

Problems of a Cambodia Pullout

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, May 13—The Saigon Government's determination to continue and expand its military operations inside Cambodia may well complicate the Nixon Administration's announced goal of withdrawing all American forces from Cambodia by the end of June. In separate remarks during the last few days, President

News Nguyen Van Thieu
Analysis and Vice President
Nguyen Cao Ky

have made unmistakably clear their intention to carry on militarily inside Cambodia after the deadline for the American withdrawal. For the Nixon Administration, this raises a basic question: Will it be militarily feasible for the Americans to quit Cambodia by July 1 as Mr. Nixon has pledged, if the South Vietnamese insist on operating across the border after that?

Many experienced observers and senior military officers here doubt that it will.

The South Vietnamese and American military machines, at least neither present state, are linked together. They are bound both by an interlocking supply and transportation network and the active American support that is provided on a routine basis for South Vietnamese troops.

As a matter of course, American advisers assist every Vietnamese infantry unit, airborne or ranger battalion and artillery group. American pilots transport these units in American-maintained helicopters and planes. The South Vietnamese First Infantry Division, for example, widely recognized as the country's best, still relies on the Americans for 80 per cent of its air transport and supply.

U.S. Arms and Ammunition

American advisers travel on South Vietnamese Navy boats and sit behind desks at the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff. South Vietnamese soldiers fire American ammunition from American weapons and depend, in a thousand

ways, on the complex American logistical system to keep their units supplied with everything from fresh water to spare parts.

The South Vietnamese units that have been operating inside Cambodia since April 29, when they first swept into the Parrot's Beak section west of Saigon, have been backed up at every level by Americans and American equipment. It is generally conceded among observers here that they have conducted themselves well in all the Cambodian operations since then.

A central question is how well they will do without American tactical and logistical air support, helicopters, advisers and artillery. Will they continue to perform well, or will they flounder and become a vulnerable and tempting target for the North Vietnamese once they are left on their own?

If they flounder, what will be the effect on the over-all morale of the South Vietnamese forces and, in turn, the Vietnamization program, under which Saigon's troops have to assume the main burden of combat as United States forces are withdrawn?

Will U. S. Officers Demur?

Finally, in light of this, will the United States officers in the field who vigorously applaud the military aspects of the Cambodian operations follow the President's instructions to the letter? Or will they, as they have been accused of doing in the past, modify policy at the field level?

These are some of the difficult questions the Administration will have to answer as it begins, under great domestic political pressure, the complicated job of extricating United States troops from Cambodia.

One American colonel who has worked with the Vietnamese command for two years was discussing this problem today. "The dilemma," he said, "is this: they can't manage without us in Cambodia and we can't force them to leave when we do. So what do we do? Abandon them and let them overextend themselves? That's not going to help either of us."

Another uncertainty is the ul-

timate South Vietnamese goal in Cambodia. President Thieu and Vice President Ky maintain that the South Vietnamese operations are designed simply to help the Cambodians drive out the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong.

Territorial Issues Noted

There is speculation here, however, that the South Vietnamese may be looking for some territorial acquisitions, such as the Parrot's Beak, a 30-mile-long extension of Cambodian territory that reaches within 40 miles of the center of Saigon.

President Thieu gave rise to some of this speculation himself last week when he was asked by a group of reporters at a dinner whether he would be willing to renew diplomatic relations with the new Cambodian Government of Lieut. Gen. Lon Nol. Formal relations were severed seven years ago and one of the outstanding disputes between the two countries is the ownership of some contested islands in the Gulf of Siam.

"I think we can work out our difficulties," the President said. "Perhaps we will give up our claim to the islands in exchange for the Parrot's Beak."

Mr. Thieu laughed as he said it, but none of the reporters listening to him thought he was making a joke.

Still another question mark is just how far the South Vietnamese intend to penetrate Cambodian territory. Talking to reporters yesterday, Mr. Ky said his troops might try to retake the Cambodian town of Kratie, some 80 miles north of Phnompenh on the Mekong River, which fell to North Vietnamese forces last week.

Some South Vietnamese sources have speculated that their troops might eventually push up to the Tonle Sap, the great lake in central Cambodia, to protect the lives and property of approximately 200,000 ethnic Vietnamese who live around its shores.

If Vietnamese soldiers probed that deeply into Cambodia, they might begin to pose a political problem for Premier Lon Nol.

Given the centuries-old animosity between the Cambodian

and Vietnamese peoples, the possibility of wide-scale and disruptive violence between them cannot be ruled out. The massacres of hundreds of Vietnamese that followed the Cambodian coup d'état in March are a fair barometer of how the two peoples feel toward each other and what can happen if one side suddenly gets the upper hand.

With this tradition in mind, some experienced observers and diplomats here believe it is not inconceivable that the Cambodians and South Vietnamese troops who are cooperating today might some day turn on each other. If they did, it would destroy whatever benefits might be reaped from the whole adventure.