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Cambodia



Tea and sympathy: Mao Tse-tung entertaining Prince Sihanouk and his wife.

By MARTIN STUART-FOX

AUSTRALIA'S "special relationship" with the neutral State of Cambodia is in danger of crumbling as a result of Australian support for American policy in Vietnam.

This is the only conclusion one can come to after talking to French, Australian and Cambodian sources in the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh.

A succession of Australian ambassadors to Cambodia have diligently built up Australian-Cambodian relations to the point where, in a very real sense a "special relationship" does exist. Indicative of this is the fact that the Australian Embassy in Phnom Penh handles American affairs there and the Australian Embassy in

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that all Cambodian students have been thrown out of China as a result of the current purge in that country. All Australian aid to Cambodia is given under the Colombo Plan.

Since Cambodia broke off diplomatic relations with the United States early last year and her relations became strained with a number of America's allies.

Australia has managed to remain in the good books of the acute, but volatile Prince Sihanouk.

She has done so through tact and diplomacy in a touchy situation. Another factor is that Sihanouk seems unwilling to burn all his bridges to the West.

Until recently Australia was the only Western power with full diplomatic relations with Cambodia. At the end of September the British rep-

sense a "special relationship" does exist. Indicative of this is the fact that the Australian Embassy in Phnom Penh handles American affairs there and the Australian Embassy in Saigon looks after Cambodian interests in South Vietnam.

On the surface there has been no change in this amicable relationship, but underneath there is a new tension that was not there before the Australian task force went to Vietnam.

Australian post-war diplomacy in Cambodia, and indeed throughout South-East Asia, has always emphasised Australia's geographic position as part of Asia, her vital interest in Asian affairs and her potential role as a bridge between the West and Asia — a nation with a special understanding of the needs, problems and aspirations of both East and West.

This has paid off in a number of ways. Diplomatic, and even friendly, relations were maintained with Indonesia throughout the period of confrontation with Malaysia. Australia has built up a reserve of trust and appreciation in Cambodia despite her aid and friendship with the nations Cambodia considers her traditional and implacable enemies — Thailand and South Vietnam.

However, Australian military support for the South Vietnamese regime is placing a severe strain upon her carefully constructed relationship with Cambodia. Prince Norodom Sihanouk, Cambodian Chief of State, has said that what is happening in South Vietnam is the business of the South Vietnamese and the United States but that the moment the war spills over the border into Cambodia it becomes a matter of grave concern for the Cambodians.

Australian diplomats in Phnom Penh were most relieved when Australian troops in Vietnam were sent to Vung Tau on the east coast where there is no possibility that they could be involved in border incidents with Cambodia.

In fact, French sources in Cambodia even go so far as to suggest that the Australians were deliberately stationed in Phuoc Tuy province to avoid any border incidents and thus enable Australia to maintain her friendly relationship with Cambodia for as long as possible.

The presence of Australian Air Force units in Thailand, even though they are there under control of the South-east Asia Treaty Organisation (Seato), does nothing to reassure the Cambodians.

Pretext

The memory of World War II when the Thai took the opportunity to annex Cambodia's two western provinces is still too fresh in Cambodian minds. They firmly believe the Thai are only awaiting a pretext to move into Cambodia again.

Mr Holt's swing through South-East Asia this year did not help matters although the embassy reportedly worked overtime to convince the Cambodians that his visits exclusively to those nations where Australian troops were stationed were for internal political reasons and heralded no change in Australian policy in Asia.

Mr Holt visited Australian troops in South Vietnam, Thailand and Malaysia, but passed over Cambodia.

Foreign aid to Cambodia comes principally from France and the communist bloc. The only foreign military advisers in the country are members of the French Military Mission provided for under the terms

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of the 1954 Geneva Accords. There are also hundreds of French teachers and French advisers are employed in most Government departments.

The Chinese have built a number of factories in Cambodia where they have technicians working to train Cambodian personnel. These factories include a plywood mill, a cement works and a small-arms factory, there are no Chinese military advisers in the country.

Australian aid to Cambodia is meagre in comparison, but it serves to remind the Cambodians that the West is also interested in the progress and prosperity of their country.

In the past Australia has given Cambodia some railway passenger carriages, a complete maintenance and repair workshop that services all government vehicles in Phnom Penh and more than 100 mobile irrigation pumps.

The latest Australian gift is a fully equipped hydrographic survey launch for the newly constructed port of Sihanoukville complete with technicians who will train a Cambodian crew on the job.

In addition there are regular scholarships for Cambodians to study in Australia. These will be doubly appreciated now

Cambodia. At the end of September the British representation in Phnom Penh was raised from charge d'affaires to full ambassadorial level.

For a year and a half Australia has handled American interests in Cambodia, a task which, in view of the strained relations existing between the United States and Cambodia, calls for patience and understanding.

Reduced

Soon after the U.S. asked Australia to represent it in Phnom Penh the Cambodians requested Australia to look after its affairs in Saigon. Previously France had handled Cambodian affairs in Saigon but when French representation there was reduced to the consular level at the request of the South Vietnamese Government the Cambodians turned to Australia rather than to another Asian nation.

Given Cambodia's almost paranoic fear and distrust of the Thai and Vietnamese and her dislike of the United States as embodied in the spectre of the Central Intelligence Agency it is only natural that Australian support for American policies in Thailand and South Vietnam should place a strain on her relations with Cambodia, Australian denials to the contrary.

Observers agree that any further increase in Australia's troop commitment and support for "hawk" policies in Vietnam can only place more strain on Australian-Cambodian relationships.