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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **Thai-Cambodian Skirmishes: Endangering ASEAN's raison d'etre?**

By Bilveer Singh

### **Synopsis**

*The ongoing Thai-Cambodia border skirmishes are chiselling away a 'no war' policy -- the very raison d'etre of ASEAN. A weakened ASEAN also faces the danger of being ignored by major powers amid a restructuring of the regional security architecture of the Asia-Pacific region.*

### **Commentary**

PEACE CANNOT be taken for granted. The ongoing border skirmishes between Thailand and Cambodia are challenging the very essence of ASEAN's existence -- a no-war policy between its member-states. Since its inception in August 1967, while found wanting in many areas, the one area where ASEAN has stood tall was the fact that no member-state had gone to war with another.

While there have been threats of war among its members (such as the conflict over Ambalat), these were eventually always defused, preserving ASEAN's status as a 'zone of peace'. To its credit, none of the group's original founder member-members -- Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines -- have gone to war with each other since its founding, despite tense relations at times. As such, what is transpiring along the Thai-Khmer border is undermining the very raison d'etre of ASEAN.

### **Breaking ASEAN's No-War Policy**

This four decade-old culture of 'no war' has, however, been broken by the lack of restraint by both Thailand and Cambodia; when national interest is at stake, important principles can become victims regardless of the costs, in this case, to ASEAN. The region's security frameworks are increasingly being anchored by ASEAN -- the Asean Regional Forum (ARF), the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC), the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), the East Asia Summit (EAS) and now, probably most importantly, the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) and ADMM Plus Eight. What will happen to these regional security architectures when ASEAN itself is undermined by inter-state wars?

While both countries have contested the ownership of the 11th century Preah Vihear Hindu temple, which in 1962 was awarded to Cambodia by the International Court of Justice (ICJ), unfinished business surrounding the temple complex remained to contribute to the current tensions. The latest military standoff broke out following the July 2008 decision by UNESCO to accord the temple the status of World Heritage Site. Thailand viewed it as a provocation, unleashing Thai nationalist outbursts.

Since July 2008, Thai-Cambodian soldiers have been involved in five low-level fire fights, namely, in October 2008, in April 2009, in January and April 2010, and the current one in February 2011. While there have been loss of lives on both sides, what is most significant is the decision by Bangkok and Phnom Penh to mobilise military power to support their respective claims. This does not augur well for ASEAN as all its members have committed themselves to the creation of an ASEAN Security Community, which by definition means an agreement not to use force to settle differences. This was best symbolised by Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia when they decided to settle their territorial differences over maritime boundaries in the ICJ.

Territorial claims and disputes are not just emotive but also highly risky ventures. Already, the Thai-Cambodian territorial dispute has led to a number of consequences. There have been many military and civilian casualties with thousands of refugees on both sides. With nationalism intensifying, Thai-Khmer bilateral relations have plummeted, raising the spectre of a dangerous escalation in the coming months. While Thailand, the bigger neighbour, is often labelled the bully, both sides are not blameless in violating ASEAN's longstanding principle of not using force to settle differences.

### **ASEAN's Strengths**

ASEAN's strength, stems from its moral power -- soft power in today's parlance -- where the use of force is avoided regardless of the intensity of the dispute. This was the key lesson of Konfrontasi when Sukarno's Indonesia launched a war of aggression against Malaysia and Singapore. Whatever differences among ASEAN member-states, war was no longer an option.

For many years, ASEAN has had a policy of sweeping differences under the carpet, rather than trying to solve problems through the use of force. This approach, much criticised by analysts, of not trying to settle the issue, greatly helped ASEAN to mature. ASEAN grew in strength and cohesion, emerging as a respected player in regional and international politics. Ideologically, the 'ASEAN Way' and more importantly, the ASEAN principles enshrined in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, acted as the region's code of conduct, anchored on the key principle of not using force to settle any issue.

### **Cost of ASEAN's Conflicts**

ASEAN's success was evident as no ASEAN member-state was involved in any shooting war until October 2008 when the Thais and Cambodians clashed for the first time. Until then, ASEAN had emerged as de facto as a successful security community. And since then, bullets have been fired across the Thai-Cambodia border on four more occasions, threatening to shatter ASEAN's image as a region of peace. More worrisome are the potential dangers as there are many unsettled issues in the region. Placing aside China's claims in the South China Sea, and its lack of inhibition to use force, almost every ASEAN member-state has unsettled land and maritime border delimitation issues.

Indonesia's Foreign Minister, Marty Natalegawa, as the current Chairman of ASEAN, has travelled to Bangkok and Phnom Penh to calm the situation. He has since called for an urgent informal meeting of ASEAN foreign ministers. The United Nations Security Council, with Dr. Marty in attendance, is scheduled to hear both Thailand and Cambodia's case on 14 February, though not to mediate the dispute.

The stakes are very high. If not a settlement, at least a truce is vital for the sake of both neighbours and for ASEAN. This is not just about the historical bad blood between the Thais and Khmers. It is more about ASEAN's security role in the region where failure would mean the region possibly returning to the past of using force to settle differences.

That would undo more than 40 years of ASEAN's hard work of ensuring stability in the region. With reduced confidence, ASEAN will be in danger of losing its role as driver of the regional security architecture, especially at a time of great flux in great power relations in the Asia-Pacific region.

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