

A History of Cambodia-Thailand Diplomatic Relations 1950-2020.
By Sok Udom Deth. Glienicke, Germany: Galda Verlag, 2020.
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Sok Udom Deth's book, drawn from the author's doctoral dissertation, is the third volume in the series on "Insights from Southeast Asia: Multiple Approaches towards the Region", and serves as an invaluable insight into the 70 years of diplomatic relations between Cambodia and Thailand. The book covers Cambodia's relations with Thailand through the Sangkum Reastr Niyum (1955–70), Khmer Republic (1970–55), Democratic Kampuchea (1975–79), People's Republic of Kampuchea (1979–91) and post-Cold War (1991–2020) periods, with occasional references to the situation before and after the Second World War. The case of the disputed Preah Vihear temple complex is a regular theme beginning with the first case brought before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in 1959 to the more recent episode of conflict that culminated in the second ICJ case in 2011.

Deth intends for his book to "contribute to the fields of area studies (particularly Southeast Asian Studies) and international relations in two significant ways" (p. 10). First, it is the first major attempt to present a comprehensive empirical study of Cambodia-Thailand relations that goes beyond a narrow "focus on specific conflicts (e.g. the anti-Thai riots in 2003 or the Preah Vihear regime)" (p. 10). Second, it "offers an alternative and more useful theoretical framework for analyzing Cambodian-Thai relations" (p. 10).

These are important aims, and Deth successfully delivers. His core contention is that domestic politics in Cambodia and Thailand is the central driver of the bilateral relationship. Deth, borrowing from Lee Jones, defines "social conflict" analysis as "the way in which potential security issues are viewed by different societal forces operating upon and within the state and understand security policy as the outcome of power struggles between these forces. *Different societal groups always evaluate potential security issues in relation to their own interests, ideologies, and strategies* (Deth's emphasis)" (p. 11). This definition is thus key to understanding "the fluctuations in Cambodia-Thailand diplomatic relations during the past seven decades" (p. 13). It also means that the state is not "a single-unit actor" and is instead composed of "various power groups competing with one another" (p. 178). This domestic competition

for power implies that, in terms of “perceiving threats and pursuing foreign policy”, different groups do so “in accordance with their own ideology and strategic interests” (p. 178).

In advocating for “social conflict” analysis, the author dismisses two other factors that have been commonly used to account for shifts in the Cambodian-Thai relationship—balance of power considerations (as when the new Thai administration of General Kriangsak Chomanan allied with the Khmer Rouge) and nationalism (“why did nationalism become a heated issue between 2008 and 2011, but not during the 1990s, or since late 2011 to the present?”, p. 13). In short, Deth believes that Cambodian-Thai diplomatic history cannot be understood merely in terms of “the changes in regional/international politics or ... through the lens of historically-embedded nationalism as realists or structural constructivists would prefer” (pp. 70–71).

Deth does not argue against realism and structural constructivism so much as he argues for “social conflict” analysis, using each chapter to present his case chronologically and then concludes (sometimes without adequate elaboration) that the frame of “social conflict” is the proper basis for analysing the developments in the bilateral relationship. For instance, in the chapter on post-Cold War relations, Deth uses “social conflict” analysis to explain Prime Minister Thaksin’s approach to the 2003 anti-Thai riots—in which the latter mended ties with Cambodia quickly because of “substantial mutual business interests” and the lack of “ideological disagreements” (p. 179). And while this chapter is the most up to date, it has the feel of an extended literature review as the author extensively quotes from the usual suspects, including Lee Jones, Pavin Chachavalpongpun and Duncan McCargo. There is a sneaking sense that Deth’s argumentative framework is self-validating—after all, trying to study the lottery by only speaking to winners can make it seem as though every gambler ends up winning.

The book can sometimes appear as a history of modern Cambodia through the lens of its relations with Thailand. This is most noticeable in the chapter on the Khmer Republic, which makes little mention of Thailand—a Thai scholar is quoted, but not in order to elucidate on the Khmer Republic’s foreign relations with Thailand. Furthermore, while Deth is right to observe that the Khmer Republic gets short shrift in the context of Cambodian-Thai relations, his chapter does not exactly rectify this state of affairs since the first ten pages read like a standard history text on the Khmer Republic.

This reviewer finds it curious that Deth does not get into any details about the death of US Marines during the Mayaguez affair in 1975, as it was a defining moment in Cambodian-Thai relations triggered by US military action. It is obvious that US forces botched the rescue although the crew was released as the attack began. US-Thai relations were indeed negatively impacted because US military action was launched from Thai soil without Thailand's consent.

The People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) chapter does not break new ground—we know that Thailand supported the Khmer Rouge and the non-Communist resistance. Here, Deth leans on Kenton Clymer, whose coverage of Cambodia-United States relations mirrors Thailand's approach towards the resistance. The strength of the chapter is the story it tells of how Cambodian-Thai relations began to change as Thailand “brought a business-oriented civilian government” [p. 138] and the PRK began its own economic reforms. That is, until yet another a coup in Thailand brought down the civilian government.

There are also a few unfortunate errata: a mistaken reference to the embassy of the South Vietnam provisional government instead of North Vietnam (p. 47); a grammatical error in “policies was adopted” (p. 104); and a missing integer in “198” in Table 5.1 (p. 125). Overall, however, Deth's *A History of Cambodia-Thailand Diplomatic Relations 1950-2020* is a welcome contribution to the study of Cambodia's foreign policy in general and Thai-Cambodian relations in particular.

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