

THE GEOPOLITICS OF THAI-CAMBODIAN RELATIONS: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF TERRITORIAL DISPUTES AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

This academic article explores the intricate geopolitical relationship between Thailand and Cambodia, focusing on the persistent territorial conflicts that have defined their bilateral interactions in the 21st century. By utilizing the framework of "Geo-body" and neoclassical realism, the study argues that the Thai-Cambodian border dispute, particularly surrounding the Preah Vihear Temple, is not merely a technical disagreement over cartography but a profound manifestation of competing nationalisms. The analysis begins by tracing the historical roots of the conflict back to the 1904–1907 Franco-Siamese treaties, which created a legacy of legal ambiguity. It then examines the pivotal International Court of Justice (ICJ) rulings in 1962 and 2013, highlighting the disconnect between international legal resolutions and domestic political sentiments. Furthermore, the article delves into how political elites in both nations have instrumentalized these border issues to bolster domestic legitimacy and distract from internal crises. The research also shifts focus toward contemporary maritime geopolitics, specifically the Overlapping Claims Area (OCA) in the Gulf of Thailand, representing a transition from symbolic territoriality to strategic resource competition. The article concludes that while military skirmishes have subsided, a sustainable resolution remains elusive as long as the border serves as a tool for nationalist mobilization. It suggests that a move toward functional cooperation and joint development, particularly in energy resources, offers a pragmatic path forward for regional stability within the ASEAN framework.

Keywords: Geopolitics, Preah Vihear, Overlapping Claims Area (OCA), Thai-Cambodian Relations

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between Thailand and Cambodia is characterized by a paradox of cultural proximity and political friction. Geopolitically, the two nations share a border exceeding 800 kilometers, a space that has become a site of intense contestation over sovereignty and identity. Central to this friction is the concept of the "Geo-body," a term coined by Thongchai Winichakul (1994) to describe the modern nation-state's obsession with clearly defined boundaries as a core component of its identity. Unlike pre-modern eras where frontiers were porous and overlapping, the contemporary Thai and Cambodian states view the border as a rigid line of absolute sovereignty.

The conflict reached a critical juncture in the late 2000s, escalating from diplomatic rhetoric to military engagement. This escalation was not driven by strategic necessity but by the convergence of unresolved colonial legacies and the "externalization" of domestic political competition (Chachavalpongpun, 2010). This article aims to analyze these geopolitical dynamics, arguing that the border is a socio-political construct used to define the "self" against the "other," often at the expense of regional cooperation and economic integration.

Content

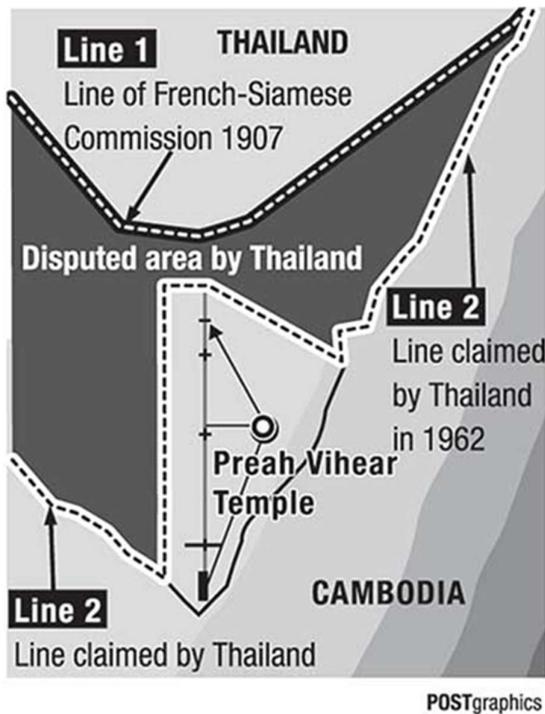
The Colonial Legacy and the 1:200,000 Map

The root of the modern territorial dispute lies in the early 20th century. During the colonial era, France, representing its protectorate Cambodia, and the Kingdom of Siam (now Thailand) established a boundary commission. The resulting 1904 and 1907 treaties intended the border to follow the natural watershed line of the Dânggrêk Mountains. However, the French-produced map, known as the "Annex I map" or the 1:200,000 scale map, deviated from the watershed line, placing the Preah Vihear Temple within Cambodian territory (International Court of Justice, 1962). For decades, Thailand utilized this map without official protest, a fact that later served as the legal basis for the ICJ awarding the temple to Cambodia in 1962. The persistence of this cartographic discrepancy created the "4.6 square kilometer" disputed zone that remains a point of contention today.

Weaponized Nationalism and Domestic Politics

Geopolitics is often inseparable from domestic political maneuvering. In the case of Thailand, the Preah Vihear issue was revitalized in 2008 following Cambodia’s successful bid to list the temple as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. (Kraiwit Gosrisirikul, Wijitra Srisorn and Sunthan Chayanon, 2020) Thai domestic opposition groups utilized the "loss of territory" narrative as a powerful weapon to undermine the legitimacy of the government at the time (Pavin, 2013). Conversely, in Cambodia, the defense of the temple became a unifying nationalist cause for the ruling party, reinforcing the image of the state as a protector of Khmer heritage against foreign encroachment. As noted by Hintjens and Hodge (2012), the temple became a "symbolic battlefield" where national pride outweighed the practical benefits of bilateral trade and stability.

Figure 1
A map illustrating the Preah Vihear temple's location on the promontory and the disputed 4.6 sq km area as defined by the 2013 ICJ interpretation
from : Bangkok Post. (11 Oct. 2013) Adapted from documents related to the ICJ postpones Preah Vihear ruling



Maritime Geopolitics: The Overlapping Claims Area (OCA)

While land borders are defined by history, maritime borders are defined by future resources. The focus of Thai-Cambodian geopolitics is currently shifting toward the Gulf of Thailand. The Overlapping Claims Area (OCA) covers approximately 26,000 square kilometers and is estimated to contain vast reserves of natural gas and oil (Schofield, 2020). Despite the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in 2001, negotiations have been periodically stalled by the same nationalist rhetoric that plagued the land border. From a geopolitical perspective, the OCA represents a transition from "territorial nationalism" to "resource security." Thailand’s increasing energy demand and Cambodia’s desire for economic development create a structural incentive for a Joint Development Area (JDA) model, similar to the Thailand-Malaysia arrangement (Bureau of Energy Resources, 2021).

Table 1: Comparison of Land and Maritime Conflict Dynamics

Dimension	Land Dispute (Preah Vihear)	Maritime Dispute (OCA)
Primary Value	Symbolic / National Identity	Economic / Energy Security
Legal Framework	1904/1907 Treaties & ICJ Rulings	UNCLOS & 2001 MOU
Key Actors	Military & Nationalist Movements	State Energy Firms & Technocrats
Risk Factor	Military Skirmishes	Economic Opportunity Cost

Refer: Synthesized by the author (2024).

Regional Implications and the ASEAN Way

(16 pt) The Thai-Cambodian conflict serves as a litmus test for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The 2011 border clashes forced ASEAN to deviate from its strict "non-interference" policy, with Indonesia acting as a mediator to facilitate observers on the ground (Chachavalpongpun, 2014). This intervention highlighted the limitations of the "ASEAN Way" when dealing with bilateral territorial disputes. The geopolitics of the region suggest that while regional institutions can provide a platform for dialogue, the ultimate resolution of such conflicts depends on the internal political stability of the member states involved.

CONCLUSION

The geopolitics of Thailand and Cambodia are deeply embedded in the historical construction of the nation-state and the strategic use of nationalism. The Preah Vihear dispute demonstrates that international law, while providing a framework for resolution, cannot easily pacify domestic political needs for a "foreign enemy." However, the shifting focus toward maritime resources in the OCA suggests a possible path toward pragmatism. To achieve long-term stability, both nations must decouple border issues from domestic political gains and embrace a "functionalist" approach to resource management. Only by viewing the border as a bridge for cooperation rather than a barrier of sovereignty can Thailand and Cambodia transcend their historical grievances in the 21st century.

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