

***Preah Vihear: A Guide to the Thai-Cambodian Conflict and Its Solutions.* By Charnvit Kasetsiri, Pou Sothirak and Pavin Chachavalponpun. Bangkok, White Lotus Press, 2013. Softcover: 127pp.**

On 11 November 2013 the International Court of Justice (ICJ) handed down its verdict concerning the interpretation of its 1962 judgement on the temple of Preah Vihear on the Thai-Cambodian border. The Court ruled that Cambodia's ownership of the temple entitled it to sovereignty over the promontory of the site, as shown on the map Cambodia bases its border claims on. The ICJ made clear, however, that the judgement concerned the promontory only, and did not affect the boundary line between Thailand and Cambodia. While the ruling allowed both sides to claim at least a partial victory on details of the interpretation, ironically enough, it was Thailand's deepening political crisis that lessened the danger of a widely feared outbreak of violence along the border. The *Guide to the Preah Vihear Conflict* is a joint effort by two Thai and one Cambodian scholar to explain the context of the dispute and how conflict might be avoided in the future.

In a sense a critique of the political manipulation of Thai and, to a lesser extent Khmer nationalism, the book offers a well-balanced account of the complex relationships between the various stakeholders in the dispute. The compact volume builds on previous work by the authors and is divided into four rather loosely integrated chapters which attempt to unravel the differing historical narratives that dominated the crisis between 2008 and 2011. In addition, the authors offer a set of practical guidelines to manage the simmering conflict.

According to the authors, the revival of contested claims to an area of roughly four square kilometers surrounding the Preah Vihear temple was primarily the result of political infighting in Thailand, and specifically, "part of a plot to remove the government of Samak Sundaravej" (p.25). Subsequent developments are interpreted through the lens of domestic power struggles in both Bangkok and Phnom Penh. The first two chapters of the book provide the historical background to the events that culminated in military clashes in early 2011, when fighting spread to two smaller temple complexes located 150 kilometers from Preah Vihear. Regrettably, however, the period between the ICJ's 1962 ruling and the first decade of the twenty-first century is somewhat sidestepped, and

the reader is left wondering how the still rather obscure past of the no-man's land surrounding the temple fits into the historical account. Nevertheless, the authors do an excellent job of highlighting the inconsistencies in the versions of the temple's history advanced by both countries. According to the authors, it is surprising that, given the similarities between the two peoples, relations "should be characterized by deep-seated ignorance, misunderstanding, and prejudice" (p.4). It is precisely the many similarities between the two peoples, however, that explain why territorial nationalism and the remembrance of past wars constitute such central elements to their respective national identities and render the ambiguities along the common border as destructive sources of potentially violent conflict.

In focusing on nation-building, it is unfortunate that the authors refrain from problematizing the challenges posed by the ongoing project of state-making, to which their description of contemporary events alludes. In 2003 Jean-Marc F. Blanchard coined the term "adolescent state"; that is a state that is yet to find its identity and to consolidate the institutional processes ensuring predictable and prudent, in short adult behaviour. Uneven development and an excessive concern with status and position in foreign policy increase the functional pressures on the borders of the adolescent state. The failure to build societal consensus and extreme fragmentation among the elites, especially in the Thai context, effectively raised the political, economic and emotional value of the Preah Vihear temple. Such a perspective calls in particular for a closer examination of the role played by the Thai military. The claim that it were members of the armed forces that successfully pushed for the militarization of the dispute is alluded to in several passages of the book, yet more could have been done to show the extent to which different actors were able to assert their preferences.

The second part of the book reflects on the viability of the different bilateral and multilateral mechanisms the conflicting parties have sought to employ. The authors advocate a stronger role for ASEAN. The organization's failure to take a decisive stance in 2011 when fighting killed dozens and displaced thousands more, was not merely due to Bangkok's insistence to deal with the dispute bilaterally. Instead, it was "ASEAN's inherent character of not getting involved in the domestic affairs of member states that made the Association too slow to react" (p. 80). However, it remains debatable whether, as the authors contend, the conflict damaged ASEAN's "reputation as a peacemaker" (p. 88). Within the region's fragile

security environment (of which the book provides just another apt illustration), ASEAN may easily afford to ignore the use of force by one of its members than is commonly expected. More importantly, ASEAN retains an interest in not actively engaging itself in bilateral disputes as long as the intensity of the conflict remains low enough not to affect the larger multilateral security framework.

The *Guide to the Conflict of Preah Vihear* is a must-read for anyone interested in the foreign and domestic policies of Thailand and Cambodia. The book also offers insights that may well be applicable to other border conflicts in a region still in the process of drawing its international boundaries as part of a bigger endeavour to build cohesive societies and stable states.

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