

The Use of Force at Home and Abroad Through Diversionary Foreign Policy: The Case of Preah Vihear

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Structured Abstract

Article type: Research paper

Purpose—This article aims to examine the Preah Vihear territorial conflict that occurred between Thailand and Cambodia from 2008 to 2011. It aims to explain how the ancient Hindu temple complex of Preah Vihear, a territorial issue rooted in history, turned into a source of international conflict between the two neighbors by exploring the role of key political actors toward the issue from diversionary foreign policy approach.

Methodology—In theory, this article employs diversionary foreign policy to trace the events by which political actors were able to command the use of low-level force. Online journals, newspaper articles and other related publications will be examined to understand and analyze events leading to the territorial conflict.

Findings—In the case of Thailand, the Preah Vihear territorial conflict was a result of the royalist factions' (PAD and the military) strategic use and manipulation of the territorial issue against Cambodia. By contrast, in Cambodia we find that the Preah Vihear territorial conflict was an outcome of Hun Sen's reactive historical disputation of Preah Vihear for power consolidation.

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Practical Implications—Useful for scholars searching for papers related to the study of historical and territorial issues in Southeast Asia given the relative dearth of literature in this area.

Originality—This study provides a more recent case in Southeast Asia of how a territorial issue rooted in historical memory becomes a source of international conflict through the politicization and historical disputation by political actors. In addition, it tests the application of diversionary foreign policy as a conceptual framework to account for a linkage between historical disputation and political leaders' interests.

Keywords: border conflict, Cambodia, diversionary foreign policy, historical disputation, historical memory, Preah Vihear, Thailand

Introduction

The controversial ancient Hindu temple complex of Preah Vihear witnessed numerous small scale skirmishes between Thailand and Cambodia from 2008 to 2011 that resulted in several casualties on both sides of the border. After the election of Thailand's Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra into office in July 2011, however, the strained situation at Preah Vihear quickly dissipated. The cordial football match was held between Thai and Cambodian government officials led by former Thai premier, Somchai Wongsawat, and Cambodian Prime Minister, Hun Sen, a week after Shinawatra's first official visit to Cambodia. Why the sudden shift in their diplomatic relations? How did the historic temple turn into a territorial border conflict between the two countries? What role did various political actors play in the territorial issue? In order to answer these questions, we examine the domestic political situation of both Thailand and Cambodia prior to and at the time of the border clashes. Each side concocted actions that evidently agitated the dispute although it was unclear who actually started the conflict. However, the intermittent encounters that had lasted for almost three years also find cause from the diversionary motives of domestic political actors in both countries. While the Preah Vihear border conflict has roots from historical antagonism between the Thai and Cambodian people due to their differing construction of the temple's historical memory, we argue that the territorial dispute intensified when key political actors strategically employed the historical issue for diversionary purposes.

In the study of how historical memory matters in international relations, while contesting historical memory generally plays a marginal role in the overall interaction among states, the significance of a historical issue in state relations can increase when political elites use and manipulate it for their own political interests. This has been evident in Northeast Asia among Japan, China and the two Koreas, from the issue of history textbooks and the Yasukuni Shrine tributary visits during the time of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi of Japan to the more recent territorial disputes in Diaoyu Islands (Senkaku in Japanese) between China and Japan and in Dokdo

Islets (Takeshima in Japanese) between South Korea and Japan. These controversies originate from their deep-seated mistrust of one another due to conflicting historical memory; however, the continuing discord in their relations was possible because of the manipulation of history by political leaders, causing diplomatic friction in the short-run and presenting a challenge to the overall regional cooperation in the long-run. Cases such as territorial disputes, which may have both tangible (economic) and intangible (religious and historical) value, can further raise the salience of the issue at stake,¹ and bring more incentives for state leaders' political contestation of history particularly when faced with domestic troubles.

How did the Preah Vihear border issue translate into diversionary foreign policy adventures? Why did the historical dispute take a dyadic, not monadic, pattern of diversionary conflict? First, state leaders could sway public sentiment using a contested historical issue because historical memories are an important component of national identity, which distinguishes between the "self," oftentimes depicted as the victim, and "Other" or "the enemy." Thailand and Cambodia consider the Preah Vihear as a part of their identity and territorial integrity²; it became a historical flashpoint starting from the 1904 drawing of the Annex 1 map,³ Thailand's occupation of the temple in 1953, and the International Court of Justice's (ICJ) verdict that ruled in favor of Cambodia over the Preah Vihear's territorial sovereignty.⁴ Both countries are more likely to have misperception and suspicion of each other on account of past memories, and political elites in both countries can easily make use of contesting historical memory by fueling the public's sense of national identity to induce nationalism. In return, the exploitation of nationalism gives more justification to use force or threaten to use force strategically to deviate interest away from domestic problems. Political elites employ historical issue through historical disputation, which we define as political leaders' use and manipulation of contesting historical memories to suit their own interests. State leader's historical disputation works to transform socially contesting historical memories into an international conflict. Without historical disputation incited by political leaders, contesting historical memories tend to remain less controversial among states.

Second, the Preah Vihear border conflict between the two countries reveals a dyadic diversionary pattern, which is a rare phenomenon in international conflict. Diversionary dyadic conflict is generally defined as the strategic interaction between two states wherein the targeted state reciprocates the diversionary use of conflict by the initiating state.⁵ Most diversionary foreign policy cases are monadic rather than dyadic because the response of the target state is uncertain; rather, the reaction will depend on strategic calculations or the incentives facing state leaders.⁶ Political elites from the initiating and targeted states not only consider the domestic political situation in their decisions to use force externally, but also they calculate the likely response of their actions towards one another and the anticipated consequences. The pretext for doing so is that the political survival of elites in both states will also depend on how well their nations perform in the international conflict.⁷ In fact, the calculated risk for the survival of political elites to exert diversionary foreign policy is considerably high, which implies the complexity of diversionary use of force to become a

theory as the strategic interaction between the challenger and target state remains inconclusive. However, our research finds evidence that a dyadic diversionary pattern is more likely to take place when historical disputation of a contested issue is employed. In East Asia, the relations among states are significantly affected by the problem of historical memory.⁸ When domestic leaders from the initiating side invoke contesting historical memories for its domestic audience, it can elicit an equally negative reaction from the targeted state. And as the case of Preah Vihear border conflict demonstrates, the use of limited force by one side was equally reciprocated by the other side, a dyadic diversionary strategy calculated under the guise of defending each country's sovereignty and national integrity.

This article provides a detailed case study tracing the events by which political actors were able to command the use of low-level force for diversionary purposes. This study further analyzes the issue from the vantage point of different political actors' use of historical disputation that resulted in the international conflict. In Thailand, as the country faced domestic power struggle, the border conflict recurrently occurred under two different competing administrations. While a political pressure group called People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) stoked nationalist rhetoric in Bangkok, the role of Thai military should be noted in the border conflict. Studies on diversionary theory recognize that the sustenance of the military is essential for political leaders to succeed in exercising diversionary foreign policy.⁹ In this case, for the Thai military, since the ouster of the populist regime of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra from power, the historical conflict not only provided a good opportunity for the military to divert domestic audience's attention to the border conflict but also reinforce and safeguard their influence in domestic decisions¹⁰ especially during the military-backed government of Abhisit.

In Cambodia, Prime Minister Hun Sen equally reciprocated Thai military threats despite Cambodia's asymmetric power relations vis-à-vis Thailand. Before the first military clash broke out, Hun Sen and the Cambodian People's Party won the 2008 elections by a relatively wide margin, which affirms his firm grip in domestic politics. However, after 2008, Hun Sen also had to contend with a number of domestic issues, and given his solid command of the military, the conflict with Bangkok provided his regime with a strategic ploy to distract public attention away domestic problems to the border conflict.

Before the Preah Vihear temple's UNESCO inscription on July 7, 2008, the territorial dispute was at the very least restrained, and Bangkok and Phnom Penh's bilateral relations were steadily maintained as evident in the continuous increase in their economic cooperation.¹¹ As Thailand's domestic political crisis continued in the same year, however, the diplomatic "war of words" and the border clashes followed. How can we then account for the ambiguity in their bilateral relations characterized by positive improvements in the political and economic aspects at one end and the crossfires at the Preah Vihear border at the other end? This paper aims to explain the Preah Vihear conflict by exploring each side's strategic use of limited force. It will begin with a brief review of the concepts of contesting historical memory and diversionary theory of war, and a discussion of the process of how political elites

rendered historical contestation a source of strategic diversion. The next section will discuss the application of the theory in the dyadic cases of Thailand (under Abhisit) and Cambodia. The last section will present the conclusion and discussion of possible implications of the recent ICJ Ruling of 2013 on the Preah Vihear dispute.

Contesting Historical Memory, Diversionary Foreign Policy and Limited Use of Force

History is never absolute as it contains both facts and interpretations by which the latter changes the “objectiveness” of the former.¹² Here, a nation’s collective memory in history by and large includes facts and interpretations, a product of the politicized construction of the past acknowledged by the state and society. With the “mythologization” of collective memory, the “historical truth” is no longer a major concern. From this viewpoint, it can be implied that the fabrication of collective historical memory works for the benefit of the state. Historical memory is one element crucial in fostering a deeper sense of national identity and promoting the country’s unification. Given that historical memory was created as a by-product of state goals, it goes to show that the public’s sense of history and national identity are also being shaped and directed by the state. Thus, if a historical issue becomes the focal point of contestation between two states, a nation’s sense of national identity can also be manipulated by state leaders. For instance, key chosen historical landmarks such as war, ethnic conflict, or past trauma play a critical role to construct a sense of national identity and awareness of the other or out-group¹³ and their different historical interpretations among nations that share the same history make historical memories a contested field. Here, contesting historical memory becomes a source of international conflict when state leaders promote and use the historical issue to ignite nationalist identity and pursue their own goals. The intensity of the public’s response, which could range from feeble to more forceful reactions, can also be considerably influenced by political actors’ behavior, especially from nationalist groups in politics and society. In Moon and Li’s study,¹⁴ they explain that reactive nationalism, which is defined as “collective expression of nationalist sentiments toward external stimuli that undermine national identity or interests,” can be augmented by political leaders for their own interests. Political leader’s response towards a historical issue can greatly affect the general public’s reaction, either by mitigating or aggravating the event. In other words, the weight of political contestation of historical memory among nations is highly dependent on the role of state leadership. In many instances, historical memory is used as a foreign policy tool by political actors with the assumption that the issue will provide them with political rewards in the short-run. One foreign policy tool being explored in this study is the diversionary theory of war.

Diversionary theory of war is largely defined as state leaders’ use of foreign policy, including war, to help them stay in power when faced with domestic challenges. Countless studies have been conducted on the correlation between domestic politics

and international conflict. While historical cases reveal many records of the use of diversionary force, still, scholars have noted the gap between theory and quantitative research.¹⁵ Recent studies have narrowed down their inquiry to test internal conditions under which states would more likely lead to international conflict; the conclusions remain marginal at best as the results suggest many contradictions. The study of regime types—democracy, democratization, and authoritarianism—have also been significantly tested in the literature. Some studies conclude that the diversionary use of force is “generally a pathology of democratic states.”¹⁶ In fact, the predominant focus of the literature has been on the use of force by U.S. presidents and other democratic states especially in the post–Cold War period; but diversionary theory also has potential in explaining the threat to use or use of force by non–U.S. leaders and their use of less costly and less risky strategies.¹⁷ In addition, diversionary theory has considerable advantage to account for how the use of force was possible due to contesting historical memories exploited by political elites. This study, therefore, suggests that contesting historical memories among concerned states cause the use of limited force when political elites of country A make use of historical disputation against country B as a diversionary tool. Historical disputation then leads to the actuality of diversionary conflict when the organizational support of the armed forces is in place. The role of organizational coalitions, particularly the military organization, plays a vital function in the success of diversionary conflict. When there is domestic strife or the contestation over political institutions that threaten the military’s organizational interests, this will more likely lead to foreign aggression.¹⁸ The study of Preah Vihear border conflict provides an interesting case of how the interplay of different political actors in Thailand and the unique characteristic of Cambodia’s long-time Prime Minister Hun Sen come together to engineer the conflict for their own political purposes, which will be discussed in details in the next few sections.

Preah Vihear Territorial Conflict Between Thailand and Cambodia

From late April to early May 2011, the most violent clash broke out between Thai and Cambodian military troops along the Preah Vihear border. The conflict took place for almost two straight weeks with reports mentioning 18 fatalities.¹⁹ The military collision persisted even with a ceasefire agreement already brokered between army officials from both sides. This has been the bloodiest encounter between the two countries since the clash started in 2008.

The Preah Vihear border issue is one manifestation of centuries old historical disputes and rivalry between the two kingdoms. The origins of the dispute began as far back when Cambodia was still under French protectorate status and Thailand was then called the Kingdom of Siam. Between the periods 1887–1893 and 1902–1908, a series of treaties were concluded between France and Siam that led to following: (a) the latter’s withdrawal of several of its territorial claims including the border

province of Siem Reap, and (b) a 1904 convention, which described the frontier in the Dangrek Mountains, and set forward a Mixed Commission composed of officers from both countries to delineate a frontier.²⁰ Known as the Annex 1 map, it was produced in 1908 with the location of Preah Vihear displayed in Cambodian territory.²¹ There was no direct proof of the binding character of the map in part due to the lack of documentation in that period. The Siamese Government nevertheless asked the French Government to have the map reproduced, and no claim of error on the map or any direct assertion that Preah Vihear belonged to Thailand was made by the Siam Government until 1940 when it occupied parts of Cambodia including Preah Vihear during the Franco-Thai War.²² In 1946, Thailand agreed with France to a return to the status quo prior to 1941, and again shortly after Cambodia became an independent state in 1953, Thai troops seized the area. From 1954 to 1958, the two parties' protracted negotiations resulted to a failure to come up with an agreement, which led to the downgrading of their diplomatic relations and the closing of the Preah Vihear border. In 1961, the Cambodian government sent a legal petition against Thailand to the ICJ regarding territorial sovereignty claims.²³ The ICJ in 1962 ruled in favor of the Kingdom of Cambodia. The ICJ, however, made no successive ruling on the 4.6 sq. km. land surrounding the temple for which a demarcation line along the border has never been completed. Since then, major flashpoints of diplomatic tensions between Thailand and Cambodia have frequently involved the disputed Preah Vihear territorial concern.

On July 7, 2008, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Committee approved Cambodia's application to have the Preah Vihear enlisted as a UNESCO World Heritage Site during its 35th convention in Paris, France, to which the Thai government supported and thus further legitimized Cambodia's claim to the temple. Just several days after its enlistment, on July 15, Thai nationalists along with Thai soldiers crossed the already closed border to plant the Thai flag on the territory reigniting their territorial squabble. Both Thailand and Cambodia consequently decided to send and increase troops along parts of the disputed border. Starting on October 3, 2008, a number of crossfires have transpired since the Preah Vihear was placed in the UNESCO World Heritage Site listing.

Thailand's Domestic Crisis and Strategic Historical Disputation of Preah Vihear

Why the discord? The circumstances which led to the territorial border conflict against Cambodia cannot be fully understood without examining Thailand's domestic political situation.²⁴ This section analyzes the turn of Thailand's domestic political events from 2006 to 2011 that evidently provoked the border skirmish. Specifically, we will examine the internal dynamics under the leadership of Abhisit Vejjajiva that made use of historical disputation of the temple and subsequently led to the external conflict. Particular attention will also be given to the role of the Thai military in this context.

For several years up until the 2011 elections, there had been brewing political

division in Thailand that continued to unsettle the country's political and economic stability. The political turmoil had derived from two main factions: pro-Thaksin circles including the political party of the People's Power Party (PPP) and anti-Thaksin groups made up of "the nonelected 'holy trinity' of monarchy, military, and bureaucracy,"²⁵ the Democratic Party (DP), and PAD or "Yellow Shirts." The roots of the crisis began in 2006 when the former Prime Minister Thaksin was removed from power via a bloodless coup d'état carried out by a royalist faction in the armed forces and backed by Privy Council members, the monarchy, and PAD, a political pressure group consisting of dissatisfied capitalists, academics, politicians, the bureaucracy, civil society groups, and the media.²⁶ Together, these anti-Thaksin forces used "royalist ideology" to set the groundwork for the 2006 coup.²⁷

Less than a year after Thaksin was removed from office, the Yellow Shirts regrouped with a broader-based coalition. Starting in May 2008, PAD went on street protests in response to the selection of a Thaksin clique that was said to be Thaksin's proxy government—the People's Power Party—as the new head of parliament which won majority seats in the December 2007 general elections. The year 2008 was predominantly a turbulent year due to repeated PAD demonstrations and violence that nearly left the Thai economy in crumbles as it jeopardized the country's tourism industry. The PAD protesters occupied government buildings and airports in their attempt to unseat the PPP-led government from office.

Meanwhile, on June 18, 2008, Thai Foreign Minister Noppadon Pattama signed the Thai-Cambodian joint communiqué but was eventually rejected by Thailand due to PAD's ultra-nationalist rhetoric in Bangkok, accusing Noppadon and the PPP administration of selling Thai sovereignty to Cambodia in exchange for economic concessions. Two days after the Preah Vihear was placed in the UNESCO list, pressures from the capital forced Noppadon to resign on July 10. On July 15, after three PAD protestors crossed the barbed-wire fence along the temple and were arrested by Cambodian officials, the Thai Army amplified its troops along several areas of the disputed border. And on October 3, 2008, the first fire exchange between Thai and Cambodian troops occurred on the disputed territory.

On December 15, 2008, the military-backed government of the DP under the leadership of Abhisit Vejjajiva was instated into power. In exchange for the army's espousal, Abhisit authorized the appointment of cabinet positions to the Bhumjai Thai Party, a military affiliated political party.²⁸ Alongside ex-military officers in Senate positions, these posts further augmented the military's political clout within the country's civilian rule. His administration was equally met with heavy opposition from Thaksin supporters, the "Red Shirts," starting in April 2009 when they stormed the Fourth East Asian Summit in Pattaya and forced its cancellation. The Red Shirts' bloody demonstrations escalated the following year in March–May 2010. Finally, on May 19, the army overran the Red Shirts' camp which culminated into their leaders' surrender and an end to the protests.

While the DP and PAD dubbed as "royalist twins" fought together to politicize the Preah Vihear and remove the PPP administration,²⁹ Abhisit once in power tried to distance itself from PAD to enhance the government's image much to the PAD's

indignation.³⁰ With the falling out between PAD and the DP government, PAD once again organized mass rallies against the DP government, invoking ultra-nationalist crusades and capitalizing on Preah Vihear. PAD's inundations initially did not gain strength as even the military brass kept silent about the Preah Vihear dispute.³¹

On December 29, 2010, seven Thai nationals were arrested by Cambodian soldiers for allegedly crossing the border. And in the following year on February 1, two of them were sentenced to lengthy imprisonment for purportedly spying.³² The PAD's barrage against the Abhisit administration regained force as they occupied the Government House and called on him to step down for failing to resolve the Preah Vihear issue.³³ At the same time, the Army's neutrality over the Preah Vihear took another turn with the February 4–7 gun-fire exchange which resulted in damage to the temple caused by Thai military artillery. On March 2011, the Army further displayed an aggressive position toward the temple issue by rejecting a February 22, 2011, agreement among the foreign ministers of Thailand, Cambodia, and ASEAN Security Council ministers in Jakarta, Indonesia that allowed sending Indonesian observers to the border. The Abhisit government which initially approved the Indonesian observers also bowed to the Army's rejection. With no clear resolution of the Preah Vihear issue in sight, the rejection of ASEAN's mediation, and the Thai-Cambodian armies' stand-off at the border, the latest and longest exchange of gun fires took place from April to May 2011.

On account of Thailand's domestic issues, the intense and continuing political polarization overlapped with the growing tensions between Thai-Cambodian relations at the Preah Vihear frontier. While the Abhisit government faced strong domestic opposition, Thailand strengthened and maintained troops along the contested border. Why did Thailand decide to send and maintain troops while in the middle of a domestic crisis? An obvious claim would be that the Thai government aimed to preserve its sovereignty across the border, which had been the Thai rhetoric regardless of who is in power. This paper, however, addresses that Abhisit and the military employed historical disputation against Cambodia in response to the country's domestic crisis, and the Thai military's role in the 2011 sporadic clashes should be noted. In the February 2011 gun battle which culminated into a 4-day heavy artillery exchange, Thailand and Cambodia alleged that it was the other which started firing. However, Thailand's internal politics seemed to be more suspect with the upcoming 2011 elections. Several political analysts' observations mentioned that while Abhisit did not order the shooting, high-ranking Thai military officials launched the border clash to disrupt possible changes to the Thai general elections.³⁴ Abhisit wanted the elections to be held in the first half of the year 2011, half a year earlier than scheduled, and the armed forces feared that holding earlier elections could possibly bring back Thaksin's political adherents in office. In addition, the 2010 army suppression of the Red Shirts' demonstrations became a tipping a point when the latter's leaders alluded to the monarchy's silence to the crackdown, seen as a sign by the former as a clear threat to the monarchy.³⁵ As for Abhisit, the upcoming elections gave him ample motivation to use the border contestation to boost his political standing.³⁶ Regardless of whether Abhisit ordered the use force or not, he played

along with the issue by staying mum about the military's ploy, giving them full support and claiming in his press statement that it was Cambodia who provoked and attacked Thailand first, quoting his remark, "this is the time I would like to see Thais united and supporting our military and soldiers who protect our sovereignty. I believe in our national anthem that Thais love peace but are also ready to fight."³⁷ His statement called for triggering nationalism among the Thai people and supporting the military in the hopes of saving his political standing in the impending elections. For the Thai military and Abhisit, the clash against the Cambodian armed forces provided them with a strategic opportunity: to divert attention and possibly delay the upcoming elections by creating a situation that portrays Thai sovereignty as still being under significant threat from its neighbor.³⁸

In summary, since 2006 Thailand juggled between two factions that supported the monarchy on the one hand and Thaksin on the other. However, the military and Abhisit used the Preah Vihear historical border issue with Cambodia to divert domestic strife to external issue. For the military, the clashes at the border promoted and highlighted their political clout in domestic politics regardless of the political factions in power. Through the Preah Vihear contestation, the military could once more display their special role in Thailand's domestic politics at a time when the country faced political instability. As for Abhisit, the Yellow Shirts' demands for him to step down from office posed a clear challenge to his leadership; and the historical disputation of Preah Vihear might allow his political party to garner the electoral support needed for the 2011 elections.

Reactive Historical Disputation and Power Consolidation in Cambodia

On May 30, 2007, the incumbent Prime Minister Hun Sen declared that 2008 Cambodian elections would be held on July 27, five years after the last election. In January 2008, coinciding with Cambodia's upcoming elections, the Cambodian government publicly announced the proposal to list the Preah Vihear in the UNESCO annual meeting in Paris. From April to May 2008, Thailand and Cambodia had discussed the possible registration, and the Thai government supported Cambodia's move for formal inscription upon a joint-agreement and on conditions that there would be a redrawing of the map which removes the Cambodian 4.2 km border territory, only leaving the temple and the surrounding environment. When the domestic crisis in Thailand began which led to its withdrawal of support, Cambodia went ahead with the application. And with the UNESCO approval on July 8, Phnom Penh residents celebrated the World Heritage Site registration of Preah Vihear, twice, with a bigger celebration held a week after at the Phnom Penh's Olympic Stadium with the return of Deputy Prime Minister Sok An from the UNESCO annual conference. A day after the celebration, Thai nationals protested at the border and were arrested by Cambodian forces. As the number of Thai soldiers increased along the disputed border, the Cambodian government also enlarged its troops, prompting military build-up between the two sides. And despite military tensions across the

border, elections were held on July 28 with Prime Minister Hun Sen claiming victory by a wide margin, making it his second 5-year term in office.

While Hun Sen employed a great deal of rhetoric regarding the holiness of a full-scale war to protect Cambodian national identity, it is quite dubious whether he had valid intentions of actually doing so. An all-out war given the sizeable asymmetric military capabilities between the two countries would be an unwise decision for Hun Sen's political security, especially in case the results do not favor Cambodia. Therefore, why Hun Sen strongly reacted to Thailand's provocation with the use of force and how he could successfully mobilize military tactics are puzzles that we explore in this section. From the point of view of Cambodia, we argue that the Preah Vihear territorial conflict was an outcome of Hun Sen's historical disputation of Preah Vihear to divert public scrutiny of domestic issues.

For Hun Sen, the auspicious timing of contesting historical memories with Thailand provided him with a number of opportunities to consolidate his monopoly in domestic affairs. First, the Preah Vihear enlistment was an opportune time for the CPP (Cambodian People's Party) to garner more support for the upcoming elections by intensifying people's national sentiment and pride. "Two birds hit with one stone" summarizes the coincidental timing of the UNESCO annual meeting and the Cambodian 2008 National Assembly elections as Hun Sen's CPP received increased votes in the elections. For example, the CPP had received 47.3 percent and 58.1 percent votes in 2003 and 2008 National Assembly elections, respectively, with 73 and 90 out of 123 seats.³⁹ While electoral surveys predicted that Prime Minister Hun Sen's ruling party was expected to retain its majority vote, the UNESCO enlistment of Preah Vihear further enhanced the reputation of the party.⁴⁰

When the territorial border conflict started, it should be noted that Hun Sen did not face serious domestic crisis. In fact, Hun Sen's domestic control was considerably resolute with weak political opposition and moderate economic growth.⁴¹ However, a series of domestic issues after his re-election became apparent: (a) criticisms from political opposition, (b) economic effects of the 2008 global financial crisis, (c) Khmer Rouge trial, and (d) land rights and environmental issues. The Preah Vihear agenda gave him ample motivation to make historical disputation against Thailand to downplay his political rivals and other local concerns. First, even though the CPP won in the National Assembly elections with landslide votes, he continued to face internal political criticisms from the opposition party and urban intellectuals in Phnom Penh. Having been in power as prime minister since 1988, Hun Sen has ruled Cambodia with a strong hand accused of massive corruption, electoral cheating, and political viciousness and abuses.⁴² In particular, Sam Rainsy, his closest political nemesis, spoke of a similar revolution in Cambodia to overthrow his political regime, and Hun Sen felt overly sensitive to the possibility of an Arab Spring in Cambodia.⁴³ Second, Cambodia's booming economy has been highly dependent on the garments industry export. The 2008 global financial crisis heavily affected the Cambodian economy as it brought the amount of garment exports down by more than 20 percent between the years 2008–2009, which resulted in the shutting down of 42 garment factories, 49,000 jobs lost⁴⁴ and consequently, numerous garment

workers' strikes. Third, the Khmer Rouge trial was thought to be proceeding too slow as the Cambodian government finds less incentives to bring these ex-leaders involved to justice.⁴⁵ Other issues include land grabbing and forced eviction, and illegal logging in which one leading environmental activist was killed under shady circumstances.⁴⁶ By subscribing to the border conflict, Hun Sen could use the temple issue to abate these domestic concerns.⁴⁷

The low-level conflict was made possible with the solid backing of the military. In Cambodia, several high ranking officers of the armed forces are Standing Committee members of the CPP Central Committee. This also allowed Hun Sen to spruce up his son's military and political career. Hun Manet was recently promoted to the rank of major general and was said to have led the February 2011 border conflict in order to elevate his standing in the military and prepare him as the next in line to becoming prime minister. Given Hun Sen's political clout over the military, he could without difficulty maneuver military campaigns against Bangkok to further cement his control.

How Hun Sen convincingly propelled Preah Vihear as a vehicle of external conflict stems from misperception and suspicion of socially embedded contesting historical memories between the two countries. Hun Sen could make the most of the temple issue by sparking nationalist identity precisely due to Cambodia's colonial history and troubled recollection of the past vis-à-vis its more "superior" neighbor, Thailand. The embittered "row" between Hun Sen and the Abhisit regime typified this historical enmity. In October 2008, PAD frontrunner and soon to be Foreign Minister, Kasit Piromaya, purportedly insulted Hun Sen by calling him a *Nakleng*, a belittling label in Thai for "gangster." In return, Hun Sen replied with the same indignation and pronounced his readiness to deploy force with the following statements, "What if I insult your king? What would you say if I insulted your prime minister and your ancestors? I'm not angry with you, but please use dignified words.... I tell you first, if you enter [Cambodian territory] again, we will fight ... the troops at the border have already received the order."⁴⁸ Hun Sen also clearly expressed his particular dislike of Abhisit by insinuating on Thailand's political insecurity with this rhetoric, "I am the leader of Cambodia who was elected by the will of the people, not by robbing power [referring to Abhisit]."⁴⁹ Furthermore, he openly exhibited his aversion and lack of regard to the Abhisit government and the PAD by demonstrating his loyalty to the latter's enemy, Thaksin. In November 2009, Hun Sen appointed Thaksin to the post of economic adviser to Cambodia.⁵⁰ Consequently, the anti-Thaksin group of Thailand felt all the more outraged because Hun Sen's decision appeared to deride Thai legal judgment and the judiciary system.⁵¹ Thus, the ruckus between Hun Sen and Abhisit government became acute further provoking the domestic audiences of the two countries and galvanizing their bilateral relations. Specifically, Abhisit responded by recalling the Thai Ambassador to Cambodia and issuing this statement, "I think it was not acceptable that Cambodia criticizes our judicial system and politics over Thaksin's case ... we always behave as a good neighbor and we also want good neighbors."⁵² The decisiveness of Abhisit on this issue immediately saw his popularity among the Thai people soared to an all-time

high.⁵³ In December 2009, Hun Sen fired back at Abhisit referring to him as the most difficult Thai prime minister he had ever had to work with, supplementing his claim with the following rhetoric, “I’m not an enemy of the Thai people.... But, these two people [Abhisit and Kasit] look down on Cambodia.... Cambodia will have no happiness as long as this group is in power.”⁵⁴

Throughout the term of Abhisit’s regime, Hun Sen would launch more inflammatory speeches against the former, thereby further spoiling their already dented bilateral relationships. For instance, just several days after a January 2010 border clash, Hun Sen boldly delivered a live coverage speech at the Preah Vihear Temple on February 6, 2010, in front of army troops together with his wife both clad in military camouflage. Once again, he reiterated Cambodia’s territorial sovereignty over the Preah Vihear and his unwavering position to deploy the military⁵⁵:

The Bangkok Post and other news in Thailand said that my visit [to Preah Vihear] is not the right time. If I am your prime minister, I should listen to you but I am the prime minister of Cambodia, which is a sovereign state. Whenever I want to go, it’s up to me. It’s not up to you. Second, wherever I want to go, it’s up to me. It’s not up to you.

If you didn’t raise the problem from yesterday, I don’t talk about it today. So yesterday’s news shows this is the Thai’s ambition to invade or want to take Cambodian land. That is why we have to strengthen our military. I agree to use the military not only 30,000 troops but maybe more. We don’t want to fight, but if the situation forces us to fight, we don’t have a choice.

Furthermore, Hun Sen displayed his solid command of the army by ridiculing Abhisit in the subsequent account, “So Abhisit, please listen up. Hun Sen can command the soldiers anytime. It’s not like you [Abhisit]. Order left—left; order right—right. It’s different from you. Listen well. It is our land.”⁵⁶

Overall, Hun Sen could further amplify his popularity and legitimacy among Cambodians and safeguard his leadership through his reactive historical disputation of the Preah Vihear territory. The Thai-Cambodian military stand-off helped strengthen the popularity of the current ruling party as Hun Sen could portray himself as the heroic defender of a national and cultural symbol against a traditional archrival. Hun Sen’s repeatedly used calloused speeches against the Abhisit administration and the ways he underscored fear of losing Cambodia’s territorial sovereignty due to Thailand’s aggressive intrusion could only reinforce his political advocacy.

Conclusion

This paper showed how contesting historical memory can be used as a tool for diversionary foreign policy through the case of the Preah Vihear border conflict. In Thailand, the Abhisit government and the Thai military could organize strategic military conflict by instigating the historical issue of Preah Vihear during a time when Bangkok faced domestic instability. In Cambodia, Hun Sen reactively responded to

Thailand's challenge through diplomatic crusades and limited gunfire exchange as a tactic to secure his political legitimacy. Although it seems unlikely that contesting historical memory functions as a direct linkage of a full-fledged war between involved nations, it is very likely to be an apparent social root of historical disputation leading to diplomatic confrontations and low-level use of force. Also, the paper indicated that contesting historical memory becomes salient during the timing of elections or stages when political leaders vie for power. In Thailand, the issue became very palpable during the period of power transition before the parliamentary elections. In Cambodia, Hun Sen as well made an extensive use of Preah Vihear agenda with the impending national elections.

On November 11, 2013, the Hague Court released its interpretation of the 1962 ICJ decision of Preah Vihear as requested by the Cambodian government, which upheld the 1962 judgment of Cambodia's territorial sovereignty over the whole promontory of the Preah Vihear temple, and obliged the Thai government to withdraw its troops from the territory.⁵⁷ The ICJ did not rule on the disputed 4.6 square kilometers surrounding area, thus leaving the border settlement of the dispute to the two states. So the question remains as to whether or not Thailand and Cambodia will be able to find a solution and bring an end to the historical contestation. The border has by far seen less indication of another skirmish with one exception on October 1, 2014, during a routine patrol but was muted by the two sides.⁵⁸ We can suppose why the two sides were not eager to agitate the issue might be partly due to the recent 2013 ICJ decision and additionally, the Preah Vihear restoration works that started in February 2014.⁵⁹ But the current calm at the border may find more reason from the domestic situations facing Thailand and Cambodia. Thailand has undergone two political transitions since Abhisit lost the 2011 elections: from Yingluck Shinawatra (2011–2014) to the appointment of retired Thai army officer Prayuth Chan-ocha (2014–present) as prime minister after he successfully led a military coup against the former. Now that a key player to the diversionary ploy of Preah Vihear is in power, the easier it is to use the border as a diversionary tool; in fact, just days after the Thai military declared martial law, Cambodia objected to the Thai army's actions at the border after it erected a new barbed wire fence facing the temple.⁶⁰ But the Thai military's gambits at the border will all depend on the current military dictatorship's ability to enforce and maintain power especially with Bangkok's transition to the next royalist succession. Already, the military has taken steps to tighten its grip in power when in August 2016, a national referendum held approved a military-drafted constitution by a majority vote of more than 60 percent voted in favor of the constitution.⁶¹ The referendum was held under heavy restrictions as protestations against the draft were banned and scores of people detained. Analysts predict that the military junta will more likely stay in power until a peaceful royal transition takes place.⁶²

In Cambodia's 2013 election, the CPP lost 22 out of the 123 parliamentary seats while Sam Rainsy's Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP), Hun Sen's closest rival, gained 55 seats. This has been Hun Sen's most significant political challenge in the last two decades: not only did the CPP lose majority vote but also the CNRP's rejection

of the official results due to alleged massive cheating has increased the prospects of further protestations and political instability in Phnom Penh.⁶³ He has since taken a softer course on Preah Vihear in order to focus his attention domestically, tackling issues of job creation and economic development to salvage his losing popularity.⁶⁴ Now, with the 2018 elections, Hun Sen's anxiety over losing the election has prompted a series of political prosecutions of opposition members and his critics, and further threatened an impending civil war should the CNRP win.⁶⁵ Hun Sen has twice stoked ultra-nationalism against Bangkok during the timing of elections.⁶⁶ This time around, however, with Bangkok is still under the grip of the military regime, Hun Sen's strategic maneuvering of provoking nationalism against Thailand might be at this time unwise. But given that the domestic situation in both countries remain in disarray, the still unsettled 4.6 square kilometer surrounding area, the Preah Vihear border contestation will continue to be a thorn in their bilateral relationships, an easy target that can strategically be exploited under conditions of domestic insecurity.

Notes

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