ASEAN and the Thai-Cambodian Conflict: The Final Stage at Preah Vihear?\(^1\)

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Introduction

While regional integration is becoming a dominant trend in perhaps every corner of the world, not many integration projects are generally viewed as success stories, even by very low evaluating standards. Quite clearly it is the European Union (EU), with all its problems, regarded as number one, followed usually by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) coming second, far ahead of any other organization worldwide. Although ASEAN has reached the point when it is perceived in international relations as (almost) a single actor, its internal dynamics are often overlooked and normally presented as “inefficiencies” resulting from its special “decision making process” termed the ASEAN Way. This chapter is going to dwell on some of these inefficiencies in the sphere of territorial disputes among ASEAN member countries, particularly the Thai-Cambodian conflict over Preah Vihear.\(^2\)

Southeast Asia is replete with territorial disputes, as this volume clearly demonstrates. While many of them are serious, deadly and having potential for major escalation, the Thai-Cambodian conflict over Preah Vihear temple is still a special case and Amitav Acharya (2009, p. 155) labeled it “perhaps the most serious threat to ASEAN’s internal peace”. After looking into Uppsala Conflict Data Program database (2013), the explanation of this is not too clear. According to its data, the year 2011, has been the most deadly year of the conflict since the 1970s, with 28 casualties. The very same database lists other conflicts from the South East Asia region. To name just a few, the conflict in southern

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\(^1\) An earlier version of this text was presented at the conferences Political Instability in Southeast Asia in 2013 at Metropolitan University Prague, Czech Republic, and the Southeast Asian Studies Symposium 2014 at the University of Oxford. The text was produced as a part of specific research at Masaryk University: “Current issues of European and International politics” (MUNI/A/0898/2013).

\(^2\) In Thailand, the temple is known as Phra Viharn/Phra Wihan. We will use throughout the text the Cambodian name Preah Vihear since the temple has been legally awarded to Cambodia. This is also how vast majority of English literature call it, including the official communication of the United Nations.
Thailand’s province of Patani shows on average about 100 casualties a year during the past decade; the conflict in Aceh province in Indonesia witnessed also a couple hundred fatalities before 2005; not to mention other Indonesian conflicts which were even more deadly in their hey-days. Looking at the Philippines, a similar picture would appear with a deadly and long conflict on Mindanao Island and a still worse situation would be in Myanmar (Burma) with its number of violent conflicts between the government and some regions and ethnic groups, such as those in Kachin and Shan states or with the Rohingya people. The important difference, however, is that all these conflicts belong to a group of intra-state wars, thus do not involve ASEAN governments fighting each other.

To examine interstate conflicts in the region, one could mention the conflict between Thailand and Myanmar in the border regions; the dispute between Singapore and Malaysia over Pedra Blanca together with their water source dispute; an old dispute between Malaysia and the Philippines over the latter’s Sabah claims; dispute between Malaysia and Indonesia over islands of Ligidan and Sipidan; and also overlapping South China Sea claims between several ASEAN members (see Weatherbee 2009, pp. 137–145). However, none of these inter-state conflicts meet the level/violence of the conflict over Preah Vihear. In most cases, there have been threats of using force and even reported deliberate ramming of boats, but countries eventually did not open fire on each other. In the case of Thailand v. Myanmar, the Thais actually used violence but their goal was more specifically the border drug and migration inflow into Thailand (Bell 2003). In the case of the South China Sea, Vietnam on a couple occasions at the end of the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s fired warning shots at Filipino boats and Filipino and Malaysian surveillance planes confronted each other over a disputed reef (CNAS 2015). However, this should be perceived as part of a rather complex dispute in which the claimant countries of ASEAN have been becoming step by step closer to each other and forming a more united opposition against China.

Thus the characteristic of the Thai-Cambodian dispute around Preah Vihear temple, which is, shortly, that the two ASEAN member states have acted in deliberate ways to use the escalation of the conflict for their domestic goals – as will be argued later – is in the history of ASEAN unprecedented. Hence the two research questions to be answered in this chapter are, firstly, what is the current stage of the dispute between Thailand and Cambodia at the Preah Vihear temple and, secondly, what is the impact of the dispute on ASEAN – the second most successful (regional) integration project worldwide.

This analysis begins with a conflict timeline, starting with roots in colonial times and ending with the current status quo after the International Court of