

The Cambodian Incursion: American War of Ideology, 1969-1970

Abstract

This article is dedicated to the Cambodian incursion and it mainly focuses on U.S. foreign policy toward Cambodia between 1969 and 1970. This small neutral country marked the continuation of the conflict between the American and the Soviet ideologies that would vie for global influence throughout most of the twentieth century. The idealistic aspect of the conflict was the basic premise that being allied to America was good for humanity. Americans were supposedly protecting democracy or the possibility of democracy against a Stalinist dictatorship. Ironically, the Vietnamese were allied to the Soviet Union and their firmest hopes of future were placed on the prospect of a union between the North and the South. The idea, after all, turned neutral Cambodia into a major player in the strategic game- a state squeezed between imperial powers

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ملخص

يسلط هذا المقال الضوء على السياسة الخارجية الأمريكية تجاه بلد محايد سياسيا هو كمبوديا بين عامي 1969 و 1970 وما انطوت عليه من حملة عسكرية جسدت استمرارية الصراع والتنافس حول الهيمنة العالمية بين الإيديولوجية الأمريكية والسوفيياتية خلال أغلبية فترات القرن العشرين. وقد كان الجانب المثالي والنظري لهذا الصراع قائما على فكرة أن التحالف مع أمريكا فيه خير للإنسانية على اعتبار أنها الدولة التي تحمي الديمقراطية من الدكتاتورية الشيوعية. لكن وعلى عكس المتوقع تحالف الفيتناميون مع الاتحاد السوفيياتي وجعلوا مستقبلهم منصبا على اتحاد شمال الفيتنام بجنوبه. وهذا ما جعل كمبوديا تتحول إلى هدف أساسي في اللعبة الاستراتيجية تعتصرها قوى الإمبريالية بعد أن كانت بلدا محايدا سياسيا.

Introduction

The Nixon Doctrine- A New Changing Strategy

As the Soviet Union approached military parity with the United States, President Nixon and Henry Kissinger embraced a concept of realpolitik in which the world was not seen as divided between good and bad, but was seen as consisting of a variety of powers, all claiming a stake in the world.¹ Yet in Vietnam, America was motivated by the domino theory, which held that the fall of Vietnam would lead to one communist victory after another throughout the world. Communist success in China and the Korean conflict stoked the United States' belief that it had to defend itself against an aggressive East. Accordingly, the United States sought to contain communism by bringing about a

stable, independent South Vietnam.²As South Vietnamese forces became thus lavishly armed, they did more and more of the fighting, which increased the intensity of the civil war and further polarized the Vietnamese nation.

In the 1968 presidential campaign, candidate Richard M. Nixon stated that he had a plan to end the war in Vietnam. As it turned out, the plan was embryonic. When he took office he moved slowly, convinced that how the United States ended the war would have an enduring impact on future American foreign policy.³ In the spring of 1969, four years after the first ground combat troops landed in Vietnam, there were more than half a million US troops in Vietnam. But the war that once gathered support from much Americans has drastically changed. Years of growing frustration over a military strategy that focused on enemy bodies instead of territory has caused public support to move against American direct involvement in Vietnam.

On June 8, 1969, six months after taking office then, President Nixon met with South Vietnamese President Thieu and announced his plan to end American involvement in Vietnam. Animated by recognition that the United States had to alter its international commitments to match its resources and capabilities, Nixon described a more limited American role in his First Annual Report to the Congress on United States Foreign Policy, submitted on February 18, 1970. In this document, President Nixon called for “a more responsible participation by [America’s] foreign friends in their own defense.” He was calling for “a more balanced and realistic American role in the world,” if “American commitments are to be sustained over the long pull.”⁴

Henry Kissinger, Nixon’s national security adviser, became the key figure in the effort to end the war, a strategy that became known as the Nixon Doctrine. This was a tacit recognition that the United States could no longer, and would no longer, serve as policeman of the world.

An elaboration of the “Nixon Doctrine” ran as follows:

The Nixon Doctrine provides that the United States will reduce its presence, particularly its military presence, in areas we’re over-extended. In those cases, we will give those countries military and economic aid to support their budgets and armed forces, because when we withdraw Americans from such a country it causes quite a serious problem. In these cases, we will help them upgrade their military establishments so that those countries don’t feel insecure as a result of our withdrawal, but will do it in a gradual and orderly way. We say to a country: “Now you have to defend yourself against subversion, guerrilla attacks and so forth. Our treaty commitment with you applies to an attack by a major power.”⁵

The doctrine then was not meant to be a retreat from commitments. Rather, it was meant to be a reordering or balancing of resources to commitments. However, Harry Haldeman, Nixon's White House Chief of Staff had a different opinion:

I suspect... the Nixon Doctrine dealt with attempts to maintain the opportunity of people in other nations to govern themselves. This was denied the people of North Vietnam and was in the process of being denied the people of South Vietnam.⁶

The first application of the Nixon Doctrine was the Vietnamization program, by which the U.S. military began the long and complicated process of withdrawing American troops and training South Vietnamese to take over for combat responsibilities. Completion would depend on how things went in Vietnam.⁷

By January 1970, US troop levels have decreased by 60,000. Hoping to speed up the process, Kissinger began a series of negotiations with North Vietnamese negotiator, Lu Doc Tho. In Paris, after nearly two years, almost all that has been agreed upon was the shape of the negotiating table. Meanwhile, Nixon's Vietnamization has been slowly but steadily implemented. Throughout the country, U.S. troops were handing over equipment, bases and years of military knowledge to the South Vietnamese. As it became clear that America's goal was no longer the pledged military victory but instead an honorable exit from Vietnam, the morale of the troops was affected. On the ground, the North Vietnamese were able to transport military personnel, innumerable amounts of ammunition to Cambodia. This was an incredible military feat. Yet, they were vulnerable to attack after having operated out in the open for so long in Cambodia.⁸

The offensive into Cambodia

For Years, the North Vietnamese have used neighbouring Cambodia as a refuge. Much of the Ho Chi Minh Trail run through the country and large stores of Vietnamese weapons and supplies were hidden along the Cambodian border. But since the start of hostilities, U.S. policy has prohibited its ground troops from entering the country for risk of widening the war.

In early 1970, however, President Nixon seized a window of opportunity when the Cambodian leader Norodom Sihanouk was overthrown by the pro-American general Lon Nol. Ironically though; the new government had also shown poor leadership. Under LonNol's rule, there was instability and rampant corruption, while the military was further weakened by poor leadership, training, and morale. While the extent of the U.S. role in Sihanouk's ouster is still debated, there is no doubt that with him out of the way, the White House could greatly expand the Vietnam War into Cambodia. ⁹ Despite the political risk, President Nixon, in April 1970, decided a chance to destroy North Vietnamese army capacity to launch assaults. So he issued top secret orders sending US troops into Cambodia. The only solution for him was a direct military intervention. On the other side, the Vietnam leaders knew that Nixon was not planning for peace.

Nixon decided that the Cambodian incursion would be secretly and swiftly done. He did not find it necessary to inform Laird and Rogers because in his view it was only a military briefing. However, Kissinger recalled that Nixon was simply fed up with both secretaries' department's "bureaucratic foot-dragging," and was determined to keep them outside the decision-making process.¹⁰ This has been offered as evidence of the rushed and secretive nature of the decision to invade Cambodia.

The American mission in Cambodia was twofold: first, to dissipate North Vietnamese sanctuaries and disrupt their supply lines along the Ho Chi Min Trail; second, to attempt to find and destroy the central political and military headquarters of North Vietnam, which was rumored to be located in Cambodia. According to the American view, the United States and South Vietnam had the right to strike at the Communist sanctuaries, and these strikes did not violate Cambodian sovereignty because it had already been usurped by the Communists in that region.¹¹

On April 30, 1970, a few weeks after the overthrow of Prince Sihanouk, American soldiers crossed the border into neighboring Cambodia. Cambodians thought their country would be obliterated as the American invasion essentially involved raining bombs down upon their country. The invasion was a reminder of American power. B52s were flying very close to the ground. A total of 31,000 American and 43,000 South Vietnamese troops took part in the incursion into Cambodia. American intelligence estimated that the invading forces killed 11, 349 and captured 2,328 North Vietnamese soldiers, cleared 1,600 acres of jungle, destroyed 8,000 bunkers, and captured or destroyed large stocks of weapons. The United States lost 354 men killed and 1,689 wounded while South Vietnamese casualties totaled 638 killed and 3, 009 wounded.¹²

Even though the Americans failed to capture the military and political headquarters, they interrupted supply lines, forced a momentary suspension of the headquarters' functions, and, by American estimates, "virtually ended the North Vietnamese threat in the southern half of South Vietnam, the most populous part of the country."¹³

The Battelfield at Home

While American troops invaded Cambodia, President Nixon prepared to deal with the political problem; the uproar that the news would surely provoke. He decided to take the offensive so he could frain the issue before the others did:

North Vietnam has increased its military aggression ... and particularly in Cambodia... Cambodia, a small country of 7 million people, has been a neutral nation since the Geneva agreement of 1954 an agreement, incidentally, which was signed by the Government of North Vietnam... North Vietnam, however, has not respected that neutrality... Tonight, American and South Vietnamese units will attack the headquarters for the entire Communist

military operation in South Vietnam... This is not an invasion of Cambodia... We take this action not for the purpose of expanding the war into Cambodia but for the purpose of ending the war in Vietnam and winning the just peace we all desire.¹⁴

However, the Nixon administration's invasion of Cambodia had reinvigorated the Vietnam protest movement. Indeed, it was the first test of how others would react to American willingness to use brute force to subjugate another country.

The day after Nixon's announcement, student protests broke out in dozens of campuses across the country. On May 4, 2000 students rallied at Kent State. As the demonstration turned to violence, members of the Ohio National Guard suddenly opened fire on the crowd of students. When the dust settled, four students had been fatally shot by the Guardsmen.

Public reaction became more widespread. Across the country, campus disturbances were reported, and thousands converged on Washington for a major protest on May 9.¹⁵ For the American public, it was abundantly clear how little they really knew of what was going on behind the scenes. The public felt that their country has been going astray for years. As the level of anti-war activity had been raised, the war seemed immoral, unwise and not in the national interest of America, and therefore, it had to be brought to an end.

The public outcry also shocked the administration. As reports of atrocities reached the international world, the political atmosphere in the White House became tense and unstable. Nixon was accused of misguiding the American congress. He was not discharging his responsibilities to the country by keeping secret what has led to the escalation of the war.

With the country tearing itself apart, Congress had put severe limits on the use of American troops in Cambodia, even against North Vietnamese sanctuaries. The Senate soon passed the Cooper-Church Amendment, a provision that appeared to bar all forms of direct military action or assistance by United States forces in Cambodia. By the terms of the amendment, U.S. forces could not stay in Cambodia; the United States could not send its own advisers to that country nor could it hire others to teach or fight there, and last; the United States could not provide combat support for the Cambodian government.¹⁶ Congress also set June 30 as the date all American troops would overturn to South Vietnam. Looking back on these events in his memoirs, *White House Years*, Henry Kissinger, then Nixon's National Security Adviser, wrote that in the weeks following the Cambodian incursion "the very fabric of government was falling apart."¹⁷

Kissinger decided that the congress was the main obstacle to the American vision of Vietnam.

After a few tense weeks, the Americans stopped the bombardment. The lesson was that the people of the U.S. cannot afford to let the president run the country by himself without the help of the Congress and the public.

The Nixon administration then was in the middle of a catastrophe. Truly, the invasion was a real political blunder. It destroyed the U.S.-supported military government in Cambodia, and empowered the native Cambodian Communist resistance known as the Khmer Rouge, which eventually, in order to create a Utopian society, killed some two million of its fellow Cambodians.¹⁸ Still, much more was yet ahead.

The result was also a humanitarian catastrophe. For the Cambodians, this was one of the most brutal occupations in history. On the ground, the war created the bloodiest and the worst killing fields in Indochina as hundreds of thousands of civilians were killed by the most disproportional and systematic bombing campaign of Cambodia.

As 1970 slipped in 1971, peace talks continued to stop while Americans withdrawal from Vietnam accelerated. President Nixon stated that

[Americans] have kept [their] commitments as [they] have taken out [their] troops. South Vietnam now has an excellent opportunity not only to survive but to build a strong, free society. ... Americans are leaving South Vietnam in safety.... Negotiation remains the best and quickest way to end the war in a way that will not only end U.S. involvement and casualties but will mean an end to the fighting between North and South Vietnamese.¹⁹

In fact, Nixon's Vietnamization served as a tool to allow the United States to extricate itself from Vietnam. Further, the Cambodian incursion was an extension of the war into the South and constituted a magnification of the military aggression in Cambodia.

Conclusion

President Richard Nixon and his National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger decided to set a new strategy with realistic goals to achieve honorable peace in Vietnam. However, people fighting for their own freedom were not going to be stopped by just changing American strategy. The Vietnamese on the other side fought only for freedom, independence and national unity. They wanted to make relations with the Soviet Union to get the help they needed against Imperialist America which did not recognize their government. On both sides, this was an ideological war from the beginning.

As time passed quickly, it seemed that without the destruction of Cambodia, American goals could not be achieved. Yet, the Cambodian incursion in 1970 shook the foundations of American democracy to its very core. Americans showed the world a very rare case in which cruelty and indiscriminate were found in the Nixon's administration. America's major mistake was that its political leaders believed the war could still be won, even more prisoners of ideology than their predecessors. Ultimately,

Americans were not to win because the Vietnamese were not going to give up. It was an honor for the Vietnamese to fight for their peace and liberty while the atrocities committed by Americans in Vietnam were unworthy of a civilized nation.

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