

ISEAS Executive Summary
**Seminar on “ASEAN and Thai-Cambodian Conflict from Historical,
Current and Regional Perspectives”**
24 February 2011

Speakers:

1. Prof. Charnvit Kasetsiri, Visiting Professorial Fellow
2. Ambassador Pou Sothirak, Visiting Senior Research Fellow
3. Dr Pavin Chachavalpongpun, Fellow, Asean Studies Center, ISEAS
4. Ambassador Rodolfo Severino, Head of ASEAN Studies Centre, ISEAS

▪ **Prof. Charnvit Kasetsiri**, in his presentation entitled “Bad History, Bad Education and Bad ASEAN Neighbour Relations”, proposed two solutions within the context of the ASEAN framework, **firstly, revising history textbooks for ASEAN**, secondly, **turning the battlefields into “Hindu-Buddhist Trans-Boundary ASEAN World Heritage” sites**. He emphasised that when history or “the past” was distorted, this created incorrect perceptions, which could then be “negatively and politically exploited”, leading to unpleasant outcomes. Essentially, “bad history” leads to “bad education” and eventually to “bad relations between nations”. Citing the example of the July 2008 registration by UNESCO of the Preah Vihear temple as a World Heritage site belonging to Cambodia, Prof. Charnvit pointed out that **history had been distorted for Thailand’s domestic politics**. He contended that this was a result of the “use and misuse of history”; hence, there was a need to revise history textbooks. The second proposal to set up an ASEAN Eco-Cultural Trans-Boundary World Heritage site was designed to foster close cooperation and collaboration at the Temple site, with the administration done by ASEAN.

▪ **Mr Sothirak** then provided a **Cambodian perspective initially from an historical and judicial perspective of the Temple, the border dispute itself, the “root cause” leading to the present conflict, and finally the impact on ASEAN and a possible solution**. He gave a historical background of the Temple, right up until 1962 when the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled that the Temple belonged to Cambodia. He elaborated that the 805 km. border was marked by boundary stones resulting from the Franco-Thai convention of 1904, which resulted in maps including the 1908 “Dangrek Map”. However, recent attempts for a demarcation of the boundary by a Thai-Cambodian Joint Boundary Commission had stalled due to the flare ups and tensions over Preah Vihear. That this dispute had reached the ICJ was due to the Thai “invasion” in 1954 to occupy Preah Vihear. The ICJ had ruled that the Temple was Cambodian territory. However, the area of contestation was the 4.6 sq km area in the immediate vicinity. In 2008, clashes had occurred between Thai and Cambodian troops, and more recently, Thailand had demanded the removal of a Cambodian flag from the Keo Sikha Kiri Svava pagoda which was located in the 4.6 sq km area. Thailand had also drawn up its own map, which showed its claims to territory in and around the border area. On 31 January 2011, Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva insisted that “the use of force will be the last option”, and that he could not withdraw the troops in the area, due to Thailand’s “right” over the area. The yellow-shirted People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD) had called for the Thai government to “revoke a pact with Cambodia on settling border disputes, withdraw from UNESCO and force Cambodian residents off land claimed to belong to Thailand”.

▪ **Cambodia had sought the help of both ASEAN and the UN Security Council to resolve this matter but Thailand believed that this should be resolved bilaterally**. The problem stemmed from domestic politics in Thailand, wherein the PAD believed that Thailand needed to assert itself against its neighbour. This nationalist rhetoric had caused the “downfall” of three consecutive Thai prime ministers. There was great pressure on PM Abhisit Vejjajiva. The current Chair of ASEAN, Indonesia, had issued a statement in February 2011 reiterating the principle of the “settlement of differences and disputes by peaceful means”. To this end, Thailand and Cambodia had agreed to the deployment of Indonesian observers and a “ceasefire” of sorts had been declared. However, the key questions were: what happens next and how influential the “observers” can be.

- **Dr Pavin** focused on the **“domestic crisis” in Thailand and how this had impacted on its relations with Cambodia**. In what he termed “linkage politics”, Dr Pavin outlined the link between the Preah Vihear and the state of play in Thai politics. A “battle” had developed internally between state and non-state actors such as the Yellow and Red shirts. **The PAD had been a driving force in the politicisation of the Preah Vihear issue**, firstly to “unseat the Thaksin-backed regime of Samak Sundaravej” in 2008 to the “stirring up of Thai nationalism” through “fabricating historical memories” such as “lost territory”. In the latest developments, the PAD had called for a “tougher” stance against Cambodia, demanding the release of Thai detainees and revoking the MOU of 2000. This in part stemmed from the appointment of Thaksin as personal adviser to Prime Minister Hun Sen, seen to be a provocative act and that Hun Sen had endorsed the Red shirts. The PAD wanted “war” and got their wish with the clashes from 4-7 February 2011, resulting in conflicting reports on the number of casualties and damage to the Temple itself. Prime Minister Abhist was perceived to be “inconsistent” with his policies on this matter, raising questions over his “awkward” relationship with the military and the differing approaches between the military and the MFA, which had not helped.

- Some observers believed that the **PAD was out to “delegitimise” the current government as it had done so to previous governments**, with “conspiracy” theories such as the PAD and the military were colluding to this effect. Pavin theorised that there had been a “lack of communication” between the Bangkok elites and the people in the border territories, which had created disunity. ASEAN could help in the short-term to provide a framework in which communication and dialogue could function, however in the long-term and echoing Prof. Charnvit’s point, Dr Pavin suggested that in order to remedy this problem, nationalism should not be “misused”, history not “distorted”, the issue needed to be “depoliticised” and finally, the strengthening of “people-to-people” contacts.

- The final speaker, **Ambassador Severino**, examined “The Cambodian-Thai Conflict in its Regional Context”. Stating the facts, Mr Severino stated that the conflict was not over the temple itself but the “land near the temple that the ICJ 1962 ruling did not adjudicate”. **The “entanglement” of Thai domestic politics with this issue could not be ignored and some contend that domestic Cambodian politics were also at play with a heightened sense of “nationalistic emotions” on both sides**. Of the two actors, Cambodia as the “weaker” of the two had sought international intervention via the UNSC ; however, Thailand, the “stronger” had expressed a “preference for bilateral negotiations”. Neither side initially opted for the involvement of ASEAN as a mediator in this dispute with possible reasons such as that they were acting in “accordance with their national interests” and Cambodia’s memory of their “delayed membership” in ASEAN due to their “internal political turmoil”. However, Indonesia’s President had sent his Foreign Minister, Mr. Marty, to Phnom Penh and Bangkok on the 7 and 8 February 2011 to see what assistance ASEAN could provide as the dispute was in danger of undermining ASEAN’s credibility. The UNSC was compelled to call a meeting on 14 February due to Cambodia’s official request, to which Thailand, Cambodia and Indonesia as ASEAN Chair were invited. The Council had expressed their support for ASEAN and for efforts to foster cooperation and resolution, as the “regional agency” with the hope that the UNSC did not have to become involved again.

- **This dispute was a test for ASEAN, particularly in relation to the TAC of 1976, which called for the “Settlement of differences or disputes by peaceful means”**, and was also a test for Indonesian leadership as the ASEAN Chair this year. Thailand still maintained the preference for bilateral negotiations but with ASEAN support, viewing the “ceasefire” as informal and which the PAD had “condemned”. Both Cambodia and Thailand had agreed to observers on both sides however. It was clear that the “onus” on avoiding armed conflicts rests with Cambodia and Thailand themselves. The nationalistic sentiments on both sides should be calmed down by the respective leaderships. Any armed escalation would damage ASEAN and its credibility and Indonesia as the Asean Chair had a key role to play in enhancing ASEAN’s role.

Note-takers

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