Thai-Cambodia Conflict Does Not End at the Border

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The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) had hoped to gain some credibility by resolving the deadly border dispute between Thailand and Cambodia at the alliance’s summit in Jakarta last week. The breach in the bloc’s ranks succeeded in overshadowing a large part of the meeting, but failed to make any progress toward breaking the deadlock.

In February, clashes sparked over the 11th century Khmer temple Preah Vihear that sits on the Thai-Cambodia border. In late April, another battle erupted 93 miles down the border near the Ta Krabey and Ta Moan temple complex across from the northeastern Thai province of Surin. At least 18 people have been killed and some 90,000 people displaced in the fighting.

The conflict has abated for now, but neither government has withdrawn its troops and both sides remain on high alert.

Thailand rejects a 1962 ruling of the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which bestowed Preah Vihear Temple and 1.8 square miles of surrounding area to Cambodia. The territory juts into Thailand with the only convenient road access being from the Thai side of the border. The existing dispute was exacerbated in 2008, when Preah Vihear was granted UNESCO World Heritage status.

Thailand, stronger both economically and militarily, wants to solve the dispute bilaterally; Cambodia wants international mediation, hoping to tip the scales in its favor.
Thai historian professor Charnvit Kasetsiri doesn't hold out much hope for ASEAN's ability to do anything.

“Too bad, ASEAN can do very little, and it will take a long, long time. ASEAN is and will continue to be seen as 'paper tiger',” wrote Charnvit via e-mail from Bangkok.

However, Pou Sothirak, adviser to the Cambodian government, told an ASEAN Institute of Strategic and International Studies conference in Phnom Penh that if the dispute was not resolved, other member nations would revert to settling it by force.

“The border clashes between Cambodia and Thailand are now threatening the very existence of ASEAN—if this now develops into a full blown war, ASEAN must do something right,” warned Sothirak, quoted in Phnom Penh Post on May 6.

The concern for ASEAN, according to Ou Virak, president of Cambodian Center for Human Rights, is that if it is seen as ineffectual in resolving the conflict, it will impact how the bloc is perceived by other countries, particularly foreign investors.

Ou Virak thinks ASEAN’s best course of action is to send an economic warning to both governments.

“Perhaps the best course of action open to ASEAN in its efforts to end this dispute is to show both governments how they too will lose out economically in the long run, if this issue is not conclusively resolved,” says Ou Virak.

**Motives Abound**

Ostensibly, the conflict is over competing claims of ownership over ancient temple ruins. However, many analysts argue that cultural relics are pawns in the game of domestic Thai politics, as much as anything else.

“It is not so much about the temple or the disputed land. It is more of Bangkok elite’s politics, which abuses [a] nationalism claim in order to gain power. It is a classic example of power play,” wrote professor Charnvit Kasetsiri via e-mail from Bangkok.

Kasetsiri is making reference to Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva’s Democrat Party government, which is aligned with the nationalist People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD), also known as the “yellow shirts.” The PAD was responsibly for ousting the government of Thaksin Shinawatra, whose supporters will face off against Abhisit in upcoming elections.

In November 2009, the fugitive Thaksin—was convicted in absentia of...
a conflict of interest and sentenced to two years in prison—was appointed economic adviser to the Cambodian government.

“So it is more of a domestic politics spilled over the border,” according to Charnvit.

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Ou Virak says, however, it is not even clear if the impetus for the dispute on the Thai side is coming from the prime minister.

“Opinions vary as to whether it is the government of Abhisit Vejjajiva or some renegade nationalist military generals who are seeking to score some political points from them,” says Ou Virak.

“It is no secret that different generals in the Thai military owe their allegiance to different political factions,” he added.

The military elements could also be agitating for a conflict to help their boss divert public attention away from the country’s messy domestic political situation.

“As long as the political situation in Thailand remains unstable, conflict on the border with Cambodia can be expected to continue,” says Sheridan Prasso, associate fellow with Asia Society.

Political dividends can also be found in Cambodia.

“The clashes might have been designed by Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen for political gain at home: either to divert attention from various problems, including rampant land grabbing, endemic corruption, and the erosion of civil liberties by recent and forthcoming laws; or to bolster the military credentials and popularity of his son and likely heir, Hun Manet, who was recently promoted to [a] two star general and who is said to be taking charge of troops at the border,” suggested Ou Virak.

And while the temples may not be the root problem, they still play an important role as symbols of national identity, and as an outlet to vent nationalist anger over a sense of historical injustice.
“Thais believe they were victims of the unfair 1962 ICJ ruling, while Cambodians view the conflict through the prism of centuries of seeing their borders shrinking, at the hands of Thais and Vietnamese,” said John D. Ciorciari, assistant professor at the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

But regardless of how the temples are being used to whip up nationalist sentiment or for political gain, Ciorciari believes it is of no benefit to the people of either country.

“The temples are element of the shared history of both Thailand and Cambodia. They ought to be something that brings people together, rather than be turned into a source of a military conflict. There lies the tragedy of it,” he says.

An equal tragedy is that while the temples are wrapped up in politics, people on both sides of the border have to bear the real consequences of the battle.

“The consequences were quite obvious: they had to leave their house, cattle, [and] fields behind, with the fear of looting, destruction, and loss of income,” said Jean-Pascal Moret, International Committee of the Red Cross spokesman in Bangkok, via e-mail.

For two weeks the border crossings near the Ta Krabey and Ta Moan temple complex were closed stopping all trade with economic consequences on both sides. Though the borders are now reopened and most of the displaced people have returned home, uncertainty and fear of a new conflict looms large.

“Even if the displaced people were taken care [of] materially quite well, the psychological impact was very high, as they could not understand why the fighting happened, and did not know how long it could take to return to normal,” wrote Moret.

Given the multifaceted, highly politicized nature of the conflict, that’s a question nobody seems prepared answer.