

Preah Vihear Dispute and ASEAN Regional Security Challenges

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Abstract: The Preah Vihear dispute illustrates how cultural heritage, sovereignty, domestic nationalism, and interstate security can become mutually reinforcing in Southeast Asia. This study examines the dispute between Thailand and Cambodia and its implications for ASEAN regional security. The principal analytical period is 2008–2011, when the dispute escalated after the temple was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, while the 2013 International Court of Justice (ICJ) interpretation is used only as a legal endpoint for assessing the clarification of sovereignty. The study employs a qualitative single-case design based on structured literature and document analysis. Sources were selected from peer-reviewed scholarship, official ASEAN and UNESCO documents, ICJ judgments, and Indonesian diplomatic records. The analysis applies Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) through four operational dimensions: security interdependence, amity-enmity patterns, polarity, and regional boundaries. The findings show that the 2008 UNESCO inscription did not create the underlying territorial dispute or determine the international boundary. Rather, it increased the political salience of a cultural site already embedded in a sovereignty contest. Domestic nationalist mobilization made compromise more politically costly and contributed to the escalation of border tensions. The conflict became a regional security concern because two ASEAN members engaged in armed confrontation, prompting ASEAN diplomatic engagement and Indonesia's mediation as ASEAN Chair in 2011. At the same time, ASEAN's institutional norms of sovereignty, non-interference, consultation, and consensus constrained coercive collective action. The case demonstrates that a bilateral territorial dispute can become regionally consequential when security interdependence activates regional institutions, while ASEAN's capacity to manage the crisis depends on member-state consent and diplomatic leadership.

Keywords: Preah Vihear, cultural heritage, sovereignty, nationalism, ASEAN, regional security, Regional Security Complex Theory.

INTRODUCTION

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established in 1967 to promote regional peace, stability, and cooperation. Its regional order is grounded in norms of sovereignty, territorial integrity, non-interference, peaceful settlement of disputes, and consultation. The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) emphasizes mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-interference, peaceful settlement of disputes, renunciation of the threat or use of force, and effective cooperation. The ASEAN Charter later institutionalized these principles and established consultation and consensus as the basic principle of ASEAN decision-making (ASEAN Secretariat, 2005, 2020). These norms have contributed to ASEAN's relatively cooperative regional environment, but they also create a structural tension: ASEAN must respond to security problems involving member states while avoiding actions that could be interpreted as interference in their sovereign affairs.

The dispute between Thailand and Cambodia concerning the Temple of Preah Vihear is an important case for examining this tension because it connects cultural heritage, territorial sovereignty, domestic nationalism, and regional security. The temple is an eleventh-century Khmer architectural complex dedicated to Shiva and located on a promontory in the Dangrek mountain range. UNESCO inscribed the Temple of Preah Vihear on the World Heritage List in 2008 under criterion (i), recognizing it as an outstanding masterpiece of Khmer architecture. UNESCO's World Heritage documentation also explicitly distinguishes the cultural-heritage process from questions concerning the legal status of territories and boundaries (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2008). Thus, the inscription should not be treated as the legal source of Cambodian sovereignty. Its significance lies in the political meaning attached to the heritage designation within an already unresolved border dispute.

The legal dispute predates UNESCO's involvement by decades. In its 1962 judgment, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) found that the Temple of Preah Vihear was situated in territory under

the sovereignty of Cambodia and held that Thailand was obliged to withdraw its military or police personnel stationed at the temple or in its vicinity on Cambodian territory (ICJ, 1962). The judgment settled sovereignty over the temple area submitted to the Court, but practical disagreements concerning the surrounding borderland remained politically sensitive. In 2013, the ICJ interpreted its 1962 judgment and clarified that Cambodia had sovereignty over the whole territory of the promontory of Preah Vihear as defined by the Court (ICJ, 2013). The legal history therefore demonstrates that the dispute cannot be reduced to a question created by UNESCO in 2008.

The 2008 inscription nevertheless altered the political environment surrounding the dispute. Because Preah Vihear had become a recognized cultural symbol in a contested borderland, the World Heritage designation became politically consequential in both countries. Scholarship on the case shows that heritage was connected to nationalist discourse and domestic political competition. Ngoun (2016) demonstrates how Cambodian state rhetoric connected the border and heritage to nation-building and border defence, while Ngoun (2018) traces the historical process through which Preah Vihear became a national symbol in Cambodia. Rattanasengchanh (2017) further shows how Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen used the dispute and the temple's symbolic status in nationalist politics, while Thai nationalist actors also contested developments surrounding the temple (Silverman, 2011). Heritage therefore functioned as a political resource through which sovereignty could be narrated and defended.

Between 2008 and 2011, the dispute escalated into repeated military confrontations. The fighting demonstrated that a territorial dispute involving two ASEAN members could move beyond legal and diplomatic disagreement and become an interstate security crisis. The regional dimension became visible through ASEAN Foreign Ministers' engagement in 2008 and, more intensively, through Indonesia's mediation when Indonesia chaired ASEAN in 2011. The crisis was also raised at the United Nations Security Council, showing that the dispute had consequences beyond the immediate bilateral relationship (Wagener, 2011).

This study asks: how did the Preah Vihear dispute develop from a sovereignty and heritage controversy into an ASEAN regional security challenge, and what does the case reveal about ASEAN's capacity and limitations in conflict management? The principal analytical period is 2008–2011 because this period captures the escalation, armed clashes, and major ASEAN diplomatic responses. The 2013 ICJ interpretation is included only as a legal endpoint that clarifies the scope of sovereignty; developments after 2013 are outside the empirical period. This delimitation prevents the analysis from mixing the 2008–2011 crisis with later events.

The study argues that the regional significance of Preah Vihear should not be inferred merely from the existence of a bilateral dispute. The conflict became regionally consequential through a sequence of mechanisms: an unresolved sovereignty issue was politicized through heritage and nationalist narratives; political mobilization narrowed the space for compromise; military escalation involved two ASEAN members; ASEAN institutions and member states responded diplomatically; and the crisis exposed the tension between ASEAN's commitment to regional peace and its norms of sovereignty, non-interference, consultation, and consensus. Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) is used to explain these processes because it conceptualizes security as interconnected within geographically proximate regions (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on Preah Vihear can be grouped into four related strands. The first examines the historical and legal foundations of the dispute. The ICJ's 1962 judgment remains the central legal reference, while the 2013 interpretation clarified the territorial scope of the earlier judgment. These legal materials establish that the sovereignty question over the temple and promontory was not created by the UNESCO inscription. They also show why the broader borderland remained politically sensitive despite the judicial settlement of the temple question.

The second strand focuses on heritage and nationalism. Silverman (2011) examines the continuing Thailand–Cambodia temple dispute in relation to UNESCO's World Heritage List and shows how heritage designation intersected with the border conflict. Ngoun (2016) focuses on Cambodian state rhetoric and popular discourse, demonstrating that heritage and development around Preah Vihear were connected to nation-building and border defence. Ngoun (2018) explains the historical emergence of

the temple as a national symbol, while Rattanasengchanh (2017) analyzes the use of Preah Vihear in Hun Sen's nationalism politics between 2008 and 2013. Together, these studies show that heritage is not simply a cultural issue when a site is embedded in a sovereignty dispute.

The third strand concerns ASEAN's role. Phan (2015) examines ASEAN's response to the Temple of Preah Vihear dispute and concludes that ASEAN played an important role in facilitating negotiations and preventing further escalation, while institutional design limited its effectiveness in conflict management and settlement. Wagener (2011) similarly shows that the 2011 conflict was particularly serious and that Indonesia's ASEAN chairmanship became central to renewed diplomatic efforts. Official Indonesian diplomatic records document Indonesia's shuttle diplomacy and the subsequent ASEAN meetings in 2011, while Phan (2015) highlights the opportunities and institutional constraints of ASEAN-led conflict management.

The fourth strand concerns regional security theory. Buzan and Wæver (2003) conceptualize a Regional Security Complex as a pattern of security interdependence in which the security concerns of states are sufficiently connected that they cannot be analyzed in isolation. Existing Preah Vihear literature often discusses regional implications or ASEAN mechanisms, but fewer studies explicitly operationalize the case through the RSCT concepts of security interdependence, amity-enmity patterns, polarity, and regional boundaries. This study addresses that gap by linking heritage and nationalism to the bilateral security dynamic and then connecting that dynamic to ASEAN-level responses.

The contribution of this study is therefore analytical rather than simply descriptive. It does not claim that every bilateral conflict in Southeast Asia automatically becomes a regional security complex issue. Instead, it establishes observable indicators of regionalization ASEAN-level diplomatic engagement, member-state mediation in an ASEAN capacity, changes in interstate security interaction, and consequences for regional conflict-management norms. This approach responds to the need to demonstrate regional impact through evidence rather than assertion.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A. Regional Security Complex Theory

Regional Security Complex Theory, developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, explains security dynamics through patterns of interdependence among geographically proximate states. The theory assumes that security threats and responses are rarely isolated because proximity creates opportunities for interaction, mutual threat perception, and political influence (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). A regional security complex is therefore defined by the density of security relations rather than simply by geographic proximity.

This study operationalizes RSCT through four dimensions. First, security interdependence is indicated when a bilateral security crisis produces consequences for other states or regional institutions. In Preah Vihear, the evidence consists of ASEAN Foreign Ministers' engagement in 2008, the regional diplomatic response to the 2011 clashes, and Indonesia's mediation as ASEAN Chair. Second, amity-enmity patterns are identified through the movement from cooperative relations toward mutual threat perceptions, nationalist rhetoric, military deployment, and armed confrontation, alongside ASEAN's attempt to restore amity through dialogue and restraint.

Third, polarity is treated cautiously. The case does not provide sufficient evidence to characterize Thailand or Cambodia as a dominant regional military pole. Instead, polarity refers here to the distribution of relevant political and diplomatic influence in crisis management. Indonesia's position as ASEAN Chair in 2011 is therefore examined as an example of diplomatic leadership rather than military dominance. Fourth, regional boundaries are defined at the ASEAN level: the empirical conflict is concentrated on the Thailand–Cambodia border, but the regional security complex is Southeast Asia as institutionally organized through ASEAN.

These operational definitions ensure that RSCT is used as an analytical framework rather than a general description. A claim of regional security impact must be supported by evidence that the conflict altered security interactions, affected regional diplomatic institutions, or required regional intervention or mediation.

Table 1. Operationalization of RSCT in the Preah Vihear Case

RSCT dimension	Operational indicator	Evidence in the case
Security interdependence	Bilateral escalation produces regional diplomatic or security consequences.	ASEAN Foreign Ministers' engagement in 2008; urgent ASEAN meeting and Indonesian mediation in 2011.
Amity–enmity patterns	Shift between cooperative restraint and mutual threat perceptions.	Nationalist mobilization, accusations, military deployments and clashes; ASEAN dialogue and mediation.
Polarity	Distribution of relevant political/diplomatic influence in crisis management.	Indonesia's ASEAN Chairmanship and mediation; no evidence of regional military dominance.
Regional boundaries	Institutional/security space in which consequences are processed.	ASEAN Southeast Asia; physical conflict centered on the Thailand–Cambodia border.

B. Regional Security

Regional security in this study refers to the condition of security relations among states whose geographical proximity and political interaction create shared consequences. A bilateral conflict becomes regionally significant when it changes the security environment, diplomatic agenda, or institutional practices of other states. Therefore, regional impact is assessed through three observable outcomes: interstate military escalation involving ASEAN members; regional diplomatic or institutional engagement; and effects on ASEAN's ability to uphold peaceful dispute settlement.

C. ASEAN Regionalism

ASEAN regionalism combines cooperation with strong protection of member-state sovereignty. The TAC establishes respect for sovereignty, non-interference, peaceful settlement, renunciation of the threat or use of force, and effective cooperation as foundational principles (ASEAN Secretariat, 2005). The ASEAN Charter reinforces the shared commitment to regional peace and security while providing that decision-making is based on consultation and consensus (ASEAN Secretariat, 2020). These principles create mechanisms for dialogue but constrain coercive intervention.

The Preah Vihear case illustrates this dual character. ASEAN can place a bilateral dispute on the regional agenda, offer diplomatic facilities, encourage restraint, and support negotiations. However, collective action remains dependent on member-state consent. In July 2008, ASEAN Foreign Ministers discussed the Preah Vihear situation and considered an ASEAN Contact Group, but no consensus existed to establish the group because several members favored continuation of the bilateral process (ASEAN Secretariat, 2008). The case therefore provides concrete evidence of both ASEAN capacity and institutional limitation.

METHODS

This research uses a qualitative single-case study design focused on the Preah Vihear dispute between Thailand and Cambodia. A case-study design is appropriate because the research seeks to explain the interaction among historical, legal, cultural, political, and security variables within one bounded case. The principal analytical period is 2008–2011, covering the escalation after UNESCO inscription and the major armed confrontations and ASEAN responses. The 2013 ICJ interpretation is used only as a legal endpoint for assessing the clarification of sovereignty.

Data were collected through a structured literature and document review. Academic literature was searched primarily through google scholar and publisher or institutional repositories. Primary and authoritative documents were obtained from the official repositories of the international court of justice, unesco world heritage centre, asean secretariat, and relevant governmental or diplomatic records. Search terms included preah vihear dispute, preah vihear asean, thailand cambodia border conflict, preah vihear heritage, preah vihear nationalism, thailand cambodia sovereignty, and regional security complex theory asean. Backward reference tracing was used to identify additional peer-reviewed scholarship directly relevant to the case.

Sources were included when they met at least one of four criteria (1) peer-reviewed scholarship directly analyzing Preah Vihear, Thailand-Cambodia relations, nationalism, heritage, or ASEAN conflict management, (2) official legal documents, particularly ICJ judgments, (3) official institutional documents

from UNESCO or ASEAN, or (4) authoritative diplomatic records concerning the 2011 mediation. Student theses, general news reports, and sources with incomplete metadata were not used as core evidence. News and secondary reporting were used only when necessary to corroborate the chronology of events.

The analysis employed qualitative thematic analysis. Sources were organized under five themes: heritage designation, sovereignty and territorial claims, domestic nationalism, security interdependence, and ASEAN conflict management. The findings were then interpreted through the four RSCT indicators: security interdependence, amity-enmity patterns, polarity, and regional boundaries. The analysis distinguishes direct evidence of regional effects from analytical inference, thereby avoiding the assumption that a bilateral conflict automatically constitutes regional destabilization.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Historical and Legal Context of the Preah Vihear Dispute

The roots of the preah vihear dispute lie in the formation of the Thailand-Cambodia boundary during the colonial period. The 1904 franco-siamese arrangements established a framework for delimitation, including the use of a watershed principle and a mixed commission. The subsequent map associated with the delimitation process became central to the legal dispute. The icj's case overview records that Cambodia and thailand disagreed about the legal effect of the map and the location of the temple in relation to the frontier (icj, 1962).

In 1962, the ICJ decided that the Temple of Preah Vihear was situated in territory under Cambodian sovereignty and consequently held that Thailand was under an obligation to withdraw its military or police forces and other personnel stationed at the temple or its vicinity on Cambodian territory (ICJ, 1962). The judgment was significant because it provided an authoritative legal determination concerning sovereignty over the temple. However, the wider borderland remained politically sensitive, and the practical question of demarcation continued to generate tension.

The 2013 ICJ interpretation is important because it clarified the scope of the 1962 judgment. The Court found that the 1962 judgment had decided that Cambodia possessed sovereignty over the whole territory of the promontory of Preah Vihear as defined in the 2013 judgment and that Thailand was obliged to withdraw personnel from that territory (ICJ, 2013). This clarification is used in this study only as a legal endpoint. The main security analysis remains focused on 2008-2011.

B. Heritage Designation, Sovereignty, and Nationalism

UNESCO inscribed the Temple of Preah Vihear on the World Heritage List in 2008 under criterion. UNESCO describes the property as an outstanding masterpiece of Khmer architecture, consisting of sanctuaries linked by an approximately 800-metre system of pavements and staircases. The listed property covers 154.7 hectares and has a 2,642.5-hectare buffer zone (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2008). The World Heritage Centre also states that publication of nomination materials does not imply an opinion concerning the history or legal status of countries, territories, or boundaries. Thus, the inscription itself should not be interpreted as a legal award of territory.

The political significance of the inscription came from the interaction between cultural recognition and an unresolved sovereignty contest. Silverman (2011) shows that UNESCO's World Heritage List became entangled with the continuing Thailand-Cambodia temple dispute. The heritage designation increased the symbolic value of the site at precisely the moment when domestic political actors in both countries were mobilizing around territorial integrity. Heritage therefore operated as a political amplifier rather than as the original cause of the dispute.

In Cambodia, Preah Vihear had already become connected to nation-building and sovereignty. Ngoun (2018) traces the transformation of the temple from a relatively peripheral site into a national symbol within postcolonial Cambodian politics. Ngoun (2016) further shows that state rhetoric connected the border province to Khmer pride, development, and border defence. These findings demonstrate that the temple's meaning was socially and politically constructed rather than determined solely by its architectural value.

The 2008-2013 period also demonstrates the importance of domestic political incentives. Rattanasengchanh (2017) finds that Hun Sen benefited politically from nationalist mobilization around Preah Vihear and that Thai conservative actors also attempted, with mixed results, to use the temple and border issue for political purposes. The conflict therefore became embedded in domestic political competition. This matters for security analysis because nationalist narratives can make territorial compromise costly governments may face domestic criticism if they appear to concede sovereignty or national prestige.

The interaction of heritage, sovereignty, and nationalism generated a security dilemma. Military deployments intended by one side to protect territory could be interpreted by the other side as evidence of hostile intent. Nationalist rhetoric could then reinforce public support for stronger defensive measures, while the other government responded to domestic pressure by hardening its own position. The result was an amity-enmity pattern in which a bilateral relationship became increasingly characterized by mistrust and confrontation.

C. Escalation and the 2008–2011 Security Crisis

The escalation after 2008 demonstrates how a cultural and sovereignty dispute can become militarized. Armed confrontations occurred around the border during 2008-2011, with particularly serious fighting in February and April-May 2011. Wagener (2011) describes the February 2011 fighting as an open conflict and identifies the later clashes as among the most serious military confrontations between ASEAN members since ASEAN's founding. The conflict produced casualties and displacement and raised concern beyond the immediate border area.

The regional significance of the fighting is demonstrated by the documented ASEAN response. On 22 July 2008, ASEAN Foreign Ministers discussed the latest developments in the Preah Vihear issue. The ASEAN statement recorded that both Cambodia and Thailand reaffirmed their commitment to peaceful resolution and that ASEAN had offered its facilities to support the parties. An ASEAN Contact Group was proposed, but there was no consensus to form it because several Foreign Ministers favored allowing the bilateral process to continue (ASEAN Secretariat, 2008). This evidence directly demonstrates the conflict's entry into the regional diplomatic agenda.

The 2011 escalation generated a more intensive regional response. Indonesia, which chaired ASEAN in 2011, pursued shuttle diplomacy and convened an urgent ASEAN Foreign Ministers' meeting in Jakarta. Official Indonesian records document shuttle diplomacy, the Special ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Jakarta, and the subsequent agreement to pursue bilateral negotiations with appropriate Indonesian engagement and observers in the affected border area (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2011 ASEAN Secretariat, 2011). Singapore's Foreign Minister George Yeo later described Indonesia's ASEAN Chairmanship as having played an outstanding role in the Preah Vihear crisis and noted that Indonesia's Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa had brokered an agreement (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Singapore, 2011).

The crisis also reached the United Nations Security Council. A February 2011 Security Council Report records that the Council took the clashes seriously and invited the ASEAN Chair to participate in discussions (Security Council Report, 2011). The European Parliament likewise recorded the fighting, casualties, displacement, damage to the temple, and Indonesia's diplomatic efforts as ASEAN Chair (European Parliament, 2011). These external responses do not mean that the dispute became a multilateral war, they demonstrate instead that the bilateral crisis generated a broader diplomatic-security response.

This distinction is important. The evidence does not justify claiming that the Preah Vihear conflict militarily destabilized every ASEAN member. The stronger and more defensible finding is that the dispute created regional security consequences by activating ASEAN diplomacy, testing peaceful-settlement norms, and requiring member-state leadership. In RSCT terms, the conflict crossed a regional threshold because the security behavior of two neighboring ASEAN states became a concern for the regional institution and its members.

D. ASEAN's Role in Conflict Management

ASEAN's role in this case is best understood as facilitative rather than coercive. Its institutional framework emphasizes peaceful settlement, consultation, consensus, and respect for sovereignty. These norms provided the political basis for ASEAN to encourage Thailand and Cambodia to exercise restraint and continue negotiations. In 2008, ASEAN considered an institutional Contact Group but did not reach consensus to establish it, demonstrating both the willingness to engage and the limits of collective action (ASEAN Secretariat, 2008).

Indonesia's 2011 chairmanship demonstrated that ASEAN member-state leadership can expand the organization's practical capacity. Indonesia used shuttle diplomacy to communicate with both governments, convened the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' meeting in Jakarta, and promoted measures intended to prevent further clashes. Official Indonesian diplomatic records document the same sequence: Indonesia conducted shuttle diplomacy on 7-8 February 2011, convened a Special ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Jakarta on 22 February, and promoted the deployment of Indonesian observers to the affected border area (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2011). The role of the Chair was therefore not merely ceremonial it served as a channel through which ASEAN diplomacy could respond to an active security crisis.

However, ASEAN's contribution was primarily conflict management rather than final settlement. Phan (2015) argues that ASEAN played a significant role in facilitating negotiations and preventing further escalation but that institutional design constrained its ability to settle the dispute. This distinction is consistent with the case evidence. ASEAN could create diplomatic opportunities and encourage restraint, but the underlying sovereignty issue remained dependent on Thailand and Cambodia's willingness to negotiate and on legal mechanisms such as the ICJ.

The Preah Vihear case therefore demonstrates a form of ASEAN regionalism in which institutional norms can reduce violence without necessarily resolving the underlying dispute. ASEAN's effectiveness is better measured by its capacity to keep channels of communication open, support de-escalation, and preserve regional solidarity than by whether it can impose a settlement on sovereign member states.

E. ASEAN's Institutional and Normative Constraints

The first constraint is the principle of non-interference. ASEAN's foundational norms emphasize respect for sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of member states (ASEAN Secretariat, 2005). In a territorial dispute, however, the central political claim concerns sovereignty itself. ASEAN therefore faces a structural dilemma stronger involvement may help protect regional peace but can be interpreted by the parties as intrusion into a sensitive sovereign issue. This tension explains why ASEAN generally preferred dialogue and facilitation over coercive intervention.

The second constraint is consensus-based decision-making. Article 20 of the ASEAN Charter states that ASEAN decision-making is based on consultation and consensus (ASEAN Secretariat, 2020). The 2008 Preah Vihear discussion provides concrete evidence of the practical implications of this rule an ASEAN Contact Group was proposed, but no consensus was reached because several members preferred continuation of bilateral negotiations (ASEAN Secretariat, 2008). Consensus protects ASEAN unity but can slow or narrow collective responses when member states disagree over the appropriate level of involvement.

The third constraint is the limited coercive capacity of ASEAN's regional security architecture. ASEAN is not a collective-defense alliance with an enforcement mechanism comparable to a military security organization. Its political-security tools emphasize consultation, diplomacy, preventive engagement, and peaceful settlement. As a result, the success of ASEAN conflict management depends heavily on the willingness of the parties and on the diplomatic leadership of member states. Phan (2015) therefore describes institutional design as a significant factor limiting ASEAN's effectiveness while still recognizing its contribution to de-escalation.

These constraints should not be interpreted as evidence of simple institutional failure. Rather, the Preah Vihear case reveals the trade-off embedded in ASEAN regionalism. The same norms that protect smaller states from coercion and preserve sovereignty also limit the organization's ability to compel compliance. ASEAN's response is therefore most effective when member states voluntarily accept

mediation, when the Chair can build trust, and when diplomatic initiatives remain compatible with the parties' sovereignty concerns.

F. RSCT Analysis: Security Interdependence, Amity–Enmity, Polarity, and Regional Boundaries

The first RSCT indicator, security interdependence, is clearly visible in the movement from bilateral confrontation to regional diplomatic engagement. Thailand and Cambodia were the immediate parties, but their armed clashes generated ASEAN Foreign Ministers' discussions in 2008, an urgent ASEAN meeting in 2011, and active mediation by Indonesia. The crisis therefore altered the security agenda of the regional institution. This is the clearest evidence that the dispute was not only a bilateral matter (Buzan, 2003).

The second indicator, amity-enmity patterns, is visible at two levels. At the bilateral level, the relationship moved toward enmity through nationalist rhetoric, mutual accusations, military deployments, and armed clashes. At the regional level, ASEAN attempted to reproduce amity through dialogue, restraint, and mediation. The case therefore illustrates that a regional security complex can contain both conflictual bilateral relationships and cooperative regional institutions. ASEAN's diplomatic activity was partly an attempt to prevent bilateral enmity from becoming a broader pattern of regional instability.

The third indicator, polarity, requires careful interpretation. The Preah Vihear dispute was not a great-power rivalry and there is insufficient evidence to argue that Thailand or Cambodia functioned as a dominant regional pole. Instead, the case demonstrates the importance of diplomatic influence and chairmanship. Indonesia's position as ASEAN Chair gave it institutional access and political legitimacy to convene meetings and mediate between the parties. The relevant form of polarity is therefore diplomatic influence within ASEAN rather than military hierarchy.

The fourth indicator, regional boundaries, is defined by the ASEAN security space. The physical conflict remained concentrated in the Thailand-Cambodia border area, but the regional boundary of analysis is Southeast Asia because both parties were ASEAN members and the crisis was processed through ASEAN institutions. This definition avoids the mistaken assumption that a conflict must spread geographically across several countries before it can have regional security consequences. Regionalization can also occur through institutions, diplomatic agendas, and security interdependence (Nizmi, 2023).

Taken together, the four indicators show why the Preah Vihear dispute constitutes an ASEAN regional security challenge. Heritage designation increased the political salience of the temple; sovereignty claims gave the issue high national stakes; nationalist mobilization strengthened the bilateral enmity pattern; military escalation created a security crisis; and ASEAN's institutional response demonstrated regional interdependence. The case therefore supports the RSCT proposition that security cannot be analyzed solely at the level of individual states when their security interactions are closely connected.

G. Heritage as a Security Multiplier

The Preah Vihear case also suggests that cultural heritage can function as a security multiplier when it overlaps with contested sovereignty. Heritage does not inherently produce conflict. UNESCO's inscription is a cultural recognition and does not legally determine boundaries. The security effect emerges when the heritage site becomes embedded in national narratives about territory, historical ownership, and identity. In such circumstances, a cultural site can acquire strategic and political significance beyond its material value.

This mechanism helps explain why the 2008 inscription was politically sensitive even though the underlying sovereignty dispute was much older. The World Heritage designation increased international visibility and symbolic recognition of the temple, while domestic political actors interpreted the event through national territorial narratives (Wisono, 2025). Silverman (2011) demonstrates this intersection between heritage and border politics, while Rattanasengchanh (2017) shows how the temple became a resource for nationalist political mobilization. Heritage thus operated as a multiplier of political sensitivity rather than a standalone cause of armed conflict.

For ASEAN, this has a broader implication. Regional conflict-prevention mechanisms should recognize that disputes involving heritage sites may contain identity and legitimacy dimensions that

make compromise more difficult than ordinary technical boundary negotiations. The Preah Vihear case therefore illustrates the importance of linking cultural-heritage governance with diplomatic conflict prevention while maintaining a clear distinction between heritage recognition and territorial adjudication.

CONCLUSION

The Preah Vihear dispute demonstrates how cultural heritage, sovereignty, domestic nationalism, and regional security can become interconnected. The underlying territorial dispute predates UNESCO and was addressed legally by the ICJ in 1962, while the 2013 interpretation clarified the sovereignty over the promontory. The 2008 UNESCO inscription did not create the sovereignty dispute or determine the international boundary. Its significance was political: it increased the symbolic salience of a heritage site already embedded in a contested borderland.

The escalation of 2008–2011 transformed the issue from a legal and diplomatic controversy into an interstate security crisis involving two ASEAN members. The regional impact is demonstrated by ASEAN Foreign Ministers' engagement in 2008, the consideration of an ASEAN Contact Group, Indonesia's mediation as ASEAN Chair in 2011, and the involvement of the United Nations Security Council. These developments demonstrate security interdependence without requiring the stronger and unsupported claim that the conflict militarily destabilized the entire ASEAN region.

Asean's role was meaningful but constrained. Its norms of peaceful settlement, sovereignty, non-interference, consultation, and consensus enabled diplomatic engagement but limited coercive action. Indonesia's 2011 chairmanship demonstrated that active member-state leadership could expand asean's practical conflict-management capacity. Nevertheless, asean could not impose a settlement because the underlying sovereignty dispute remained dependent on the parties' consent and on international legal processes.

The rsct analysis reinforces this conclusion. Security interdependence is demonstrated by asean-level engagement; amity-enmity patterns explain the interaction between bilateral hostility and regional cooperation polarity is better understood through diplomatic influence than military dominance; and regional boundaries are defined by the asean institutional space within which the crisis was managed. The case therefore shows that a bilateral territorial dispute can become a regional security challenge when its political and military consequences.

The principal lesson for ASEAN is not that its regional model is ineffective, but that its strengths and limitations are structurally connected. Dialogue, consensus, and respect for sovereignty can prevent escalation and preserve regional cohesion, yet these same principles make decisive intervention difficult. Future conflict prevention should therefore strengthen early diplomatic engagement, institutionalized preventive diplomacy, and mechanisms that allow ASEAN to respond quickly while preserving the sovereign equality of its members. For heritage-related border disputes, ASEAN and its member states should also recognize the political sensitivity of cultural symbols and avoid allowing heritage narratives to become instruments of escalation.

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