

Thailand's acrimonious adjacency to Cambodia (Part 2)



From the moment the French imposed their boundaries on the Thai-Khmer border in the 19th century the region has been in dispute. Later, the border became a fault line in the Cold War. In the first of two articles on this Southeast Asian hotspot Eisel Mazard examined American support for Cambodian Communism and its influence on two decades of conflict. In this concluding essay, Mazard suggests that ideas of a 'greater Thailand' and military interests in maintaining low-level hostilities on the border are some of the reasons behind Thailand's latest aggression against Cambodia.

Eisel Mazard

THAILAND'S SUPPORT FOR SINO-AMERICAN POLICY resulted in an infamous game of international aid, arms-trading, and atrocities along its Cambodian border for roughly 20 years. This came to public attention with the televised documentaries of John Pilger (e.g., *Cambodia: The Betrayal*, 1990) showing that there was blood on the hands of many UN agencies and American allies (such as West Germany and the UK) and that these unnecessary evils were being carried out in support of the notorious Pol Pot himself.

As with so many Cambodian tragedies, the Thai border was the easiest part of the story to capture on film. The refugee camps proved to be important sources of 'secret' information, yet the Thai perspective on the very existence of the border has been lost in much of the moralising and agonising that this subject inspires.

Perhaps because we are habituated to 'post-colonial' recriminations, Western observers tend to refer all question of the Thai-Khmer border to the French aggression of 1893, if the history is mentioned at all. This was the prelude to an Anglo-French accord in 1896, ending the long-simmering possibility of a war between Empires over control of mainland Southeast Asia, followed by more comprehensive settlements between Thailand and France in 1902 and 1907.

Aside from vague regrets about the imperialist enterprise as a whole, entailing that borders established in that period may be 'unfair' in principle, one newspaper column after another seems to express a postured disbelief that anyone could even regard the border as a subject of dispute. The Thai nationalists' perspective is precluded on the simplistic grounds that such matters transpired over a century ago and that the UN, with its presumably unimpeachable moral authority, has already spoken. Beyond the odious fact that the UN did so much to discredit itself on that same border, this approach omits most of the truth, along with some important fictions.

The argument for a 'greater Thailand' does not rely on the complaint the Thais have suffered as a weak power, with borders imposed upon them by the French in the 19th century. They can also appeal to the fact that they defeated the French and dispensed with those borders in the 20th century.

The victory of 1941 was of monumental importance to the Thais themselves, even if overlooked overseas, and has served to justify a bellicose border policy before and since. One direct result was the Thai disavowal of the separate existence of Laos and Cambodia at the newly-formed United Nations at the close of World War Two. The UN convened the Franco-Siamese Conciliation Commission to settle the question of Thailand's eastern frontier in 1947, and the Thais mustered all available

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evidence to support the theory that their borders included all of Laos and a large part of Cambodia (Ngaosyvathn, 1985). A significant part of the Thai population was convinced, although the UN Commission was not.

Sivaram, 1941, is an example of primary-source Thai propaganda composed in English. Already at this early date the border issue was broached in terms of the nationalist myth of Suvannabhumi, evoking the illusion of a longstanding unity of Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos, prior to French intervention. What this means is that the claim in contention here is not one temple nor one mountain pass: the Thais do not merely consider themselves entitled to Preah Vihear, but certainly to Angkor Wat, and their briefly-held province of Battambang in-between.

Suvannabhumi is not just the name of Bangkok's new airport: it is a fiction loosely inspired by the findings of James Prinsep in 1837 and, contrary to what is now widely believed in Thailand, the legend of this imaginary empire is no more ancient than that date. Suvannabhumi is one of many modern pseudo-histories that sprang up across Buddhist Asia, making creative use of the first translations of the inscriptions of Ashoka. Bangkok's brand new 'National Discovery Museum Institute' (NDMI) credits Prince Damrong as the first to venture this fable, and, unfortunately, the exhibits reprise it for a contemporary audience.

At any rate, it was rather bold diplomacy for Thailand to lay claim to their neighbour states in 1947, as Thailand had just been defeated in the process of annexing the Shan States and only withdrew their forces of occupation from three Cambodian provinces in '46. Conversely, we may say that Thailand's eastward expansion was of renewed importance as their designs on the western frontier seemed forever lost with the end of Japanese rule over Burma.

This Thai tradition of 'False Irredentist-ism' has also justified territorial claims extending beyond Shan State to Southern Yunnan with wild theories of a lost homeland projected back along this path, by stages, all the way to the Altai mountains of Mongolia. In the 20th century, racist narratives of such lost empires were both influential and popular. Apart from written history and required curricula, Thailand is home to what could objectively be called a Fascist tradition of the performing arts and broadcast media (e.g., Luang Wichitwathakan's Fine Arts Department).

While it may be self-evident to any outsider (even UNESCO officials) that the 'native people' surrounding the Preah Vihear temple on both sides of the border are ethnically Cambodian, and that everything about the monument itself is historically

Cambodian, these mere facts do not contradict the assumptions of the Thai nationalists. For them, Cambodia's separate existence is an accident of history, created by French intervention. Their claims are thus posed as irredentist, though based purely on ideology.

Lingering armies on porous borders

The prospect of annexing Burmese territory ended with the Japanese occupation, but dreams of northward expansion were kept alive by the expectation of invading Yunnan for decades thereafter. The US maintained a mercenary army comprised of former KMT troops on Thai soil, adventitiously gathering together the marooned veterans of the war against the Japanese (who were unable to retreat to Taiwan from Thailand or Burma). These lingering armies were intended to serve as a bulwark in a possible war with the PRC, but proved instead to be pawns in the opium trade and ensuing hostilities against Laos. Nixon's alliance with the PRC ended the possibility of northward expansion forever, but propelled Thailand toward the outright invasion of Laos in the 1980s (first in 1984, then on a larger scale in 1987-8) and set the stage for its current incursions into Cambodia.

Apart from the overall pattern of Thailand's army serving as its permanent government (interspersed with ephemeral periods of parliamentary democracy) the country's rural periphery is regularly home to military autonomy of another kind. Whether in forestry policy, opium eradication, or border patrols, Thailand has a fantastic history of special military units operating as authorities unto themselves, and then developing many features of a small state. Such secret armies' self-funding activities tend to entail the direct control of small civilian populations. An excellent new study (Thibault, 2009) sheds light on the latter, important factor. The Thai military units controlling the Khmer border actively delayed the return of tribes and villages (officially deemed Cambodian refugees) who had been employed in a range of paramilitary and smuggling operations, along with homestead farming, as residents of a borderland where the Thai military were the sole authority.

Of course, the big money in this game came from directing the material support for Pol Pot, flowing in from America and its allies, often through border camps bearing the regalia of the UN and WFP, amounting to tens and hundreds of millions per annum. Although a glimpse of that game reached the world through the films of John Pilger, its gradual end was not until 1999, when the Thai army was still trying to hold on to the populations who had effectively become 'citizens' (or serfs?) of their small duchies along the border.

War or peace? Cui bono?

Thailand's acts of war against Cambodia have not come about by accident: a highly professional army, with decades of experience along a disputed border, has made a series of clear moves to re-arm the frontier, scarcely ten years after the death of Pol Pot. The motives are not difficult to understand, if we can begin by recognising that these are strategic decisions – though certainly made by authorities other than Thailand's elected parliament. That parliament has had a somewhat intermittent existence over the past three years, but even if this had not been the case, there is no reason to suppose they would have initiated this war any more than they initiated the invasion of Laos in 1987-8. The latter is an important precedent, in principle disputing the same 'French' border, and UN decisions were as impotent in averting that dispute as they have been in this one.

Like America, Thailand has an elected government that lags behind the foreign-policy initiative of a largely unseen political class, closer to the military than the common man. However, there can be little doubt that an invasion of Cambodia would be a popular war in Thailand, as the invasion of Laos was before. The imperative for a 'greater Thailand' denoted by Suvannabhumi antedates the ad hoc alliances of the cold war, and will endure long after the hysteria of anti-Communism has faded. Even without a single victory, the perpetuation of low-level hostilities against Thailand's neighbours benefits a military that has become accustomed to profiting from such occupations, and can provide a pretext to either pre-empt or dissolve an already weakened parliament at any time.

Eisel Mazard
Independent Scholar (Theravada Asia)
www.pali.pratyeka.org
eisel.mazard@gmail.com

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