

ASEAN summit fails to resolve Thai-Cambodian conflict

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The summit of the 10-member Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) held in Jakarta last weekend made no significant headway in resolving the border conflict between two member states, Thailand and Cambodia.

Armed conflict first erupted in early February over disputed territory surrounding the ancient Preah Vihear Hindu Temple. In late April fighting spread to the area of the Ta Kwai and Ta Muen temples, 160 kilometres west of the Preah Vihear site. At least 20 Thai and Cambodian soldiers have died in the fighting and up to 50,000 people have been displaced.

During the summit, both sides observed an uneasy ceasefire agreed on April 28 but no agreement was reached at the summit to end the confrontation, let alone resolve the underlying dispute over territory.

Indonesia, the current ASEAN chair, had attempted to defuse the issue which threatened to overshadow crucial economic discussions at the summit about the implementation of the ASEAN free trade zone by 2015, trade agreements with China, Japan and South Korea, and concerns over rising food and energy prices.

The Indonesian government offered to send troops to the disputed border area to act as observers. While Cambodia agreed, the Thai government, after initially supporting the proposal, rejected it under pressure from the military. Thailand has insisted that the dispute must be resolved bilaterally and not be internationalised.

Last week the Thai cabinet agreed to the deployment of observers, but only on condition that Cambodia pulls out its troops from the disputed area around Preah

Vihear. Phnom Penh bluntly refused to withdraw from what it regards as its own territory. It also launched a case in the International Court of Justice as a matter of urgency for a ruling on the meaning and scope of the court's 1962 decision to award jurisdiction of Preah Vihear to Cambodia.

Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa called a meeting of foreign ministers last Friday to prevent any disruption to the ASEAN summit, but, according to the *Jakarta Post*, the meeting ended in a shambles. Thai Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya declared that he would oppose anyone seeking to discuss the bilateral dispute at the summit.

Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono prevailed on Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and his Cambodian counterpart Hun Sen to meet on Sunday, but that discussion proved to be just as rancorous. Hun Sen branded Thailand's demand for Cambodian troops to be withdrawn before any deployment of observers as "irrational and unacceptable" and demanded that Thai troops be pulled back. Abhisit replied in kind.

As a face-saving device, a further meeting of foreign ministers took place on Monday that accepted a six-point "package deal" proposed by Indonesia's Marty Natalegawa. The six points—including an exchange of letters on the terms of reference for the Indonesian observers and meetings of the General and Joint Border Commissions—are purely cosmetic. In any case, the two governments have yet to agree to the package.

As soon as the meeting was over, the war of words began again. Yesterday, Abhisit publicly reaffirmed

that his government would not agree to Indonesian observers unless Cambodian troops left the disputed area. “Thailand’s stance remains the same,” he said, all but inviting a riposte from Phnom Penh.

The failure of ASEAN to end the confrontation between two of its member states highlights the impotence of an organisation that aspires to play a significant role in international economic and political affairs. The Thai-Cambodian dispute, along with other underlying tensions between member states, has the potential to undermine plans for a single economic community by 2015.

An editorial in the *Straits Times* declared that ASEAN would “need to ponder how badly the ill will generated would impede ASEAN collaboration on projects... An ASEAN disunited will be taken less seriously by investors.”

At present, the border conflict, which has been accompanied by the whipping up of nationalism in both countries, appears to be driven largely by internal political considerations.

The Abhisit government has provoked concerns in the traditional Thai political establishment, including the military, by calling an early election for July 3 that could be won by the opposition Puea Thai party. After nearly five years of acrimonious factional infighting in ruling circles, sections of the traditional elite are hostile to any possibility that Puea Thai and its backer former Premier Thaksin Shinawatra could return to office.

The military, or at least layers of the army top brass, are widely suspected of fostering the clashes with Cambodia to undermine an early election. Certainly, the generals have insisted that the government take a tough line with Cambodia. Puea Thai is promising to improve relations with Phnom Penh if it forms government.

Similarly the Cambodian regime is pushing a strong nationalist line. A report in the *Asian Times* on April 30 referred to Hun Sen’s willingness to exploit the divisions in Thailand and marginalise his political opposition. The prime minister has played on the fact

that the Cambodian military was outgunned by Thailand. He has denounced Abhisit as the worst Thai prime minister with which Cambodia has had to deal, and accused Bangkok of threatening “to take control of Cambodia.”

Currently, the United States and China appear to be taking a hands-off approach. Both have called for the two sides to end any fighting and to negotiate an end to their disputes.

The conflict, however, threatens to get caught up in the US-China rivalry that has sharply intensified throughout the region in the past two years. Under President Obama, Washington has intervened aggressively in ASEAN on a range of regional issues in a bid to undermine Beijing’s growing influence, including in China’s closest partners—Cambodia and Burma. For its part, China is using its economic clout to forge closer ties with South East Asian countries as it seeks to secure its vital shipping from Africa and the Middle East.

No doubt both Washington and Beijing are calculating how best to exploit the Thai-Cambodian tensions to their own advantage, thus compounding the danger of a worsening conflict.



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