

UN rejects intervention in Thai-Cambodian border tensions

John Roberts
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A closed-door meeting of the United Nations Security Council in New York on February 14 refused Cambodian requests that the UN intervene in the border dispute between Thailand and Cambodia over the thousand-year old Preah Vihear Hindu Temple site.

Between February 4 and 7, hostilities had escalated into exchanges of artillery fire that killed at least 10 people—three Thais and seven Cambodians—and injured at least 89 others. Thousands of civilians on both sides of the border have been evacuated from the area around the ancient temple.

A 1962 World Court ruling gave sovereignty of Preah Vihear to Cambodia but the surrounding land, which allows tourist access, has never been demarcated. Tensions have been high since July 2008 when Cambodia proposed that it be given the authority to oversee World Heritage listing for the site by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation.

The Security Council session was addressed by Cambodian Foreign Minister Hor Nambong and his Thai counterpart Kasit Piromya.

Hor Nambong maintained Phnom Penh's line that only international intervention could resolve the dispute and that UN monitors were needed on the border. He alleged that Thailand had provoked the fighting on February 4 and launched a full-scale military assault on February 6 that constituted a "war of aggression". He denied Thai claims that Cambodian troops were using Preah Vihear and the nearby area as a military base. He accused Thailand of deploying artillery and tanks, and warned that fighting could break out "at any time".

Thailand's Kasit insisted that the conflict could be settled only in bilateral talks, without outside intervention, and accused Cambodia of instigating the border clashes.

The Security Council rejected the Cambodian calls for the deployment of an international monitoring force to the temple site. Instead, the UN adopted the posture of

neutrality. Security Council President Maria Luiza Ribeiro Viotti said it had urged the Thai and Cambodian governments to "display maximum restraint and avoid any action that may aggravate the situation" and had called for a permanent ceasefire and "effective dialogue". It also called on both parties to cooperate with mediation efforts by the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Behind the UN stance is the competition for economic and political dominance in South East Asia between China and the United States, which both hold veto rights in the UN Security Council. Any UN intervention would not be to secure peace as such but would be the means for advancing the interests of one or other of the major powers. At this point, neither the US nor China see any benefit from a UN operation.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Ma Zhaoxu said Beijing was in close contact with both nations and was keen to assist ASEAN in finding a resolution to the conflict. US State Department spokesman Philip Crowley said the Obama administration also welcomed intervention by ASEAN. He told journalists that the US was undecided on whether the UN should become directly involved.

By handing the border conflict to ASEAN, which historically has had little influence in dealing with the rival interests of its member-states, the Security Council exacerbated an already volatile situation.

No sooner had the UN meeting concluded than new skirmishes flared. On February 15, the Thai military accused Cambodian forces of throwing grenades at a Thai position. The following morning saw a more serious clash. Thai army spokesman Colonel Sansern Kaewkamnerd claimed Cambodian soldiers had attacked a border outpost in the Phu Khua area.

On his return from the Security Council meeting, Hor Nambong accused Thailand of having a hidden agenda to

“use its overwhelming superior military forces to take over Cambodian territory in the vicinity of Preah Vihear”. The Thai military has reportedly deployed 23,000 heavily armed troops near the disputed area around the temple, underscoring the potential for the conflict to escalate.

It remains unclear who is behind the latest clashes. There is some speculation, however, that elements within the Thai military command initially provoked the latest crisis—without the knowledge of the Thai government. The military hierarchy fears that an early election planned by Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva would result in a victory for the political forces loyal to the former prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra.

The armed forces, backed by the monarchy, overthrew Thaksin in a coup in 2006 in order to repudiate economic policies that were opposed by powerful business interests and the country’s traditional elites. Thaksin’s supporters, however, still constitute a large base of electoral support, due to limited social concessions that were made by his government to the urban and rural poor.

The *Wall Street Journal* noted on February 10 that “some people familiar with the situation say some members of the armed forces and other Thaksin opponents—worried that elections might return Mr Thaksin’s supporters to power—may seek to disrupt elections plans by distracting Mr Abhisit with the Cambodia issue”.

The main instrument of the military and sections of the political establishment in stoking the border conflict is the right-wing People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD). PAD played a pivotal role in both the ousting of Thaksin and the destabilisation and ultimate removal of the pro-Thaksin government that was established after the December 2007 election. Abhisit was installed in office in December 2008.

Members of PAD illegally entered Cambodian territory near the temple site last December to invite arrest and create a diplomatic incident. In the weeks since, it has organised small but high-profile demonstrations in Bangkok denouncing Abhisit for refusing to take a harder line over the border dispute. Abhisit has increasingly adapted to the PAD campaign. He has stepped up his rhetoric against Cambodia, and last week offered to take part in a nationally-televised debate with PAD leaders.

Banham Silpa-acha, the chairman of Abhisit’s coalition partner, the Chart Thai Pattana Party, has insisted that the Thai prime minister resolve the border conflict before setting an election date. Abhisit subsequently announced that no election would be held before June.

The domestic considerations of the Thai establishment dovetail with concerns in Washington over Cambodia’s ties with China. While Cambodia depends on US and European markets for its major textile exports, China has become its major foreign investor, particularly in the natural resources sector and infrastructure. As of 2009, Chinese investment totalled \$US4.5 billion.

On February 3, the US Congress received a report from the Congressional Research Service entitled, “China Naval Modernisation: Implications for US Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress”. The report raised alarm over Beijing’s efforts to establish a series of bases or friendly ports-of-call for Chinese naval vessels. Chinese infrastructure investments in Cambodia were specifically noted, including a rail-link. China has since foreshadowed a major port in the southern Cambodian province of Koh Kong.

Washington has already made moves to undermine Chinese influence in Cambodia. During her visit to Cambodia last year, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared that the US was “re-engaging” in the region economically and politically, and warned Prime Minister Hun Sen not to become too dependent on China.

Hun Sen appears to have heeded the message, amid the Thai military mobilisation on the border. The Cambodian army announced on February 16 that it would send 200 troops to participate in a 13-day exercise with 135 troops from the US Army’s Pacific command and three other countries it did not identify. Called “Angkor Sentinel 2011,” the exercise, according to US Army Colonel Robert Dunton, will train American troops for possible “humanitarian” work in Cambodia.



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