CHAPTER 2

Border Disputes in Southeast Asia and Their Impact on the Regional Integration Process

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Introduction

Unresolved land border disputes, overlapping territorial claims in the South China Sea and the rising power of the People's Republic of China (PRC) are considered the main regional security challenges for Southeast Asian states that could have global consequences (Sothirac 2013; Mazza 2011). The PRC in particular is depicted by certain Western media as a hegemonic power (Keck 2014) with neo-imperial ambitions that could potentially instigate a resurgence of Cold War-style tensions (Koike 2011).

It is true that border disputes affect not only the diplomatic relations of regional states, but also their domestic situation – especially their economic development. Moreover, if we take into consideration that border disputes in the region are mainly inherited from the colonial and Cold War eras, we can easily decipher a pattern typical of “Third World” nations – a pattern depicting the region as a victim of colonization that still bears many post-colonial burdens, a region abandoned by those who are responsible for the situation and at the mercy of those who may harbor neo-imperial tendencies.

Yet, the reality is always more complicated. Border disputes, as much as nationalism, are colonial legacies exacerbated by the Cold War. But it is also clear that these legacies are utilized and exploited by local politicians in populist rhetoric and domestic policy. In many cases, prolonged border disputes are a result of the complicated domestic situation in these countries. Care must also be taken in assessing what are considered as hegemonic acts and neo-imperial tendencies of newly emerging regional superpowers – in this case the PRC – as these acts and tendencies may also be a part of the colonial legacy and not the result of hegemonic aspirations of regional powers.

In order to show how these colonial legacies function in Southeast Asia, this chapter aims to first highlight the roots of the problem in the colonial past; second, by tracing the historical trajectories of border settlements, prove that – at least in the case of land boundaries – the problems of border settlements lie mainly in domestic political situations, wherein some political forces utilize nationalistic sentiment against their rivals; and third, this chapter will
show that in contrast with land boundaries, solutions to maritime border disputes are still far away. Due to the economic potential of these maritime areas, no claimant state is willing to make the concessions necessary to resolve these disputes, and the lack of good will between states makes the settlement of such disputes highly problematic. This is clearly visible in the case of the South China Sea (SCS) where the extremely unbalanced power relationship between the PRC and Southeast Asian states leaves no other option for the smaller countries but to internationalize the issue. Naturally, the PRC seeks to counter the trend of gradual internationalization of the dispute by weakening the international platforms that are involved in its resolution – in this case ASEAN. This argument will be tested using the example of Cambodia, which has potential – through its almost unconditional support of the PRC's interests to slow down the Southeast Asian integration process.

In order to explain all of the above-mentioned problems, this chapter will examine three cases concerning the settlement of land borders disputes between Vietnam and Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia, and Cambodia and Thailand. These cases are contrasted with the unresolved maritime boundaries of the South China Sea.

**Tracing the Roots of Contemporary Border Disputes in the Colonial and Cold War Eras**

The French conquest of territories in Southeast Asia started in 1858 with the capture of the Vietnamese cities Da Nang and Saigon. After four years of fighting, in 1862 the Vietnamese Emperor Tu Duc (r. 1847–1883) ceded three southeastern provinces to France and recognized Cochinchina as a French protectorate (Brocheux and Hemery 2010, pp. 20–27; Stewart 2007, pp. 18–19; Cooper 1997, pp. 10–12).

In 1863, hoping to protect his country against the threat of Vietnamese and Siamese incursions into his territory, the Khmer King Norodom requested the establishment of a French protectorate over the Khmer Kingdom. The French accepted the King's offer, but it was not until 1867 when, in exchange for control of Battambang and Siem Reap, Siam officially recognized the French protectorate over Cambodia, and it was another twenty-one years until the French decided to fully integrate Cambodia into French Indochina (Brocheux and Hemery 2010, pp. 26–27; Stewart 2007, p. 9).

The "easy access" into the Khmer Kingdom created an opportunity for the French to solidify their gains in the region and France decided to seize southern Vietnam by force. As a result, the entire Mekong River delta had fallen