we will recall as the Senate Majority Leader and a personal friend of Sihanouk – and his desire to visit China, in the same

98 Ibid.

breath in which he urged the US to contact the insurgency directly, is telling. If the Chinese were indeed trying to send a message – and as Huang Hua read this from a talking points memo, it certainly seems likely – then perhaps that message was a pitch to set up a Mansfield channel as a means of breaking the impasse.

It will never be known what such a channel might have accomplished, however, because Kissinger nipped it in the bud, referring to Mansfield dismissively as “not competent to talk for the United States Government with Sihanouk”.⁹⁹ The conversation concluded shortly thereafter with more boilerplate from the national security advisor about being “prepared to work within the spirit of what the Prime Minister [Zhou Enlai] has said [to Bruce]”, followed by a noncommittal pledge from Huang to relay Kissinger's words to Beijing.¹⁰⁰

Two days later in Washington, Kissinger followed up with Huang Zhen, the PRC Liaison Office chief, by reiterating the American proposal labeled “tentative thinking” to Huang Hua in New York – immediate ceasefire to be followed by bombing halt and preliminary talks with the deposed prince – adding this time that if the Chinese could sound out Sihanouk sometime before the resumption of Kissinger's talks with Tho one week later, then the chances for a settlement of the Cambodian problem would be somewhat improved. As with Huang Hua in New York, though, Huang Zhen's response was noncommittal, promising only to report back to Beijing with deliberate speed, while

99 Ibid.

100 Ibid.

at the same time reiterating that “Dr. Kissinger is of course very clear about Ambassador Bruce's talk with the Premier [Zhou]”.¹⁰¹

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The substance of these meetings with the Chinese are of crucial importance, because Kissinger himself, through his memoirs, has hung a highly contentious argument upon them. As we have observed, Kissinger has claimed that he was ensconced in delicate negotiations with both Hanoi and Beijing in the spring of 1973, that could have resulted in a brokered settlement of the Cambodian problem had Congress not intervened to force a unilateral American bombing halt. In this way, the former national security advisor has sought to deflect responsibility for the outcome of the Cambodian war away from the administration, and to lay it instead at the feet of the legislative branch. An examination of the transcripts of these meetings with Chinese officials, though, tells a very different story than the memoir narrative given by Kissinger. Beyond very general shared preferences for a peaceful resolution to the Cambodian war, there was nothing of substance in evidence. Kissinger and his interlocutors were hatching no joint plans to bring the warring sides together; more importantly, the two sides seemed to be talking past each other, Kissinger exhorting the Chinese to bring the insurgents to the table, and Huang Hua, Huang Zhen and Zhou Enlai himself imploring the Americans to stop its military activity and engage the insurgency directly, possibly with the good offices of Senator Mansfield, a suggestion peremptorily rejected by their American counterpart.

What the Chinese actually pledged to do for Kissinger in the spring of 1973 was minimal. Huang Hua and Huang Zhen promised to relay Kissinger's messages back to

101 Memcon, Kissinger & Huang Zhen, Washington, 29 May 1973. DNSA, CH00263.

Beijing. Huang Zhen followed this up in Washington the following week by offering to communicate America's "tentative thinking" to Sihanouk in Beijing, checking with Kissinger to confirm the substance and wording of that proposal.¹⁰² Kissinger, in his memoirs, identified this moment as the moment of truth, arguing that the Chinese would not have offered to act as a conduit for this proposal, and would not have gone to the length of confirming the US' position, had they not been confident of its prospects for success. This argument is disingenuous, however, in that it exaggerates the extent to which the PRC would have been identified with the US' proposal, and makes assumptions about China's confidence in the success of Kissinger's "tentative thinking", none of which is really in evidence here. It is just as easy, and probably more meritorious, to argue that China, motivated by friendly bilateral relations with the US and a genuine desire for peace in Cambodia, was willing to use its good offices to act as a messenger to deliver Kissinger's overture to the insurgency, without necessarily endorsing the plan or expecting it to work. This is much more consistent with what we have observed both about China's position on the Cambodian civil war, as well as the substance of its diplomatic wrangling with the US during the winter and spring of 1973. Kissinger's post facto spin on events, motivated by the desire to wash his hands of the ugly aftermath in Cambodia, requires mental gymnastics and a liberal dose of fancy to reconcile with the available documentary record.

In actual fact, though, the Chinese did not even carry through on the minimal pledges they had made, namely to communicate Kissinger's proposal to the deposed

102 Memcon, Kissinger & Huang Zhen, Washington, 4 June 1973. NARA, Record Group 59/Lot 77D114/Entry 5027/Box 381/Folder "PRC – Cambodia – Secretary Kissinger".

Cambodian prince. Even by mid-June, this contact had not been made, on the grounds that Sihanouk was on an international tour and had not yet returned to Beijing.¹⁰³ By the beginning of July, with the message still not delivered, the administration grew antsy; Nixon had Huang Zhen of the PRC Liaison Office in Washington over to the Western White House in California for a personal conference, where among the standard bromides about a peaceful, independent and neutral Cambodia, the president emphasized the administration's view that the Chinese government held the key to peace in Cambodia through its influence over Sihanouk. Huang said he would “carefully convey” Nixon's words to Zhou Enlai in Beijing, but little else.¹⁰⁴ Finally, however, on 18 July the Chinese dropped the bomb: proclaiming that it was “up to the doer to undo the knot”, the Chinese side found it “obviously inappropriate” to communicate to Sihanouk the US “tentative thinking” of late May. With this curtly worded note the Chinese dropped abruptly out of the game, leaving the Cambodia question squarely in the American court.¹⁰⁵

Kissinger's assumption about China's unceremonious exit from the demarche of spring 1973 – the assumption that undergirded his entire “lost chance” hypothesis given in his memoirs – was that congressional intervention into the administration's bombing campaign deprived the US of whatever leverage it had over the Cambodian question. With no bombs, or the threat of bombs to back up the diplomacy, America had nothing with which to bargain. Simultaneously, with a free hand to prosecute the civil war to a successful conclusion, the Khmer Rouge had no use for diplomatic maneuvering or really

103 Memcon, Kissinger & Ji Pengfei, France, 13 June 1973. HAK Office Files 94/4.

104 Memcon, Nixon and Huang Zhen, Western White House, 6 July 1973. DNSA, KT00770.

105 PRC diplomatic note to US, 18 July 1973. HAK Office Files 95/4.

for Sihanouk himself. In other words, the unilateral bombing halt agreed to between Congress and the administration at the end of June meant that “Sihanouk couldn't deliver the Khmer Rouge, and the Chinese couldn't deliver Sihanouk”.¹⁰⁶

This is, however, purely supposition, and a rather unreflective one at that. Kissinger has offered no evidence to back up his argument that the Chinese were driven out of the game by a shortsighted Congress; indeed, it is more than a little arrogant to suppose that the foreign policy of Beijing was determined primarily by political wrangling in Washington. It is just as likely – more so, actually – that domestic factors came into play in Beijing's calculations about how, and how far, to support Washington in its quest for a brokered peace in Cambodia.¹⁰⁷ With access to Chinese archives still sharply curtailed, it is of course impossible to definitively establish one way or the other the reasoning behind the Chinese decision to withdraw. Nevertheless, Kissinger's argument – that the congressionally-mandated bombing halt drove China out of the process by depriving Beijing and Washington of leverage over the Cambodian factions – remains specious and self-serving, and highly suspect.

France

In the interim before this final act, however, Kissinger was back in France for another round of talks with Le Duc Tho, having suspended them a couple of weeks prior in order to suss out the possible Chinese option. If his briefing book for this round is any

106 Kissinger, NSC Staff Meeting notes, 19 July 1973. *The Kissinger Transcripts*, pp. 147-152.

107 This less Washington-centric notion appears to have occurred to the more thoughtful of Kissinger's aides, if not the man himself. See, for example, Richard Solomon's memo to Kissinger entitled “Mao and Zhou Under Pressure? Some Recent Pieces in the Chinese Puzzle”, HAK Office Files 95/4.

indication, he went back to France in an ornery mood. “Don't take us for naïve,” read his prepared statement on Cambodia. “We know full well you can stop the fighting in Cambodia if and when you so choose”.¹⁰⁸ Included in the document was a proposed draft understanding on Cambodia that was unrealistically maximalist, calling for a Cambodian ceasefire on 15 June, to be followed by a withdrawal of all foreign personnel and materials within sixty days subsequent to the ceasefire.¹⁰⁹ Considering the details of Kissinger's previous sessions with Le Duc Tho, this was, to say the least, an ambitious agreement to try to secure.

And so Kissinger and Le Duc Tho butted heads in Paris once more. We are by now well acquainted with the characteristic proceedings whenever these two men got together, and again this episode was no different. On 6 June, they conferred in France, where in a lengthy private conversation during the lunch break Tho once again spoke candidly with Kissinger, informing that the Cambodian insurgency was calling its own shots, and that therefore the DRV could not sign onto the joint understanding as conceived by the Americans. Kissinger ignored this, reiterating his belief that the North Vietnamese could prevail upon their Cambodian “students” to agree to terms; Tho once again corrected Kissinger's terminology, insisting they were autonomous “allies”, and not students. Once again, the meeting broke up under mutual threats and recriminations pertaining to the Paris Accord and to reconstruction aid, Kissinger's favourite cudgels.¹¹⁰ The following day, 7 June, Tho informed Kissinger of the DRV's categorical rejection of

108 Briefing book for Kissinger's June talks with Le Duc Tho, undated (early June 1973). HAK Office Files 38/1/1KK.

109 Ibid.

110 Memcon, Kissinger and Le Duc Tho, France, 6 June 1973. HAK Office Files 124/3.

the provisions in the US draft understanding containing hard deadlines for ceasefire and withdrawal, arguing that such things fell under the purview of the Cambodian factions, and not of their big-power allies.¹¹¹ Kissinger huffed and puffed, but eventually agreed to a heavily watered-down joint understanding that merely reaffirmed that the Cambodian problem fell under the sovereignty of the Cambodian people, and pledged the US and DRV only “to exert their best efforts” to bring about a solution to the civil war.¹¹²

Kissinger tried to put a positive spin on things, cabling to Nixon that “in short, we have a document [joint understanding] which we can use to retake the initiative in our Indochina policy”. He opined to his boss that “with the Soviets and Chinese, the communiqué and understandings on Cambodia give us new devices to exert their influence over the DRV. Domestically, these documents make it evident that you are making the January [Paris] Agreement work and that you have an effective policy which opponents will interfere with at their peril”.¹¹³ Clearly, however, despite the negotiator's attempt to put a nice shine on the fruit of his labours, he failed to achieve his goal in this round of talks – namely, to extract a commitment from Le Duc Tho to bring about a ceasefire in Cambodia. Why he thought he could do this in the first place, given his abysmal failure to do so in February and again in May, is far from clear.

It is abundantly clear, though, that the joint understanding with which he came away from France was a thin papering over of the same old impasse we have observed time and again: Tho's insistence that American assumptions about the relationship between the insurgency and the DRV were flawed, Tho's oft-repeated urging that

111 Memcon, Kissinger and Le Duc Tho, France, 7 June 1973. HAK Office Files 124/3.

112 Memcon, Kissinger and Le Duc Tho, France, 13 June 1973. HAK Office Files 124/3.

113 Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, 11 June 1973. HAK Office Files, 124/1.

Kissinger approach the insurgents – preferably Sihanouk – directly, and Kissinger's consistent refusal to take any of this in. Blinded by his unquestioned assumptions about geopolitics – that problems plaguing small powers were best addressed via their great-power patrons – he spent months haranguing Hanoi and Beijing to solve his Cambodia problem, rather than approaching the insurgency itself; the PRC and DRV, however, turned out to have no more sway over the situation than did the mighty USA.

It is fitting to add that the positive spin that Kissinger attempted to put on his labours in Paris proved to be as wrong as his whole diplomatic approach throughout these critical months. For the vaguely-worded, commitment-free joint understanding hammered out in France neither yielded America any new devices with the Soviets or the Chinese, nor did it mollify congressional critics of the administration's Indochina policy, who over the course of June brought the confrontation to a head, effectively shutting down the government over the Cambodia bombing, until Nixon agreed to the 15 August deadline that completed America's protracted military disengagement from Indochina, and left the remainder of the Cambodian civil war squarely within the purview of the contending Cambodian factions.

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For many years after the fact, Henry Kissinger had a virtual monopoly on the documentary record of this period, and hence on the form and content of the historical narrative that came into being in due course. It is now clear, though, that there are several gaping holes in his story, and numerous claims that even with only a partially available paper trail are now reopened for contention. The insistence in his memoirs, for

example, that the ultimate goal was always the restoration of the deposed prince in some kind of coalition structure; the documents raise serious doubts about that, as Kissinger and others in the Indochina scene spoke scornfully of a figure, long a thorn in the American side, whose time had passed. Similarly, his sanctimonious claim to have been desperate for peace in Cambodia, and interested in keeping Congress at bay only to gain more time to stop the fighting, is belied by transcripts that have come to light in which Kissinger, ever conscious of the verdict of history, seemed more preoccupied with deflecting blame for the Cambodia mess than with seeking peace by any means necessary.¹¹⁴

Probably the most contentious claim given in the Kissinger narrative, though, and the one which we have tested here with the documentation available, is the assertion that through the winter and spring of 1973, he was busy crafting a diplomatic opportunity for a Cambodian peace through delicate three-cornered negotiations with Hanoi and Beijing – an opportunity that was abruptly derailed by Congress' rash action to force a unilateral halt to the bombing that comprised Washington's sole source of leverage in the deal. This claim, we have observed, is largely fictitious; Kissinger was being honest insofar as he did have talks with Hanoi and Beijing, but the parallels between his account and the available documentary evidence end there. There was no “lost opportunity” for the great powers behind the Cambodian factions to broker a settlement; there was a lot of hot air emanating from Washington as Kissinger browbeat an exasperated Le Duc Tho to perform feats that Tho consistently claimed were beyond his power, followed by more

114 See, for example, his conversation with Melvin Laird, in which an exasperated Kissinger gets candid and says “we really have to think about whether we are not better off saying these sons-of-bitches just are responsible for the defeat”. Telcon, 26 June 1973. DNSA KA10340.

congenial but ultimately noncommittal dialogue with the administration's friends in Beijing.

Kissinger's early seizure of the historical narrative – the privilege of the powerful – has endured for a long time, withstanding numerous challenges from scholars who were dubious about his assertions, but lacked the hard evidence to gainsay him. Now, however, as the documentary record becomes increasingly available and we edge ever closer to the point when the entirety of the Kissinger archive becomes accessible to the public, we will be able to test his claims with greater frequency and scrutiny, and to gradually wrench the narrative away from the actors and into the purview of the historians. We can take a long stride toward that here by asserting with confidence that the “lost opportunity” described in Henry Kissinger's memoirs is a fiction, created after the fact to deflect the blame for America's role in bringing the Khmer Rouge regime into being. There was no light at the end of the tunnel in the spring of 1973. Congress was correct to force the bombing halt, and Kissinger's doubters were right to doubt.

Conclusion: Narratives Debunked

At the Nixon Presidential Materials Project in Maryland, among the papers of Winston Lord, Kissinger's principal aide at the National Security Council and later the State Department, is a folder entitled "China – Cambodia Negotiations – Secretary Kissinger, 1973-1975". Assembled in the spring of 1975, as the Khmer Rouge were closing in on Phnom Penh, in order to prepare the secretary for congressional testimony as to how the downfall of the GKR came to pass, this compendium of documents, memoranda and transcripts also represents an incipient attempt to pre-emptively establish the narrative of America's failure to resolve the Cambodian civil war. The narrative thus established – an opportunity born of delicate three-cornered negotiations, undermined by a bullheaded and ignorant Congress that tied the administration's hands and thus doomed the GKR – was later canonized, in a manner of speaking, through the publication of Henry Kissinger's memoirs, which remained for many years the sole accessible primary source on much of the inner workings of the Nixon administration, and particularly of its foreign policy.

In subsequent years, though, a number of factors have converged to cause us to reassess this verdict. First, the enormity and brutality of the Khmer Rouge regime that came into existence as a result of the civil war makes the question of responsibility an emotionally charged one, with high stakes in the court of historical opinion. Second, a number of scholars and journalists, such as William Shawcross, have accused Kissinger of distorting the truth and of outright lying about controversial aspects of his career, including the plans he had purported to be hatching with Beijing in the spring of 1973

before Congress prematurely terminated them. Finally, although the entirety of Henry Kissinger's personal papers remains inaccessible during his lifetime, enough material has emerged in the intervening years to test several of his claims, particularly those about the substance of his demarches to Hanoi and Beijing in order to bring an early end to the Cambodian war. There are, therefore, many compelling reasons to revisit the issue, and to focus the sharp light of historical inquiry on the backroom machinations of early 1973.

This inquiry has called the established narrative into serious question, as the Nixon administration was clearly not on the cusp of ending anything by the time Congress had weighed in on the question. As we have observed, Kissinger and his staff had identified two avenues – Hanoi and Beijing – through which to pursue their efforts. Notably absent from this calculation were the Cambodian insurgency and Prince Sihanouk's government-in-exile, both of which were never directly engaged by the US on the erroneous assumption that they were firmly under the control of the Vietnamese, and to a lesser extent the Chinese. We now know the reverse to have been true, as the Khmer Rouge-dominated insurgency was at that time pulling away both from Vietnamese control as well as from Sihanouk's government-in-exile. In this instance, as in many others, the Nixonian assumption that trouble in remote countries could be resolved by engaging their great-power patrons proved to be tragically mistaken.

More than this, though, the substance of the diplomacy itself was unimaginative and ultimately unproductive. Throughout the winter and spring of 1973, we have observed Kissinger repeatedly browbeat Le Duc Tho in Hanoi and in France, demanding that he bring the insurgents to heel, using empty threats and the vaguely worded Article

20 of the Paris Accord. Tho, for his part, was unmoved by these tirades, although we have caught glimpses of his normally impassive facade giving way to frustration as he tried, unsuccessfully, to reason with Kissinger that Vietnam had no reason to want continued warfare in Cambodia, that the insurgency was more autonomous than the Americans gave it credit for, and that it would be far more fruitful for Kissinger to deal directly with Sihanouk. These interlocutors ended up talking past each other, pausing only to paper over their differences in a meaningless communiqué that resolved nothing as the war continued on the ground and from the air.

An equally unproductive series of events played out in Beijing, despite the warmer atmosphere that prevailed between the two great powers at the time. Congeniality notwithstanding, Kissinger's approach was much the same with Beijing as with Hanoi: to appeal to Zhou Enlai and his subordinates in the Chinese foreign ministry to use its influence to bring the Cambodian insurgency to heel, and for GRUNK, Sihanouk's government-in-exile, to talk peace directly with the GKR. The only difference between his overtures to Hanoi and those to Beijing was in his aggressiveness; where Kissinger saw fit to browbeat and threaten Le Duc Tho, he instead used a more cajoling tone to try to coax Beijing to play ball.

The message coming back from the Chinese, though, closely resembled Tho's consistent rejoinder to Kissinger: that the insurgency was beyond the control of its larger allies, and that the Americans would do well to engage with it directly if it truly desired a brokered peace in Cambodia. And as it was with the DRV, so too with the PRC did Kissinger miss the point.

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In retrospectively committing pen to paper, Henry Kissinger marked the spring of 1973 as a pivotal moment in the Cambodian peace process. In his retelling, he was on the verge of a critical breakthrough with the Chinese, who had ostensibly signed onto a joint effort to bring Sihanouk, the remnant elements of the GKR and the United States together to hammer out a ceasefire and power-sharing agreement. This opportunity, however, was scuttled when the US Congress, in forcing a halt to the bombing of Cambodia, deprived the administration of its sole source of leverage over the outcome in that country, while simultaneously alienating the Chinese and handing Cambodia to the Khmer Rouge. In this way Henry Kissinger washed his hands of the Cambodian civil war and its horrible aftermath and walked away, pausing only to pick up his Nobel Peace Prize.

For a long time, no one has been able to gainsay this narrative, owing to a paucity of accessible documents. Even William Shawcross, Kissinger's principal antagonist in the historiography of American engagement in Cambodia, was only able to speculate that these "delicate negotiations" were a post facto fabrication to deflect blame for the civil war's outcome. We will not know the full extent of Henry Kissinger's career during his lifetime, and even then it is uncertain what secrets will be revealed once the archives are unsealed. Nevertheless, enough documentation has become available in the intervening years to be able to piece together a fairly certain case that these negotiations were non-substantive and going nowhere. Vietnam was clearly a nonstarter; Kissinger and Tho could not even agree on a shared frame of reference on the insurgency, what it

represented, and who was in control of it. And although the Chinese obviously desired peace in Cambodia as much as the Americans purported to, there's really nothing to suggest that they were prepared to sign on to a joint overture to the warring Cambodian parties, as Kissinger claimed in his memoirs. Rather, all signs seem to indicate that they were trying to convey a message to the Americans themselves, namely that direct engagement with the deposed Sihanouk was the key to achieving anything resembling a peaceful, neutral, independent Cambodia that all sides claimed to want. As with much else in this tragic episode, however, that message was lost on the national security advisor, as he continued to shun the prince, and to wait for his Vietnamese and Chinese counterparts to pull his chestnuts out of the fire for him. In other words, Nixon and Kissinger fiddled while Cambodia literally burned until Congress grew fed up with the bombs, and then took advantage of congressional intervention to deflect responsibility for the outcome by concocting a story of an opportunity squandered by a reckless legislature.

The sordid story of America's diplomatic failure in Cambodia is emblematic of the Nixon administration's foreign policy in general under the direction of Henry Kissinger, which is being re-evaluated by a generation of historians critical of Cold War superpower politics, and of this particular administration's relentless *realpolitik*. The Nixonian preoccupation with geopolitical strategy, and its underlying (and mistaken) assumption that problems in the periphery can be solved in Washington, Moscow or Beijing – all of which was on full display in its attempt to resolve the Cambodia question – caused an inordinate amount of human suffering in many different lands. The voices of these victims, long silenced by the “realists” of international relations and their fixation

on systemic stability and polar order, are only now beginning to be heard, decades after the fact. Cambodia – perhaps the single biggest failure of Nixonian foreign policy, where millions paid in blood for the administration's strategic blinders – needs to be understood against the background of this historical revision, as the consensus on the administration's foreign policy, and particularly of Henry Kissinger's career, completes its descent from brilliant to unimaginative, and even monstrous.

Bibliography

Archival sources – explanatory note

Most of the primary material in this essay was derived from archival sources in Washington, more specifically the National Archives and Records Administration facility in College Park, Maryland. This facility is also (as of 2009) the repository of the Nixon Presidential Materials Project, which although housed in the same building is nevertheless a separate entity from the rest of NARA. Categories of documents cited from the Nixon Project include the Henry A. Kissinger Office Files (abbreviated in the footnotes as HAK Office Files) and the National Security Council Files (abbreviated in the footnotes as NSC Files). Documents cited from the main body of NARA are marked as such in the footnotes. The numerical sequences in these footnotes give the box number, folder number and document number (if applicable), in that order.

This essay also made extensive use of material from the Digital National Security Archive, abbreviated in the footnotes as DNSA. I have cited documents from three collections in the DNSA: China and the United States, 1968-1998 (CH); the Kissinger Transcripts (KT); and the Kissinger Telephone Conversations (KA). The organization of each collection in this archive is chronological; the number and letter combinations in the footnotes, therefore, refer to the collection and the specific document contained therein.

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