Nicholas Tarling


Until his demise in 2012, Norodom Sihanouk was a phenomenon of political and indeed physical survivor—in stark contrast with a large part of his unfortunate people. For more than 70 years he held the positions of king, head of state, prime minister, leader in exile, and lately king-father. His controversial political roles have been examined in detail by a host of historians and political analysts such as Wilfred Burchett, David Chandler, and Milton Osborne, to name a few of the better-known studies. As Nicholas Tarling shows with the present book, there are nevertheless untapped sources which can deepen our understanding of the enigmatic prince. The author has undertaken a thorough study of the British diplomatic records from the National Archive in London, complemented with American sources on foreign relations and newspapers. The story runs in a strictly chronological fashion from the Geneva Conference in 1954 to the overthrow of Sihanouk in 1970.

Britain was not a main player in the political game that evolved in Indochina during the period, and its attention in Southeast Asia was devoted to Sukarno’s ‘devour Malaysia’ campaign during the escalation of the Vietnam War. After Malaysian-Indonesian relations were normalized, the British withdrew most of their political commitments in the region east of Suez in 1967. As pointed out by Tarling, they nevertheless tried to play an active role with regard to Indochina up to that date, though they were overshadowed by their American allies. The general policy was to impede an escalation of the Cold War and make themselves useful to the US in various diplomatic issues. One British concern was the neutrality of the weak and hard-pressed Cambodia. An agreement on the neutralization of Laos was hammered out in 1961–1962, although it proved to be worth little. Sihanouk wanted a similar conference to ensure the neutralization of Cambodia. The British were supportive of this in spite of misgivings about the unpredictable stance of the prince, and in fact a substantial part of Tarling’s book is about the ultimately unsuccessful efforts to convene such a conference. The increasingly precarious position of Cambodia during the 1960s is tellingly illustrated by the diplomatic reports, which show Sihanouk’s deep distrust of his Thai and South Vietnamese neighbors. For example, the area of the Preah Vihear temple, which has made headlines in recent years as a bone of contention between Thailand and Cambodia, was already an acute issue in the period under scrutiny. Repeated South Vietnamese and American violations of the border added to the prince’s fears of Vietnamese historically rooted expansionism. The reports hint that Sihanouk’s overtures with Communist China and...
North Vietnam related to his belief that Communism was inevitably bound to overtake Indochina, and that it was vital to make the best of an awkward situation for Cambodia.

The material is interesting not least for the forecasting made by diplomats at the time. The British acknowledged that the prince, in spite of his sometimes erratic course of action, managed to keep the country united and relatively peaceful. Still, they were far from optimistic in the years prior to his actual overthrow in 1970. The counter-insurgency expert Robert Thompson asked in 1964 if one could not exert pressure to topple Sihanouk, which would certainly ignite a Communist insurgency on Cambodian soil, but also lead to a US-supported regime in Phnom Penh and ‘an identifiable front in Southeast Asia’. This prompted the diplomat James Cable to question if the country would hold together or disintegrate if such a coup took place. As is now known, events after 1970 fully affirmed his fears. His colleague Leslie Fielding wrote prophetically in 1965: ‘Sihanouk will continue to walk the political tight-rope ... In perhaps five years time he may have become so eccentric and arbitrary that an indigenous opposition will arise to overthrow him’.

Tarling’s work has some shortcomings. The index is incomplete, which is irritating since the text is studded with details and names which are sometimes difficult to keep apart. There are some inconsistencies, such as the spelling of Chinese names and the use of abbreviations. Moreover, there is very little contextualization of the political events that are mentioned, which means that their significance is frequently obscure for anyone who does not already know the story. In many ways the book is a tool rather than a study. It contains an impressive amount of data from the archives, but hardly any analysis (although there is a useful retrospect on the last five pages). The contents of the various chapters are not summarized and the strict empirical-chronological structure makes the text rather tedious at times. What it offers is important raw data for the study of the diplomatic game in the fateful years when the Vietnam conflict escalated.

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