

Regime Survival through Omnibalancing: Insights from Sihanouk's Regime

Donna Hoang

University of Michigan
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Abstract:

Omnibalancing is an alignment strategy wherein a state aligns with the international allies of its internal threat. This strategy ultimately aims to strain the relationship between the international ally and the internal threat, weakening the latter's position. Although omnibalancing is rooted in the regime's desire to survive threats and crises, its conditions and limitations have not been rigorously examined. Through the case study of Sihanouk's regime from 1955 to 1970, I explain the utilization, scope conditions, and limitations of omnibalancing. Analysis of Sihanouk's successes and failures in omnibalancing reveals that external patrons are inclined to curb internal threats when the regime holds strategic importance and faces intense competition for support. However, the 1970 coup exposes omnibalancing's limitation, indicating its failure to establish long-term mechanisms of durability. The Sihanouk case shows that the lack of infrastructural power and fragility of adapting an externally dependent strategy can ultimately undermine regime durability.

Introduction

Upon consolidating political power in 1955, Sihanouk found himself confronted with threats from various directions. The emergence of political parties a few years earlier had enabled rightist elites to secure formal positions within the government, while neighboring countries lent support to both these elites and rightist insurgent groups aligned with their cause. Concurrently, communist insurgent factions, backed by North Vietnam and China, were gaining momentum. Considering the prevalence of internal and external challenges, Sihanouk's rule from 1955 until the 1970 coup presents a paradox from a regime survival perspective. While it is surprising that he managed to maintain power until 1970 despite such hostile conditions, the inevitability of the coup in 1970 becomes apparent for a state contending with such threats.

This project aims to explain the survival and ultimate downfall of Sihanouk's regime amidst turbulent times by introducing omnibalancing as a strategy for regime survival. Focusing on Cambodia as a case study, I highlight how realignment served as a crucial tool in mitigating various internal threats. By examining the variability within the three cases of realignment and omnibalancing, I argue that external patrons are more inclined to engage in omnibalancing when the third-party states hold significant geopolitical importance and when there is intense rivalry over control of these states. The absence of either condition undermines the likelihood of external patrons aiding in constraining internal threats.

Despite these efforts, the Sihanouk regime ended with the 1970 coup. I find that while omnibalancing can offer temporary relief from internal threats, the strategy lacks long-term mechanisms for regime survival. Vulnerabilities arise from the strategy's reliance on external factors, including the continuous willingness of external patrons to intervene and the dependence of internal threats on external support. Additionally, omnibalancing fails to facilitate the expansion of infrastructural power within the state, thereby limiting its coercive capabilities. Through an analysis of Cambodia's colonial legacy and the nature of internal threats faced by Sihanouk, the paper elucidates the underlying causes of weak infrastructural power, providing crucial insights into the regime's vulnerabilities.

The paper's structure will unfold as follows. Initially, it will introduce David's notion of omnibalancing as a regime survival strategy, illuminating how weaker states can wield foreign policy to tackle internal threats. Subsequent sections will expound upon the methodology employed to identify instances of omnibalancing and to assess empirical data. Following this, attention will shift to the colonial legacy bequeathed to Sihanouk by the French and the various threats faced by the regime, providing vital contextual understanding of the events unfolding in the 1950s and 60s. Then, the paper will proceed to scrutinize three cases of alignment during Sihanouk's tenure, examining how he implemented omnibalancing tactics. This analysis will explore both internal and external threats, as well as external powers' responses to Sihanouk's appeals for omnibalancing. Finally, drawing upon empirical findings, the paper will delineate two pivotal conditions

influencing the outcomes of Sihanouk's omnibalancing endeavors and explain why this strategy ultimately fell short in ensuring regime durability.

Omnibalancing as a Regime Survival Strategy

The strategies employed by authoritarian regimes to maintain power vary in effectiveness and coerciveness. To safeguard against internal fragmentation, regimes often resort to strategic co-optation as a means to coup-proof their rule. This may involve buying the military's allegiance or providing rents to the dictator's winning coalition.¹ Alternatively, regimes may opt for counterbalancing, dividing the state's coercive power into multiple overlapping security forces to mitigate the risk of military defection.² By creating parallel forces, regimes can create incentives for officers outside of the regime to defend the regime and use the forces to monitor the existing military.³ In more extreme cases, regimes resort to violent means of protection. Regime leaders can purge threatening elites, especially those that have military capacity or is politically powerful, to get rid of sources of internal splinters.⁴ They can also engage in military crackdown on targeted groups as a counterinsurgency measure.

However, alongside these well-documented strategies, regimes can protect their leadership via omnibalancing. Steven David's concept of omnibalancing involves leaders strategically aligning with secondary adversaries to counter primary threats, which are often domestic in weak states.⁵ Because the secondary adversary is the international ally of the domestic threat, omnibalancing attempts to splinter this relationship and weaken the domestic threat. Omnibalancing differs from other strategies in that it heavily relies on external actors. The pervasive nature of domestic threats that are often supported by international allies in conjunction with the state's lack of power to dispel these threats makes omnibalancing particularly appealing in weak state contexts.⁶ This paper delves into the mechanics of omnibalancing to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics involved in the usage of omnibalancing by weak regimes.

Identifying Cases of Omnibalancing

In this study, I focus on Cambodia because it is a case with which I am most familiar. However, beyond my personal knowledge, Cambodia also serves as a compelling example of utilizing alignment decisions to address internal threats. To evaluate instances of omnibalancing, I analyze three shifts in alignment: the 1955 alignment with the U.S., the

¹ Wright et al, 2015; Mesquita & Smith, 2010.

² Quinlivan, 1999.

³ De Bruin, 2018.

⁴ Boutton, 2019.

⁵ David, 1991, p. 6.

⁶ Ibid, p. 17.

1963 realignment with the communist bloc, and the 1969 realignment with the U.S. Alignment is defined as agreements between states for defense-related security cooperation, while realignment involves shifting alignment to other states, at times the expense of previous partners.⁷ This analysis, inspired by David's work, concentrates on shifts during the tenure of a single leader, allowing examination of evolving threats and ideologies.⁸

The Sihanouk regime is particularly a good case for assessing rationales for realignment decisions because of its personalist nature. Since all policy decisions were primarily controlled by Sihanouk and his close circle, realignment decisions can be attributed to Sihanouk with minimal influence from other governmental bodies. Additionally, with little ideology shift occurring under Sihanouk's rule, ideological factors can be held constant. Finally, I examine the internal and external threats faced by the regime as variables that affect shifts in alignment. Consistent with the perspectives of Stephen Walt and Steven David, I hold that states respond primarily to threat when making alignment decisions.⁹

Although Sihanouk attempted omnibalancing in all three cases, his success varied. By assessing the variance in success of external powers agreeing to constrain internal threats, I outline the scope conditions required to make omnibalancing possible. Finally, the Sihanouk regime came to an end with a rightist-led coup in 1970. This empirical fact shows that omnibalancing in Cambodia was unsuccessful at thwarting internal threat and exposes the limitations of the strategy. Therefore, the case study of Cambodia demonstrates the utility, conditions, and limitations of omnibalancing as a strategy for managing internal threats.

Setting the Stage

The colonial legacy of the French in Cambodia was primarily driven by economic interests. Initially focused on timber concessions and mineral rights, the first treaty between Cambodia and France was an exchange of these goods for French protection. As pre-existing governance structures failed to deliver large amounts of revenue, the French gradually expanded their influence, pressuring the Cambodian monarchy to implement reforms aimed at modernizing the governance structure. These reforms included the abolishment of slavery, the introduction of institutionalized land ownership, and the creation of provincial bureaucracies overseen by French residents. Reform efforts, however, faced significant resistance from regional elites, whose power was diminished by the reforms. The abolishment of slavery broke traditional patronage networks and

⁷ Ciorciari, 2010; Liska, 1962; Walt, 1987; Rothstein, 1968.

⁸ David, 1991, p. 27.

⁹ Walt, 1987; David, 1991.

increasing bureaucratization and institutionalization of land prevented regional elites from collecting taxes based on harvests, reducing their revenue.¹⁰

Attempts to implement the reforms resulted in the 1885 nationwide revolt against French rule. The revolt reflected two important political realities in Cambodia. First, it demonstrated the elite's unwillingness to comply with the new reforms both via violent rebellion and sidestepping of the rules. Slavery was replaced with servitude for debt and collecting taxes through land ownership was avoided by not enforcing these taxes or by not recording land records.¹¹ Second, the revolt displayed regional elites' capability to organize sizable and efficient guerrilla forces independent of the wishes of the central monarchy.¹² The largely decentralized power structure and the inability to enforce institutional change meant that the French continued to struggle to exert authority beyond urban centers.¹³

By the end of French colonial rule, coercive power remained decentralized, with local elites retaining control over security forces in their respective regions. Consequently, the French colonial administration left behind a legacy of weak institutions and fragmented coercive power in Cambodia, rather than a centralized state apparatus. It is under these conditions that Sihanouk became the French-appointed monarch in 1941.

The threats faced by Sihanouk's monarchy were multi-faceted. Following the new electoral law in 1943, new political parties directly opposed to the monarchy emerged, signaling growing discontent and opposition to the monarchy. The creation of the Democratic Party, which advocated for immediate independence and a French-style democracy, viewed Sihanouk as a puppet of colonial interests and challenged his rule. The Democrats' success in the September 1946 elections, winning 50 out of 67 seats in the Consultative Assembly, underscored their popularity and organizational strength, further undermining Sihanouk's legitimacy.¹⁴ Simultaneously, the rise of communist factions added to internal tensions. The establishment of the Khmer People's Revolutionary Party (KPRP) in 1951 and the participation of more moderate communist factions, such as the Pracheachon, in national elections highlighted the growing influence of leftist ideologies in Cambodian politics.

On the periphery, insurgent groups armed themselves against the monarchy. The Khmer Issarak was an anti-French, anti-Sihanouk guerrilla force operating along the Cambodian borders. Backed heavily by Thailand, the guerilla force brought high levels of disruption in the late 1940's, undermining Sihanouk's prestige, and legitimacy.¹⁵ In the 1950s, the Khmer

¹⁰ Chandler, 2007, p.176.

¹¹ Chandler, 2007, p.179.

¹² Kiernan, 2008, p.222.

¹³ In the 1930's, tax delinquency rates rose up to 60% and resulted in the French struggling to find ways to increase its revenue in Cambodia. Such example demonstrates that the French's inability to control the periphery as seen in the 1885 revolt continued into the 1900s. (Chandler, 2007, p. 197).

¹⁴ Chandler, 2007, p. 213-214.

¹⁵ Leifer, 1962, p. 11.

Issarak's split into two groups: those who supported the Democratic Party, and those who supported the KPRP. The latter group enjoyed support from Viet Minh forces, which was providing military, financial, and technical support to Cambodian and Laotian communist movements. The Viet Minh also helped establish communist political schools and recruitment efforts, which led to the rapid expansion of communist-controlled Khmer Issarak forces.¹⁶

These insurgent groups, supported and funded by neighboring countries with their own agendas, added a layer of complexity to Cambodia's internal dynamics. While concerns over external threats traditionally revolve around sovereignty breaches and invasion, the more pressing issue for Sihanouk's monarchy was the external support for internal conflict. The backing of insurgent groups by neighboring powers not only posed a direct challenge to the monarchy's authority but also served as a means for external actors to exert influence and achieve their own strategic objectives within Cambodia. In this context, the distinction between internal and external threats becomes less clear, as external actors leverage internal conflicts to advance their interests. The intertwining of internal and external conflicts further escalated in the 1960s when the Vietnam War escalated geopolitical tensions.

With a state under threat from all sides, Sihanouk with the agenda to bring stability back into his country staged a coup against his own government in 1952. From this point to 1955, Sihanouk consolidated power through a variety of methods. He slowly disempowered the Democratic Party-led National Assembly, which was fully dissolved in 1955. He also bolstered his image as the father of Cambodian independence, enhancing his legitimacy within the state. This simultaneously allowed him to de-legitimize potential elite opponents such as Son Ngoc Thanh, whose popularity also stemmed from his nationalist stance.¹⁷ The 1955 National Assembly elections marked the peak of Sihanouk's centralized power when his party, Sangkum, won a majority of the seats in the National Assembly. Through repression and co-optation, Sihanouk greatly reduced the formal power of the Democratic Party and Pracheachon. Lacking popularity and power to oppose the new Sihanouk regime, both parties slowly collapsed by the end of the 1950s and those left in the parties fled to different insurgency groups.

As Cambodia moved into a new era of the Sihanouk regime, several problems remained. Despite centralizing power in the center, the regime faced challenges in exerting control beyond Phnom Penh. The state had been unable to build nor inherit a centralized military or institutionalized mechanisms to control the periphery. This lack of infrastructural power¹⁸ limited Sihanouk regime's coercive capability, making it difficult to effectively identify and crackdown on opposition forces. Without institutionalized methods of securing the regime

¹⁶ Chandler, 1991, p. 34.

¹⁷ Chandler, 2008, p. 228.

¹⁸ The importance of infrastructural power in ensuring regime durability will be discussed in detail in the final sections of the paper.

from the internal instability created by escalating Cold War tensions, the Sihanouk regime looked externally to find ways to ensure regime survival. The next section explores three instances in which Sihanouk used omnibalancing to dampen internal threats.

Omnibalancing to Survive

1955: Alignment with the U.S.

In 1955, Cambodia entered into a bilateral agreement with the United States, formalizing the Military Assistance Program (MAP) administered by the U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG). This program aimed to bolster Cambodia's military capabilities through assistance in organization, training, and equipment provision. Throughout the latter half of the 1950s, the U.S. remained extensively involved in military assistance, becoming the largest source of funding for the Sihanouk regime.¹⁹ This support, coupled with economic aid programs, cemented the U.S.'s significant influence over Cambodia's military and economic development, despite Sihanouk's official stance of neutrality.

Concurrently, Sihanouk viewed his alignment with the U.S. as a way to constrain internal threats. Since South Vietnam and Thailand funded and supported internal opposition forces like the Khmer Serei, Sihanouk wanted the U.S. to pressure the two neighboring countries from partaking in these activities.²⁰ As an important external ally to both South Vietnam and Thailand, the U.S. had the capability to apply these pressures. Sihanouk continuously asserted that if the U.S. did not constrain the neighboring powers, he would cut off all U.S. aid and turn to the left – a threat he made publicly numerous times.²¹ By using Cold War tensions as a threat, Sihanouk attempted to omnibalance against internal threats supported by regional powers.

Several incidents tested the United States' willingness to constrain regional powers in the late 1950's. The return of Sam Sary, a pro-U.S. ambassador, to Phnom Penh marked the beginning of a series of events that would increase Sihanouk's distrust towards South Vietnam, Thailand, and by extension, the United States. Upon his arrival, Sary founded a newspaper that attacked China and pro-communist sentiments and requested to form his own party. Sihanouk viewed these actions as a direct threat and referred to this incident as a "Bangkok Plot" to undermine his regime.²²

The deterioration of relations reached a critical point with the Dap Chhuon affair in 1959. Dap Chhuon's involvement in a coup attempt, supported by Thailand and South Vietnam,

¹⁹ The Comptroller General of the United States, *Report on Review of Military Assistance Program for Cambodia*, 1958, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/b-133085.pdf>.

²⁰ "Cambodia's Anger," *The Washington Post*, 1963.

²¹ Sihanouk, 1958.

²² Chandler, 1991, p. 100.

once again verified Sihanouk's distrust towards the neighboring countries. Despite Sihanouk's swift action in thwarting the coup and eliminating Chhuon,²³ the incident underscored the foreign support for regime change and highlighted the United States' reluctance to rein in its allies' involvement in Cambodian affairs. Sihanouk's growing disillusionment with the U.S. and his tilt towards the communist bloc stemmed partly from the perceived complicity of American allies in destabilizing Cambodia's government.

Meanwhile, the Khmer Serei, backed again by South Vietnam and Thailand, posed another internal threat to Sihanouk's rule. Led by Cambodian nationalist Son Ngoc Thanh, the Khmer Serei accused Sihanouk of communist sympathies and actively recruited members, including Democrats fleeing persecution.²⁴ Sihanouk's irritation towards the Khmer Serei stemmed less from their ability to overthrow the regime but more from the idea that regional powers were willing to support subversive activities.²⁵ The continuous support of these insurgency groups by Cambodia's neighbors strained diplomatic ties further, leading Sihanouk to sever relations with Bangkok in 1961.²⁶ Despite Sihanouk's pleas to the United States to restrain its allies, Cambodian appeals largely fell on deaf ears.

Sihanouk's strategy to omnibalance failed for several reasons. First, U.S. presence in mainland Southeast Asia was increasing but geopolitical tensions were not as high as the 1960s when the U.S. enhanced its engagement in Vietnam. While the U.S. wanted to contain communism, Cambodia's cooperation was less important at this point in aiding U.S. and South Vietnam's war efforts, decreasing the incentive to accommodate to Sihanouk's demands. Furthermore, a 1958 secret U.S. policy directive noted that the U.S. government was willing to find a way "to reverse the drift toward pro-Communist neutrality" by encouraging groups who opposed the communist bloc.²⁷ This confirms that the United States was supportive of subversive activities and would have not opposed a regime change that could operate in its favor. Therefore, while Sihanouk attempted to omnibalance, the strategy did not work because Cambodia's cooperation was not crucial to U.S. war efforts, and a pro-U.S. regime change was a viable possibility.

1963: Alignment with China²⁸

Sihanouk's decision to sever ties with the United States and align militarily with China stemmed from a culmination of events that eroded his trust in U.S. support. The U.S.'s

²³ Chhuon's plan were unraveled when he expressed his intentions to those who were loyal to Sihanouk (Chandler, 1991). The coup failed less because Sihanouk had a large amount of visibility into the periphery regions but more because of Chhuon's misreading of his friends and foes.

²⁴ Kiernan, 1996, p. 47.

²⁵ Deth, 2020, p. 34-35

²⁶ Deth, 2020, p. 38.

²⁷ Chandler, 1991, p. 93.

²⁸ Sihanouk completely broke off relations with the United States in 1965, but relations were dwindling down from 1963 when he publicly renounced U.S. aid (Chandler, 1991, p. 146).

response to internal threats, such as the Khmer Serei and the Chhoun plot, convinced Sihanouk that the U.S. was unwilling to prevent its allies from interfering and supporting sources of internal instability. This belief was reinforced by the U.S.' involvement in the overthrow of the Diem regime in South Vietnam, showcasing the U.S.' readiness to depose regimes that did not align with its interests. Consequently, Sihanouk perceived the U.S.' actions as disregarding Cambodian security concerns, prompting a radical denunciation of U.S. aid, despite its status as the primary source of military and economic assistance. This shift led Sihanouk to realign with China.

The strategic realignment with China was motivated by various factors. The new alignment provided Sihanouk with a means to neutralize leftist threats from the Khmer Worker's Party (KWP)²⁹, which was directly supported by North Vietnam and China.³⁰ In exchange of Sihanouk's cooperation with North Vietnamese troops operating through Cambodia, Hanoi and Beijing urged the KWP to wait for success in Laos and South Vietnam before taking up their armed struggles.³¹ By leveraging China and North Vietnam's war interests, Sihanouk used his alignment with the communist bloc to constrain the KWP insurgent activities. While the omnibalancing succeeded, it resulted in dissent within the KWP, resulting in the creation of Khmer Communist Party (KCP) led by Pol Pot. Frustrated with the lack of support from the communist bloc, this faction split away from the North Vietnamese Communist Party, laying the groundwork for the Khmer Rouge insurgency in 1975.³²

However, Sihanouk's renunciation of U.S. aid risked isolating both the military and conservative sectors, which had benefited significantly from Cambodia's relations with the United States. To address this, Sihanouk negotiated agreements with China and North Vietnam to enrich the military sector and ensure their continued loyalty. The agreement allowed the Cambodian army to skim off 10% of the Chinese military aid that entered through Sihanoukville in addition to the additional levies the Cambodian army could charge at the border.³³ These agreements demonstrated the communist bloc's willingness to make concessions to maintain Sihanouk's cooperation, which they saw as a small cost for maintaining military access and establishing sanctuaries within Cambodia.

Conversely, the conservative sector, comprising bureaucrats, businessmen, and members of the royal family, faced isolation under Sihanouk's new socialist economic policies and dealignment from the United States. Despite some elites retaining power, Sihanouk's crackdown on opposition and control over state institutions effectively thwarted coup efforts. The conservative elites were held down in the early 1960s through repression and fear, although their resentments and disapproval towards Sihanouk's policies would have major repercussions in the late 1960s.

²⁹ The KPRP was renamed to KWP in the early 1960s.

³⁰ Chandler, 1991, p. 140.

³¹ Nguyen-vo, 1992, p. 47.

³² Kiernan, 1996, p.14.

³³ Chandler, 1991, p.140.

In 1963, omnibalancing played numerous roles. First, it was used to lessen the threat posed by Cambodian communists. By leveraging the external power's war interest, Sihanouk used his alignment with China to restrict the activities of the KWP. Second, Sihanouk leveraged the bipolar context to "punish" the U.S. for failing to help him omnibalance by aligning with the other power who was more willing to commit to this task. This also demonstrated that Sihanouk was willing to use alignment decisions to pressure greater states to accommodate his demand, adding credibility to his threats. Finally, as the escalation of the Vietnam War in the 1960s enhanced the importance of Cambodia's geopolitical location, China and North Vietnam had increasing incentives to preserve the security of the Sihanouk regime. Since an opposition regime could shift Cambodia's foreign policy towards the U.S., the communist bloc was incentivized to aid in coup proofing measures even if it came at the cost of their funds.

1969: Realignment with the U.S.

In 1967, the Sihanouk regime faced a severe crisis as its economy spiraled downward and the Vietnam War left the countryside of Cambodia devastated. The failure of omnibalancing became glaringly apparent when the KCP staged the Samalut Rebellion against the wishes of North Vietnam and China. The rebellion marked the beginnings of armed insurgency led by the KCP. The rupture between KCP and North Vietnam exposed the vulnerability of omnibalancing strategies, demonstrating how internal threats could diverge from their external patrons' agendas. The KCP's armed struggle was less than ideal for North Vietnam as well. The Viet Cong's operations relied heavily on Cambodia and its ports as a transit route for vital supplies, and they benefited greatly from the prince's cooperation.³⁴ However, North Vietnam's inability to contain the insurgents angered Sihanouk and diminished the level of cooperation the prince was willing to provide.³⁵

Sihanouk's relationship with the communist bloc was further complicated by tensions with China. As Sino-Khmers, angered by the economic crisis, protested in Phnom Penh and declared their allegiance to Mao, Sihanouk saw these acts as a direct threat to his regime. This view worsened when Zhou Enlai affirmed the Chinese people's right to express loyalty to Chairman Mao, escalating tensions between the two countries and prompting Sihanouk to take measures to assert control.³⁶ In response, Sihanouk shut down the Khmer-Chinese Friendship Association and pro-China media outlets in efforts to display intolerance towards China's infringement of Cambodian sovereignty. While these tensions did not culminate in a complete rupture of Khmer-Sino relations, the incident displayed Sihanouk's sensitivity and irritability towards external patrons supporting sources of internal threat.

³⁴ Nguyen-vo, 1992, p. 60.

³⁵ Chandler, 1991, p. 185.

³⁶ Ibid, p.169.

Growing leftist threat within Cambodia, the escalation of the Vietnam War since 1966, and the severe economic crisis pushed Sihanouk to resume talks with the United States in 1968. This realignment strategy had both external and internal dimensions. Externally, Sihanouk sought to assert some control over the continuous military operations conducted by the U.S. within Cambodian territory, which the Cambodia had little power to resist altogether. The realignment allowed him to set ground rules with the U.S. military, which allowed "very occasional U.S. military attacks" that "should be kept at a minimum" and target "non-populated areas."³⁷ Sihanouk also demanded Cambodia's right "to protest and seek compensation and to take other public steps to demonstrate its indignation and ergo its neutrality," creating a set of rules that the CIA described as "rules that may never be more than tacit."³⁸

Internally, Sihanouk viewed realignment with the U.S. as a way to omnibalance the growing influence of right-wing elites within his government. Initially, he attempted to mitigate internal threats by granting some governmental powers to moderate leftists, aiming to balance factional politics and prevent the consolidation of power among conservative elements. With the leftist purged out of government positions post-Samolut Rebellion and right-wing elites consolidating their positions of power, Sihanouk saw alignment with the U.S. as a mechanism to safeguard his regime against the rising pro-U.S. rightest faction.³⁹ By bringing U.S. aid back into the economy and cooperating with U.S. military campaign, Sihanouk hoped that the realignment could protect his regime internally and externally at a time when regime survival was most severely tested.

The latter half of the 1960s exposed several limitations to omnibalancing. One such limitation was the inability of external patrons to effectively control internal threats, as displayed by the case of North Vietnam and the KCP. Additionally, Sihanouk's appeals for U.S. support to omnibalance largely fell on deaf ears. Despite assistance from China and North Vietnam, it became apparent that this aid was insufficient to strengthen Cambodia's economy or military, relieving the U.S. of the need to compete with rival powers or accommodate Sihanouk's demands. The Samalut rebellion also forced Sihanouk to direct his efforts to containing communist insurgency, allowing the pro-U.S. rightest elites to grow as an opposition force. Knowing that a regime change under the rightest faction would not harm U.S. interests in the Vietnam War, the U.S. had no incentives to prevent a regime change from occurring.

Regime Survival Tested

The Sihanouk regime faced a dual challenge of economic crisis and heightened geopolitical tensions, both of which tested the regime's ability to survive.⁴⁰ These shocks

³⁷ "Draft Press Announcement for MACV Spokesman," 1969.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Chandler, 1991, p.163.

⁴⁰ Geddes, 1999, p.138-139.

not only depleted the regime's resources but also served as catalysts for internal unrest. As discontent brewed within the populace, the regime found itself increasingly vulnerable to challenges from within. These tensions culminated in the 1970 coup in which Sihanouk was ousted by Lon Nol and Sirik Mantak who were members of the rightist faction.

The 1970 coup unfolded amidst a backdrop of unchecked influence by rightist factions within the National Assembly, marking a pivotal moment in the demise of the Sihanouk regime. The assembly, comprised of individuals not handpicked by Sihanouk for the first time in 1966, saw the ascent of rightist rivals whose grievances were mounting against Sihanouk's economic policies.⁴¹ Strategically evading Sihanouk's repressive measures against dissent, the rightist elites secured official government positions. By 1968, with leftist elites purged and lack of intervention from the United States⁴², the disgruntled army officer corps and urban elites went unchecked. This environment set the stage for the 1970 coup, which unfolded without violence as Lon Nol and Sirik Matak held a parliamentary vote to oust the Sihanouk regime while Sihanouk was abroad.

The 1970 coup against Sihanouk revealed critical weaknesses in the regime's capacity to ensure its survival. Sihanouk's dependence on external backing for coup-proofing made the regime vulnerable to the interests of major powers, whose willingness to intervene was uncertain. Furthermore, Sihanouk's control over his government and his ability to govern as a personalist regime were waning as the economy deteriorated. As Geddes notes, personalist regimes are most vulnerable when the leader no longer can deliver benefits of loyalty to his narrow support base.⁴³ With discontent among urban elites growing and lack of state resources to appease them, Sihanouk's ability to command their loyalty greatly weakened. This problem was compounded by Sihanouk's lack of infrastructural power and coercive capability to swiftly address emerging internal threats. This dearth of infrastructural power persisted from the early days of his monarchy throughout his tenure as Prime Minister, hindering the regime's ability to establish institutionalized mechanisms to counter internal challenges.

Omnibalancing: A Successful Strategy?

A closer examination of Sihanouk's alignment decisions reveals a strategic utilization of omnibalancing to address pressing internal threats. Each shift in alignment was accompanied by Sihanouk's endeavor to utilize these new alignments to curb internal

⁴¹ For example, in 1963, Sihanouk nationalized the Bank of Phnom Penh, which was mainly used by bureaucrats, businessmen, and members of the royal family to shelter funds and investment. The bank closure resulted in financial distress among many conservative elites, and the worsening economic conditions further verified their distrust of Sihanouk's ability to make sound policy decision (Chandler, 1991, p. 137).

⁴² While the extent of CIA involvement with the CIA is debated, the fact that minimally, the CIA did not actively prevent the rightists from staging a coup proves the point that requests to intervene went unheard.

⁴³ Geddes, 1999, p. 122.

threats, often funded and supported by the newly aligned partners. In 1955, Sihanouk consistently requested that the United States to constrain South Vietnam and Thailand, which were funding the Khmer Serei. The realignment with the communist bloc in 1963 resulted in the communist bloc constraining the KWP. Finally, Sihanouk once again requested that the U.S. constrain rightest threats after the realignment in 1969. Success for each case of omnibalancing can be assessed through two dimensions. One, does Sihanouk succeed in getting external powers to constrain his internal threats? And two, does omnibalancing help Sihanouk make his regime more durable? The following sections will systemically address these two questions.

The Conditions of Omnibalancing

An evaluation of the outcomes, both successes and failures, of Sihanouk's omnibalancing efforts uncovers several scope conditions associated with this strategy. Through the Cambodian case, it becomes evident that omnibalancing thrives in a bipolar international order. Bipolar rivalries incentivize rival powers to win over third-party states that can help create an advantage over the other. In cases of escalating tensions, incentives increase as any additional weight can tilt the balance of power in one rival's favor.⁴⁴ Because both rivals are aware that the other can benefit from an alignment with the third-party state, they are also incentivized to engage in "black knight diplomacy" and thwart the leverage of the other rival.⁴⁵ Offering alternative source of aid or protecting the third-party state's regime are a couple of ways in which black knight diplomacy can occur. The pursuit of alignment by one rival and the incentive of the other to thwart those efforts gives third-party states, typically weaker in military, economic, and political terms, a unique opportunity to make demands of the rival powers. By offering its support in exchange of its demands or by threatening to side with the other rival, weaker third-party states have a window of opportunity to make foreign policy demands that can work in its favor.

This role of bipolarity is especially prevalent in the communist bloc's agreement to constrain the KWP and provide unofficial income to the military. Prior to the agreement, the Viet Cong had been utilizing Cambodian territory to move troops and establish sanctuaries. With a lack of military capacity, the Sihanouk regime had no ability to push out the North Vietnamese. From the communist bloc's perspective, it would have been completely possible for them to ignore Sihanouk and continue with their operations without making any of the accommodations and taking on the costs of those accommodations. However, the communist bloc accommodated because Sihanouk's cooperation not only made it easier for the North Vietnamese to operate within Cambodia, but it also disincentivized Sihanouk from realigning with the United States. This also further incentivized the communist bloc to keep Sihanouk in power since a regime change could result in a pro-U.S. government. The bipolar conditions, therefore, made it possible for a weak state like

⁴⁴ Karsh, 1988, p. 98-99.

⁴⁵ Haufbauer et al., 1990, p. 12.

Cambodia to assert its foreign policy priorities⁴⁶ as tensions escalated during the Vietnam War. These conditions also meant the presence of a rival competition mattered in incentivizing external powers to contain internal threats.

The third-party state’s geopolitical significance also alters its degree of leverage. The more strategically important the third-party state is to the rivals, the more leverage it can have in omnibalancing through external powers. Sihanouk’s ability to pressure external powers to constrain internal threats was enhanced when Cambodia’s location gained more strategic importance in the 1960s. The Ho Chi Minh trail and seaports of Cambodia were significant to reinforcing communist war efforts, which made Cambodia an important war zone for the U.S. and South Vietnam. On the contrary, Cambodia’s geopolitical significance was relatively low in the 1950s. While the United States was heavily invested in containing the spread of communism, at this point, the U.S. did not need Cambodia’s support to handle Cold War tensions since the war had not spread into Cambodia nor was Cambodia actively supporting the communist war efforts. Thus, the variation in strategic importance of Cambodia throughout Sihanouk’s rule affected his leverage.

Hence, the relative success and failure of Sihanouk’s ability to omnibalance in each period underscore the critical influence of Cambodia’s geopolitical importance and bipolar rivalry intensity. As shown in Table 1, it is only when a state is geopolitically important and can leverage intense bipolar rivalry that it succeeds in omnibalancing.

Table 1: Outcome of omnibalancing attempts during Sihanouk’s tenure

	1955: Alignment with the United States	1963: Alignment with Communist bloc	1969: Alignment with the United States
Geopolitical significance of third-party state	Low	High	High
High rivalry competition over third-party state	High	High	Low
Outcome	Does not contain internal threat	Contains internal threat	Does not contain internal threat

⁴⁶ Sihanouk made clear threats during his tenure that he would not align with a state that did not respect the sovereignty of Cambodia (Sihanouk, 1958). Sovereignty meant two things for Sihanouk. One was protecting Cambodia’s borders from being engulfed in the Vietnam War. The other was thwarting foreign intervention in the internal affairs of the Cambodian government. Interestingly, in the 1963 alignment with the communist bloc, Sihanouk allowed intrusion in his borders in exchange of regime protection, showing that omnibalancing can often result in regime survival trumping state survival as a foreign policy agenda (David, 1991).

An alternative explanation for the variation in outcome could be the differences in alignment partners. Notably, both instances of failure occurred while Cambodia was aligned with the U.S., suggesting that the United States may not have endorsed a foreign policy conducive to omnibalancing. However, David's examination of Egypt's case illustrates a contrasting scenario wherein the United States swiftly supported Sadat's regime upon realignment, indicating a willingness to engage in such activities.⁴⁷ Given the absence of discernible shifts in U.S. foreign policy from the 1960s to the 70s, solely linking the variation in outcome to differences in alignment partners is insufficient.

The Impact of Omnibalancing on Regime Durability

Sihanouk's omnibalancing strategy, aimed at reducing internal threats and bolstering regime durability, ultimately failed due to several vulnerabilities. First, constraining internal threats by external powers proved to be unreliable. While severing ties between internal threats and their international allies can hinder their operations, these groups often possess the capability to operate independently and secure alternative resources. This is exemplified by the Khmer communist armed resistance during the Samlut rebellion, wherein despite the communist bloc's urging for restraint, the KCP persisted with its agenda. In fact, omnibalancing efforts resulted in resentment within the KWP, leading to the emergence of the KCP faction. This underscores that even if internal threats are supported by external powers, the former retain agency and can defy constraints. Thus, when external powers lack the capacity to control internal threats, the effectiveness of omnibalancing diminishes.

In addition, Sihanouk's omnibalancing strategy also falls short in addressing a sustained lack of infrastructural power, which is essential for regime durability. A regime's ability to maintain control over its coercive capacity is fundamental to its survival.⁴⁸ Levitsky and Way emphasize that authoritarian governments rely on coercive capacity to crackdown on opposition and ensure compliance through various means, including co-optation, military crackdowns, and targeted coercion.⁴⁹ However, the effective execution of these mechanisms necessitates infrastructural power—"the capacity of the state to penetrate civil society and implement political decisions throughout its domain."⁵⁰ For instance, a regime must possess the capability to gather information on its population to identify and prevent rival groups from threatening its stability. The ability to project power also allows the regime to have a strong command over the military to deploy it as needed or to prevent independent action outside of the government's directions. While states lacking infrastructural power may resort to non-institutionalized violence to suppress opposition,

⁴⁷ David, 1991, p. 94.

⁴⁸ In her book *States and Social Revolutions*, Skocpol (1979) shows that only when the state's coercive capabilities breakdown can revolutions successfully topple a regime. The durability of the regime is therefore closely tied to its ability to hold onto the state's coercive capabilities.

⁴⁹ Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 57.

⁵⁰ Mann, 1984, p. 189.

as noted by Slater and Fenner, such violence tends to be undisciplined and fails to establish the stable coercion afforded by infrastructural power.⁵¹ The importance of infrastructural power in strengthening a regime's coercive capacity make this form of power significant for regime survival.

The challenge of developing infrastructural power is compounded for post-colonial regimes with weak state capacity. These regimes may initially have the opportunity to develop infrastructural power through either colonial legacy or external patronage. One avenue for building such power involves inheriting institutions established during the colonial era. The nature of colonialism significantly influences the types of institutions left behind, as highlighted by Acemoglu et al.⁵² Colonial legacies can provide the institutional tools for extending the state's power from the center to the periphery. In the Cambodian case, French attempts to establish provisional bureaucracies for efficient tax collection was met with significant resistance from local elites. Also, the extractive nature of French presence in Cambodia further disincentivized systemic efforts to create institutions that centralized control over the periphery. Consequently, upon assuming power, Sihanouk inherited no institutional framework that could be leveraged to extend infrastructural power, further exacerbating the regime's challenges in consolidating control.

Additionally, infrastructural power can be acquired through institutions established by foreign patrons. Casey illustrates that Soviet client states benefited from a reduced risk of regime collapse due to the Soviet Union's construction of institutions that constrained military forces and promoted civilian control.⁵³ The external imposition of these institutions allowed weak regimes sponsored by the Soviet Union to circumvent the need for developing infrastructural power internally. Instead, these regimes could utilize externally developed coercive institutions to maintain control over their military even after the cessation of Soviet sponsorship.⁵⁴ This process effectively de-autonomized the military and shielded the regime from the threat of a military-induced coup in the long term. However, neither alignment with the U.S. nor the communist bloc resulted in the establishment of such long-term institutions in Cambodia. Moreover, omnibalancing does not inherently necessitate that external patrons assist in building such infrastructure.

Consequently, as a weak post-colonial state, the Sihanouk regime was deficient in the infrastructural power and institutional frameworks necessary to exert such power. The 1970 coup serves as a stark illustration that while omnibalancing tactics may temporarily mitigate internal threats, they do not provide mechanisms for de-autonomizing the military or controlling internal threats seeking to depose the regime. Fundamentally, the strategy of omnibalancing does not help build long term institutions that can mitigate threats to the regime. Lacking the capacity to coerce opposition in the long term and reliant on strategies

⁵¹ Slater & Fenner, 2011, p. 20.

⁵² Acemoglu et al., 2002.

⁵³ Casey, 2020.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

such as omnibalancing, which are contingent upon numerous international factors, the Sihanouk regime proved unable to withstand the shocks that ultimately tested its durability.

Conclusion

By examining Cambodia as a case study, this project has demonstrated how realignment served as a crucial tool for mitigating internal threats through omnibalancing tactics. The analysis of three distinct cases of realignment during Sihanouk's rule has revealed the importance of geopolitical significance and intense bipolar rivalry in determining the success of omnibalancing efforts. These conditions also offer a unique window of opportunity where weak states can gain more leverage in negotiations with greater powers, allowing them to push demands. Countering traditional realist claims that weak states have no agency in their foreign policy making,⁵⁵ omnibalancing shows that weak states can craft foreign policy to its advantage under certain conditions.

Additionally, analyzing Sihanouk's alignment decision through regime survival and omnibalancing shows that his foreign policy was guided by a clear strategic agenda. Sihanouk's decision to dealign with the U.S. resulted in observers labeling his foreign policy as "unfathomable, sometimes, senseless and frequently amusing fluctuations"⁵⁶ led by a leader who is a "victim of his own emotions."⁵⁷ The decision to suddenly cut off mass amounts of military and economic aid simply seemed irrational and illogical, and many analysts attempted to make sense of this decision through the lens of bandwagoning.⁵⁸ They argued that Cambodia chose to dealign because it strongly believed the communists would win the war.⁵⁹ However, such arguments fail to understand the role of internal threats on Cambodia's alignment decisions. Facing a variety of different internal threats backed by external powers, handling domestic threats was a priority to the Sihanouk regime with omnibalancing becoming a core strategy to addressing these concerns.

Finally, despite the temporary relief offered by omnibalancing, the strategy ultimately failed to ensure regime durability. Two key vulnerabilities of omnibalancing have been identified: the reliance on external powers for containment of internal threats and the lack of infrastructural power within the regime. The paper has illustrated that external powers' support is not always reliable, as internal threats can operate independently and external support can shift as the geopolitical circumstances shift. It also demonstrates the

⁵⁵ Karsh, 1988; Handel, 1990.

⁵⁶ "Intelligence Memorandum, Cambodia's Foreign Policy," 1965.

⁵⁷ "Special Report: The Situation in Cambodia," 1963.

⁵⁸ "Intelligence Memorandum, Cambodia's Foreign Policy," 1965; Deth, 2020.

⁵⁹ The argument follows realist logics that weak states will choose to bandwagon because they have little ability to control or defend against sources of external threat. Therefore, they bandwagon to share spoils of victory, as a form of appeasement, and in hopes that the greater power can compel obedience of other sources of threat (Karsh, 1988; Handel, 1988; Walt, 1987).

importance of institutional frameworks in producing longer term durability, a quality omnibalancing does not provide.

Although this study centers on Cambodia, the concepts can be further enriched through comparative case studies. By examining other contexts where omnibalancing occurred, the scope conditions can be further verified. In addition, additional cases could introduce variation in infrastructural power as an additional variable to the effectiveness of omnibalancing. For example, a state with more infrastructural power could use omnibalancing to address internal threats without using state resources, allowing the regime to reallocate resources towards bolstering their infrastructural power. To test such possibilities, the study requires more cases to assess variance. A comparative approach, therefore, can help establish stronger links between regime's foreign policy and its impact on their regime durability.

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