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Driving Factors Pushing Cambodia into Vietnam War (1960s-1970s)

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Abstract: Vietnam War, also known as Indochina war, is one of the serious historical tragedies for the Vietnamese and the neighboring countries, Laos and Cambodia. Millions of people died and thousands of houses were destroyed. The war took place from the 1950s to 1970s. This war is commonly known as the competition between the Communist bloc led by Soviet Union and the Capitalist bloc led by the United States. Vietnam's neighboring country, Cambodia, was positioning as neutral, non-allied to any bloc, yet after the coup to overthrow Prince Sihanouk in 1970, Cambodia declared taking side with Capitalist bloc fighting against the North Vietnamese government which sided with the Communists led by the Soviet Union. This paper will figure out the driving causes which drove Cambodia to shift its neutral position to be sided with the United State-led Capitalist bloc pushing the country deeply into the war causing serious tragedy in Cambodia's history.

Key words: Vietnam, Cambodia, United States, Vietnam War, Khmer Republic.

INTRODUCTION

After World War II ended in 1945, the world was dominated by two major blocs namely, the Communist bloc led by the Soviet Union and the Capitalist bloc led by the United States. In Indochina region, the nationalist movements striking against the colonizers were increasing. In 1941, the prominent Vietnamese nationalist Ho Chi Minh and his communist colleagues formed a nationalist movement namely the League for Independence of Vietnam, also known as Viet Minh, aiming to fight against foreign occupiers namely the Japanese and French.¹ In 1945 Japanese

¹ Encyclopedia Britannica, Viet Minh, accessed on 12 June, 2018, via: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Viet-Minh>

surrendered and withdrew from Vietnam due to the losing in the World War II. The League for Independence of Vietnam had face another confrontation with French. French troops were defeated in 1954 and resulting in a Geneva Accord recognizing the independence of Vietnam. Yet, the Accord divided Vietnam into two, the North Vietnam, controlled by the Communists led by Ho Chi Minh, and the South Vietnam, led by Ngo Dinh Diem backed by the United States. The confrontation between the two Vietnams which backed by their allies has expanded and lasted till 1973 when the United States withdrew their armies from Indochina. Cambodia was dragged into the war which seriously ruined the country and tens of thousands of people were killed. In March 18, 1970, there was a coup to depose the Prince Norodom Sihanouk from power as head of state and the new United States-backed government was formed and transformed the country from Monarchy to the Republic. Both internal and external factors are the root causes dragging Cambodia to get involved in Vietnam war which resulted in social break up, tens of thousands of people died and thousands of houses were destroyed.

BRIEF HISTORY OF VIETNAM WAR

Vietnam War is the form of nationalist struggle to fight against foreign occupiers in their country. After Geneva Accord in July 1954, Vietnam was supposed to be temporarily divided into two, the South and the North. The national election was planned to be held in 1956 to elect the President and unify the country. This national election never happened because the U.S.-backed South Vietnamese government did not accept to join the election as they knew that Ho Chi Minh, the Communist North Vietnam's leader would win the election. The South Vietnam government depended on the U.S.'s aids for survival.

The two Vietnamese governments faced internal opposition which led to arms clashes fighting against one another. Ho Chi Minh had gained trust and support from majority of Vietnamese people while the Diem administration faced many problems such as internal break up within the government and there were people in the South formed group fighting against the government. In early 1950s, North Vietnamese government received aids from both Soviet Union and China as China.

Diem's administration was much criticized by the people as well as officials in the government because Diem appointed a number of his family to possess prominent positions in the government. Even Diem administration received \$US 300 million per year, but he was reluctant to take

Washington's advice regarding the political and economic reform in the country.² Diem's nepotism and weak administration were beneficiary to the Communist North Vietnamese government to gain more support from people in the South. There was a rebel group namely National Liberation Front, formed in the South aiming to fight against the U.S-backed government in the country. The United States' government saw the declining of Diem' regime and civil uprising in the South protesting again the government. Thus, the United States tried to take control the situation by increasing aids and sent more military advisors as well as the special force to help the South Vietnamese government. Yet situation was too serious to control under Diem's regime. To cope with deteriorating situation, the United States, under Kennedy administration backed a military coup to depose Diem and his relatives from government. Diem and his brother, Nhu, head of the regime's secret police, were assassinated in 1963.³

In August 1964, two United States' destroyers were attacked in the Gulf of Tonkin. The United States accused the North Vietnamese government for the incidents. Consequently, the U.S.'s congress passed a Resolution regarding the Tonkin attacks, authoring the right to the U.S's president to use all kinds of means to prevent the Americans from such any attack in the future. Some scholars analyzed that Tonkin attacks was the American's pretext to allow the United States to send more troops to fight a war in Vietnam. Receiving the resolution from the Congress, the United States' president Lyndon B. Johnson, in August, ordered out a sharp attack on communist North Vietnamese government's naval facilities. The war had been escalated into bigger scale while in 1965, the United States' president Lyndon B. Johnson ordered U.S.'s air force to bomb the communist North Vietnam. This escalating attack could not stop the communist North Vietnamese's struggling for victory to their country. There were also more attacks occurred on the South Vietnamese government, the United States' president Lyndon B. Johnson had increased the numbers of American troops to 200,000 to fight in war in Vietnam. By 1968, the number of United States' troops rose to more than 500,000 stationed in Vietnam.⁴ Massive bombings were conducted to not only in North Vietnam but also the bombardment was spread into Loa's and Cambodia's territory. The amount of bombs which the United States dropped during Vietnam War was three

² Antony Best, Jussi Hanhimäki, Joseph Maiolo and Kirsten Schulze,(2008), 'International History of the Twentieth Century and Beyond' 2rd.ed. pp.299

³ Newsweek (17/10/2013), ' Dead of a President': accessed on 13 June 2018, via <http://www.newsweek.com/2013/10/18/death-president-243702.html>

⁴ Antony, 'International History of the Twentieth Century and Beyond', pp. 301

time larger than the amount of bombs which dropped by all combatants in the Second World War. The United States even used chemical weapons such as Agent Orange and other chemicals to attack on the North Vietnamese government's armies and the rebel group hiding in the jungles in Vietnam and in jungle in Cambodia's territory in order to destroy and stop them from accessing to foods. The chemical attacks did not only killed the solders but the civilians. The United States' government was so much worried that the communist North Vietnamese government and the National Liberation Front, were gaining more support from people all over the country.

Facing the confrontation with the U.S-backed South Vietnamese government, the North Vietnamese leaders ordered out to use revolutionary warfare against the South Vietnamese government, aiming to end the civil war and unify the county. In 1959, the communist North Vietnamese government put out a plan to build secret path namely Ho Chi Minh Trail, used as strategic route to fight against the South Vietnamese government.⁵ North Vietnamese government used the Ho Chi Minh trail which running from North Vietnam to Loa, Cambodia and the South Vietnam, to attack the South Vietnamese government and send supplies to the National Liberation Fronts which based in the South. The United States heavily bombed targeting the Ho Chi Minh trail which the bombardment spreading into Lao's and Cambodia's territory. This circumstance was one of the key actors to damage the neutral position of the two countries, Cambodia and Loa.

The communist North Vietnamese government received aids from both the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. Even though during the time of Sino-Soviet split, the North Vietnamese government still received heavy military weapons from the Soviet Union while they also received the lighter form of military aids from Chinese government. Both the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union sent their military advisors to help the communist North Vietnamese government to fight against the U.S-backed South Vietnamese government. The National Liberation Front launched major attacks namely Tet Offensive on the government of the South Vietnam and the Americans in 1968. Within days, most of provincial cities and the major cities of the South Vietnam were under fire. More significantly, even the United States' embassy in Saigon was also under the attack. This hazardous attack aimed to destroy the Saigon government and to show to the United States' government that the war was not over. Vietnam War was completely ended in 1975 when the United States withdrew their troops from Indochina countries

⁵ Encyclopedia Britannica, 'Ho Chi Minh Trail' : accessed on 13 June 2018, via <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ho-Chi-Minh-Trail>

in 1973 and the two Vietnams were unified into one as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. This war caused millions of people died. More than 58,000 of Americans soldiers died while other 300,000 were wounded and almost 14,000 other were completely disable. In Vietnam, more than two million people died and other four millions are wounded and more than five millions acres of cropland and forest were laid waste due to 18 million gallons of poisonous chemical herbicides.⁶

FACTORS DRIVING CAMBODIA INTO VIETNAM WAR

After gaining dependence from France in 1953, the King Norodom Sihanouk (later prince) turned the country's foreign policy toward the neutral position, non-allied to any bloc. He wanted to prevent Cambodia from getting involved in the Cold War, the Indochina war. Yet, Cambodian government's neutral foreign policy, under the Prince Sihanouk administration, was labeled as pro-Communist by the United States. Prince Sihanouk, the head of State of Cambodia, shifted the country's foreign policy to the left wing believing that the Communists would win the Indochina war.⁷ His position tending to procommunist bloc led to disappointment to some officials whose position tend to pro the Capitalist bloc, in the government especially within the armies.

In 1965, the relations between the Kingdom of Cambodia and the United States were cut off and that circumstance allowed China to step in boosting cooperation with Cambodia. In fact, the when Cambodian government rejected to join the South East Asian Treaty Organization which led by the United States (SEATO) in 1955, Cambodian government already earned the trust, economic and military aids from China and the political support from the communist North Vietnamese government. In March 1970, there were mass demonstrations protesting against the presence of Viet Cong, and North Vietnamese troops in Cambodia's territory. On March 18, 1970, Lieut. Gen. Lon Nol, the Prime Minister and Defense Minister, and the First Deputy Prime Minister, Prince Sisowath Sirik Matak, the Prince Sihanouk's cousin, led a coup to overthrow the Prince Sihanouk from his post as chief of state and reshaped the Country's foreign policy toward the United States.⁸ Cambodia was changed its administration from Kingdom of Cambodia to the Khmer Republic. Premier Lon Nol was later elected as the President of Khmer Republic in 1972. The new

⁶ Starr, Jerold M, (1991), ' The Lesson of Vietnam War', Center for Social Studies Education, USA, pp.iii

⁷ Sok Udom Deth,(2009), 'The Geopolitics of Cambodia During the Cold War Period', Ohio University, journal of southeast asian studies, Vol.9, Spring 2009, pp. 47-48

⁸ Henry Kamm (March 19,1970), 'Sihanouk Reported Out in a Coup by His Premier; Cambodia Airport Shut', The New York Times News: accessed on 14 June 2018 via <https://www.nytimes.com/1970/03/19/archives/sihanouk-reported-out-in-a-coup-by-his-premier-cambodia-airports.html>

government led by General Lon Nol was backed by the United States. Lon Nol eventually turned Cambodia to be officially sided with United States fighting against the Communists and allowed the United States' and the South Vietnam's troops to base in Cambodia's territory in order to fight against the Communist North Vietnamese and the Cambodian communist movement namely Khmer Rouge.

President Lon Nol was not intelligent and his poor health condition did not allow him to have fast-moving countryside visits to earn popular supports in those areas. The country faced economic downturn, military reversals and his popularity declined.⁹ There was corruption within Lon Nol administration. Within the armies, there were illegal arms sales to the Communist Vietnamese through black market.¹⁰ Poor administration and the United States' bombardment in Cambodia's territory in late 1960s and early 1970s caused tens of thousands of Cambodian people died and thousands of houses were destroyed. These circumstances caused many people lost trust and support in Lon Nol administration, especially people who living in the areas which were affected by the U.S's bombardment.

The failure to gain popular support and the poor administration of the government in Lon Nol administration were beneficial to the Khmer Rouge, the communist Cambodian movement. This communist group was originally formed aiming to fight against the French which colonized Cambodia nearly a century. The group was not dissolved even though Cambodia fully gained Independence from France in 1953. This communist movement had close link with Communist North Vietnamese government as they were sided in the Communist bloc. The Khmer Rouge had gained more support from the people as the Prince Sihanouk, while staying in Beijing, formed an exiled government and encouraged people in the country to join with Khmer Rouge in order to fight against Lon Nol administration which backed by the Capitalist United States. The number of Khmer Rouge members was increasing. The Chinese military assistance and the increasing numbers of soldiers had allowed the Khmer Rouge to expand controlling areas.

On April 17, 1975, Khmer Rouge defeated Lon Nol administration and took control country since that time. Khmer Rouge put Prince Sihanouk in house arrest and took control of the country.

⁹ Official webpage of Office of the Historian, 'Telegram From the Embassy in Cambodia to the Department of State' Department of States of USA: accessed on 14 June 2018 via: https://history.state.gov/historical_documents/frus1969-76v10/d137

¹⁰ Julio Jeldress, (March 18 2015), 'Opinion: March 18, 1970: 'Revolutionary' Group Moves Against Sihanouk', The Cambodia Daily News, Phnom Penh, Cambodia; available at: <https://www.cambodiadaily.com/news/march-18-1970-revolutionary-group-moves-against-sihanouk-80002/>

Under Khmer Rouge administration, Cambodia as changed its official name from Khmer Republic to Kampuchea Democratic. Khmer Rouge regime turned the country into genocide. The Khmer Rouge had ran the country for three years. In 1979, Khmer Rouge regime was collapsed due to the Vietnamese invasion. Nearly two million people died during the Khmer regime.¹¹

CONCLUSION

The major factors which dragged Cambodia to get involved in the Vietnam War can be concluded as the influence of the Cold War in the region as well as the fragile neutral foreign policy of the Prince Sihanouk administration. The influence of the Cold War in Indochina had led Vietnam to break into the North Vietnam and the South Vietnam. With assistances and influence of the supper powers namely the Soviet Union and the United States, the two Vietnams fought against one another to take control the whole country. The Cambodia's neutrality in foreign policy was threatened. The United States' bombing in Cambodia's territory and the presence of Viet Cong's and North Vietnamese troops in Cambodia's territory played major role in threatening Cambodia's neutrality and it resulted in a coup to depose the Prince Sihanouk from power. Noun Sothimon, Cambodian senior government official, wrote in his book, 'U.S's War in Cambodia, Lon Nol and Khmer Rouge-1970 – 1975' there were American's CIA tried to lobby the senior Cambodian government officials to be allied with the United States and promising to be with and help Cambodia at all time. The United States successfully dragged Cambodia to be on her side fighting in Indochina war against the Communists after the 1970 coup. This circumstance can be viewed as the external driving force pushing Cambodia the Vietnam War which resulting in social break up in Cambodian society among people who adored the Prince Sihanouk and the new formed government. There were demonstrations occurred in countryside demanding the return of Prince Sihanouk to country and handing back his power to his him. The demonstrators were cracked down by the Lon Nol government's army.

The presence of Viet Minh and Viet Cong in Cambodia's territory started in 1962. In 1969 there were 50,000 Vietnamese troops in Cambodia's territory.¹² They based in Cambodia's territory aiming to fight against the South Vietnamese government. Cambodia's soil was used to

¹¹ Official webpage of Cambodia Tribunal Monitor, ' Khmer Rouge History', accessed on 15 June 2018 via: <http://www.cambodiatribunal.org/history/cambodian-history/khmer-rouge-history/>

¹² Noun Sothimon,(2005), 'U.S's War in Cambodia, Lon Nol and Khmer Rouge-1970-1975' ATB Center, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 2nd Ed. Pp.02

battle fired for the tow Vietnams and the United States without any consent of Cambodian government. This scenario can also be implied as another external factor bridging Cambodia to the Indochina war tragedy.

Internally, Prince Norodom Sihanouk also played important role in bringing Cambodia to get involved in this Indochina war. Cambodian government rejected to join SEATO in 1955, the decided to cut off military and economic aids from the United States in 1963 and, in 1965 Cambodia cut all relations with the United States and turned to forming international alliance with China.¹³ Prince Sihanouk's tendency of foreign policy toward China caused disappointment of those officials who pro the United States. This scenario resulted in the coup on March 18 1970 to depose the Prince from power. After the coup in 1970, Cambodia the Indochina war occurred in Cambodia's territory in more tragic and bigger scale.

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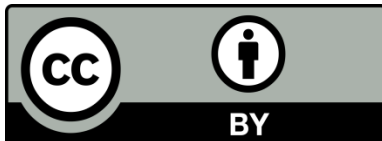
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