

*The following excerpts are from the article “Time for ASEAN Peacekeeping Force” by Fuadi Pitsuwan, associate at The Cohen Group, a strategic advisory firm headed by former Secretary of Defence William S. Cohen and an adjunct research scholar at Georgetown University’s Asian Studies Department. The article first appeared on The Diplomat website on 2 May 2011 - <http://the-diplomat.com/2011/05/02/time-for-asean-peacekeeping-force/>*

The latest clash between Thai and Cambodian troops over a disputed area surrounding the ancient Preah Vihear temple along the two countries’ border should be a wake-up call for ASEAN.

Years of negotiations have proved ineffective in resolving the crisis as Thailand’s insistence that the issue is a bilateral one has been sharply rejected by Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen. Hun Sen’s response has been to call for UN peacekeepers to be deployed to the area, a call that raises an interesting question—is it time for ASEAN to seriously consider a peacekeeping force?

Ad hoc ceasefire agreements reached after each clash have been too fragile and prone to being breached by both sides—every time a skirmish has broken out, each side has been quick to blame the other.

Political efforts to find a solution, meanwhile, have been complicated by the domestic politics of both countries. Hun Sen has been accused by his political opponents of exploiting the border dispute to maintain his tight grip over his country, while Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, who is expected to dissolve the Thai parliament in early May, is loathe to appear weak heading into an election. All this is complicated by the close relationship between Hun Sen and the de facto leader of the Thai opposition, former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

Indonesia, as chair of ASEAN, has played an outstanding role in trying to broker a resolution to the dispute, but it can only do so much. For example, it put proffered the suggestion of dispatching a team of Indonesian observers to monitor the disputed area to avoid further clashes. This proposal was reportedly actually agreed on by the political leaders of both sides in the dispute, but there have been suggestions that objections from the Thai

military, which feels uneasy with the idea of having a third party present in the conflict zone, have meant the idea is still on hold.

The latest clash started late last month, and many observers believe it is the most serious so far. At the time of writing, the official death toll stood at 17, although this is expected to increase. A temporary, fragile ceasefire was reached between the two militaries last Thursday, but quickly broke down after only 10 hours, leaving a tense situation and the prospect of war looming over the border.

What can ASEAN do to prevent all-out conflict? It could start by pooling the resources of all member states—including Thailand and Cambodia—to establish and deploy a peacekeeping force at the first opportunity.

The benefits of an ASEAN peacekeeping force would go beyond resolution of the Thai-Cambodian border conflict. Any region must have its own processes and mechanisms for ensuring confidence and stability to maintain economic growth and sustainable development. ASEAN has made a remarkable transition into a formidable player in Asia and beyond, and a regional peacekeeping force would build on this progress and contribute to a greater sense that the region can take care of itself in times of crises—manmade or natural.

If it is to have legitimacy in the current spat, any force would clearly need to consist of an equal number of Thai and Cambodian troops, stripped of their respective national military uniforms in favour of one bearing the ASEAN flag. To ensure neutrality, an Indonesian four-star general could serve as commander. If Indonesia was somehow to make such a peacekeeping force happen, it could well be the country's single most important contribution to the future of ASEAN during its chairmanship.

It will, of course, inevitably have to keep pushing to bring the idea to fruition and overcome opposition from some of its neighbours. But the country is the only member of ASEAN with sufficient political capital and respect to put forward a proposal for such a paradigm shift in ASEAN's security cooperation.

The ASEAN Summit to be held this weekend in Jakarta presents a timely opportunity for Jakarta to really step up.