Thailand, Cambodia look beyond Thaksin
By James O'Toole

PHNOM PENH - Former Thai premier and fugitive from justice Thaksin Shinawatra's arrival on his private jet in Phnom Penh last year was broadcast live on local television, the climax of weeks of diplomatic intrigue that brought relations between Thailand and Cambodia to their lowest point in years.

Arriving nominally as an economics adviser to the Cambodian government, the ousted leader served mainly as a pawn in a spat between Bangkok and Phnom Penh that saw the countries withdraw their respective ambassadors and engage in an unflattering war of words over the next several months.

The abrupt announcement of Thaksin's "resignation" from his post...
last month has been cause for rapprochement, with ambassadors returned to their posts and a meeting scheduled between Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen and his Thai counterpart Abhisit Vejjajiva in New York next week.

Yet for all the pomp attached to Thaksin's comings and goings, the current rapprochement between Thailand and Cambodia can only steal the spotlight for so long from their more fundamental disagreement over their shared border. Ironically, Thaksin's advisory appointment caused significant economic harm for Cambodia.

In retaliation, Bangkok tore up a 2001 memorandum of understanding on joint development of a 26,000 square kilometer area in the Gulf of Thailand thought to contain significant oil and gas reserves. Cambodia's exports to Thailand plunged 50% year-on-year in the first six months of 2010, while many Thai investors have likely been dissuaded from investing in Cambodia in view of the acrimony between the countries.

Politically, though, Thaksin provided Hun Sen with a chance to ratchet up tensions with a traditional enemy and intensify his border rhetoric to a rather outlandish extent. "Do you dare to swear on magic that could break your neck, on a plane crash or a dissolution of the countries, that your soldiers did not invade Cambodia's territory?" Hun Sen said in a speech last year,
apparently addressing Abhisit.

Tension over the border erupted in 2008 after the listing of Preah Vihear temple as a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage site for Cambodia, as both sides laid claim to a 4.6-square-kilometer patch of land adjacent to the temple. The issue flared up again last month after a meeting of UNESCO's World Heritage committee in which Cambodia submitted management plans for the temple.

The countries are in the process of demarcating their border, but talks have been stalled since last year pending approval of the latest round of negotiations in the Thai parliament. Abhisit and his Democrat party-led government are under intense pressure from hardline elements of the nationalist "yellow shirt" movement not to give any ground in the territorial dispute, and a vote in the Thai parliament to approve the latest negotiations was again postponed last month, to the ire of Cambodian leaders.

Cambodia has been pressing aggressively to bring attention to the dispute, appealing to both the United Nations and the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) for assistance. ASEAN assistance was required, Cambodian Foreign Minister Hor Namhong said, to help avoid "large-scale armed conflict" along a frontier in which at least seven soldiers have been killed in periodic skirmishes since 2008.

These appeals have irked Thai officials, who have repeatedly stated their opposition to border talks in any forum but a bilateral one. The move to cut ties with Thaksin may be the latest element of Cambodia's border strategy, said Ou Virak, president of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights.

"It gives Cambodia the upper hand when the Thaksin issue has been played out," Ou Virak said, with the move allowing Phnom Penh to "separate the Preah Vihear conflict or tension from other kinds of issues".

Amid its diplomatic maneuvering, Cambodia is also bidding very publicly to upgrade its military capabilities at the border. This week, the government announced the purchase of dozens of T55 tanks and armored personnel carriers.
Meanwhile, in a bizarre bit of corporate charity that has drawn condemnation from rights groups, a local television station is collecting donations to help build reinforced concrete bunkers for combat troops at the border.

Carlyle Thayer, a professor at the Australian Defense Force Academy, said these efforts were largely "grandstanding" for the benefit of a domestic audience. "You can't take it at face value - there's no way that Cambodia is ever going to acquire the military power to take on Thailand in a conventional military conflict," Thayer said.

He said the militarization that Hun Sen has been pushing in relation to the border may be an effort to consolidate his support in the military, an institution that is the only conceivable counterweight to his near-absolute power. "It keeps the military on his side if you talk about an external threat or their importance," Thayer said.

For Thailand, the border dispute with Cambodia remains a key issue in a domestic political crisis that shows no sign of being resolved any time soon.

"The real reason that the border issue is a problem is not because Cambodia has these claims - the real reason the border issue is a problem is that the yellows accuse the reds [Thaksin supporters] of giving away a national asset," said Michael Montesano, a visiting fellow at Singapore's Institute for Southeast Asian Studies. "The government doesn't want to have to deal with large-scale yellow-shirt demonstrations, and the lives of people in the government can be made very difficult and the lives of their families can be made very difficult if they are seen as somehow stepping back from the yellow cause."

Signs do, for the moment, point to a warming of relations. With the return of their ambassadors - absent for more than nine months - Cambodia and Thailand have now resumed full diplomatic ties, and Abhisit and Hun Sen are scheduled to meet again in October following their meeting in New York next week.

Montesano said Thaksin's "resignation" had in fact likely been brokered in secret talks between the two governments, with Bangkok perhaps hoping to get closer to apprehending red-shirt leaders known to be hiding out in Cambodia after the May 19
military crackdown on protests in Bangkok.

In a surprise move in early July, Cambodian authorities apprehended two Thais believed to be red-shirt supporters and suspected of involvement in a bomb attack on the headquarters of Bhum Jai Thai, the second-largest party in Abhisit's ruling coalition. Phnom Penh handed over the suspects to Thai authorities without a formal extradition request from Bangkok.

"This is to show the willingness of the government in fighting terrorism," Koy Kuong, Cambodia's Foreign Ministry spokesman, said after their arrests.

At the very least, Thaksin's departure has given Hun Sen and Abhisit the political cover to hold talks on economic issues and other obvious common interests. The border dispute continues to loom large in their relationship, however, and for the moment, appears indifferent to external developments.

Just one day after Thaksin's resignation was announced, the Cambodian government's Press and Quick Reaction Unit (PQRU) issued a statement accusing Abhisit of becoming "an accomplice and a sponsor of criminal-prone activity" by the yellow shirts.

"Once again, the [PQRU] urges Thai political figures to put an end to the malicious campaign of innuendo, suggestion and speculation to fault Cambodia by raising the issue of the Temple of Preah Vihear," the statement read.

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