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Cambodia Catch 22: The Question of Australian Military Assistance to the Royal Government of Cambodia
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SUMMARY

There is much debate as to the wisdom of providing military aid, whether training or equipment, to the Royal Government of Cambodia, which is under pressure from armed elements of the former Pol Pot regime, the Khmer Rouge (KR). The difficulties were recently highlighted by the KR murder of several hostages, including Australian David Wilson.

During the Cold War the KR was in an unlikely alliance with several Western-backed groups, with the common aim of opposing a Vietnamese-dominated regime installed by force in Phnom Penh. The Thai-Cambodian border was a point at which supplies and other material reached these groups. Thailand had a military unit, Unit 838, which managed these contacts. After the Paris Peace agreements, which the KR signed but later broke, Thailand (which also signed) ended support for the KR, as did China. And in late 1993, after the KR was declared illegal in Cambodia, Unit 838 was disbanded.

However, the continued resilience of the Khmer Rouge forces in the field suggests continued KR access to supplies. This may be because orders issued by the Thai Government have not been effectively executed by Thai forces along the Cambodian border, something not inconceivable in a state where the military has always exerted a great deal of influence. KR combat successes have cast doubts over the effectiveness of the Royal Cambodian Government's armed forces, which have also been accused of poor leadership, large scale corruption and several atrocities.

At present the Royal Forces receive some support (either as aid or as access to supplies on a commercial basis) from several states, including the US, France, Singapore, Indonesia, China, North Korea and Australia. But the Royal Government would like more, including from Australia.

To date Australian military support has consisted of de-mining, English language training and communications assistance. An Australian Defence Force team sent to the country in July this year was reportedly cool on the provision of equipment, but less so on further training aid.

The "Catch 22" of the title is that Cambodia needs military assistance because its forces are in a parlous condition. But because its forces are in this condition it may be unwise to provide military assistance which will not yield the desired benefits but, in the worst case, help the Khmer Rouge instead.

On balance, the paper concludes, though there are risks, the lesser risk seems to be to provision of appropriately targeted military assistance, perhaps with an initial emphasis on training, but to avoid the commitment of ADF troops in a combat role.
INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses issues surrounding the provision by Australia of military assistance to the Royal Government of Cambodia in Phnom Penh. By military assistance in this context is meant the provision of military equipment, training and advice, probably along lines similar to the Defence Cooperation Program Australia has with a number of regional states (eg, in the South Pacific). The provision of direct combat assistance, stationing operational Australian Defence Force units on the ground to fight, does not appear to be an option under serious consideration.

The paper provides a brief historical overview before turning to an assessment of Cambodia's current military position. The final part of the paper then analyses the fundamental issues and problems surrounding the provision of military assistance. There is a map of Cambodia following the contents page of this paper.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The troubles of contemporary Cambodia are a legacy of the long Indochina war (1945-75) and its outcome. While the National Liberation Front (NLF - Viet Cong) and North Vietnamese triumphed in the Vietnam conflict, in Cambodia the Khmer Rouge (Red Khmers or Cambodians)1 almost simultaneously defeated the US-backed Lon Nol regime which had replaced a neutralist Government under Prince Norodom Sihanouk after a coup in 1970. Prior to that coup the Khmer Rouge had been a significant but not exceptionally dangerous insurgent group operating against the Sihanouk regime from jungle bases, in the manner of Thai and Malayan communist guerrillas at the same time.

The horrors of Khmer Rouge rule after 1975, graphically portrayed in the well-known motion picture The Killing Fields, require no recapitulation. Whereas united Vietnam indeed introduced to the south the predictable Marxist authoritarian state and command economy, complete with "re-education" camps, detention of political opponents and the other paraphernalia of communism, the Khmer Rouge proved to be of another stamp altogether. In the twentieth century perhaps only the Armenian genocide of World War I, the excesses of Stalin in the thirties and the Nazi Holocaust of World War II stand comparison with Pol Pot and Khieu Samphan, names now synonymous with atrocity on the grand scale.

The Khmer Rouge (KR) ruled Cambodia for less than four years, killing an estimated one million people, before being ejected by invasion from Vietnam. Thereafter the KR and some anti-communist resistance groups formed an

1 Khmer is the Cambodian word for "Cambodia", while rouge is of course French for "red").
unlikely coalition and practised guerrilla war against a Vietnamese-backed Government in Phnom Penh. This coalition enjoyed support from China (which backed the Khmer Rouge) and several Western states (backing the anti-communist groups). It held the UN Cambodian seat. Critically, the KR forged close links with the Thai military during this period. The Phnom Penh regime at this time depended on strong Vietnamese military support.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and end of the Cold War provided a window of opportunity for a broad-based settlement of the Cambodian issue. Vietnam was economically isolated by the West and itself dependent on substantial Soviet economic aid. This now came to an end and in part consequence Vietnam could no longer maintain its large army in Cambodia and commenced to withdraw. At the same time, China had less reason to support the KR once the danger of Cambodia being drawn into the Soviet camp was removed. Moreover, after the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre Beijing was eager to rehabilitate itself in the eyes of wealthy states whose capital and technology it needed, and continued support for the notorious KR was not calculated to further this objective.

Eventually, in a peace plan in which Australian diplomacy and troops played a significant role, it was agreed to establish a transitional authority in Cambodia, to disarm all the guerrilla groups, to hold UN-supervised elections and to establish a sovereign Cambodia on the basis of the outcome. In the event, although the plan and elections went ahead (May 1993), the Khmer Rouge reneged (though some defected), failed to disarm and attempted to sabotage the elections. But ninety percent of the people defied the KR and voted in the polls. Having rejected a place in the new Cambodian body politic, the KR have been practising guerrilla war and terrorism (as in the kidnapping and eventual murder of several Vietnamese and Westerners, including David Wilson) ever since. Importantly, Thailand announced the end of all official contacts with the Khmer Rouge (late 1993).

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2 Australia deployed about five hundred troops (mainly communications specialists) as part of the UN peacekeeping force. The UN force was commanded by Australia’s General Sanderson.

3 Thailand was a signatory of the October 1991 Paris agreement which set the peace process in motion; this bound all the parties not to provide support to the warring factions, including the Khmer Rouge. It did not, however, preclude contact with these factions which were themselves parties to the agreement.
CAMBODIA’S MILITARY SITUATION

Chinese support for the KR is definitely an end. The non-communist guerrilla groups and their activists are now (however uneasily) part of the Phnom Penh post-election political system and the Cambodian Army. Nevertheless, the Khmer Rouge have shown a disturbing ability to undertake military operations and to inflict reverses on Government forces. In March 1994, for example, the Government captured the KR base at Pailin in the northwest of the country, a success touted as a major setback for the KR. The Khmer Rouge, however, appear to have withdrawn in good order with most of their forces in the region intact. In any event, the Government was driven out of Pailin only a month later.

The ability of the KR to interfere with routine transport movements, such as the train on which David Wilson was travelling, highlights the fragility of Government control in substantial parts of the country. The map at Annex A shows the approximate area which is considered to be under KR control, though it must be emphasised that these areas do not define the limits of the area in which they can undertake operations such as hostage seizures. Nor does it imply that Government forces cannot enter these areas.

Overall, if neither the Royal Government nor the Khmer Rouge were to receive or lose any substantial source of support beyond that which each now enjoys, the war in Cambodia would seem destined to be inconclusive. That is, the KR could not defeat the Royal Government and regain power, but neither could the Government defeat the KR in the field and put an end to its depredations.

The Question of Thai Support

As already noted, Thailand has officially withdrawn support for the Khmer Rouge. Moreover, in September 1993 Bangkok reportedly disbanded Special Unit 838, which had had the task of liaising between Thai military on the Cambodian border and the anti-Vietnamese guerrillas, including the Khmer Rouge. For over a decade, via this unit and with significant international support, the Thai military had provided a valuable conduit for the KR to export timber and gems from areas under KR control, for cash to reach the KR and for them to acquire weapons and supplies. This conduit became especially important to the KR after China withdrew its support, and the winding-up of Unit 838 was widely interpreted as a signal that any Thai support (even covert) for the KR was to end. The end of external support for the KR, from

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5 "Pol Pot’s Special Unit Disbanded". *Asian Defence Journal*, December 1993, p. 114. This report was based on an unidentified news report dated late September 1993.
whatever source would, over time, cause the strangulation of the KR as its ability to acquire military materiel continued to decline.

However, KR performance since mid-1993 has shown a resilience which suggests that it still has access to essential military supplies, especially ammunition. In October 1993 Cambodian Government General Keo Prasit alleged that covert Thai military support for the KR was continuing, a charge strongly denied by Bangkok. In November 1993 the veteran Australian Indochina commentator Denis Warner, writing from Phnom Penh, published an article alleging that Thai troops had actually cooperated with the KR in an attack on a United Nations checkpoint in July that year. Warner included a photograph allegedly showing Thai and KR troops together.

On November 6 this year, after the KR murder of David Wilson, the Foreign Minister (Senator Evans) was reported as saying:

> It is unacceptable I believe for Khmer Rouge leaders still to be harboured in Thailand. I believe it's unacceptable for the Khmer Rouge still to be able to cross the [Thai-Cambodia] border more or less with impunity when they are put under pressure by the Cambodian forces.

It has since been reported that the Prime Minister (Mr Keating) will raise with Thailand the issue of the apparent impunity with which KR are able to cross the Thai-Cambodian border and use Thai territory as a safe haven. However on 13 November, following strong Thai protests, Senator Evans said that he was persuaded that Thailand was determined to enforce control along its border with Cambodia, and that "perhaps I might reasonably have modified some of the language I used which implied...that a lot of those things were happening in a major way right now."

Any assessment of this issue should not neglect the nature of the Thai state, and the significant role played by the armed forces. In particular, it is not inconceivable that orders issued in good faith by the civilian government in Bangkok are in some cases being evaded or ignored by military commanders on the border who stand to profit from a continuation of trade with the KR.

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7 Denis Warner, "Cambodia's last chance?", *Asia-Pacific Defence Reporter*, October-November 1993, pp.6-8.


9 Keith Scott, "Keating to query Thai support for guerrillas", *Canberra Times*, 8 November 1994.

Nor is it impossible that more senior military figures in Thailand see value in the existence of an unstable frontier, as a means of maintaining defence spending levels which might otherwise be cut. Whatever the facts of the matter, it is clear that the Khmer Rouge has found some means of sustaining its military power at levels well above what might be expected if it was indeed cut off from foreign sources of support and safe havens. The extent to which this source is via Thailand remains a matter for debate (see also the map at the front of this paper).

Cambodia’s Present Military Supports

Since the re-establishment of a sovereign Cambodia in 1993, the Royal Government in Phnom Penh has reportedly concluded a number of arrangements with other states designed to strengthen its military. Of these perhaps the most startling is a $15m deal with North Korea whereby that country will train and equip two battalions of the Cambodian Army and build a defence equipment factory in Cambodia. King Sihanouk’s personal bodyguard of about 40 men is composed of North Koreans. It was subsequently reported that Cambodia will acquire twenty thousand anti-tank rifle grenades and fifty 69mm antitank weapons from Singapore, and that the Government is seeking defence contacts with Israel to help support its currently inoperable Air Force. The same report also has it that the Cambodian Army has acquired some three million rounds of 5.56mm small arms ammunition from Indonesia. France (the former colonial power) and the United States have also provided some assistance, and China has made a symbolic contribution (uniforms).

Certainly the Royal Cambodian Government has made no secret of its desire to attract military support of this type - training and equipment - from friendly states. Australia is presently considering its options, which are discussed at some length below.

The Condition of the Cambodian Military

The size of the Cambodian regular military is not wholly clear. Immediately before the peace process began it numbered about 52,000, of which all but two thousand were in the Army. (The Navy and Air Force were one thousand each.) In addition there were another 50,000 troops in lightly equipped provincial forces with one or more regiments in each province. These latter

11 Nate Thayer, "Cambodia signs $15m accord with N Korea", Jane’s Defence Weekly, 2 July 1994, p.1. This connection is explicable, however, in terms of King Sihanouk’s long association with Pyongyang, which provided him with a residence and facilities when he was exiled from Pol Pot Cambodia. The King’s North Korean bodyguard would have the particular advantage of being difficult to suborn or corrupt.

forces should be considered more as local militia of low combat effectiveness. It has already been noted that the Royal Cambodian Air Force's MiG-21 aircraft, obsolescent in any case, are reportedly inoperable; it also has five helicopters and three transport aircraft, also Soviet types. The Navy has four inshore patrol craft of Soviet origin and six small craft under 100 tonnes displacement.

As part of the peace process the forces of the former resistance groups were to be disarmed and demobilised or incorporated into the new Cambodian Armed Forces. Excluding the Khmer Rouge there were about 14 000 effectives in these groups. The KR were then estimated at 25 000, though more recent estimates have them at about eight to nine thousand.

How many of the 14 000 non-KR have been incorporated into the Cambodian Forces is not wholly clear. Nor is the present status of the 50 000 provincial troops. Moreover, despite the intransigent attitude of the leadership, many KR did change sides. Recent reports, though, have the Army at 130 000 men organised into twelve divisions, with plans to reduce this to between sixty and seventy thousand so as to contain the economic burden of defence spending. These plans, however, are said to be opposed by Army elements and General Proche Bunthol was reported as saying that if numbers were cut quickly, "there might be a coup."

The Cambodian Army is poorly led and corrupt from top to bottom. It stands accused of horrific crimes, many of them against a deeply traumatised civilian population.

This assessment of the Cambodian Army may well be expressed in the hyperbole common among journalists, but there is little doubt that it is not the effective, well-led and disciplined force which Westerners take for granted in considering their own armed forces. The reverses inflicted on it by the Khmer Rouge - which, external support or no, is only a guerrilla force - demonstrate that it is not yet capable of fulfilling its function of national defence. And it is also true that serious allegations of atrocities have been made against it.

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16 Lindsay Murdoch, "Risky aid to Cambodia's rotten army".
17 Nate Thayer, "Army: a dossier of shame", Phnom Penh Post, 12-25 August 1994. This article alleges torture and execution of political opponents; abduction, robbery and killing of traders; gambling, prostitution and extortion.
Moreover, the capture and speedy loss of Pailin, noted above, suggests poor top strategic leadership in that an operation to seize a key KR stronghold should not have been undertaken at all unless the military command were assured of the capability to hold it. This is particularly so given the negative consequences for morale and self-esteem when a major victory is announced, only to turn into defeat a few weeks later.

Allegations of excesses, if true, are testimony to poor discipline and low esprit de corps.

As a general conclusion, it would appear that the Cambodian Armed Forces are underequipped, poorly trained and led, less well-disciplined than is desirable and, therefore, of relatively low combat effectiveness.

AUSTRALIA AND AID TO CAMBODIA

For some time Australia has been providing assistance to Cambodia to help clear the tens of thousands of landmines which litter the countryside, constituting an impediment to agriculture and inflicting numerous casualties on the civilian population. Australia has also provided assistance with installation of a communications system and English-language training. It was reported in July 1994 that Australia had rejected a request for the provision of patrol boats. Later reports have it that Malaysia has agreed to refit Cambodia’s existing Soviet-type patrol craft. Nevertheless, the Royal Government has made clear that it would appreciate more substantial military assistance.

In May this year King Sihanouk was reported as saying in Phnom Penh that he favoured Australia, France and the US supplying ammunition, training and equipment to his Government’s forces, though "he warned against giving outright aid to corrupt government forces". From 17 to 22 July 1994 a ten-member Australian Defence Force team was in Cambodia "to provide a report on possible additional assistance which Australia might provide to the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces". In August the media reported that this team had recommended against further assistance in the form of equipment, arguing

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that the Royal Armed Forces are "in such disarray that training is a much higher priority."22

CATCH 22: AID OR NO AID?

It seems unlikely that a force in the condition described above can raise its effectiveness without significant external support. Therefore it might be thought that any friend of Cambodia would automatically support the provision of military assistance to the Royal Government. Given Australia's substantial political and military investment in the Cambodian peace process, our support could be argued to be politically essential.

However, if the Cambodian forces are as run-down as indicated, it can also be argued that there is little point in providing significant support. Corrupt officers may sell equipment to the Khmer Rouge; ill-led troops may flee the field leaving weapons and ammunition behind; ill-trained and incompetent operators may damage equipment; equipment may simply be left to rust. Therefore it might be thought that there is little point in the provision of aid.

This is the Catch 22: Cambodia requires military assistance because its forces are in a parlous condition. But because its forces are in a parlous condition it may be unwise to provide military assistance which will not yield the desired benefits but, in the worst case, help the Khmer Rouge instead.

The decision which needs to be made will depend in the first instance on a careful and professional evaluation of the true state of the Royal Government's Armed Forces. If they are beyond redemption then aid would be a case of throwing good money after bad. If, however, there is a reasonable prospect that with help their effectiveness can be enhanced, then the case for military aid is compelling.

One signal which should not be ignored is that sent by the Khmer Rouge during the abortive negotiations over murdered hostage David Wilson. The initial KR demand was for money, but this was quickly escalated to a demand that no Australian military aid be given to the Cambodian Government. The Khmer Rouge, it would seem, fear the prospect of such aid, and this argues that they at least believe that with support the Cambodian forces would pose a real threat to KR interests.

Another consideration is that Cambodia is already forging links with other states, among them North Korea. It can cogently be argued that if North Korea can cash in on its contribution then it will improve its links in Phnom Penh and, through Cambodia, in the southeast Asian region.

22 David Lague, "Reject Cambodia's military plea, PM told".
Of course, it will be necessary to assess the prospects of success carefully. In particular the Khmer Rouge, as with all southeast Asian insurgents, will not be easily defeated as long as they retain access to external supply. This may well have continuing implications for Australian relations with Thailand.

Nor would the provision of ADF combat troops to help fight the KR be advisable. Counterinsurgency in Indochina is surely an experience no western power which went through Vietnam would wish to repeat. In any event, Australia lacks the forces which would be necessary to undertake substantial operations against the KR over the lengthy period their defeat would require.

Finally, it is perhaps worthwhile to note that in one sense Australia is more deeply committed to Cambodia than many other states. The peace process was an Australian initiative and the Defence Force played a significant role in its implementation. The commander of the UN force was Australia’s General Sanderson. To back away at this stage, when the going has got tougher, would reflect poorly on Australia’s resolve and commitment to a process it helped start. On balance, though there are risks, it would seem the lesser risk to provide Cambodia’s armed forces with appropriately targeted military assistance, perhaps with an initial emphasis on training, but to avoid the commitment of ADF troops in a combat role.
CAMBODIA

GNP
Growth 1991: 7.6% 1992: 8.0%
Inflation 1991: 8.1% 1992: 9.6%
Def exp* 1991: $42.7bn ($138.1bn)
1992: $122.0bn ($58.1bn)
FMA* 1993: $12m (US)
$1 = riel 1990: 550.0 1991: 780
1992: 846.6 1993: 3,800.0
R = Riel
* All dollar figures are adjusted.
* Security assistance to the Cambodian resistance as Economic Support.

Population: 9,068,000
Men 323,700 352,400 829,800
Women 326,500 351,300 807,000

TOTAL ARMED FORCES:
ACTIVE: some 102,000 incl provincial forces.
Terms of service: conscription, 5 years; ages 18 to 35. Militia serve 3 to 6 months with Regulars.

ARMY: some 50,000.
5 Military Regions.
7 inf div.
3 indep inf bde.
9 indep inf regt.
3 arm regt.

Some indep recce. arty, AD bn.

EQUIPMENT:
MTB: 150 T-54/55/59.
LIGHT TANKS: 10 PT-76.
APC: 210 BTR-60/152, M-113.
TOWED ARTY: some 490: 76mm: M-1942; 122mm: M-1938, D-30; 130mm: Type 59.
MRL: 107mm: Type 65; 122mm: 8 BM-21; 132mm: BM-13-16; 140mm: 20 BM-14-16.
MORTARS: 82mm: M-37; 120mm: M-43; 160mm: M-160.
RCL: 82mm: B-10; 107mm: B-11.
AD GUNS: 14.5mm: 2PU 13/2/-4; 57mm: M-1939; 57mm: S-60.
SAM: SA-7.

NAVY: €1.000.
PATROL AND COASTAL COMBATANTS: 10:
2 Sov Turya PFI (no TT).
2 Sov Steka PFI (no TT), about 6,
AMPHIBIOUS: Craft only: 2 Sov LCVP.

AIR FORCE: €1.000.
21 cbt ac; no armed hel.
FIGHTER: 21 MiG-21.
TRANSPORT: 3 An-24, Tu-134.
HELICOPTERS: 5 Mi-8/17.

PROVINCIAL FORCES: some 50,000.
Aeroplane reports of at least 1 inf regt per province: with varying number of inf bn with it wpn.

PARAMILITARY:
MILITIA: Some 220,000 local forces, org at village level for local defence. €10–20 per village. Not all armed.

OTHER FORCES: UN to monitor demobilisation, incl government forces to form united army.
KVHMER ROUGE (National Army of Democratic Kampuchea) some 25,000 org in 25 ‘bde’, plus 2 indep regt.
KVHMER PEOPLE’S NATIONAL LIBERATION ARMED FORCES (KPNLA): some 7,000 org in 5 div and 3 indep bde.

ARMEE NATIONALE SHANOUKISTE (ANS): perhaps 7,000 org in 5 div.
EQUIPMENT: T-34, Type-62 tk; 122mm: M-1938; 130mm arty; 60mm, 82mm mor; RPG-7 RL, RCL, SA-7 SAM.

FOREIGN FORCES:
UNITED NATIONS (UNTA): some 16,000, plus
3,540 civ pol from 45 countries incl inf bn from Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Netherlands, Pakistan, Tunisia and Uruguay. Air Assets: 3 C-160, 2 C-130, 1 Beechcraft CA-21 Mi-17, 12 Mi-26, 6 Bell-212, 9 Bell 206, 6 Piona hel.