Back From the Brink: Ending the Conflict at Preah Vihear

By Rennie Silva

The bitter struggle over a 1,000-year-old Khmer temple on the Cambodia-Thailand border could be solved without continuing bloodshed through a common-sense solution, writes Rennie Silva, who lived in Cambodia from 2007 to 2009 as a Peace Corps volunteer. He is now writing his master’s thesis at the University of Maryland on the UN-backed Khmer Rouge tribunal.

A COUNTRY ONCE DEVASTATED and long divided by the Indochina wars of the 20th century, Cambodia today stands among the prime beneficiaries of Southeast Asia’s transformation from pock-marked geopolitical chessboard to a region largely free from inter-state armed conflict. Yet an ongoing standoff between Cambodia and Thailand at Preah Vihear has turned their shared border into a flashpoint, pitting the forces of two ASEAN members against each other and placing an ancient temple in their crossfire.

Indonesia, the current chair of ASEAN, sent military and civilian observers to the area after the organization on Feb. 22 pledged to “assist and support the parties in respecting their commitment to avoid further armed clashes between them, by observing and reporting accurately, as well as impartially on complaints of violations and submitting its findings to each party through Indonesia.” It is unclear how long the observers will remain in place. And while it is a welcome respite, it is not a permanent solution. Nor need it be. A sober assessment suggests that Cambodia and Thailand could, if they chose, take measures to secure the temple, prevent the further erosion of their bilateral relations, and avoid undermining ASEAN’s historic role in the region.

CAMBODIA’S LACK OF INTEREST
Built 1,000 years ago on windswept cliffs atop the Dangrek mountain range that straddles the Cambodian-Thai border, Preah Vihear is a four-hectare temple complex. Long isolated in recent years by civil war, rendered inaccessible by land mines and cut off by the last of the Khmer Rouge
Cambodia’s assertions of territorial sovereignty overlook the unfettered access to the Preah Vihear complex that Hun Sen’s regime permitted Thais over the last several decades ... allowing Thailand to expand its near-monopoly on the temples.

that controlled the area in the wake of their disastrous reign over the country, the temple was cast back from the brink: Ending the Conflict at Preah Vihear

THAILAND’S TERRITORIAL AMBITIONS

Cambodia’s renewed interest in the temple complex following UNESCO’s 2008 recognition of the temple places the Thai presence there in a precarious position: by contesting Cambodian ownership, Thailand is encroaching on Cambodia’s internationally-recognized borders that date back to 1962. That year, an international court hearing in which former US Secretary of State Dean Acheson argued on Cambodia’s behalf resulted in a ruling that determined Preah Vihear to lie inside Cambodia. Many other Angkor-era temple sites, once part of a Cambodian empire that stretched from modern-day Vietnam to Burma, are today scattered across Thailand, Laos and Vietnam; they include Phnom Rung, a near- replica of Preah Vihear, built on a hilltop now geographically deep inside Thailand. Yet based on the 1962 ruling, Preah Vihear belongs to Cambodia.

FALLING STRAWS

Yet while the Cambodian government has adroitly used Preah Vihear to galvanize the support of its public, it has also obfuscating the origins of the recent conflict. At its heart lies the issue of access: for decades, Thailand has offered tourists the sole entry point to the temple complex.

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A faltering state plagued by endemic corruption has led to the neglect of the Cambodian Armed Forces; its regular forces are often equipped with little more than well-worn uniforms, flip-flops, and aged Chinese and Soviet AK-47s.

Thailand, sustained international intervention is not essential to end it. What is necessary is acceptance from both governments of the historical context and present realities of their situation.

A negotiated settlement could be reached through the willingness of Thailand to acknowledge Cambodia’s long-term ownership of the temple, as set out in the 1962 international court ruling and reinforced by UNESCO’s 2008 decision. Cambodia in turn must accept that, in the short term at least, the primary access point to the temple will remain in Thailand. Due to the time and resources required for Cambodia to establish access to Preah Vihear and develop the broader region in which the temple sits, it would be in the interest of both governments to accept an interval during which visitors could continue to enjoy open access to Preah Vihear via Thailand. Revenue generated through tourism could be shared equitably and used to partially finance the needed investments in Cambodia’s infrastructure, while Cambodian police and tourist authorities could replace Thai military forces. Such a sustained presence must be included in any agreement on the temple is adequately protected; Cambodia’s most expansive ruins, located close to Preah Vihear, were badly disfigured and in some areas reduced to rubble after looters detonated dynamite to uncover gold deposits believed to be buried under the unguarded temples.

Given the forces presently deployed to Preah Vihear and the emphasis on the temple as a symbol of national pride, the steps outlined here will not necessarily be easy; present conditions on the ground in both Bangkok and Phnom Penh suggest a shared reluctance on the part of leaders to look beyond their respective short-term political interests to constructively engage with one another. The Yellow Shirts of the People’s Alliance for Democracy have opportunistically pressured the government of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva as he seeks to juggle the issue of Preah Vihear with the domestic instability that has rocked Thailand since the coup that ousted former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in 2006. It remains to be seen whether Abhisit can resist their extremist demands and respond instead with a strategy to allow cooler heads to prevail. In Cambodia, Hun Sen has leveraged Preah Vihear both to consolidate his power in advance of 2013 elections and propel his son, recently promoted Major-General Hun Manet, into the spotlight as leader of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces and potential future successor to his father.

However, while fanning the flames of conflict at Preah Vihear advances near-sighted political agendas on both sides of the disputed border, the potentially disastrous consequences of prolonged conflict necessitate the opposite. The fate of the temple, already bearing the scars of battle, hangs in the balance; so too does the future of Khmer-Thai relations and the credibility of ASEAN, which has proven instrumental in fostering peace and stability in the region. Such high stakes must eventually transcend politics and bring both governments to the negotiating table. When they do, the path forward should be clear.

Rennie Silva lived in Cambodia from 2007 to 2009 as a Peace Corps volunteer, during which time he visited the Preah Vihear region on several occasions. He is currently a graduate student in international security and economic policy at the University of Maryland, where he is writing his master’s thesis on the UN-backed Khmer Rouge tribunal.