



# STEPPING BACK FROM THE BRINK AT PREAH VIHEAR: CAMBODIA AND THAILAND'S CHOICE

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*Regarded as a “sideshow” to U.S. foreign policy interests during America’s Vietnam era, Cambodia has often been overshadowed in the region by its more economically influential Southeast Asian neighbors. Yet, its festering feud with Thailand over the Preah Vihear temple has once again flared up, claiming at least five lives. The ongoing standoff between the two ASEAN member states threatens a conflict that would be devastating to the UNESCO world heritage site and its surrounding communities. While the government of Cambodia has called on the UN to intervene, a sober assessment suggests that Cambodia and Thailand can take measures to deescalate tensions and prevent further erosion of the relations between the two countries.*

## Temples forgotten: Cambodia’s Dangerous Precedent

Built 1000 years ago on windswept cliffs atop the Dangrek mountain range that straddles the Cambodian–Thai border, Preah Vihear was long made inaccessible by civil war, landmines and the last vestiges of the Khmer Rouge that controlled the area. The temples were cast into the spotlight in 2008 when they were recognized by UNESCO as a world heritage site. Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen immediately embraced Preah Vihear as a potent symbol of national pride with which to bolster his regime by reinvigorating deep seated historical animosities between Cambodia and its Thai neighbor.

Yet Cambodia’s current assertions of territorial sovereignty and recent heated rhetoric overlook the unfettered access to Preah Vihear that its regime permitted Thailand to establish and enjoy over the last several decades. Even after the return of peace and stability to Cambodia in the mid-1990s, the government showed itself to be disinterested in Preah Vihear, allowing Thailand to continue and expand its near-monopoly on the temples. Having long ago built roads and tourist facilities that the Cambodian side continues to lack, Thailand currently remains the only viable overland route to Preah Vihear. By the middle of the last decade, thousands of tourists were visiting the temples via Thailand on a daily basis, making them an extension of Thai territory in all but name only. Rather than arouse con-

cern or provoke action, this de-facto annexation of Preah Vihear was met with silence on the part of Cambodian government that lasted almost until the day the temples were recognized by UNESCO.

## Thailand’s Border Beyond Borders

Though Cambodia’s abdication of authority at Preah Vihear set a precedent that emboldened Thailand’s historically-rooted territorial ambitions, it did not negate events of the past half-century that validate the Khmer claim to the temple. A 1962 international court hearing – in which former U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson argued on Cambodia’s behalf – resulted in a ruling that recognized Preah Vihear to lie inside Cambodian territory. Many other Angkor-era temple sites, once part of a Cambodian empire that stretched from modern-day Vietnam to Myanmar, fall within Thailand’s borders, a fact which is universally accepted by Cambodians. Yet based on the 1962 ruling, Preah Vihear is within Cambodian territory.

## Forces and Facts on the Ground

Even as Cambodia’s government reminds the world that its temple is in Thailand’s crosshairs, the dramatic rise of Preah Vihear among Cambodians from forgotten ruins to nationalist icon and political pawn must be tempered by a realistic assessment of the military capabilities on both



sides of the disputed border. In the wake of recent violence, with Cambodia reporting part of the temple to have collapsed under Thai artillery fire, the severe power imbalance between the Cambodian and Thai forces is clear. A faltering state plagued by endemic corruption has led to the neglect of the Cambodian Armed Forces and put them at a decisive disadvantage at Preah Vihear; its soldiers are often equipped with little more than well-worn uniforms, flip-flops, and aged Chinese and Soviet AK-47s. While luxury SUVs belonging to Cambodian army generals line Phnom Penh's streets, the government has periodically solicited the country's figurehead king and its largely rural public for the funds necessary to feed and sustain soldiers stationed at the remote mountaintop. In the absence of medical supplies or facilities, malaria has remained a persistent threat.

In stark contrast, Thai commandos have appeared at Preah Vihear in polished boots, wearing creased uniforms and brandishing American-issue M-16s with grenade launchers. Critically, they are backed by an air force with offensive capabilities (something which Cambodia lacks and which would be vital to winning a battle on mountainous terrain). While any conflict, no matter how small, jeopardizes the temples and threatens them with further damage and possible destruction, prolonged fighting would also reveal the vast disparities in equipment and training between the two militaries. It is precisely this gap which leads many to speculate that Cambodia, despite its saber rattling, would be unlikely to provoke a wider war.

### A Negotiated Solution

Contrary to the requests of the Cambodian government, international intervention is not essential to a peaceful resolution of the on-going stand-off at Preah Vihear. What is necessary is recognition from both Cambodia and Thailand of the historical context and the present realities of the current situation. A negotiated settlement could be reached through the willingness of Thailand to recognize Cambodia's long-term ownership of the temples, matched by Cambodia's acceptance that, in the short term at least, the primary access point to the temples will remain in Thailand. Given the time and resources required for Cambodia to establish access to Preah Vihear and develop the broader region in which the temples sit, it would be in the interest of both governments to accept an interval during which Thailand could continue

to enjoy open access to Preah Vihear. Revenue generated through tourism could be shared equitably and used to partially finance the needed investments in Cambodia's infrastructure, while Thai military forces could be replaced by Cambodian police and tourist authorities.

This solution could easily be achieved through bilateral negotiations at a time when both countries are committed to resolving the Preah Vihear conflict. Present political conditions on the ground in both Bangkok and Phnom Penh suggest that that time is not now, with Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejavijja facing pressure from nationalist "yellow shirts" and Hun Sen seeking to consolidate power in advance of 2013 elections. Yet the risk of Preah Vihear's destruction – a UNESCO site of world heritage, as Hun Sen has repeatedly highlighted – must eventually transcend politics and bring both governments to the negotiating table; when it does, the path forward should be clear.

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