
Thai-Cambodia temple/border dispute

As part my activities as a lecturer and advisor on Asian studies with the Centre Européen de Recherches Internationales et Stratégiques (CERIS) (or European Centre for International and Strategic Research) in Brussels, I have to supervise work on some of the students' masters theses. This year, one has been submitted on the recent dispute between ASEAN neighbours, Thailand and Cambodia, over the Preah Vihear temple on their border.

I just finished reading it yesterday, while nursing our convalescing cat who was attacked by a fox last week.

While I recall the border incidents of 2008 and remember reading more about them, including the history of the disputed area dating back to the period of the First World War described to me by a friend, Stefan Hell, then in Hanoi and now in Beijing, who was doing a doctoral thesis on Siam's involvement in the War and the subsequent discussions with France, then the colonial power in Indochina, I do not have a great deal of background on the subject except to feel that the current dispute is another consequence of those often-arbitrary colonial borders.

But, without taking sides, what strikes me more is the inability of the current leaderships to deal appropriately with such problems. The two governments directly involved, of course are subject to pressures of public and political and nationalistic opinion, sometimes with not-so-hidden agendas. But ASEAN, the UN, other neighbours, or even the EU, might have tapped more effectively their conflict-prevention tool-box resources and good offices to help mitigate the clashes and avoid more bloodshed. Yes, only a few soldiers lost their lives and limbs in the 2008-2009 conflicts, but even those are too many.

This certainly seems like another test for the ASEAN system, as it enters a new era under its ambitious new Charter. While both parties would have had to agree at the time for ASEAN to discuss the issue, it would seem as if there still exists room for maneuvering either through back channels or Track II peacemakers. Someone as experienced and capable as ASEAN Secretary General Surin Pitsuwan should be able to stimulate some positive mediation before more clashes erupt needlessly.