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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Memorandum of Conversation

DATE: July 23, 1970

PLACE: Assistant Secretary Green's Office

SUBJECT: Situation in Southeast Asia

PARTICIPANTS: Rene Lion, Charge d'Affaires a.i. of Belgium
A. Rahir, Counselor, Belgian Embassy
Marshall Green, Assistant Secretary
J. T. Papendorp, EUR/FBX

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Mr. Lion called at his initiative to request a review of the Secretary's recent visit to Southeast Asia and developments since that time.

SEATO

Mr. Green said that the SEATO Meeting in Manila and the Troop Contributing Countries (TCC) Ministerial Meeting in Saigon were both largely ritualistic. The most significant development in the SEATO Meeting was the announcement by the British representative Royle that the UK would review its position on withdrawal of forces from east of Suez and would continue to maintain a presence in Singapore. This announcement brought spontaneous applause from the participants. There was some discussion of the Nixon Doctrine and several of the members expressed concern that American withdrawal from the area might be too great and too fast but the Secretary was able to reassure them on this.

TCC and Security Situation in Vietnam

The most significant thing about the TCC Meeting was that it brought five Foreign Ministers and their wives to Saigon - something that would have been unbelievable two years ago and unlikely last year. It demonstrated the very real improvement in the local security situation. The Ministers were even able to take a field trip outside of the capital without incident. In response to Mr. Lion's question about the reaction of the other parties to the U.S. troop withdrawals from Vietnam, Mr. Green said that it appeared that there would be no Korean, New

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Zealand or Thai withdrawals patterned after ours, although the Australians would make a token withdrawal of one Battalion. Mr. Green said that many U.S. troops had been withdrawn from the II Corps areas and that the IV Corps region was completely Vietnamized. The Vietnamese operations against the Cambodian sanctuaries had given ARVN and the Government confidence in what the Vietnamese forces could do, even operating independently and on foreign soil. This increase in confidence, coupled with the destruction of the sanctuary supplies had without doubt improved the security situation in South Vietnam. There was, nevertheless, continued enemy threat especially further north in the area along the First and Second Corps border south of Danang.

Situation in Cambodia

Mr. Green mentioned that during this trip he had had the opportunity to make a two-day visit to Phnom Penh and, although he was by nature a sceptic, he had come away encouraged that the short-term situation is quite good and that there is hope for the long term. The Cambodian Army, the FANK, must of course, be expanded and strengthened, but this is under way. We have provided over 35,000 small arms and several million rounds of ammunition, several hundred FANK NCO's are in training in Thailand and 10,000 FANK are in training in South Vietnam. Cambodian ethnics from South Vietnam, the Khmer Krom, had been integrated into FANK and were doing a good job. In addition, ethnic Cambodians from Thailand, Khmer Thai, were being trained and equipped there for eventual deployment in Cambodia.

Communist Operations

In response to Mr. Lion's question about the military activity of the other side, Mr. Green showed Mr. Lion on a map the current disposition of enemy forces. He pointed out that areas in the northeast of the country had been under NV/VC control for some while and the Cambodians plan no major attempt to expel them. They would concentrate their efforts to protect the rice and population belt of the country south of the line of Route 6 and 7. As far as we knew, there were between 35 and 40,000 enemy troops in Cambodia at this time, opposed by 70,000 FANK under arms and some 18,000 ARVN. South Vietnam forces have the capability to return when and if necessary. Mr. Green pointed out that in 1969 about 3/4 of NV/VC supplies came in through Sihanoukville. This is now subject to an effective blockage by the South Vietnamese. The Communist land supply route through Laos is not only physically more difficult to utilize but is under attack both by Lao guerilla forces and U.S. air attacks. We understand that much of the movement of NV/VC bands through the central region are mainly for foraging purposes rather than any attempt to "encadre" the country side. In any event, they are having a difficult time doing this in the rural areas since the NV/VC not only are hated as Tonkinese strangers, but also their potential helpers, the Khmer Rouge, are anti-Sihanouk.

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Broad Support for Lon Nol

Mr. Green pointed out that while the politically active urban groups strongly support the Lon Nol Government - the army, the students, the intellectuals, and the Buddhists, - the peasantry is largely apathetic. One problem in the relation between the South Vietnamese and Cambodians has been that of Vietnamese ethnic refugees - many of these were evacuated to Vietnam following the early massacres. Mr. Green described the relations between Lon Nol and President Thieu as excellent; the relationship between the Cambodian and Vietnamese peoples, as such, suspicious; and between FANK and ARVN one of some tension, in view of the contrast between the rag-tag Cambodian forces and the highly trained and well-equipped ARVN units. In addition, there were stories about ARVN high-handedness, and molestation of Khmers, etc., but President Thieu is doing what he can to avoid excesses. All in all, Khmer-SVN relations are now remarkably good, given the long historic enmity between Cambodians and Vietnamese.

Political Situation in Vietnam and Peace Prospects

Mr. Lion asked about the political situation in Vietnam as a whole, particularly the role of the Soviet Union and China in the conflict. Mr. Green responded that rather than there being the question of increased Chinese influence, per se, on Hanoi, it appeared that the longer the war goes on, the more the North Vietnamese become like the Chinese: hard, tough, increasingly intransigent, and interested in struggle for its own sake. This obviously makes it more difficult to achieve peace. On the other hand, the attitude of other countries with some influence in Hanoi - the French, the Soviets, and the Indians - seems to favor a negotiated settlement. Mr. Green noted that Hanoi is still swayed by the power of world public opinion: and particularly by the development of public opinion in the United States. Once they feel that the world looks to them to make some move, then they may make it.

The best prospects for peace at this stage seemed to lie in continued probings in the Paris talks. With the return of the Communist principals there, chances seemed to be improving. Mr. Green said he could not comment on reported new instructions to Ambassador Bruce from the President, but he could say that Bruce has both extraordinary experience and diplomatic flexibility, and is backed up by an outstanding team of 40 good men under Ambassador Habib.

Relations with China

Mr. Lion drew attention to the recent Chinese release of Bishop Walsh and the fact that the Cambodian operations had caused only a postponement, rather than a breaking off of the U.S./Chinese talks in Warsaw. He asked Mr. Green to comment on the Chinese position. Mr. Green said the Chinese leadership could not be described as more forthcoming, but only as less extreme. Diplomatically, it seemed to be more flexible, economically it seemd to take a more pragmatic attitude but politically there was no change. We had heard rumors of the assignment of a new Chinese Ambassador to Warsaw and if true, this would probably have an impact on the talks when they reopen. The increased Chinese flexibility vis-a-vis its relations with the U.S. also improves their position vis-a-vis the USSR and they're vastly interested in probing for more information about what the U.S. has in mind re its future relations with China.

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