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Colonial Legacies and Modern Conflicts: The Preah Vihear Temple Conflict in Thai-Cambodian Relations

Warisan Kolonial dan Konflik Moden: Konflik Kuil Preah Vihear dalam Hubungan Thailand-Kemboja

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ABSTRACT

Colonial demarcation of boundaries in Southeast Asia left behind vague and ambiguous territorial issues that have persisted and become a source of interstate tensions in the post-colonial period. The Thailand-Cambodia conflict over the Preah Vihear Temple is used in this paper as a classic case of how imperial cartographic practices facilitated modern warfare. The study of the Franco-Siamese treaty negotiations, the adjudication by the International Court of Justice, and the subsequent bilateral crises shows that the options of the colonial period in the delimitation of territories have left their mark on present-day diplomatic options. The analysis is based on the historical institutionalist approach and reveals causal processes ranging from the expansion of imperialism in the 19th century to military conflicts in the 21st century. Evidence indicates that when boundaries were set in the French colonies, strategic and cultural considerations were much more important than geographical accuracy, and that the documentary reports were later used by states that, in turn, applied the same formula of sovereign maintenance. The process of creating the temple as a nationalist image is but part of a wider pattern in which colonial interventions reimagined local spatial imaginaries, replacing the fluid frontier space with a linear one that could not accommodate existing political structures. This longue durée perspective situates recent events, such as new military conflicts and diplomatic initiatives, within the ASEAN framework. The article contributes to post-colonial studies in two ways in particular: (i) it demonstrates that imperial histories are not just background but can become active and constitutive forces that influence the current political possibilities in formerly colonised countries; (ii) it illustrates how these can at once be the object of critique and constitute it.

Keywords: Colonialism, border conflicts, Franco-Siamese treaties, Preah Vihear Temple, Thai-Cambodian relations

ABSTRAK

Proses pelukisan sempadan kolonial di Asia Tenggara telah mewujudkan kekaburan yang berterusan dalam aspek kewilayahan yang kekal hingga ke hari ini dan menyumbang kepada ketegangan antara negara semasa tempoh pasca-kemerdekaan. Kertas ini meninjau pertikaian Thailand-Kemboja mengenai Kuil Preah Vihear sebagai contoh klasik bagaimana amalan kartografi imperialis memperkasa peperangan moden. Dalam perbincangan mengenai rundingan perjanjian Perancis-Siam, penghakiman Mahkamah Keadilan Antarabangsa, dan krisis dwipihak yang seterusnya, analisis ini mendedahkan bahawa pilihan yang dibuat semasa era kolonial dalam penandaan wilayah telah mewujudkan pergantungan yang menghadkan pilihan diplomatik semasa. Analisis ini berdasarkan pendekatan institusionalisme sejarah, yang mengenal pasti proses kausal (daripada pengembangan imperialisme pada abad kesembilan belas hingga konflik ketenteraan pada abad kedua puluh satu). Bukti menunjukkan bahawa pentadbir koloni Perancis lebih mementingkan faktor strategik dan budaya semasa menentukan sempadan berbanding ketepatan geografi, menghasilkan laporan dokumentari yang akhirnya digunakan oleh negara-negara masa hadapan, yang kemudiannya menuntut hak kedaulatan yang sama. Proses menjadikan kuil tersebut sebagai simbol nasionalis adalah contoh trend yang lebih luas, di mana campur tangan kolonial menyusun semula imaginasi spatial tempatan, menggantikan zon sempadan yang fleksibel dengan pembahagian linear yang tidak dapat menyokong struktur politik yang sedia ada. Peristiwa terkini, seperti konflik ketenteraan baharu dan usaha diplomatik dalam kerangka ASEAN, dibingkai dalam konteks longue durée (jangka masa panjang) ini. Artikel ini relevan dengan kajian pasca-kolonial dengan menunjukkan bagaimana warisan imperialis bukan sahaja menjadi latar belakang sejarah, tetapi juga kuasa aktif dan konstitutif yang membentuk kemungkinan politik semasa di negara-negara yang pernah dijajah.

Kata kunci: Kolonialisme, konflik sempadan, perjanjian Perancis-Siam, Kuil Preah Vihear, hubungan Thailand-Kemboja

INTRODUCTION

Colonial rulers' decisions and the interests of the native peoples were not always the main concerns, and in the modern period, borders are heavily imbued with European imperialism and relevant to the interests of the European empire. The Preah Vihear Temple on the Dangrek escarpment, a boundary between Thailand and Cambodia, and an eleventh-century Hindu temple, is one of the best examples of this colonial legacy, which has been disputed between the two nations for years. What seems on the surface to be a local territorial dispute can be further investigated to reveal a conflict with roots as far back as the making of the Southeast Asian political map by the colonisers (Chandler, 2008; Thongchai, 1994). The boundary-making process in the early twentieth century was a multi-stage process of courtroom adjudication, nationalism, and military conflict, as illustrated by the timeline in Table 1, which depicts the Thai-Cambodian Preah Vihear conflict.

TABLE 1. Timeline of the Preah Vihear Conflict: Colonial Cartography to Contemporary Dispute (1904–2025)

Year	Key Development
1904	Boundary commissions formed by the Franco-Siamese Treaty.
1907	Franco-Siamese Treaty; Preah Vihear is located on the colonial map of Cambodia.
1954	Cambodia acquires independence from France.
1959	Cambodia launches an ICJ against Thailand.
1962	ICJ grants Cambodia sovereignty over the temple.
2008	UNESCO world heritage designation; tensions between the military grow.
2011	Large-scale military confrontations; deaths of both sides.
2013	The ICJ's interpretation confirms that Cambodia has sovereignty over the promontory.
2025	New military conflicts; mediation by ASEAN.

Note: Author's own elaboration based on International Court of Justice (1962; 2013), Chandler (2008), and Strangio (2025).

Conceived in the context of European colonialism, space was redrawn, and new notions of territory, sovereignty, and statehood were imposed on societies with different principles of spatial organisation in maritime and mainland Southeast Asia. The pre-colonial polities in the region had graduated spheres of influence extending outward from royal centers, without distinct or definite borders. In frontier areas, where competing mandalas met, boundaries were not barriers to sovereignty or exclusive claims to territory, but rather permeable spaces of interaction, multiple overlapping claims, and no need for a clear-cut determination of sovereignty (Wolters, 1999; Lieberman, 2003). This spatial logic was lost in colonial mapping, which used the European concept of the bounded territorial state to establish boundaries where none had existed before and to produce new types of conflict that never before figured into the indigenous political vocabulary.

The Preah Vihear conflict is a good example of these more general changes. The French colonial administration, which was expanding its Indochinese sphere of influence into territories claimed by Siam, negotiated a series of treaties that defined boundaries in accordance with European diplomatic conventions. Two Franco-Siamese agreements in 1904 and 1907 provided for the creation of commissions to establish frontiers, whose findings would be used in international legal proceedings. However, these mapping activities were not purely geographical; they aligned with colonial agendas and interests, positioning the temple within Cambodia's territory even when watershed principles might have indicated a different location (Wagner, 2021; Stalin, 2025). Thus, the documentary legacy of the making of colonial boundaries set the stage for conflict, which would only break out decades later with the emergence of successor states that inherited territorial claims amid imperial documents.

In this article, the authors suggest that one must pay attention to the colonial history of Thai-Cambodians to understand the nature of tensions between the two groups today. The investigation is based on the premise that imperial interventions not only established background conditions but also generated the categories, claims, and documentary resources by which present-day conflicts are articulated and adjudicated. The answers to why the Preah Vihear conflict has been so difficult to resolve require a discussion of colonial cartography, the creation of territorial facts, nationalistic mobilisation of historical grievances, and international legal institutions that have more reinforced than transcended colonial determinations (Boonkob, 2023; Kulwuthivilas, 2021). The analysis therefore has a double value: both for post-colonial studies and for shedding light on the actual processes by which imperial legacies can foster current instability.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Preah Vihear research has gone in a few directions. One large body of work deals with the legal and diplomatic history of the Franco-Siamese settlements and the subsequent adjudication before the International Court of Justice, and views the controversy as almost an issue of treaty interpretation and territorial title (Yoosuk, 2013). The second strand focuses on the domestic politics of nationalism and demonstrates the successive use of the temple by Thai and Cambodian governments as a symbol of the nation's suffering and its pride in civilization (Ngoun, 2017). A third, more policy-oriented literature considers the possibilities for negotiated settlement and regional mediation, and explores bilateral diplomacy, judicial recourse, and ASEAN facilitation (Kasetsiri et al., 2013). As important as these are, they often treat the colonial encounter as a fixed starting point rather than a productive formation that shapes a current logic. What has yet to be explained is how colonial boundary-making not only comes first but also actively produces the contemporary conflict, directing diplomatic and legal options down avenues already carved out in colonial times. This article seeks to fill this lacuna by applying a mix of post-colonial and historical institutionalist analysis that allows one to take a historically informed look at imperial cartographic decisions and at the ways in which these decisions became a self-reinforcing constraint on contemporary statecraft.

POST-COLONIAL THEORY AND TERRITORIAL DISPUTES

In this section, the researcher will discuss post-colonial theory and territorial disputes. Post-colonial theoretical concepts provide a valuable toolkit for analysing the reconfiguration of political geography that happened as a result of European imperialism, and which is still a source of tension decades after decolonisation. Colonialism, in this tradition, has been demonstrated to not only function through military conquest and economic expropriation, but through epistemic changes that resulted in the reconfiguration of the senses of space, time, and political possession by the colonised societies (Said, 1978; Chakrabarty, 2000). Cartography was a powerful instrument of colonial power, used to transform the diversity of spatial practices among the natives into the European norm and, simultaneously, to give the impression of scientific objectivity, which only veiled political choices (Harley, 1988; Winichakul, 1994).

The influential study by Thongchai Winichakul on the transformation of Siam into Thailand provides insights into the creation of the modern geo-body, a bounded territorial geo-body that had never been imagined in the pre-colonial political imagination and was shaped by colonial experiences. Unlike Western notions of sovereignty, the Siamese version prior to European contact was about relationships among individuals, not necessarily a demarcated sovereign territory, and the kingdom was where the king's power lay; he did not necessarily rule over a specific territory (Winichakul, 1994). Under pressure from colonialism, European conventions on territory have been adopted, and the fear of boundary definition has led to the modern era. The Preah Vihear controversy is thus not just a dispute over a specific space, but a manifestation of other, more fundamental antagonisms between imported and indigenous conceptions of political space.

Postcolonial analysis also demonstrates the ongoing power of imperial archives in post-independence settings. Today, the decision of whose land it is and who has sovereignty over it is based on evidentiary records that privilege European-created documents over other sources of territorial authority, such as colonial texts, maps, and treaties. An example of this archival power is the use of French colonial maps by the International Court of Justice in determining the sovereignty of Preah Vihear, in which adjudicatory power was delegated to the dead colonial mapmakers, whose rule favored the empire rather than local tastes (Biersteker and Weber 1996). To understand the temple issue, one has to see the continuity of colonial knowledge in shaping opportunities today and recognize that the diplomats' choices are confined to the range they had during the colonial period.

THE INSTITUTIONAL VIEW OF THE STATE AND PATH DEPENDENCE

The historical institutionalist approach is complementary to post-colonial theory, and is an analytical tool that allows tracing causal relationships between options and outcomes. This approach underscores the fact that once institutional structures are established, they give rise to path dependencies that guide political evolution in particular ways and rule out other forms of evolution that were possible at earlier stages (Pierson 2004; Mahoney 2000). Colonial boundary formation resulted in exactly this type of path dependence, whereby territorial formations were created as a fait accompli, regardless of their naturalness or indigenous preferences.

The critical junctures in this model are moments of contingency, times when a decision with long-term impact is required, whether in times of uncertainty or not, that may appear unremarkable at the time. As a point of departure, the Franco-Siamese treaty negotiations of the early twentieth century can be highlighted, while the territorial solutions developed by the colonial commissioners amounted to the creation of realities that could, in principle, be undone only with difficulty. What may have seemed, in 1907, to be only a technologically drawn border created the documentary grounds for the assertion of sovereignty, which still led to war a century later (George and Bennett, 2005; Gerstl and Strasakova, 2017).

There are several reinforcing processes of path dependence in the case of Preah Vihear. The decisions made during colonization have been repeatedly reiterated in the international legal arena and have consolidated the present territorial situation. The temple has become a symbol, the victim of the mobilisation of nationalism, and the question of compromise is one that is not cheaply paid for by any government that is seen to be compromising sacred patrimony. The claims of competing sovereignty have been “naturalised” in education programs and popular culture, making

it more difficult for the population to see alternatives to positions touted as historically necessary. This "self-preservation" is a factor that can account for the continued nature of this conflict despite many diplomatic attempts proving ineffective and both parties incurring costs (Acharya, 2014; Acharya, 2021). The theory is outlined in Table 2 and is the basis of this analysis: colonial decisions in the processes of treaty negotiations, cartographic production, generation of territorial state and spatial logic have produced dependencies in the course of action that are still being applied today to achieve international legal adjudication, the authority of the archives, post-colonial nationalism, and even military conflicts.

TABLE 2. Conceptual Framework: Colonial Legacies and Path Dependence in the Preah Vihear Dispute

COLONIAL ERA	PATH DEPENDENCE	CONTEMPORARY
Franco-Siamese Treaties (1904, 1907)	→	ICJ Adjudication (1962, 2013)
Colonial Cartography	→	Archival Authority
Bounded Territorial State	→	Post-Colonial Nationalism
European Spatial Logic	→	Military Confrontation

Note: Self-elaboration of the author as per Pierson (2004), Mahoney (2000), and Winichakul (1994).

These two views together provide one, combined point of view, not two parallel commentaries. Post-colonial theory describes the nature of the inheritance, namely the territorial imaginary of bounded space, the authority of the imperial archive, and the epistemic conventions by which sovereignty is now claimed and contested. Historical institutionalism details the nature of its persistence and how this inheritance is "locked-in" by critical junctures and path-dependent processes of "self-reinforcement" that transform initial map decisions into lasting constraints. The first specifies the causal substance, and the second the causal logic, with both having their own distinct blind spots: post-colonial theory is better at specifying the genealogy but less careful about specifying the mechanisms, and historical institutionalism is more careful in specifying mechanisms, but less precise in being able to specify the genealogy. Reading them together is thus an exercise in analytic eclecticism, in which insights from different research traditions are brought together to address a problem neither paradigm can solve on its own (Sil & Katzenstein, 2011). Synthesis of material and ideational, attuned at once to imperial structures and to their ideational afterlives, is the unique analytical contribution of the present study.

METHODOLOGY

It is an inquiry that uses qualitative historical analysis and archival research, with process tracing, to shed light on causal processes linking colonial boundary-making to a modern conflict. The methodology used is based on the principles of case study research as stipulated by Yin (2018). The situation of Preah Vihear is regarded as a case in its own right, and a case study is presented in detail, whilst at the same time it is used to examine the general trends of post-colonial territorial conflict. More specifically, it uses causal-mechanism tracing, a form of process tracing focused on identifying intervening steps between antecedent causes and outcomes rather than their mere covariation (Bennett & Checkel, 2015). This process makes it possible to identify intervening

variables and lines of causation between past antecedents and present outcomes, going beyond mere correlation, and to see how colonial legacies come into play (George and Bennett, 2005).

Judgments of the International Court of Justice and its documentation, texts of the Franco-Siamese treaty, colonial cartographic documents, and diplomatic letters of key times are the primary sources used. Secondary sources include academic books on the history of Thailand and Cambodia, regional security studies, and postcolonial theory and international law. Special focus has been given to recent research on the modern aspects of the conflict, including journalistic reports on military conflicts and diplomatic efforts (Strangio, 2025; Sophalkalyan, 2025; Hobbs, 2025). Claims from a particular news outlet were triangulated with other news reports and, where possible, with primary documentation to ensure the interpretation was not based on a single source and the news was not subject to editorial framing and national bias (Flick, 2015). It ranges from the colonial boundary talks of the early 20th century to the gains of 2025, allowing one to examine the influence of colonial pasts across generations.

Analytical approaches included organizing the coding of the sources thematically as defined by the theory, including colonial cartographic activities, post-colonial nationalism, international legal court decisions, and, more recently, diplomatic efforts. In practical terms, this meant that instead of using automated coding software to classify passages, the researcher manually coded them, reading the assembled materials closely and assigning passages to categories developed from the theory to preserve interpretive attention to historical context and nuance (Saldaña, 2021). The comparative aspect entitles the perspective of the two countries on the mobilisation of colonial inheritances, where there was a difference in both the experience of colonialism and different approaches to the documentary record. Dispersed throughout are issues of the partiality of the historical record and the interpretive judgments that any historical reconstruction must include in the problem of causation. Nevertheless, all these converging pieces of evidence now add up to the thesis that colonial boundary-making has set permanent conditions for present conflict.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

PRE-COLONIAL SPATIAL ORGANISATION AND THE TEMPLE'S SIGNIFICANCE

The author discusses in this section the spatial organisation that existed prior to the building of the Temple and its meaning. The European colonial intervention disrupted a political system that was based on principles very different from those of the modern nation-state, of which the Preah Vihear Temple was a part. The Khmer Empire constructed the temple in the 9th to 13th centuries, at the height of its power, when its territory encompassed what are now several countries. Angkorean spatial organization was not a delimited territorial organization but a sacred one in which temples were not simply centers housing sacred objects, but rather focal points within cosmological systems linking earthly kingdoms to heavenly ones (Higham, 2001; Briggs, 1951). That is, relations of personal obedience and ritual power, rather than a monopoly over delimited areas, were entangled in issues of sovereignty.

The temple's location on the Dangrek escarpment in the Khmer and Siamese domains left it in the borderland between the two, but not the kind of categorical conflict seen in modern territorial conflict. Monks, manuscripts, and ritual objects crossed what are now international borders as part of Buddhist religious networks, creating common cultural areas beyond political boundaries. French colonial observers were especially frustrated by the discovery of Buddhist

artifacts from Siam in 'Cambodian' locations, as they had to draw the line in their own area of influence and were thus thwarted in their attempt to create a clear-cut boundary for their territories (Chandler, 2008). The pre-colonial significance of the temple lay not in its location within its present political boundaries but in its sacredness.

This pre-colonial context enables us to realize the transformative role of the European boundary-making. Colonial intervention was not just a way of resolving pre-existing conflicts; it also created new forms of conflict by imposing European concepts of exclusive territorial sovereignty over spaces governed by other principles. The next shift from the temple as a nationalistic landmark and a source of interstate tensions is not a reenactment of the historical conflicts, but an altogether new phenomenon brought about by a reorganization of the political geography of colonization (Winichakul, 1994; Lieberman, 2003). The current claims for the temple's "Thai" or "Cambodian" heritage thus involve anachronic projections of contemporary expressions of national difference onto a time when they have no significance. The major differences between pre-colonial and post-colonial spatial organisation on five major dimensions are summarised in Table 3 and show how European colonialism influenced the conceptions of sovereignty, frontiers, power, sacred places, and war, and how the spatially exclusive and strict territorial logic of the modern nation-state renders compromise on the issue of borders politically unsustainable.

TABLE 3. Comparative Study of pre-colonial and post-colonial Spatial Organisation in Southeast Asia

Dimension	Pre-Colonial	Post-Colonial
Sovereignty	Personal relationships; graduated spheres of influence	Exclusive territorial jurisdiction; fixed boundaries
Frontiers	Permeable zones of interaction; overlapping claims	Rigid linear borders, exclusive demarcation
Authority	Mandala system; radiating from royal centres	Nation-state; uniform territorial control
Temple Role	Sacred site; cosmological significance; shared heritage	Nationalist symbol; territorial marker; object of dispute
Conflict Type	Dynastic rivalry; tributary relationships	Interstate territorial dispute; zero-sum sovereignty

Note: Author's own elaboration based on Wolters (1999), Lieberman (2003), and Winichakul (1994).

FRANCO SIAMESE TREATIES AND COLONIAL CARTOGRAPHY

Indeed, it was through its expansion in mainland Southeast Asia that French colonization seriously transformed the region's political geography and introduced the European concept of limited territorial states in place of the native concept of spatial organization. Commissions of boundary were established in the treaties of 1904 and 1907 between France and Siam to define the frontiers in accordance with the principles of diplomatic usage in Europe. Agreements stipulated boundaries should be "natural" in hilly areas and based on watersheds, seemingly an objective geographical definition, but in fact a definition that had to be interpreted in the complex topography. Franco-Siamese commissions would then produce maps that would be crucial in the international legal dispute, which would appear to be matters of technicality but would, in fact, be political choices in cartography (Wagner, 2021; Stalin, 2025).

The Franco-Siamese treaty of 1907 was also signed with a map attached, which placed Preah Vihear within Cambodian territory, even though, according to the "watershed" principle, it should have designated it as Siamese territory. The cartographers of the colonies, who obeyed instructions from French authorities eager to consolidate their control of Indochina, supported the

Cambodian claims but did not always need to exercise much latitude in interpretation. The map rendered geographical determination as a fact of geography rather than a political option, and it provided colonial cartographic authority with scientific credibility that was difficult to challenge later (Harley, 1988; Winichakul, 1994). The map was accepted by the authorities of Siam at the time without objection, perhaps because they did not recognise the far-reaching implications of the map-making decisions, which appeared to be merely technical.

This cartographic heritage of the colonies served as the documentary basis for determining future sovereignty. In 1962, the International Court of Justice issued a verdict that, and in 2013, an interpretation that made strong use of the 1907 map as a source of authoritative evidence for territorial determination, and delivered verdicts on sovereignty to colonial governors whose interests were acting on behalf of French imperial interests and not indigenous preferences. The Thais' claims, according to watershed principles, were not accepted, and the cartographic record took precedence over their arguments, demonstrating that the colonial archives still have determinative power in post-independence contexts (International Court of Justice, 1962; International Court of Justice, 2013). The path dependence created by the boundaries of colonies, therefore, limited the range of legal options, directing adjudication toward results predestined by imperial cartography.

POST-COLONIAL NATIONALISM AND POLITICS OF HISTORICAL MEMORY

Colonial structures of territoriality were not eliminated with the fall of colonialism, but rather became a topic of the national struggle. Preah Vihear became a national symbol in Thailand and Cambodia, whose symbolic value outweighed its material value, and thus became part of the national histories of both countries. In the case of Cambodia, the temple served as a material reminder of association with Angkorian greatness, a testament to the architecture of a great civilisational past, one that then thinking of being reconnected with and rejoiced in. In Thailand, the colonial-era temple treaty was the most prominent aspect of territorial loss, which was then used in nationalistic discourse of lamentation and reclamation (Chachavalpongpun, 2010; Streckfuss, 2011). Thai nationalist historiography invented the concept of lost territories to denote territories lost in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to European colonialists. This historical image depicted Thailand as an object of imperial aggression, and concealed the fact that the kingdom was engaged in territorial conquest and had generally been more successful than other nations in maintaining formal independence. Preah Vihear was part of this discussion, as a part of the Thai religious heritage that was wrongfully appropriated by colonialism and returned to Thailand as a historical, not territorial, restitution. The ICJ decision of 1962 that gave Cambodia its sovereignty was not perceived as a legitimate decision under the law; rather, it was seen as a continuation of colonial injustice, thereby heightening rather than alleviating nationalist sentiment (Winichakul, 1994; von Feigenblatt, 2012).

In Cambodia, the mobilisation of historical memory was also a condition of nationalism, albeit on a different foundation. The Angkorean empire became a symbol of national identity, and the architectural achievements would be a testimony to the Khmer civilisational glory prior to the era of weakness and foreign occupation. The nationalist project was aided by the rediscovery and glorification of Angkorean heritage, and its assimilation into the colonial system of knowledge through French colonial scholarship. The Cambodian temple was left behind in post-independence Cambodia alongside colonial discourses, but the construction of the nation was carried out through the discourse of Angkorian heritage, while the Temple itself was contested as a discourse of

Cambodian history, a form of historical revisionism (Chandler 2008; Edwards 2007). It is not just a fight over land rights, but also a contest over competing histories, each marshaling colonial history differently.

INTERNATIONAL LAW: TRIBUNALS AND ARCHIVES

The Preah Vihear case, for which the ICJ has issued two rulings (in 1962 and again in 2013), relied heavily on colonial-era documentation as authoritative evidence in determining territory. In 1959, Cambodia brought a case seeking the Thais' withdrawal from the temple and the declaration of Cambodia's sovereignty. Thailand also disputed not only the jurisdiction but also the merits of the case, arguing that the 1907 map was not in conformity with the treaty, which was based on watersheds, and that the map's errors could not be used to determine sovereignty. However, the Court ruled that the map's long acceptance by Thailand without protest made it impossible to challenge the map post hoc, and that the doctrine of acquiescence applied to the map drawn by the colonists (International Court of Justice, 1962; Svay, 2015).

This is a rational argument that ultimately succeeded in making the colonial archives determinate; French maps were considered real documentation of territorial reality, not politically subjective images. The Court did not question whether colonial cartographers had adhered to the principles of watershed delineation or whether other demarcations might have been equally valid; rather, it followed the documentary record in affirming facts that Thailand had not disputed in due time. The colonial archive was thus retained for decades after formal decolonisation, and legislative options were limited to the agenda set by the imperial rulers within the spheres that they had created, which did not have a central focus on the interests of either of the successor states (Biersteker and Weber 1996; Wagner 2021).

The 2013 interpretation also reinforced colonial cartographic dominance and the validity of Cambodia's territorial sovereignty to the land's tip, where the temple is situated. The areas around the temple have remained under Thai control since the 1962 decision, which stated that the temple's sovereignty did not necessarily extend to the surrounding land. The Court found that Cambodia did have sovereignty over the entire promontory, as shown by colonial-era maps, and rejected this interpretation. This decision demonstrated the continued influence of colonial records in modern territorial politics and the ICJ's ability to 'convert' imperial records into global law (International Court of Justice, 2013; Turcsányi & Kříž, 2017).

MODERN TRIBULATIONS AND REPETITIVE DISASTERS

The case of Preah Vihear, which has been tried several times in different courts, has been the source of bilateral crises and shows that international law is ineffective in solving problems arising from national accounts and a colonial past. In 2008, a new conflict broke out through a unilateral nomination by Cambodia, and this sparked nationalistic fervour in Thailand, which resulted in government instability and military mobilisation, amidst renewed face-to-face conflict. The signing of the inscription by Thai Foreign Minister Noppadon Pattama led to the minister's resignation, thereby making the temple an issue in the local political arena (Chachavalpongpun, 2010; Wagener, 2011). What could otherwise have been considered as technical heritage was transformed into an existential struggle against national identity and historical justice.

In 2008, 2010, and 2011, there were military battles, both sides suffered casualties, and thousands of civilians were displaced as a result of border clashes. Thai and Cambodian military personnel were firing across disputed territory, each side claiming that the other was being aggressive and that it was in self-defense. The mediatory efforts of ASEAN were mostly ineffective due to the organisation's consensus-based procedures and non-interference principles, at the expense of collective security over sovereignty (Acharya, 2014; Kurlantzick, 2012). During the war, it became clear how the colonial division of boundaries had laid the ground for a repetition of violence, and the dependencies of the routes constructed over a hundred years ago, continued to take a toll in victims today.

In 2025, new ground has been seen, and the border populations have been seriously affected by the military conflict, which has resulted in casualties and displacement. However, the Malaysian chairmanship of ASEAN has sought to mediate ceasefires and establish observer mechanisms, with little success (Strangio, 2025; Sophalkalyan, 2025). The civilian populations living in the border areas have suffered disproportionately from humanitarian expenses, as violence, the causes of which were made by colonial governance officials more than 100 years ago, disrupted their lives (Hobbs, 2025; Hunt, 2025). They are modern crises that signal that colonial legacies are not just historical contexts but ongoing processes and forces shaping present political possibilities and constraining the scope of diplomatic choices within the frames set in the imperial period.

Beyond the loss of life, there are other broader trends of displacement, economic shocks, and psychological trauma to the communities of the border on either side of the conflict. Villages that are near conflict areas are repeatedly evacuated and resettled. The military operations disrupt the agriculture-based society, while the education of their children is interrupted because of the security issues. The communities suffer from territorial problems they cannot generate or resolve, a direct result of territorial demarcations imposed by colonial administrators without regard for the communities involved. It is essential to consider not only state-level processes but also the lived experiences of those directly impacted by colonial legacies when understanding the Preah Vihear conflict (Hobbs, 2025; Boonkob, 2023).

ASEAN AND REGIONAL MECHANISMS OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

The Preah Vihear conflict has shown that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations is not fully working towards achieving a regional security community and its founding principles of non-interference and sovereignty. The institutional structure of ASEAN, which is expected to accommodate the various member states without being confrontational, has not been encouraging in handling bilateral territorial sovereignty claims. The consensus-based decision-making processes in the organisation entail that all members should agree, and thus, in the event of a conflict, each member can block any action that could put them in a bad position (Acharya, 2001; Acharya, 2021).

The role and limitations of regional engagement in mediation were illustrated in Indonesia's efforts after the 2011 military tussles. At that time, Indonesia, the chair of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), offered to dispatch observers to monitor the disputed border, but Thailand rejected it as meddling in bilateral affairs. Collective security efforts were an example of how the rules of sovereignty, a consequence of post-colonial state-building, could be used to prevent them (Gerstl & Strasakova, 2017). The ASEAN Way of informal consultation and respect of sovereign prerogatives enabled more interaction at the diplomatic level, but preclusively decisive action that could have prevented further escalation into violence.

Malaysia's most recent bid to chair ASEAN, led by Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, has sought to revive mediation in the region, with mixed results. Although pacts to send ASEAN observers have been announced, they have not yet been fully adopted, and tension between regional aspirations and bilateral sensitivities persists (Strangio, 2025; Reed, 2025). The conflict, therefore, sheds light on greater problems with ASEAN as it tries to transition into a more substantive example of a security community when it needs to be diplomatic, issues that had their foundation on the colonial bequest of bounded territorial sovereignty, which makes compromise on issues of border politics politically expensive to member state governments (Acharya, 2023; Buzan and Acharya, 2022).

The Preah Vihear conflict also illustrates the tension between ASEAN's norms and its conflict management practices. In the spirit of the ASEAN Way, consultation, consensus, and non-interference have been key to keeping the organisation together in the face of various member states without any confrontations that might divide the region. However, the very same principles that make it hard for ASEAN to address territorial conflicts also call for decisive action. The fact that the organisation is not willing to take sides that could put one member state at a disadvantage over another in bilateral fights implies that a conflict such as Preah Vihear is ready to boil over without a solution, and it constantly breaks out into violence only to calm down without any fundamental change (Acharya, 2014; Kulwuthivilas, 2021). In this way, not only were the disputes over the territory itself created by colonial boundary-making, but so were the institutionalized possibilities for overcoming the conflict.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

To achieve a sustainable solution to the Preah Vihear conflict, attention must be paid to territorial issues, as well as to the more fundamental colonial frameworks that continue to shape the organisational dynamics of the conflict. Formal sovereignty has also proven ineffective in reconciling through legal adjudication, as it has validated colonial cartographic determinations that neither challenge nor recognise the political contingency. The decisions of the ICJ are seen as imposed on both sides rather than as a mutually agreed method for resolving disputes and grievances (Sophalkalyan, 2025; Hutt, 2025).

The failure to find legal remedies is symptomatic of a more general lack of legal solutions to the problems posed by colonial boundary-making. European expansion also gave rise to international law institutions that codified principles applied to previously colonised areas. One example of how international law has reinforced the colonial territorial dispensation rather than helping to transform it is the doctrine of uti possidetis – the boundaries drawn by administrators at independence are sacrosanct. While this doctrine has been invoked to maintain stability at borders while reducing the likelihood of frequent border disputes after decolonisation, it has tended to reinforce borders constructed in ways that reflect imperial convenience, geographical rationality, and indigenous preferences (Biersteker and Weber, 1996; Wagner, 2021). The Preah Vihear case is thus a sign of a larger struggle against international law and post-colonial justice.

However, other options may be bilateral heritage management systems that would have both countries' valid claims to the Angkorean civilisation without necessarily addressing sovereignty issues. These would recognise that the significance of the temple is not limited to the present-day national boundaries; that a shared cultural heritage was artificially divided by the creation of colonial boundaries. Nevertheless, the UNESCO heritage systems provide for the potential of mechanisms of cooperation that would transform the temple from a place of conflict

into a place of reconciliation, but they require the political will of both governments to implement such mechanisms on a long-term basis (Thomas, 2001; Kacowicz, 2005).

Last, but not least, there is a need to transcend colonial legacies, which should be critically examined in relation to the historical processes that led to the present territorial set-up. This means recognising that boundaries are imperial rather than natural or historically created and considering relationships closed off by colonial boundary-making. This would have to be a gradual process, and require educational programs that would make the nationalist narratives more complicated, political institutions that accommodate, and an investment in regional relations over bilateral confrontation, because the cognitive and normative processes that make it possible for communities to reconceptualize inherited borders are themselves gradual and socially constructed (Acharya, 2009; Adler & Barnett, 1998; Adler, 2019). Path dependence, as established by the colonial border, is not irreversible; other paths can be taken, and political will plays a role in this process.

These policy pathways are not individual vacuums but rather part of a larger geopolitical field that shapes the possibilities for settlement, as questions of sovereignty are never purely territorial but are entangled in varying configurations of regional and global power (Agnew, 2003; Peou, 2022). The dispute between Thailand and Cambodia was not unique in modern Southeast Asia. The great power rivalry between the United States and China has complicated bilateral relations, and both Thailand and Cambodia have been grappling with how to develop a strategic relationship that will shape their stance on the Preah Vihear case. The increasing economic and diplomatic role of China in Cambodia has altered the regional status quo, providing Phnom Penh with external aid that influences its bargaining with Thailand (Acharya & Buzan, 2019; Yan, 2019). The history of colonialism, thus, needs to be viewed in light of present-day great-power politics to understand current trends.

Cambodia's growing ties with China have given the country resources and diplomatic backing to strengthen its position in territorial disputes. Reliance has been built through infrastructure development, especially in ports, roads, and special economic zones, so that the Kingdom of Cambodia's foreign policy is now aligned with the preferences of the Chinese government in the region. The Preah Vihear conflict affects this strategic partnership and could shape calculations on compromise and escalation. Thailand, in turn, has had a more balanced relationship with both China and the United States, but domestic politics has occasionally shifted this balance (Chachavalpongpun, 2010; Kurlantzick, 2012). Thus, the historical background of colonial territories and the current dynamics of great power politics are overlaid, adding another layer of complexity to an already impossible conflict.

However, international mediation missions, including US and other ASEAN allies' efforts, have failed to make any headway in addressing the tensions they are meant to address. It is challenging to balance conflicting interests for outside parties, maintain relationships with both, and be sensitive to sovereignty and historical grievances. The colonial experience of restricted territorial sovereignty is especially problematic for external mediators, who offer innovative solutions that may help transcend zero-sum territorial rationality but may be rejected due to post-colonial nationalism (Buzan and Acharya, 2022; Gerstl and Strasakova, 2017). Thus, the legacies of colonialism are not just limiting bilateral possibilities, but also the possibility of a positive external relationship.

CONCLUSION

This research has demonstrated that the case of Thailand-Cambodia Preah Vihear cannot be fully understood without considering the long-term colonial history. The European imperial expansion caused the political geography of Southeast Asia to be entirely restructured in line with the European conception of limited territorial states. Colonial interests, not local inclinations, formed the basis of the boundaries drawn by the Franco-Siamese treaties of the early twentieth century and gave rise to sovereignty claims that, a hundred years later, still generate war. Colonial maps were not only reflections of the territory but also helped produce it and define the "parameters of choice" that have affected subsequent diplomatic options and courses of action along paths defined by imperial officials.

The adjudication of international law has strengthened, rather than overturned, colonial determinations, in which the imperial archives are treated as authoritative sources of facts about territorial reality, and decisions are made in accordance with doctrines that assert the validity of colonial-era judgments and do not abrogate them. The maps, made by the ICJ and used in French, show that colonial knowledge systems continue to have influence in post-colonial contexts and restrict legal potential within the boundaries set by the colonial period. With the advent of post-colonial nationalism, the colonial territorial configuration is even more entrenched with a symbolic dimension, and boundary disputes are transformed into "life-and-death" issues of historical justice and national identity and cannot be sacrificed.

New events, such as resurgences of military conflicts and political endeavours in the context of ASEAN, should be put in the longue durée. The cost of war, including loss of life and livelihoods, and displacement, is imposed on today's generation of people whose lives were decided by the actions of colonial decision makers over a hundred years ago. The answer should not only include the technical delimitation of boundaries, but also important reflections on the processes of colonial formation that shaped the current territorial organisation. Only when the current space is recognised as the product of imperial decisions, rather than nature or history, can space be opened up in which relationships and social relations that colonial boundary-making has disallowed can be reenacted.

Its wider implications are not limited to the particular case of Thailand-Cambodia but serve to shed light on tendencies that define post-colonial conflicts over territories in the Global South in general. Boundary-making on a colonial basis created the condition of conflict in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, and also the path-dependency that is still a source of violence after formal decolonization. The dynamics of understanding these dynamics require frameworks of analysis sensitive to historical dynamics and the present effects, not simply background conditioning functions of imperial legacies, but forces themselves that precondition contemporary political possibilities. The Preah Vihear case thus becomes window dressing for the greater problems faced by post-colonial societies, which are attempting to resolve problems they did not invent but must deal with.

Further investigation into this discussion can be conducted through other studies, which may examine parallel traits in other post-colonial territorial conflicts, acknowledge the similarities in the processes by which imperial boundary-making engenders conflict today, and attend to differences suggestive of distinct historical conditions. Comparisons might help to shed light on the situations of scope in which colonial inheritance is more/less constraining, and hence to identify what might make it easier to overcome path dependencies formed in the imperial period. As they explore the interplay of past and present forces in shaping territorial politics in the Global

South, they open new avenues for research in the context of recent developments, including great power competition, climate change, and migration (Acharya, 2023; Buzan and Acharya, 2022).

The analysis indicates the need to scrutinise the colonial past, not take contemporary borders for granted, nor assume that history is close at hand. Diplomatic initiatives that take account of the provisional nature of territorial settlements can be more effective than those that assume boundaries are sacred, based on decisions made by the imperial powers rather than local realities. Nationalist narratives, heritage management arrangements that recognize the potential for shared cultural ruptures across boundaries, and regional institutions that provide alternatives to bilateral conflict constitute complicating factors in educational programmes as constructive means of dealing with the legacy of colonial inheritances. This is no easy, instant job, but without doing it, there would be more struggles ahead due to the decisions made.

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