

Preah Vihear Temple I

Background:

From 8 July 2008 to 24 August 2009, a crisis took place for Thailand and Cambodia over an ancient temple located along their shared border. The temple, Preah Vihear, was the subject of a long-standing dispute between the two countries. In 1962, the International Court of Justice awarded ownership of the temple to Cambodia.

PRE-CRISIS:

In March 2008, Cambodia attempted to unilaterally inscribe Preah Vihear in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) list of World Heritage Sites and informed Thailand of its plans. This attempt was initially supported by the Thai government led by Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej, a position that was unpopular with and used as a key rallying point by the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) (also known as the Yellow Shirts), a domestic opposition movement that attempted to topple Sundaravej. In June 2008, Thailand and Cambodia issued a joint communiqué regarding the temple registration. Increasing domestic unrest and a ruling by the Thai Constitutional Court that found the communiqué to be unconstitutional led to an alteration in the Thai stance on Cambodia's move to unilaterally inscribe Preah Vihear prior to the outbreak of the crisis. Embattled Prime Minister Sundaravej eventually withdrew his bid to regain his seat in September 2008, and Thai Foreign Minister Noppadon Pattama resigned several days after crisis outbreak as a result of the Thai Constitutional Court ruling.

Summary:

On 8 July 2008, UNESCO announced that Preah Vihear temple was included in the list of World Heritage Sites, triggering a crisis for Thailand. Thailand's major response was deploying military troops to its border area with Cambodia on 15 July. Cambodia claimed that 50 Thai soldiers crossed into Cambodian territory about 300 meters from the Preah Vihear temple that day, triggering a crisis for Cambodia. Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen believed that the Thai deployment threatened Cambodia's national security. Sen's major response was to send military troops to the area that same day by. Over the next several days, the number of Thai and Cambodian soldiers deployed to the area increased to 480 and 800, respectively.

On 17 July, Cambodian Prime Minister Sen implemented the other parts of its major response to the perceived crisis trigger by making telephone contact with and sending a written letter to Thai Prime Minister Sundaravej calling for action to defuse the tension and the immediate withdrawal of Thai troops. The following day, Sundaravej responded with a letter to Cambodia insisting that the area around the temple where Thai troops deployed is Thai territory. On 21 July, high-level talks occurred between the Thai army commander and the Cambodian defense minister during a special meeting of the Thai-Cambodian General Border Committee (GBC), but no outcome was achieved.

From July to September 2008, both sides dramatically increased their troop deployments in the border region, and the confrontation incrementally deteriorated further. Violence erupted on 3 October, with both sides blaming one another for instigating the clash. On 14 October,

Cambodian Prime Minister Sen proposed that both sides withdraw troops, but Thailand rejected this proposal. On 15 October, the two sides exchanged fire again.

Tensions between the two sides remained high throughout late 2008 and early 2009. No negotiations occurred between the two sides during this period, but neither did violence. On 3 April 2009, fighting broke out again between the two countries after apparent disagreements between troops over access to the disputed area. A Thai soldier crossed into Cambodian territory and stepped on a landmine. The two sides subsequently exchanged artillery, mortar, and grenade fire.

Tensions continued until late August 2009, when both sides engaged in deescalatory moves. On 22 August, Cambodian Prime Minister Sen announced troop reductions in the border region, proposing a cut of 50 percent. In response, a Thai general said Thailand would do the same. Two days later on 24 August, top military leaders of Cambodia and Thailand met in Phnom Penh and officially announced troop reductions and an end to hostilities. This terminated the crisis for both sides.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was involved in the crisis in a low-level manner. ASEAN attempted to set up a “contact group” to mediate the standoff between Thailand and Cambodia but decided against it on 22 July 2008 after Thailand opposed the idea on the grounds that the two countries should try to resolve the dispute bilaterally before seeking the help of outsiders. ASEAN discussed the crisis in its general meeting and encouraged both parties to resolve the conflict through bilateral talks. Cambodia appealed to the UN Security Council (UNSC) to take up the case, but ASEAN persuaded the UNSC to not do so. ASEAN preferred that the parties resolve the situation bilaterally and was also concerned about potential harm to its organizational reputation and credibility had the parties too quickly resorted to UN Security Council action to solve the crisis. At a November 2009 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit, after the crisis terminated, the Thai prime minister asked Indonesia to help resolve the conflict in its role as chair of ASEAN. Reluctant to get involved in other countries’ internal affairs, Indonesia denied the request, saying that the two sides can manage the issue without additional third party involvement.

References:

Bangkok Post; BBC; Hindustan Times; International Crisis Group Asia Report; Japan Economic Newswire; Letters to the UN Security Council (from Thailand and Cambodia); Reuters; TIME magazine; Security Council Report Update Report (www.securitycouncilreport.org); Xinhua.