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Historical Identity, Border-Making, And The Contemporary Cambodia–Thailand Conflict Over Preah Vihear

Nur Afiyin Tadore A
Universitas Pertahanan Republik Indonesia, Indonesia

Corresponding author email: afiyintadore@gmail.com

Abstract

The Cambodia–Thailand dispute over the Preah Vihear Temple exemplifies the enduring impact of historical identity structures and colonial-era border-making on contemporary security relations in mainland Southeast Asia. Despite the International Court of Justice (ICJ) rulings of 1962 and 2013, which legally settled questions of sovereignty, the conflict continued to generate political tension and sporadic military clashes, particularly between 2008 and 2011. This study argues that the resilience of this conflict lies not in legal ambiguity but in identity narratives shaped by centuries of mandala politics, asymmetric colonial interactions, and postcolonial nationalism. Using qualitative methods, historical-document analysis, discourse analysis, and process tracing, this research uncovers how French cartography (1904–1907) transformed fluid mandala spaces into rigid territorial boundaries, producing enduring contestations. Cambodia's narrative centers on Angkorian civilizational continuity and anti-colonial restoration, while Thailand frames the border as part of "lost territories" resulting from unequal treaties with France. These diverging identities enable political elites to securitize the temple, mobilizing nationalism for domestic legitimacy. The findings demonstrate that legal decisions alone cannot resolve identity-based grievances; durable peace requires joint management mechanisms, ASEAN-supported dialogue, and identity-oriented peacebuilding that integrates historical understanding with contemporary diplomacy.

Keywords: border conflict, Cambodia; colonial cartography; identity; Thailand

INTRODUCTION

The Preah Vihear conflict between Cambodia and Thailand has long served as a symbol of how deeply historical identity and border-making intersect in shaping contemporary geopolitics. Although territorial disputes in Southeast Asia are relatively common, none have demonstrated the same enduring emotional intensity or symbolic weight as the conflict surrounding this 11th-century Khmer temple. Even after the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled decisively in 1962 and issued a clarification in 2013, the dispute remains embedded in political rhetoric, educational

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narratives, and public sentiment within both states. This persistence suggests that the conflict cannot be understood solely through legal or territorial frameworks; instead, it must be viewed through the lens of identity formation, colonial legacies, and the securitization of cultural heritage. Historically, pre-modern Southeast Asian political systems did not conceive of borders as fixed lines but as overlapping mandala-style spheres of influence. The arrival of European powers, especially France, in Indochina introduced the Western territorial model, imposing rigid boundaries where earlier polities recognized fluidity. The French mapping expeditions of 1904–1907 and the resulting Annex I map constituted a colonial redefinition of territoriality that continues to structure Cambodia–Thailand relations today. When the ICJ relied on this map, it reaffirmed a spatial order that Thailand perceived as externally imposed and politically unjust. The introduction of the UNESCO World Heritage listing for Preah Vihear in 2008 further intensified the conflict. What might appear as a cultural achievement for Cambodia triggered nationalist mobilization in Thailand, especially during periods of political instability, culminating in military clashes from 2008 to 2011. This indicates that the dispute is sustained not by ambiguity in the border but by historical memory, nation-building narratives, and political instrumentalization. Therefore, this research aims to examine the historical, political, and identity-based processes that have shaped the dispute. It argues that a comprehensive understanding of the conflict requires bridging colonial history, identity theory, and contemporary security studies, thus offering a multidimensional analysis beyond legal adjudication.

Literature Review

This section presents a critical and systematic review of the existing literature on the Cambodia–Thailand dispute over the Preah Vihear temple, with particular attention to the intersection of historical identity, colonial border-making, and contemporary security relations in mainland Southeast Asia. The review synthesizes relevant theoretical frameworks and empirical findings from the past decade (2014–2024), while also engaging with foundational works that remain analytically salient. The literature is organized thematically across four interconnected domains, such as identity, nationalism, and collective memory. Then colonial cartography and border-making in Southeast Asia; (3) securitization theory and the politics of heritage; and (4) ASEAN regionalism and conflict resolution. Following this synthesis, the review identifies critical research gaps and establishes the present study's theoretical position within the broader scholarly conversation.

Theoretical Foundations: Identity, Nationalism, and the Construction of Territoriality

Nations as Imagined Communities

The constructivist turns in nationalism studies, particularly the work of Anderson (1991), provide a foundational lens for understanding how the Preah Vihear dispute transcends material territorial interests. Anderson conceptualizes nations as *imagined communities,* socially

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constructed entities wherein members perceive a sense of communion despite never meeting most fellow members. Applying this framework, the Cambodian and Thai national communities have constructed divergent imaginaries of the Dangrek Range region. For Cambodia, the temple symbolizes Angkorian civilizational continuity and postcolonial restoration (Chandler, 2008; Edwards, 2007). For Thailand, the same geography evokes memories of *territorial loss* under duress from French colonial power (Strate, 2012; Thongchai, 1994). These imagined geographies are reproduced through education systems, state rituals, and mass media, making them resistant to legal adjudication.

Banal Nationalism and the Everyday Reproduction of Borders

Extending Anderson's framework, Billig (1995) introduces the concept of *banal nationalism:* the routine, often unnoticed symbolic practices that reproduce national identity in everyday life. Flags, anthems, currency, and news media constantly remind citizens of national belonging. In the context of Preah Vihear, banal nationalism operates through Thai and Cambodian newspaper editorials, school textbooks, and political speeches that routinely frame the temple as either *under threat* (Cambodia) or *illegitimately claimed* (Thailand) (McGregor, 2011; Keyes, 2002). This daily reinforcement ensures that even when diplomatic relations normalize, nationalist sentiments remain latent and easily reactivated during political crises. Gellner (1983) and Hobsbawm & Ranger (1983) complement this perspective by demonstrating that nationalism is a modern phenomenon wherein traditions are *invented* to legitimize state authority. The competing historical narratives surrounding Preah Vihear exemplify such invented traditions.

The Social Construction of Territoriality

Wendt's (1999) constructivist theory of international relations challenges realist assumptions that states act solely on material power calculations. Instead, Wendt argues that *ideas and identities shape interests*. Applying Wendt to the Preah Vihear case, the dispute persists not because the temple has strategic economic value, it is remote and relatively inaccessible, but because it has become *identity-constitutive* for both nations. Similarly, Lake (2008) examines hierarchy in international relations, demonstrating that subordinate states often accept dominant powers' authority when the hierarchy is perceived as legitimate. Thailand's historical resistance to French-imposed borders reflects a rejection of perceived illegitimate hierarchy, a rejection transmitted across generations

Colonial Cartography and Border-Making in Mainland Southeast Asia

The Transformation from Mandala to Modern Borders

Before European colonization, mainland Southeast Asian political organization followed the *mandala* model, overlapping spheres of power radiating from core cities, with fluid

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boundaries and multiple, layered loyalties (Thongchai, 1994; Winichakul, 2000). The arrival of French and British colonial powers introduced the Western *territorial state* model based on fixed, linear boundaries. Thongchai's (1994) seminal work *Siam Mapped* demonstrates how this geographical revolution transformed Siamese conceptions of space, replacing graduated sovereignty with exclusive territorial jurisdiction. The Preah Vihear dispute directly emerges from this historical rupture. Where pre-modern policies recognized the Dangrek escarpment as a zone of overlapping influence, French cartographers drew a singular line. The watershed principle, preferred by Siam, was subordinated to French strategic interests (Pou Sothirak, 2012; Tuck, 2015).

Cartography as Power

Harley (1989) revolutionized cartographic history by arguing that maps are not neutral scientific documents but *instruments of power*. French colonial maps of Indochina served multiple political functions: they justified territorial claims, facilitated administrative control, and constructed new realities that eventually became naturalized. Branch (2014) extends this argument, demonstrating how the *cartographic state* replaced earlier spatial orders across the colonized world. In the Cambodian case, French surveyors produced the Annex I map of 1907 under conditions of technological superiority and political leverage. Siam's failure to protest immediately due to diplomatic asymmetry and internal inconsistencies later became legally decisive in the 1962 ICJ ruling. However, as Sahlins (1989) shows in the European context, even formally settled borders remain symbolically contested when local populations maintain alternative understandings.

French Colonial Administration in Indochina

Brocheux & Hémery (2009) provide the most comprehensive English-language analysis of French Indochina, demonstrating how colonial governance was simultaneously bureaucratic and coercive. The French protectorate over Cambodia sought to define territorial limits against Siam not merely for administrative convenience but to consolidate colonial authority. Edwards (2007) specifically examines Cambodian responses to French rule, revealing how Cambodian elites selectively appropriated colonial categories, including territorial boundaries, to assert Angkorian heritage. This insight is crucial for understanding why post-independence Cambodia embraced the Annex I map: it validated both colonial legality and pre-colonial Khmer greatness.

Securitization Theory and the Politics of Heritage

The Copenhagen School's Securitization Framework

Buzan (1991) and Buzan & Wæver (2003) developed securitization theory within the Copenhagen School framework. Securitization occurs when political actors frame an issue as an *existential threat* to a referent object (state, nation, identity), justifying extraordinary measures

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beyond normal politics. Balzacq (2011) further refines the theory by emphasizing the *audience acceptance* dimension: a securitizing move succeeds only when relevant audiences accept the threat framing. Applying this to Preah Vihear, the 2008 UNESCO World Heritage listing served as a triggering event. Thai nationalist groups and political elites successfully securitized the listing, framing it as an existential threat to Thai territorial integrity (Pou Sothirak, 2012). The audience, urban middle classes, military officers, and media consumers accepted this framing, enabling military mobilization. Floyd (2010) extends securitization theory to environmental and heritage domains, providing theoretical justification for analyzing cultural heritage as a security issue.

Heritage Securitization

Meskell (2018) and Labadi (2013) critically examine UNESCO's role in global heritage politics. While UNESCO promotes World Heritage listing as a mechanism for protection and international cooperation, Meskell demonstrates that listing can *intensify* conflicts when heritage sites straddle contested borders. Winter (2007) specifically analyzes post-conflict heritage tourism in Asia, showing how memories of violence become embedded in heritage sites. The Preah Vihear case exemplifies heritage securitization: a site intended for universal cultural appreciation became a battleground for nationalist assertion. When Cambodia successfully listed the temple, what Thailand might have celebrated as a regional cultural achievement was securitized as national humiliation.

Empirical Studies of Preah Vihear Securitization (2008–2011)

Several scholars have directly analyzed the 2008–2011 escalation. Pou Sothirak (2012), a Cambodian academic and former government official, provides an insider perspective on diplomatic dimensions, documenting how both states' political leaders used nationalist rhetoric for domestic legitimacy. McGregor (2011) applies discourse analysis to Thai and Cambodian media coverage, identifying recurring frames of *victimhood* (Cambodia) and *injustice* (Thailand). Weatherbee (2009) situates the dispute within broader patterns of Southeast Asian international relations, noting that historical grievances frequently re-emerge when domestic political stability weakens. Strate (2012), in *The Lost Territories*, specifically examines Thai historical consciousness of colonial-era concessions, demonstrating how the early twentieth-century losses to France remain *unhealed wounds* in Thai national memory.

ASEAN Regionalism and Conflict Resolution

ASEAN's Non-Interference Principle

Acharya (2001, 2014) provides the most influential constructivist analysis of ASEAN, demonstrating how the *ASEAN Way,* emphasizing consultation, consensus, and non-interference, has both enabled regional stability and constrained conflict resolution. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) successfully prevented major inter-state warfare among its

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members after 1975, yet its non-interference norm prevents deep engagement in bilateral disputes. Haacke (2003) critically examines ASEAN's diplomatic culture, arguing that the very norms facilitating cooperation also inhibit meaningful mediation when member states resist. The Preah Vihear dispute exemplifies this tension: ASEAN repeatedly called for restraint but could not compel compliance. Busse (1997) earlier argued that constructivism explains ASEAN's endurance: shared norms of non-violation of sovereignty create a *security community* in formation. However, Jones & Smith (2006) counter that ASEAN's normative framework is too shallow to resolve identity-based conflicts.

Indonesia's Mediation Role (2011)

Sukma (2011) examines Indonesia's growing role in ASEAN conflict resolution, particularly during the 2011 escalation when Indonesia, as ASEAN chair, deployed observers to the Cambodia-Thailand border. This intervention, while limited, represented a significant precedent: ASEAN's first direct involvement in a bilateral territorial dispute between members. Weatherbee (2009) contextualizes this within Indonesia's broader aspirations for regional leadership. However, the observers' mandate was strictly monitoring, not adjudication, reflecting the limits of ASEAN's conflict resolution mechanisms.

Critiques of Liberal Peacebuilding

Newman, Paris, & Richmond (2009) and Paris (2004) critically examine liberal peacebuilding, the post-Cold War assumption that democracy, markets, and institutions produce durable peace. Paris (2004) argues that imposing liberal frameworks on conflict-affected states can backfire when local identities and historical grievances are ignored. Galtung's (1996) distinction between *negative peace* (absence of direct violence) and *positive peace* (addressing structural and cultural violence) is particularly relevant. The ICJ rulings achieved negative peace intermittently but failed to address cultural violence, the identity-based hostility reproduced through education, media, and political discourse. Richmond (2009) further argues that peacebuilding must engage *local* narratives, not merely state-level diplomatic frameworks.

Research Method

Research Approach and Types of Data

This study employs a qualitative research approach grounded in interpretivist epistemology. This epistemological stance recognizes that identity, collective memory, and symbolic meaning cannot be adequately captured through quantitative indicators or statistical measurements. Instead, the objective is to interpret how political actors, media organizations, and nationalist groups construct and mobilize narratives to advance territorial claims or consolidate domestic legitimacy. The qualitative approach is particularly appropriate for the Preah Vihear case because the dispute persists not due to material or economic factors but due to deeply

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embedded identity narratives that require interpretive analysis. The types of research data used in this study are entirely qualitative in nature, consisting of textual and visual materials. These include historical documents such as the treaties of 1893, 1904, and 1907 between France and Siam; French colonial maps, including the critical Annex I map of 1907; legal documents such as the International Court of Justice rulings of 1962 and 2013; UNESCO World Heritage documents from 2008; political speeches delivered by Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen and various Thai political leaders during the 2008–2011 escalation period; and media reports from both Cambodian and Thai newspapers, including the Bangkok Post, The Nation, Phnom Penh Post, and Rasmei Kampuchea.

Sources of Data and Techniques for Determining Informants

The research data sources are divided into primary sources and secondary sources. Primary sources include the original colonial treaties between France and Siam (1893, 1904, 1907), reproductions of the French Annex I map of 1907, the complete ICJ judgment of 1962 and the ICJ interpretation judgment of 2013, UNESCO World Heritage Committee records from 2008, transcripts of political speeches by Cambodian and Thai leaders, and archival newspaper reports from 2008 to 2011. Secondary sources include academic books on Cambodian and Thai history, colonialism in Indochina, and border disputes; peer-reviewed journal articles from publications such as Contemporary Southeast Asia, Asian Studies Review, Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, and Modern Asian Studies; and research reports from ASEAN and various think tanks. Because this study is document-based rather than field-based, traditional informants or respondents are not used. Instead, the technique for determining which documents to include is purposive sampling based on explicit criteria. Documents are selected if they meet four criteria: relevance (directly addressing the Preah Vihear dispute), time period (historical documents from 1893–1907 and contemporary documents from 2008–2024), authority (official documents prioritized over unofficial sources), and diversity of perspective (sources selected from both Cambodian and Thai sides to capture competing narratives).

Research Instruments and Data Collection Techniques

The research instruments used in this study consist of three main tools developed before data collection. The first instrument is a document analysis sheet, which is a structured template for recording information from each document, including document type, author, date, key arguments, relevant quotations, and analytical notes. The second instrument is a discourse analysis coding framework, which contains systematic codes for analyzing political speeches and media reports, including codes for nationalist rhetoric, threat framing, victimhood narratives, territorial claims, references to historical grievances, and emotional appeals. The third instrument is a process tracing protocol, which is a chronological event log for mapping causal sequences from colonial cartography in 1904 through the contemporary conflict to 2013. For data collection, this

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study employs three techniques. The first technique is historical-document collection conducted through multiple archival and digital sources, including the ICJ website, the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, the Internet Archive, and academic databases such as JSTOR, Google Scholar, and Scopus. The second technique is discourse data collection focusing on political speeches and media reports from 2008 to 2011, collected from government websites, parliamentary records, and news archives using keywords such as "Preah Vihear," "Cambodia-Thailand border," "temple dispute," "ICJ," and "UNESCO 2008." The third technique is secondary literature collection through systematic database searches using combinations of relevant keywords, with only peer-reviewed journal articles and academic books from reputable presses included in the analysis.

Theoretical Framework and Data Analysis Techniques

The theoretical framework of this study integrates three complementary perspectives. First, constructivist international relations theory, drawing primarily on Wendt (1999) and Acharya (2014), argues that state interests are not determined by material conditions alone but are socially constructed through shared ideas, identities, and historical narratives. This framework explains why the Preah Vihear dispute persists despite minimal economic or strategic value. Second, securitization theory from the Copenhagen School, drawing on Buzan and Wæver (2003) and refined by Balzacq (2011), analyzes how political actors frame issues as existential threats to justify extraordinary measures. This framework explains how the 2008 UNESCO listing was transformed from a cultural achievement into a national security threat by Thai nationalist groups and political elites. Third, critical cartography, drawing on Harley (1989) and Thongchai (1994), demonstrates that maps are not neutral scientific documents but instruments of power that reflect and reinforce the interests of their creators. This framework explains how the French Annex I map of 1907 created a colonial spatial order that continues to structure Cambodia-Thailand relations today. For data analysis, this study employs three techniques. Historical-document analysis is applied to treaties, maps, and ICJ rulings through close reading and source criticism, focusing on explicit statements regarding boundaries, the political conditions under which documents were produced, and what was deliberately omitted. Discourse analysis, following Fairclough's (1995) critical discourse analysis framework, is applied to political speeches and media reports to identify framing, identity construction, othering, historical invocations, and emotional mobilization. Process tracing, following George and Bennett (2005), is used to reconstruct the causal sequence from the pre-colonial mandala system through French colonial intervention, production of the Annex I map, Siam's tacit acceptance, the 1962 ICJ ruling, the 2008 UNESCO listing, securitization by Thai elites, military clashes from 2008 to 2011, Indonesian mediation in 2011, and the 2013 ICJ clarification.

Data Credibility

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the research findings, this study employs

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four strategies. The first strategy is source triangulation, which means using multiple independent sources to verify the same finding. For example, the content of the Annex I map is verified through three sources: the original map reproduction, Thongchai's (1994) analysis, and Pou Sothirak's (2012) documentation. The second strategy is methodological triangulation, which means using three different analytical methods (historical-document analysis, discourse analysis, and process tracing) to analyze the same phenomenon from different angles. When different methods converge on the same finding, confidence in that finding increases significantly. The third strategy is reflexivity, which means the researcher explicitly acknowledges the limitations of the study. These limitations include reliance on English-language sources, which may miss nuances in Khmer and Thai language materials; limited direct access to certain physical archives, requiring reliance on secondary reproductions; and the researcher's positionality as an Indonesian scholar with no direct stake in the Cambodia-Thailand dispute. These limitations are openly stated to maintain transparency. The fourth strategy is the maintenance of a complete audit trail, which includes records of all documents collected with their sources and access dates, the coding frameworks used for discourse analysis, chronological event logs for process tracing, and all analytical notes and memos generated during the research process. This audit trail enables external reviewers, including journal peer reviewers, to verify the research process if necessary. Through these four strategies, the credibility of the research findings can be academically justified and defended.

RESULT & DISCUSSION

Colonial cartography and the making of the border

The transformation of the Cambodia–Thailand border from a fluid mandala zone into a rigid territorial boundary was primarily a product of French colonial intervention. Before European involvement, the Dangrek region was understood not as a fixed frontier but as a space of overlapping cultural and political affiliations, shaped by tributary relations and shifting regional power. The French protectorate over Cambodia sought to formalize territorial boundaries to secure administrative control and strengthen its geopolitical position against Siam. Through the treaties of 1904 and 1907, France and Siam agreed to establish a joint boundary commission, which conducted surveys across the region. The French, possessing superior cartographic technology and political leverage, produced maps that privileged their strategic interests and those of their Cambodian protectorate. The Annex I map of 1907 became the critical document in this process. Although intended as a technical record, it was deeply political. The map’s placement of Preah Vihear on the Cambodian side contradicted the watershed principle that Siam preferred. Yet Siam did not formally protest the map, partly due to the unequal diplomatic context and partly due to internal administrative inconsistencies. This silence later became a key argument in the 1962 ICJ decision, which ruled that Siam's failure to contest the map constituted tacit acceptance. However, Thailand never fully internalized the legitimacy of the Annex I map. In Thai historiography and textbooks, colonial-era territorial losses to France are framed as national

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humiliation. The map thus symbolizes historical injustice rather than legal certainty. Conversely, Cambodia views the map as validation of ancient Khmer territorial reach and colonial recognition of its civilizational heritage. The conflicting symbolic meanings attached to the same map illustrate how colonial cartography continues to shape political identities and generate dispute. Therefore, the border around Preah Vihear is not merely a geographic line but a product of competing historical narratives. Colonial cartography created a legal template, but it also created enduring psychological boundaries that still influence bilateral relations.

Identity narratives and national memory

Identity narratives play a decisive role in sustaining the Preah Vihear conflict long after legal questions have been settled. In Cambodia, national identity is built upon the legacy of the Angkor empire, which is celebrated as the pinnacle of Khmer civilization. Preah Vihear, with its elaborate architectural symbolism and historical significance, is perceived not only as a religious monument but also as a national emblem of cultural and territorial continuity. Cambodian political discourse frequently frames the temple as part of an ancestral inheritance unjustly threatened by external actors. This narrative gained particular traction in the post-Khmer Rouge era, as Cambodia sought symbols of unity and historical legitimacy. Leaders, including Hun Sen, have invoked Preah Vihear as a rallying point for nationalism, portraying Cambodian stewardship of the site as both a historical duty and a marker of sovereignty. In Thailand, identity narratives revolve around the concept of "lost territories," reflecting the historical memory of concessions made under colonial pressure. Thai national historiography emphasizes resistance to colonial encroachment, constructing Thailand as a unique Southeast Asian state that maintained sovereignty despite foreign intervention. Within this narrative, territorial losses to France in the late 19th and early 20th centuries are depicted as painful episodes in national memory. Preah Vihear, situated near regions formerly under Siamese influence, becomes a symbolic representation of these grievances. Nationalist groups, such as the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), mobilized this sentiment during the 2008–2011 political crisis, framing the UNESCO listing as a threat to national dignity. These contrasting identity narratives mean that Preah Vihear simultaneously embodies pride and grievance for both nations. The temple is entangled with emotional histories that influence public opinion and political decision-making. The symbolic value attached to the site magnifies any territorial disagreement, transforming technical demarcation issues into existential questions of identity. As long as these narratives persist, legal clarity alone cannot resolve the conflict.

Securitization dynamics (2008–2011)

The escalation of the Preah Vihear conflict between 2008 and 2011 is best understood through the lens of securitization theory. Securitization occurs when political actors frame an issue as an existential threat to justify extraordinary measures. In both Cambodia and Thailand, political

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elites strategically employed securitizing language to mobilize nationalist sentiment and secure domestic legitimacy. This process intensified following Cambodia's 2008 bid to have Preah Vihear recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage site. While the listing applied only to the temple itself, Thai political leaders and nationalist groups portrayed it as a precursor to Cambodian claims over surrounding territory. In Thailand, the securitization process was amplified by domestic political instability. Competing factions, including PAD, anti-Thaksin groups, and military elites, used the dispute to challenge the government's credibility. Media outlets framed the UNESCO decision as a national humiliation, and protests erupted in Bangkok demanding stronger action. The Thai military responded by increasing its presence along the border, contributing to heightened tensions. In Cambodia, the securitization dynamic manifested through the state's strategic use of nationalist rhetoric. Prime Minister Hun Sen capitalized on the UNESCO listing to strengthen his political authority, presenting himself as the defender of Khmer heritage against perceived Thai aggression. Cambodian media framed Thai objections as threats to cultural identity and national sovereignty, reinforcing a sense of external danger. The reciprocal nature of these securitization processes created a feedback loop. Thai military movements prompted Cambodian mobilization, which in turn justified further Thai deployments. The result was a series of violent clashes, including exchanges of artillery fire, that caused casualties and displaced civilians. The 2011 confrontation even drew international concern as the violence threatened to destabilize ASEAN's diplomatic framework. Thus, the conflict's escalation during this period cannot be attributed solely to border ambiguity. It was the product of deliberate political choices, identity-laden narratives, and securitizing practices that transformed a historical dispute into a militarized confrontation.

Legal settlements and their limits

Although the ICJ rulings of 1962 and 2013 provided legal clarity, they were insufficient to resolve the underlying conflict. The 1962 ruling awarded sovereignty over the Preah Vihear temple to Cambodia, but it did not delineate the surrounding territory, leaving room for competing interpretations. Thailand accepted the ruling publicly but continued to contest the vicinity, arguing that the watershed principle supported its claim. This ambiguity contributed to recurring disagreements. The 2013 ICJ clarification sought to resolve this by affirming that Cambodia has sovereignty not only over the temple but also over adjacent land as indicated in the Annex I map. While this decision reinforced Cambodia's legal position, Thailand maintained concerns about territorial integrity and public backlash. For many Thais, the ruling confirmed a long-held perception of international injustice, rooted in colonial history. The limitations of legal adjudication stem from its inability to address the emotional and symbolic dimensions of the dispute. Law operates on technical principles, treaties, maps, and administrative conduct, but identity conflicts operate on historical memory and nationalism. When sovereignty becomes tied to cultural heritage, legal decisions may be perceived as insufficiently legitimate or even

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threatening. Furthermore, political actors may strategically reject legal clarity when it conflicts with domestic interests. Thai politicians during periods of instability frequently used the dispute to rally support, regardless of the ICJ's authority. Conversely, Cambodian leaders invoked the ruling as validation of national pride, further entrenching polarized interpretations. Therefore, while the ICJ decisions establish an international legal framework, they do not create mutual recognition of identity narratives. Without addressing these deeper layers, legal solutions cannot fully resolve the dispute. Durable peace requires complementary mechanisms that integrate diplomacy, historical dialogue, and cultural cooperation.

CONCLUSION

The conflict surrounding the Preah Vihear temple persists as one of the most revealing examples of how historical identity narratives and colonial border-making continue to shape modern interstate relations. Although the International Court of Justice (ICJ) has twice decided in favor of Cambodia, first in 1962 and again in 2013, the dispute has not been fully resolved in practice. This endurance underscores a critical point: the conflict is not fundamentally rooted in legal ambiguity or technical disputes over cartographic interpretation, but in deeper identity constructions that give symbolic meaning to territorial space. For Cambodia, Preah Vihear represents the continuity of the Angkorian empire and the resilience of Khmer civilization after centuries of foreign intervention and internal trauma. The temple serves as a national symbol that reinforces narratives of cultural pride and historical legitimacy. For Thailand, Preah Vihear is tied to memories of territorial loss and colonial encroachment by France, feeding into broader narratives of national humiliation and resistance. These competing identities transform the site into a symbolic frontier of historical justice, cultural rights, and sovereign pride. Additionally, political instrumentalization of the issue, particularly during periods of domestic instability, has repeatedly escalated tensions. Thailand's political factions have used the conflict to challenge governments, while Cambodian leaders have invoked it to consolidate power and strengthen nationalist sentiment. These dynamics create a cyclical pattern wherein nationalist mobilization reinforces identity-based interpretations, making diplomatic progress difficult. Ultimately, the Preah Vihear dispute demonstrates that legal rulings alone cannot resolve conflicts deeply rooted in identity, memory, and symbolic politics. Sustainable peace requires approaches that address both the legal framework and the psychological narratives shaping public and elite perceptions. A multidimensional strategy incorporating diplomacy, historical dialogue, cooperative heritage management, and community-based peacebuilding is essential. Only by engaging identity directly can both states move beyond historical grievances toward long-term stability.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Addressing an identity-driven territorial conflict requires a holistic, multi-level strategy that goes beyond legal and diplomatic mechanisms. Based on the findings of this study, several

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recommendations can be proposed to support a durable and mutually recognized resolution to the Preah Vihear dispute. First, Cambodia and Thailand should establish a *joint heritage management council* under the guidance of UNESCO. This body would be responsible for managing conservation, tourism, cultural preservation, and site access. By shifting the focus from ownership to stewardship, both states can reduce nationalistic framing and transform the temple into a shared cultural asset. Such cooperation has precedent in other transboundary heritage sites. Second, ASEAN should play a more active facilitative role. Although ASEAN historically adheres to non-interference, the 2011 involvement of Indonesia as an observer demonstrated regional willingness to support stability. Asean could institutionalize a *border cooperation and mediation mechanism* providing technical assistance, demarcation expertise, and conflict-prevention frameworks. Third, the two states should pursue long-term confidence-building measures at the societal level. This includes cross-border cultural festivals, school exchange programs, joint archaeological workshops, and shared historical publications. These initiatives can help reduce entrenched stereotypes by fostering interpersonal relationships and expanding mutual understanding. Fourth, border communities should be integrated into peacebuilding strategies. These communities bear the brunt of violence during clashes, yet they also stand to gain the most from stable cooperation. Cross-border economic zones, shared markets, and co-managed livelihood programs can create economic incentives for peace. Finally, both states should initiate a *bilateral historical dialogue* facilitated by academic institutions. Scholars, educators, and museum specialists can collaborate to produce historically accurate, non-politicized narratives that correct misconceptions embedded in school curricula and public discourse. These recommendations emphasize that sustainable peace must engage not only governments but also communities, educators, and cultural institutions. Identity conflicts are resolved not merely through treaties but by transforming narratives, relationships, and collective memories.

LIMITATIONS

This study acknowledges several limitations that must be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the analysis relies heavily on historical documents, treaties, and colonial-era maps, many of which reflect the political intentions and biases of their original creators. French colonial archives, in particular, were produced under conditions of asymmetric power and may not fully capture local perspectives or Siamese interpretations. Although secondary scholarship helps contextualize these documents, gaps remain in reconstructing the perspectives of local border communities. Second, discourse analysis draws on political speeches, media reports, and academic literature. Political agendas, editorial lines, or ideological positions inherently influence these sources. While triangulation reduces the risk of misinterpretation, the study cannot fully eliminate bias within the data. Furthermore, media narratives from 2008 to 2011 were shaped by

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domestic instability in both countries, meaning that depictions of events may have exaggerated conflictual aspects. Third, the study focuses primarily on state-level and elite-level narratives, with limited incorporation of grassroots perspectives. Local communities at the border have their own identity experiences, economic concerns, and cultural attachments that may depart significantly from national discourses. Their voices are less documented, making it difficult to fully explore how the conflict affects micro-level social dynamics. Fourth, contemporary political developments, especially shifts in leadership, diplomatic priorities, or regional security alignments, may influence the salience of the dispute. As political contexts in Thailand and Cambodia evolve, the dynamics described in this study may change, reducing or intensifying the dispute in ways that cannot be fully anticipated. Finally, this study does not employ geographic information systems (GIS) or high-resolution spatial analysis due to data limitations. Such tools could strengthen future research by providing more precise assessments of terrain, demarcation challenges, and military deployments. Despite these limitations, the study offers a robust foundation for understanding the historical and identity-based dimensions of the Preah Vihear conflict. Further research incorporating fieldwork, local narratives, and interdisciplinary methods would deepen and refine the insights presented here.

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