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The Cambodia-Thailand Conflict: A Test for ASEAN

BY SOKBUNTHOEUN SO

Sokbunthoeun So, visiting fellow at the East-West Center in Washington, explains that “While the non-interference component of the ASEAN Way may help prevent problems from occurring, it has been less successful at solving conflicts after they erupt.”

The current conflict between Cambodia and Thailand, both members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), provides a test case for ASEAN to act as a key player in resolving disputes among its members. A failure by ASEAN to do so would reduce its credibility and impede the realization of an ASEAN community by 2015. Since its establishment in 1967, ASEAN has made substantial achievements in preventing armed conflict among its members. In the view of many ASEAN supporters, such achievements are attributed to the development of a regional identity among ASEAN members through strict adherence to the “ASEAN Way,” a concept that includes non-interference in member countries’ domestic affairs, the peaceful settlement of disputes, and reliance on the principle of consultation and consensus for decision-making. While the non-interference component of the ASEAN Way may help prevent problems from occurring, it has been less successful at solving conflicts after they erupt. Such a test case now exists in the conflict between Cambodia and Thailand.

Cambodia and Thailand’s diplomatic relations deteriorated severely following the Cambodian government’s November 2009 appointment of Former Thai Prime Minister (PM) Thaksin Shinawatra as an economic advisor. Thaksin, who was ousted in a 2006 military coup, remains in exile and is wanted by the current Thai government on corruption charges. This situation is not a disconnected event, but part of a chain of events that occurred after the enlistment of the Preah Vihear temple as a World Heritage Site by the Cambodian government in July 2008.

Preah Vihear, a 900-year-old Hindu temple dedicated to Shiva, is situated near the Cambodian-Thai border. Despite the International Court of Justice (ICJ)’s 1962 ruling that the Preah Vihear temple is located within Cambodian territory, some Thai nationalists have never accepted that the temple belongs to Cambodia. Others suggest that the ICJ’s ruling only covers the temple and not the surrounding 4.6 square kilometers of land. This situation made Preah Vihear a point of contention between Cambodia and Thailand.

Cambodia’s enlistment of the temple as a World Heritage Site actually covered only the temple, not the surrounding land, and was supported by the government of former Thai PM Samak Sundaravej. A joint communiqué demonstrating Thailand’s support was signed between former Thai foreign minister, Noppadon Pattama, and Cambodia. However, both Samak and Noppadon were viewed by their political opponents as Thaksin’s proxies, and the situation was exploited by an anti-Thaksin group known as the People Alliance for Democracy (PAD) to raise nationalist ire in order to remove the so-called “Thaksin’s remnant” from Thai politics. The result was an escalating



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political upheaval within Thailand and a renewed and deteriorating border conflict with Cambodia.

Cambodia proposed ASEAN’s assistance to facilitate a peaceful settlement of this border conflict with Thailand during the 2008 ASEAN summit. However, because of its strict adherence to the non-interference principle, ASEAN asked Cambodia to resolve the dispute through bilateral negotiations with Thailand. The negotiations were unsuccessful. The appointment of Thaksin as an economic advisor to the Cambodian government was part of Phnom Penh’s quest for an international solution to the unresolved Cambodian-Thai conflict. It increased bilateral diplomatic tensions and sent a message to the international community that the conflict had yet to be resolved and required international attention. As a result of this escalation, Indonesia, one of the core founding members of ASEAN, has offered to help mediate the conflict.

Embracing Thaksin and escalating the conflict may seem like a risky move, putting Cambodia in danger of war with Thailand, which is better equipped militarily. However, two factors may be crucial to the Cambodian government’s decision. First, Cambodia and Thailand have an interdependent relationship that makes it hard for Thailand to resort to coercive measures to end the conflict. Thailand trades heavily with Cambodia, and a move to close the border or wage war would have a more damaging economic effect on Thailand than on Cambodia. In 2008, Thailand’s exports to Cambodia amounted to approximately \$2 billion worth of merchandise compared to about \$90 million of exports from Cambodia.¹ In addition, Thailand, which is already ravaged by political conflicts between Bangkok elites and rural Thais, also has a separatist movement in the south. A Thai engagement in an external armed conflict could provide an opportunity for the insurgents in the south to revolt. Further, Thailand needs the support of Cambodia and other neighbors to prevent the flow of arms to these insurgents.

Second, the ruling Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) would make a substantial political gain domestically if the border conflict is resolved. The border issue includes not only the area surrounding the Preah Vihear temple, but also hundreds of miles of shared land and maritime borders that have not been completely demarcated and agreed upon by both parties. The favorable resolution of the border conflict would satisfy nationalist sentiment and would further increase the CPP’s popularity. It is crucial to note that the CPP gained a substantial proportion of votes in the 2008 election because of nationalist sentiment over the Preah Vihear enlistment as a World Heritage site. If Thaksin can help to boost the CPP’s legitimacy by promoting trade and investment in Cambodia through his personal business connections, this will continue to increase the CPP’s popularity and therefore appears to be a worthwhile risk to the CPP.

The current Cambodian-Thai conflict originates from deep historical animosities between the two countries and the use of nationalism for domestic political ends by both sides. This situation renders a bilateral solution difficult without mediation from a third party. ASEAN can play a crucial role to help mitigate this bilateral conflict by serving as a mediator and providing an avenue for negotiation between the two parties. Yet ASEAN’s strict adherence to the non-interference principle will likely keep it from fully utilizing its potential for resolving conflicts among its members. Without a change in ASEAN’s approach to intra-Southeast Asian conflicts, the question of its ability to form and maintain an ASEAN community remains in doubt.

¹Speech by Prime Minister Hun Sen, cited in “Thaksin to give economics lecture in Phnom Penh,” *Kyodo News*, November 8, 2009.