THAILAND AND CAMBODIA: THE BATTLE FOR PREAH VIHEAR

Historical memory plays a profound role in shaping national identities and international relations. Leaders often invoke visions of a shared past to unify diverse populations under a common flag or to rally diverse countries toward a common regional purpose. However, historical memories can also be explosively divisive. This article briefly examines one such case: the case of Preah Vihear, an ethereal ancient temple complex that sits high in the Dangrek Mountains near the Thai-Cambodian border. The story of Preah Vihear is a sad one. Among other things, it shows how easily governing elites can undermine peace and mutual understanding among peoples when they cynically deploy historical disputes as instruments of power politics.

The History of Preah Vihear

Preah Vihear—which Thais call Phra Viharn—long predates the modern states of Southeast Asia. Most surviving parts of the temple date from the 11th and 12th centuries, during the golden age of the Khmer Empire. The Khmer people were the direct ancestors of modern Cambodians, who still refer to themselves as Khmers. Their kings constructed the magnificent complex at Angkor and governed much of mainland Southeast Asia, including most of modern-day Thailand (then called Siam). Preah Vihear bears the influence of Hinduism, the predominant religion of Khmer monarchs at that time. It also reflects elements of Buddhism, which later became ascendant in the surrounding region. Despite its Khmer origins, Preah Vihear has not always been under Cambodian control. The area it occupies has sometimes been governed or occupied by Siamese kingdoms and the modern Thai state that succeeded them.

Pre-Colonial and Colonial Background

In 1431, as the Khmer Empire began its long decline, forces from neighboring Siam sacked the Cambodian capital at Angkor Thom. That defeat forced the Khmer king to move southward and consolidate his power closer to Phnom Penh. Over the next four centuries, Siam gradually chipped away at Cambodian territory, and by 1794, a greatly weakened Khmer monarch ceded control to Siam over the northwestern provinces around modern-day Sisophon and Batdambang. Eventually, Cambodian King Norodom requested French protectorate status in 1863, largely to avoid Siamese domination. Four years later, the King of Siam renounced his claim of suzerainty over Cambodia in exchange for large territorial concessions in northern and western parts of the Khmer kingdom, including the area around Preah Vihear (see Fig. 1).

By the 1880s, however, the French were on the march. The brief 1893 Franco-Siamese War left Laos under French control, and with only half-hearted British backing, the weaker Siamese were vulnerable to further French advances. In 1904, the two parties signed a border treaty agreeing that the northern frontier near Preah Vihear would run along the watershed line of the Dangrek Mountains. That principle would have put most of the temple on Siamese soil, but the treaty did not state that conclusion. Instead, it provided that the precise demarcation would be agreed by a mixed commission. In 1907, French officials conducted a survey and produced a topographical map showing a border that deviated from the watershed line and put all of Preah Vihear on Cambodia’s side. The Siamese members of the mixed commission did not approve the French map, but they did not conduct a competing survey or raise a clear objection.
The Legal Dispute

The issue was far from resolved. In 1941, Thailand seized Preah Vihear and other areas as part of a wartime alliance with Japan. After returning the territory to France, Preah Vihear again changed hands after the defeat of French colonial forces in 1953. While a newly independent Cambodia sought to stand on its own, Thai troops moved into Preah Vihear in 1954 to replace the departing French soldiers. Cambodia protested and filed suit at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) five years later. Diplomatic relations were severed, and war was a real possibility.

At the ICJ, Thailand maintained that the 1907 French survey was not legally binding, because it was never blessed by the mixed commission. They also cited their de facto control of the temple—which is much more easily accessible from the Thai side of the border—as evidence that they believed Preah Vihear belonged to Siam. Nevertheless, the ICJ found that the Thais had acquiesced in the French demarcation of the border for almost half a century and issued a 9 to 3 decision in favor of Cambodia in 1962.

Notably, the ICJ decision said almost nothing about the sensitive issues of cultural ownership or the “inheritance” rights that either country would possess as a historical successor to the Khmer Empire. The narrow technical grounds for the decision may have avoided a diplomatic dust-up at the time but did little to resolve larger historical and normative debates. Thailand responded to the decision with diplomatic sound and fury but withdrew its troops.

There was some hope for reconciliation. When Cambodian Prince Sihanouk held a ceremony in 1963 to take possession of the temple, he emphasized the significance of the site to Buddhists in both countries. He also advertised that Thais would be free to visit the temple without a visa, and he permitted Thailand to keep relics taken from the site during the period of Thai occupation, even though the ICJ had ruled that the items should be returned. Unfortunately, that promising political gesture would later be forgotten.

The Dispute Resurfaces

For many years after the 1963 handover, Preah Vihear was effectively off limits, as Khmer Rouge guerillas and other forces fought for control and mined the area heavily. The site became accessible to visitors only after the Khmer Rouge organization crumbled in the late 1990s. In the years that followed, both the Thai and Cambodian governments took measures to make the temples more accessible to religious visitors and tourists. However, in 2008 the historical dispute over ownership resurfaced when Cambodia sought to register Preah Vihear as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The Thai government objected on the basis that the application referred to land around the temple that belongs to Thailand.

Political Posturing in Bangkok and Phnom Penh

Cambodia’s UNESCO application poured fuel on a political firestorm that was already raging in Thailand. “Yellow” forces led by the People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD)—backed by the monarchy, military, and urban elites—were squared off against the “red” forces loyal to incumbent Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej and the populist former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. In June, the Samak government signed a communiqué with Cambodia and acquiesced in a revised Cambodian application. That gave the opposition PAD a chance to skewer the government. The PAD organized protests and accused Samak and others of forfeiting Thai dignity and sovereignty in exchange for Cambodian business concessions.

Under intense domestic pressure, the Samak government withdrew its support for Cambodia’s application. Both yellow and red leaders sought to show their nationalist credentials by dredging up the history of Preah Vihear, directing vitriol toward Cambodia, and issuing recriminations about who “lost” the temple. To most observers, the PAD’s reaction to the UNESCO application was nakedly political and at least somewhat irresponsible. The Samak government’s response also subordinated the interests of peace and understanding to the dictates of domestic politics.

The Cambodian government also seized on the issue for political gain. Stoking resentment of Thailand is not difficult in Cambodia, where many people resent what they perceive as a Thai sense of superiority. (That fact was evident in 2003, when a Thai actress allegedly claimed that “Angkor Wat belongs to Thailand,” precipitating a series of violent attacks against Thai interests in Phnom Penh.) Prime Minister Hun Sen and other members of his Cambodian People’s Party used the Preah Vihear dispute to rally nationalist support in the run-up to national elections in late July.

Verging on Warfare

The situation went from bad to worse in early July, when UNESCO was considering the application. Thai opposition figures sued Foreign Minister Noppadon Pattama, arguing that the communiqué he had signed with Cambodia was unconstitutional. The Thai Constitutional court upheld the suit on July 7, but UNESCO approved Cambodia’s
application for Preah Vihear the following day. Cambodians celebrated, Noppadon resigned, and tensions mounted to dangerous levels. Cambodia closed off the border to Preah Vihear as Thai protests unfolded. Within a week, hundreds of Thai and Cambodian soldiers were stationed in the area, many in disputed areas immediately adjacent to the temple. Hun Sen demanded the immediate withdrawal of Thai troops. Samak responded by accusing Cambodia of territorial infringement.

The two states thus became locked in a struggle that both sides have domestic political incentives to continue. In late 2008, Abhisit Vejjajiva replaced Samak as Thai Prime Minister, but he has also taken a hard line. Abhisit has rejected proposals for regional dispute mediation by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations or adjudication by the ICJ. Hun Sen has also stoked antagonism by refusing to extradite Abhisit’s mortal political foe, former Thai leader Thaksin Shinawatra. Instead, the Cambodian leader provocatively appointed Thaksin as an economic and personal advisor, leading to an angry war of words between Hun Sen and Abhisit.

Behind the diplomatic barbs lies a dangerous situation at the border, where the two states remain uncomfortably close to the brink of armed conflict. They have clashed and exchanged fire on more than one occasion—most recently in April 2009—leading to several deaths and a number of injuries on both sides. Thai nationalist protesters have also marched on

**The Uses of History**

The tragedy of Preah Vihear is that political leaders have chosen to emphasize what is disputed about the temple’s history rather than its potential as a “connector” between the two neighboring countries. Thai elites have been particularly culpable over the past year. As the dispute arose, political leaders in both states have generally avoided acknowledging the nuances and complexity of history. Instead, they have tended to paint the dispute in relatively uncompromising, absolute terms. This is hardly unique in international politics, but it obscures the truth and turns history into a weapon for political gain rather than a tool for mutual understanding.

Preah Vihear’s origins are Khmer, and most analysts consider Cambodia to have the stronger of the competing claims, but the history surrounding the temple is complex. The temple has meaning—both as a cultural symbol and a religious place of worship—to people on both sides of the border. In fact, many of the people around Preah Vihear share broadly common ancestry and were themselves divided by relatively arbitrary national frontiers. The two sides have much to gain from a mutual access agreement. Preah Vihear should be a magnet for tourists and a shining example of cultural traditions that exist on both sides of the border, not a graveyard for young Thai and Cambodian soldiers.