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Price Of Political Will: The Fall of Two Regimes

By Barry Desker

SYNOPSIS

Echoes of the fall of Saigon and Phnom Penh in the 1970s, Southeast Asian governments had to contend with upheavals not dissimilar to what Afghanistan's neighbours are experiencing now. In both instances, the absence of political will proved as painful as it was pivotal.

COMMENTARY

AS THE rapid collapse of the Afghan government played out on television over the past few days, I was riveted by the images of the Taliban advance and the scenes of panic and desperation in Kabul. It made me recall the Khmer Rouge conquest of Phnom Penh and the fall of Saigon in April 1975. People crowded North Vietnamese Army tanks taking position near the presidential palace in Saigon, following a last-ditch battle, on 30 April 1975.

As I wondered how Afghanistan's neighbours who had supported the American ouster of the Taliban were reacting to events in Kabul, I was reminded of my own reactions at Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in April 1975 as we followed developments in Indochina. It was a chaotic period. Veteran diplomat Lee Chiong Giam and I were then senior officers handling Southeast Asian affairs and we were having only two to three hours of sleep each night as the rapidly changing situation necessitated frequent updates.

Collapse of Political Will

At the time, then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew was headed for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Kingston, Jamaica (30 June-6 May) before making his way to the United States for a state visit hosted by President Gerald Ford. With the

rapid collapse of the South Vietnamese and Cambodian governments, this visit provided a major opportunity to obtain a reading of American thinking as well as the reactions of leaders from a range of Commonwealth countries.

American forces had withdrawn from Vietnam after the Paris Peace Accords of January 1973. A few months later, the US Congress passed the Case-Church Amendment to a Bill funding the State Department for the new fiscal year. The amendment officially ended American military involvement in Vietnam by prohibiting any funding for bombing in Cambodia and any military action in Indochina.

Although the war continued for nearly two years, Phnom Penh fell to the Khmer Rouge on 17 April 1975. The 1975 spring offensive by the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) saw it sweep the south and capture Saigon on 30 April. It took all of 55 days.

Just like Afghanistan, there was a collapse of political will and the South Vietnamese army retreated or surrendered, although it was better equipped than the North Vietnamese forces.

ASEAN Response

Singapore had closed its embassy in Phnom Penh and evacuated our staff on the last Royal Australian Air Force flight, which flew out the remaining Australian and New Zealand diplomats as the Khmer Rouge were poised to enter the city.

The ASEAN diplomats from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand stayed on in Phnom Penh and had tried to influence our diplomats to remain. Indonesia had close ties to the collapsing Cambodian junta and the Indonesian army had sent a contingent to Cambodia after the 1971 Jakarta Conference on Cambodia. Thailand was the third largest provider of ground forces in Vietnam, after the US and South Korea, and the Philippines had a contingent in Vietnam.

US bases in U Tapao in Thailand and Clark in the Philippines were major staging points for US air force deployments in Indochina. By contrast, although Singapore had recognised the Lon Nol government after the 1970 coup in Cambodia, Singapore enjoyed close relations with the ousted Prince Sihanouk.

As Singapore did not have a resident embassy in either Hanoi or Saigon, we did not have to worry about evacuating embassy staff from Saigon. In these circumstances, Singapore citizens were advised to leave South Vietnam when the PAVN advanced southwards but there were no systems then in place to assist Singaporeans who needed to be evacuated.

Tussle Over Diplomatic Recognition

One common feature in both the Afghan and Vietnamese cases is that just as American policymakers asserted that Kabul could be held by President Ashraf Ghani's government even as provincial capitals capitulated before the Taliban onslaught, the Americans claimed that a ring of steel was being created by the South Vietnamese army around Saigon.

In both cases, they were oblivious to the reality that as the defenders saw their commanders' families fleeing abroad and as supplies and rations disappeared, these ground personnel melted into the crowd or returned to their families.

Such optimism led to political miscalculations by the US and its allies in both cases. There was insufficient time for a planned withdrawal, especially for local partners. Hasty helicopter departures occurred, which is the abiding memory of the US exit from Saigon, just as videos of Afghans clinging to departing American military aircraft would haunt the current US administration.

The change of regimes raised the issue of diplomatic recognition of the new governments, a challenge which Afghanistan's neighbours face today, just as the ASEAN states were confronted with this dilemma in 1975.

When Phnom Penh fell on 17 April, Thailand pushed the other ASEAN members for joint recognition of the new Khmer Rouge regime by 0700 hours (Bangkok time) the following morning. All the ASEAN members agreed. The Thai Foreign Ministry made a similar proposal on the night of 30 April for joint ASEAN recognition of the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) of South Vietnam.

ASEAN's Dilemma

In the days before mobile phones, Chiong Giam and I went to then Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam's home after midnight to discuss how to proceed. Mr Rajaratnam was firm that ASEAN should not be seen as panicking or fearful. He opposed immediate recognition of the PRG, which was a political fiction. A contest of wills was beginning in the region and ASEAN should not be seen as caving in.

All five ASEAN states already had diplomatic relations with the Hanoi-based Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Singapore's decision resulted in the ASEAN states not proceeding with the Thai proposal. As other countries which had diplomatic relations with the Saigon-based Republic of Vietnam did not switch their recognition to the PRG, Vietnam eventually pushed for unification as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and submitted a single application for membership of the United Nations, which was supported by all the ASEAN states.

Before its overthrow in December 2001, the previous Taleban government was recognised by only a handful of states — Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Today, Russia and China appear to be moving towards diplomatic recognition of the new Taleban government while Pakistan can be expected to act quickly on this issue.

Several governments had already initiated contact with the Taleban, including Indonesia. A Taleban delegation led by its co-founder and deputy head Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar visited Indonesia for meetings with Indonesian government leaders in July, after the Indonesian foreign minister Retno Marsudi met Baradar in Qatar in May this year.

Taleban's Charm Offensive

The Taleban's diplomatic charm offensive accompanying the takeover of Kabul will result in more states recognising the new government as it downplays its earlier record of supporting Al-Qaeda, ignoring the rights of women and children, engaging in the manufacture of narcotic drugs and other human rights violations.

Afghanistan's neighbours including Uzbekistan and Tajikistan will be pressured to follow if more states recognise the new government. Despite the likely momentum to accept the new leaders in Kabul, there will be lingering fears about the Taleban. Its spokesmen have made various assurances about the rights of women and not exporting terrorism.

Still, concerns remain that as the dust settles the Taleban would become once again an exporter of hardline salafi doctrines and a safe haven for radical Islam, with far-reaching impact on the immediate neighbourhood and beyond.

Despite Southeast Asia's trauma in the 1970s, the region overcame the odds and has fared better than we would have imagined during those harrowing days of the fall of Saigon and Phnom Penh. The script for Afghanistan's next chapter has barely begun to be written. The hope is that it too would turn out better than expected.

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