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Norodom Sihanouk: His Mercurial Art of Preserving a Small State

By Emrys Chew & Alan Chong

Synopsis

No one has devised a universal formula for managing a small state's interests, let alone charted a foolproof course for survival. King Norodom Sihanouk's life and legacy must be appraised as a relentless game of skill to maintain Cambodia's political integrity.

Commentary

CAMBODIA'S FORMER king Norodom Sihanouk, ceremoniously laid to rest early this month, was frequently described by the world's press as mercurial. He appeared to leave statesmen and ideologues confused by the vicissitudes of his political life. But this was Sihanouk's flawed genius.

As king in his teens, then prime minister, and head of state and king again, his destiny was intertwined with Cambodia's. Sihanouk ensured that his small state – sired amid the Cold War, orphaned through the cruelties of the Khmer Rouge, and then occupied by Vietnam – was, nonetheless, not discarded by the international community.

Sihanouk's two-fold charm

The Cambodia that Sihanouk reigned over was a far cry from the ancient, proud Khmer kingdom that had once incorporated vast swathes of present-day Thailand, Laos and Vietnam. Along with much of Asia from the late 1940s, he oversaw Cambodia's transition toward sovereign statehood. He contended with the politics of a weakened French empire, the Cold War manoeuvres of Moscow, Washington and Beijing, as well as the turbulence of neighbouring Asian nationalisms obsessed with recovering lost pride and territories.

Sihanouk's charm worked two-fold: in his ability to switch allegiance as one would change a suit of clothes, and in his ability to balance the encroaching powers. While not everything he did was an unqualified success, his unorthodox moves helped preserve Cambodia despite recurring tragedies.

As World War Two ended, young Sihanouk, who was enthroned by the French colonial power, and kept on by the Japanese Imperial Army, decided that the nominal sovereignty accorded him could be driven towards a political bargain leading to independence with a constitution modelled on the 1946 French constitution. The French accepted this fait accompli but were reluctant to grant full independence. Meanwhile, Vietnamese

communist nationalism was beginning to inspire anti-colonial movements on the ground, threatening Sihanouk's legitimacy as the nationalist spearhead.

Refusing to be held hostage by French pusillanimity, Sihanouk visited London and Washington, seeking approval of his anti-communist, pro-independence credentials. Sihanouk argued that if he was bereft of Anglo-American backing, the French would hand Cambodia to the communists waging an anti-colonial insurgency in Cambodia and Vietnam.

Sihanouk leveraged himself between the American commitment to support its NATO ally France, and needing to back anti-communist nationalists. He extracted a dual commitment from both the French and the Americans for the partial neutralisation of Cambodia. Independence was attained without bloodshed in 1953, and aid and defence agreements with the Americans followed.

Win, lose, or draw in the Cold War

Sihanouk desired an additional layer of insurance, however. To keep Cambodia from getting drawn into a wider regional conflict, he espoused non-alignment by forging ties with Nehru's India and other members of the Afro-Asian movement that he had associated with at Bandung in 1955. Yet he was a mercurial figure operating in a high-pressure geopolitical environment where genuine neutrality was virtually impossible. This led him to make difficult choices of alliances, in pursuit of what he perceived as the least dangerous course of action for Cambodia.

With the Vietnam War escalating in the late 1960s and the US Air Force bombing Vietnamese military sanctuaries in Cambodia, Sihanouk appealed to China to pressure both Hanoi and Washington. But while visiting Moscow to seek Soviet support against North Vietnam, he was ousted by a US-backed General Lon Nol in 1970 effectively forcing him into political exile in Beijing. Sihanouk responded to the political betrayal by striking an ill-fated bargain with Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge, which he had suppressed previously. Visiting them in the field, his charismatic presence swelled their ranks from 6,000 to 50,000 fighters, many of whom were loyalist peasants fighting for Sihanouk, not communism.

Seizing power in 1975, the Khmer Rouge invited Sihanouk to return as head of state momentarily before consigning him to house arrest. When the Khmer Rouge regime was ousted by Vietnamese forces in 1979, Sihanouk deftly courted the Americans, along with ASEAN and the Chinese, in marshalling all Cambodian forces against the Soviet-backed Vietnamese occupation. Sihanouk presided over a UN-backed coalition that pressured Vietnam to withdraw from Cambodia in 1989 and restored constitutional government in 1993. Sihanouk returned to Cambodia as king again until his abdication in 2004.

Attesting to Sihanouk's remarkable capacity to forgive and reconcile the extremes, he presided over a royal government that was headed by two prime ministers, the Vietnamese-supported Hun Sen and one of Sihanouk's sons, Prince Ranariddh. Both premiers fell out following the defection of the Khmer Rouge in the post-war political landscape.

Although Premier Hun Sen eventually took charge under a parliamentary system that reinforced a dominant party regime, Sihanouk had achieved his goal of preserving Cambodian sovereignty. It must have given Sihanouk some satisfaction in his old age that despite issues with corruption and authoritarianism, Hun Sen's Cambodia was at last entering a phase of peace and stability after four decades of unending conflict.

The art of the mercurial leader

We might never know what he truly thought of his opponents, but in his worldview, the Cold War was never a bipolar chess game and he never a mere pawn. His legacy must surely be appraised as that of a Third World leader playing the Cold War contest with the weakest hand, yet compensating by playing fast and loose.

Sihanouk was by turns entrepreneurial, and where he could not control events, drifted along with the political tides, until such time as he could play his cards to decisive effect. He raised many eyebrows when he bided his time in exile in both Beijing and Pyongyang. His chameleonic political alliances and extreme ideological flexibility showcased the strength of weakness, a recourse to strategies available to leaders of small states.

Independent Cambodia faced a strategic nightmare not unlike many decolonised states. To check predatory neighbours he courted the big powers. When some of them turned menacing, he courted their rivals. He conceded ground tactically, with the existential aim of keeping Cambodian sovereignty intact. With a disarming smile – against the volatility of competing regional nationalisms and global superpower brinkmanship – he demonstrated that the 'tail' could wag the 'dog'. Sihanouk looms larger than life in the annals of Asian nationalism, having so intuitively set a mercury standard for small state survival.

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