

WASHINGTON COMMENTS

Sen. Frank Murkowski



THE UNITED STATES' ROLE IN CAMBODIA

The agony of Cambodia continues. Once again, the United States must consider to what extent should we become involved in finding a solution to the problems of Indochina.

With the painful memories of Vietnam still in mind, Congress has just authorized assistance to noncommunist resistance movements opposing the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia.

Our aid will provide up to \$5 million in 1986 to the guerrilla forces of Prince Norodom Sihanouk and former Cambodian Prime Minister Son Sann, the leader of the Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF). There is also the prospect of supplying more financial aid in future years.

To date, only "military assistance" and "economic support" have been specified, but weapons could also be provided.

The idea of aid to the noncommunist resistance has received bipartisan approval in Congress. The United States cannot be indifferent to the fate of Cambodia. We should be part of the international effort to help those Cambodians who are willing to risk their lives for a free Cambodia.

At the same time, it would be a mistake for the United States to preempt the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) — Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Brunei — or to allow world opinion to incorrectly conclude that the United States is once again shouldering the main burden in Indochina. ASEAN and the Cambodians themselves should bear the prime responsibility for this movement for freedom.

The United States' role in Cambodia must continue to be inferior to ASEAN's. United States' policy to date has been to provide moral, political and humanitarian aid to the non-communists. This policy has been successful because it has been supportive of ASEAN's prime role. The ASEAN countries are the architects of the Cambodia strategy and they should continue to bear the responsibility for implementing it.

Five million dollars is not enough to make a big difference — it amounts to perhaps 20 percent of the noncommunists' annual budget. Yet, it may be enough to kindle hope of sustained U.S. support.

No weapons are contemplated for now — economic assistance and cadre training are under study.

Whatever forum our aid takes, we should admit that provision of assistance represents a major change in U.S. policy in Southeast Asia. These implications should be clearly understood by the American public.

The United States must proceed carefully and in full awareness of history and age-old rivalries of this region. The resistance forces and ASEAN are in for a long, tough fight. Vietnam has for centuries sought the creation of a vassal state in Cambodia.

The bitter struggle has continued for a millenium, but in 1985 the Vietnamese are closer than they ever have been to realizing their dream — a western frontier secured by a Cambodia (and a Laos) under their political and military domination.

To loosen or even modify Vietnam's grip, the anti-Vietnamese resistance will have to become numerically larger, more potent militarily, more coherent politically, and more active within Cambodia.

A second hard reality is the Khmer Rouge. They have become allies of convenience with the noncommunist groups in the "Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea."

This bizarre alliance is one fundamental anomaly in ASEAN's strategy. Remembering Pol Pot's genocide of the 1975-78 era, the KPNLF and Sihanouk must fight just as hard to keep the Khmer Rouge from regaining power as they do to force the Vietnamese out of Cambodia.

The dilemma of cooperation with the Khmer Rouge has not been addressed satisfactorily by either noncommunist Cambodians or ASEAN. The ASEAN will have to do more to boost the noncommunist side, if only to balance the heavy aid China provides the Khmer Rouge. It will take more than the present level of guerrilla activity and international political pressure to persuade Vietnam to negotiate a political solution.

ASEAN will have to maintain its unity and demonstrate political determination over a prolonged period (the Vietnamese think in terms of generations, not fiscal years) if this strategy is to succeed. And China will have to help neutralize the Khmer Rouge at the proper time.

Under no circumstances should the United States help the vicious Khmer Rouge directly or indirectly. ASEAN has the financial and material wherewithal to supply what is needed to the noncommunist resistance, but has been reluctant to announce publicly that some of its members are supplying material aid to the KPNLF/Sihanouk forces. If the United States contributes material aid, ASEAN should share public responsibility for similar activities of its own. We have only to reflect upon the pain, political turmoil, and controversy the United States suffered through its deep involvement in Indochina. The United States in 1985 should not be expected to pick up the ball and run with it once more.

ASEAN should be perceived clearly by the international community as having the lead in Cambodia. The United States should do nothing to dilute ASEAN's primacy in finding a solution to the agony of Cambodia.

Alaska Senator Frank Murkowski is a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the Select Committee on Intelligence, Chairman of the Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs, and Chairman of the Veterans' Committee.