Afghanistan Endgame
Lessons from Cambodia 1973-1975

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History has limitations as a guiding signpost, however, for although it can show us the right direction, it does not give detailed information about the road conditions. But its negative value as a warning sign is more definite. History can show us what to avoid, even if it does not teach us what to do by showing the most common mistakes that mankind is apt to make and to repeat.

–Sir Basil Henry Liddell Hart

U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class Nathaniel Young (standing), a military intelligence advisor, conducts an after-action review following low-level voice intercept training with Afghan National Army soldiers near Forward Operating Base Lightning, Paktia Province, Afghanistan, 9 December 2012.
(U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Aaron Ricca, 115th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment)

Questions about the long-term viability of the Afghan government and its ability to resist Taliban incursions are becoming more serious in light of the quickly declining number of U.S. and international troops in that country. Insecurity in Afghanistan

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CH-47 Chinook crew chief Staff Sgt. Joey Barnard of Savannah, Georgia, loads a pallet of humanitarian supplies for distribution to snowbound villages in eastern Afghanistan, 15 February 2005.

stems from numerous factors, including the future of the bilateral security agreement with the United States, the results of the April 2014 presidential election, and potential foreign policy actions of states such as Pakistan, India, China, and Iran in 2015 and beyond. American policymakers and senior military officers are united in their wish to ensure the survival of the Afghan regime beyond 2014. Yet, there is currently no consensus on the policies that would help achieve success.

To develop guidance and to identify actions U.S. strategy should avoid, academics, experts, and policymakers sometimes compare the drawdown in Afghanistan to the U.S. withdrawals from Iraq and Vietnam. This article offers the view that a more helpful analogy for Afghanistan would be the U.S. withdrawal from Cambodia in the 1970s.

Although the situation and the cultural context in Cambodia in the 1970s and those in Afghanistan today are not identical, there are certain key similarities. A careful analysis of Cambodia's five-year civil war and eventual collapse—focusing on 1973 to 1975, when the United States drastically reduced its support—illustrates what may be a sure path to failure in Afghanistan. Conversely, a study of Vietnam-era policy toward Cambodia may help inform policies to make Afghanistan succeed.

In short, the circumstances contributing to the collapse of the Cambodian regime in 1975 suggest that U.S. policy for Afghanistan should avoid a complete withdrawal of U.S. military advisors and troops (known as the *zero option*), as well as a reduction to little or no U.S. funding and advising for the Afghanistan government or military. Without sustained U.S. aid and military advising, Afghanistan is likely to go the way of Cambodia. Therefore, if the United States settles upon a policy intended to enable the resilience, stability, and long-term survival of Afghanistan's regime after 2014, that policy must include, at a minimum, a strong commitment to provide U.S. military advisors and funding for its government and military for the next decade.

A general similarity between the situations in Cambodia and Afghanistan is the continued, but declining, provision of U.S. military and financial support to a fragile central government after a major inflection point (a turning point that results in a dramatic

U.S. Air Force photo from the National Museum of the USAF

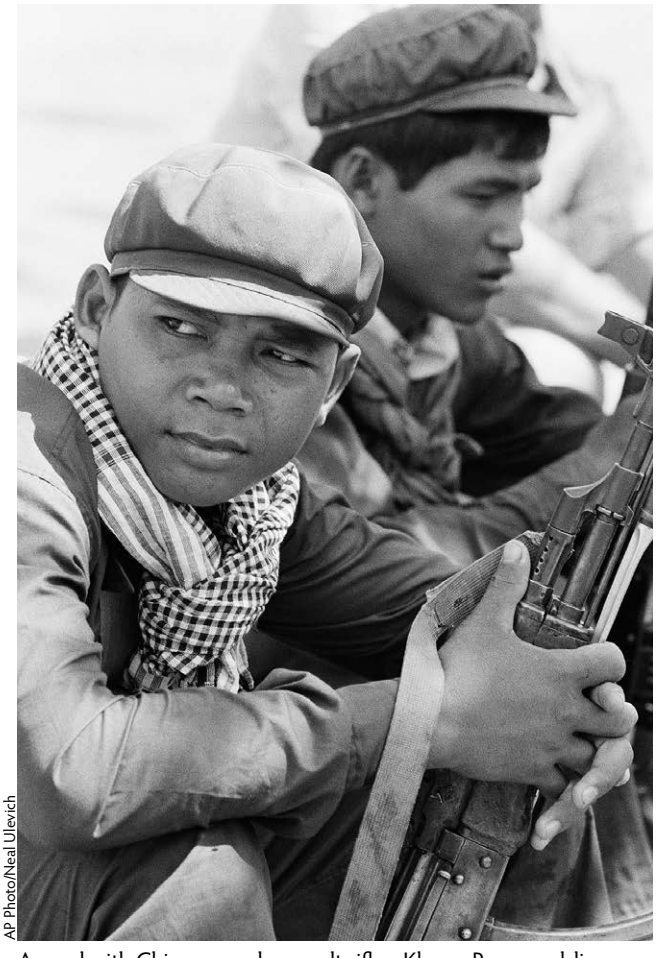
A U.S. Air Force Fairchild C-123K Provider from the 309th Tactical Airlift Squadron, 315th Tactical Airlift Wing supporting ground operations in Cambodia between April and July 1970.

change). For the Cambodians, this inflection point was the 1973 Paris Peace Accords. For the Afghans, the change began with the ongoing drawdown in 2014.

In the case of Cambodia, the central government faced a highly motivated, ideologically based enemy

that had sanctuary and refitting opportunities in neighboring Vietnam. The government in Phnom Penh (the capital city of Cambodia) controlled the major population centers, but large swaths of Cambodia fell under insurgent control. In fact, as Cambodia's Khmer Republic lost more and more territory, citizens jokingly referred to Prime Minister Lon Nol as the mayor of Phnom Penh.[2]

Similarly, the Afghan government confronts the religiously motivated Taliban insurgency that uses sanctuaries in Pakistan. This refuge gives them a place to regenerate, resupply, and recruit. According to Robert M. Cassidy, Taliban sanctuaries in Pakistan allow the Taliban to protect its "senior leadership and the insurgency's regenerative potential—thus protracting the war to exhaust the political will of the coalition."[3] Additionally, while Afghan forces currently retain control of most major cities and critical areas, the insurgency persists in several regions, and Taliban control has the potential to expand. Moreover, in similarity to Lon Nol, opponents deride President Hamid Karzai as the mayor of Kabul; his successor could well inherit this title if the situation were to deteriorate post-2014.



AP Photo/Neal Ulevich

Armed with Chinese-made assault rifles, Khmer Rouge soldiers pause at the border town of Poipet, Cambodia, 19 November 1975. Troops then made up the population of the once thriving border town. Virtually all civilians had been dispatched to the countryside to plant rice.

In the next section, this article sketches the historical features of the Cambodian conflict in the early 1970s that are relevant to the current situation in Afghanistan. Then, it discusses the capabilities and weaknesses of the Cambodian army (*Forces Armées Nationales Khmères*, known as FANK) that were similar to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) today—including the role of U.S. aid and advising. Finally, it offers some thoughts on the application of the Cambodian historical case study to the situation in Afghanistan.

Cambodia in the Early 1970s

Unrest among the Khmer people led to a coup that placed Lt. Gen. Lon Nol as head of the Cambodian government in 1970. The next five years saw a full-scale civil war accompanied by massive U.S. bombing. Writer Ira A. Hunt Jr. describes how the conflict in Vietnam fueled the war in Cambodia.[4] In 1970, the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) had been violating Cambodian territory at will. It then created Khmer communist forces to overthrow the Lon Nol regime. The war ended with the defeat of Lon Nol's Khmer Republic, which had been supported by the United States, in 1975.[5]

After assuming power, Lon Nol pledged to pursue a neutral course in Southeast Asia as long as the Vietnamese communists withdrew from Cambodian territory. To implement this policy, he closed off a critical port and several supply routes that imperiled North Vietnamese sanctuaries in the Cambodia-South Vietnam border region. The NVA countered and advanced toward Phnom Penh.[6]

Saving the endangered Lon Nol regime became one of President Richard Nixon's motivations for ordering the invasion of Cambodia on 30 April 1970. Nixon also hoped to destroy the communist military headquarters for South Vietnam, thought to be located inside Cambodia, and to neutralize the Vietnamese sanctuaries so the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam could proceed without threatening the stability of the Saigon regime. However, the introduction

of 31,000 U.S. and 43,000 South Vietnamese troops into Cambodia quickly stripped the Lon Nol regime of its neutralist veneer.[7] The initial consequences of the Cambodian incursion were favorable. Overall enemy offensive plans were set back, Cambodian supply lines were denied to Hanoi, and Phnom Penh and the Lon Nol regime appeared safe for the time being.[8] Yet, while the NVA retreated, abandoned huge base areas, and decreased its pressure on the FANK, the success was short-lived.

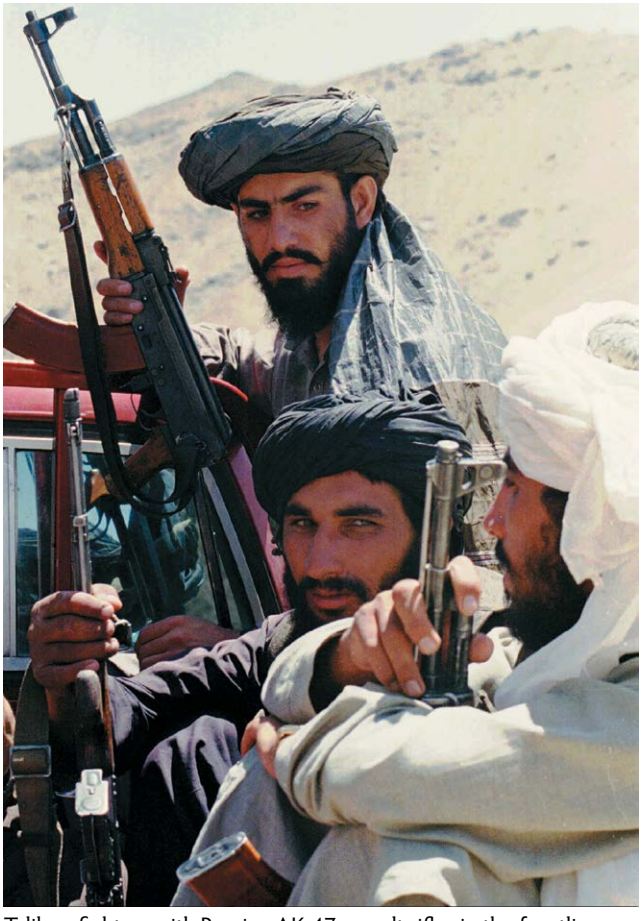
Fearing further widening of U.S. involvement in the Southeast Asian conflict, the U.S. Congress refused to authorize retaining U.S. ground forces in Cambodia, forbade the use of combat advisors, limited U.S. military aid, and in 1972 placed severe restrictions on the number of U.S. in-country military personnel.[9] The Khmer Republic had become, by the completion of the Peace Accords in neighboring Vietnam in 1973, a sickly dependent of the United States. In 1974, U.S. financial aid exceeded the total Cambodian national budget for 1969.[10] Unfortunately, this policy did not permit sufficient U.S. personnel to ensure the money would be well spent.

Cambodian Armed Forces (FANK) Leadership, Logistics, and Airpower Capabilities

Operationally, the condition of officer leadership, logistics, and airpower within the FANK led to disastrous consequences—themes that are similar to the current criticism of the ANSF. The insurgent Khmer Communist force had a much higher quality of combat leadership than the FANK. The Khmer peasant soldiers fighting for the communists were sturdy individuals who performed well and even heroically when properly led. In contrast, poor officer leadership, low morale, and high levels of troop desertion hampered the FANK's combat performance. Additionally, the officer corps was corrupt and cronyism endemic to the force.[11] Furthermore, differences in the effectiveness between territorial and intervention battalions plagued combat readiness.[12]

While the FANK's performance was certainly disconcerting, the few U.S. military personnel assigned did make some progress in training them. However, the shortage of advisors precluded significant improvements in FANK capabilities. While the U.S. Congress was relatively generous with military advisors to the U.S. defense attaché in Saigon, it provided few advisors for Cambodia. The organization known as the Military Equipment Delivery Team, Cambodia, was limited to 74 advisory and program personnel in Cambodia and 15 in Thailand. The defense attaché in Phnom Penh supplemented this effort with 17 personnel. These were meager numbers to improve a Cambodian army that had 224,000 personnel.[13]

By mid-1972, U.S. aid to the Cambodian military had reached about $400 million–equal to $2,000 for every soldier, if the official personnel counts were accurate. Nonetheless, the support had done little apparent good.[14] Logistical support continued to be hampered by inefficiencies in the FANK system and by insufficient advising. By 1975, despite $1 billion in U.S. aid and the efforts of the few U.S. military officers attached to the



AP Photo/Zaheeruddin Abdullah

Taliban fighters with Russian AK-47 assault rifles in the frontline village of Shakardara 15 miles (25 km) north of Kabul, 9 August 1997. The Taliban at that time controlled the southern two-thirds of Afghanistan and were battling a northern-based opposition coalition led by ousted defense chief Ahmed Shah Massood and Uzbek Malik Pahlawan.

American embassy, the FANK still had not remedied its fundamental logistical weaknesses.[15] The army remained road-bound because it had no ration system and could not operate away from village markets.[16] While its tactics had improved slightly, a proper supply system still was lacking.

One example of this supply issue was ammunition. The FANK fired about as much artillery ammunition as the entire South Vietnamese army—which was at least five times as large and was defending a much larger territory against an enemy that was better armed and several times bigger than the Khmer Communist army. Even an inexpert correspondent could see that the Cambodian commanders habitually used firepower to compensate for tactical and leadership deficiencies. As an official assessment by U.S. officers in Phnom Penh early in 1975 stated, "The Khmer Armed Forces [FANK] depend on firepower to win."[17] Yet, the FANK's logistical system for feeding this demand was inadequate.

AP Photo/Mark Godfrey/Nash

A Cambodian soldier grimaces as he prepares to fire a rocket into a suspected Viet Cong position in the Cambodian town of Saang, 23 April1970.

The U.S. investment in Cambodia from 1970 to 1975 was unsuccessful for several reasons that included poor policies and administration as well as terminating support when Cambodian forces were not yet ready to defend their nation. If the United States had provided adequately funded, staffed, designed, and administered U.S. military aid programs starting in 1973 and continued these over the necessary duration, perhaps it could have enabled the FANK's—and the government's—survival after the Paris Peace Accords. However, the U.S. Congress progressively closed the aid spigot that funded the ammunition and other supplies.

In December 1974, Congress enacted an effective ceiling of $275 million on military aid for 1975, which included $200 million in appropriated funds and authority to use up to $75 million worth of materiel already in Defense Department stocks. This represented about $75 million less than the previous year's program.[18] By spring 1975, U.S. funding dried up; in April the FANK succumbed as it used its last rounds and flight hours in fighting the Khmer communists.

A bright spot for Cambodia was the Khmer National Air Force. From its almost virtual destruction on the ground by an NVA sapper attack in January 1971, the resurrected air force grew in competence and capability until its demise in 1975.[19] The U.S. Military Equipment Delivery Team, Cambodia, designed the force structure of the Khmer National Air Force mainly for counterinsurgency missions: close air support, resupply, and command and control. With an operational strength of 10,000 in January 1975, the Khmer National Air Force had 131 aircraft, of which 101 were operationally ready. That month it flew a remarkable 7,208 sorties, as compared to 5,134 sorties in January 1974. Its operational ready rate for the T-28 aircraft was 79 percent, compared to the U.S. Air Force standard of 71 percent.[20]

Reports from the U.S. defense attaché judged the caliber of the Cambodian pilots as quickly approaching the skill level of their Thai and South Vietnamese counterparts.[21] When its end came on 17 April 1975, the Khmer National Air Force was the last effective fighting force in Cambodia, and its determined resistance contrasted sharply with the South Vietnamese air force's almost total capitulation. Reasons for its effectiveness included good leadership and greater access to U.S.

advisory and support efforts based out of Thailand.[22]

Afghanistan After 2014

The history of Cambodia provides a case study in the adverse effect a similar zero option might have in Afghanistan. Comparative analysis lends credence to the argument for a vigorous post-2014 train, advise, and assist mission, with continued funding for the ANSF through a bilateral security agreement with the United States, and the sustained financial support of the U.S. Congress for several years.[23]

Cassidy reports that as of Spring 2014, qualitatively and quantitatively, the Afghan security forces have improved; they have taken a genuine lead for combat operations.[24] However, the work remains unfinished, and it is unlikely that Afghanistan can complete its development without help. According to International Security Assistance Force commander Gen. Joseph Dunford Jr., "they still need assistance in maturing the systems, the processes and the institutions necessary to support a modern national army and police force."[25] The U.S. commitment to funding and advisors should aim at strengthening the Afghan ministries and corps that can sustain the military and police in the long term.

As did the FANK in the 1970s, the ANSF still needs support for developing officer leadership, operational-strategic logistics, and aviation capabilities. Developing the logistics capability of the ANSF remains of critical importance. Lt. Gen. Joseph Anderson, commander of the International Security Assistance Force Joint Command, stated in a 20 March 2014 phone interview with the *Army Times*, "The real issue [in Afghanistan] is getting a supply system in place where they generate requirements based on what happens to their vehicles, their weapons, their radios. That system doesn't exist. Right now things are bought on a bulk predictive model."[26]

Similarly, during a 12 March 2014 hearing before the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services,

Spc. Justin French , U.S. Department of Defense

Soldiers from Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 173rd Special Troops Battalion, give a block of instruction on rocket-propelled grenade launchers during range training in Beshud, Nangarhar Province, Afghanistan, 13 February 2008. The training is for the U.S. forces to evaluate the Afghanistan national policeman on their marksmanship skills.

Dunford warned of inevitable deterioration in Afghanistan without continued support, saying that ANSF units would run out of fuel, base systems would become less operable, spare parts for vehicles would become unavailable, and readiness and operational reach would decrease.[27] Moreover, the International Security Assistance Force would not be able to complete its work with the land or air forces; work with the air force needs two years or more.

When asked by the Senate Armed Services Committee on 6 March 2014 about the likely effects of a zero option in Afghanistan, head of U.S. Central Command Gen. Lloyd Austin said,

"I think it [a zero option] would be problematic. It would be bad for the country of Afghanistan, as a whole. I think that, without our fiscal support, and certainly without our mentorship, we would see, immediately, a much less effective Afghan National Security Force. Over the long term, we could possibly see a fracturing of that force."[28]

Conclusion

To say the failure in Cambodia was due only to a withdrawal of financial support would be an oversimplification. Success in Cambodia would have required much more than just money—for much longer than

just five years. To some extent, the United States appears to have learned from its mistakes; its policy in Afghanistan has been more effective and better implemented than policy in Cambodia between 1970 and 1975.

Moreover, in contrast to the FANK in 1975, the ANSF has been able to stand up to the insurgency throughout most of Afghanistan's sovereign territory. However, as Cambodia did in 1975, the ANSF will need continued advising as well as financial support for several more years if it is to create sustainable and sufficient leadership, logistics, and air force capabilities.

Without the right kind of support from the United States, for the right length of time, Afghanistan after 2014 could meet the same fate as Cambodia in 1975. After the United States ceased supporting Cambodia, the central government first lost the countryside, then the supply routes, and finally the strategic urban centers. The ultimate outcome was regime collapse and national tragedy. This does not have to happen in Afghanistan.

Notes

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