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Thailand-Cambodia Border Conflict: Sacred Sites and Political Fights

Ihechiluru Ezuruonye

Introduction

“I am not the enemy of the Thai people. But the [Thai] Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister look down on Cambodia extremely”

He added:

“Cambodia will have no happiness as long as this group [PAD] is in power.”
- Cambodian PM Hun Sen

Both sides of the border were digging in their heels; neither leader wanted to lose face as doing so could have led to a dip in political support at home.ⁱ

Two of the most common drivers of interstate conflict are territorial disputes and the politicization of deep-seated ideological ideals such as religion. Both sources of tension have contributed to the emergence of bloody conflicts throughout history and across different regions of the world. Therefore, it stands to reason, that when a specific geographic area is bestowed religious significance, then conflict is particularly likely. This case study details the territorial dispute between Thailand and Cambodia over *Prasat* (meaning ‘temple’ in Khmer) *Preah Vihear* or *Preah Vihear Temple*, located on the border between the two countries. The case of the Preah Vihear Temple conflict offers broader lessons on the social forces that make religiously significant territorial disputes so prescient and how national governments use such conflicts to further their own political agendas.

The two arguments are as follows:

Hypothesis 1: Conflicts over religious spaces occur because of differing interpretations of modern collective perception of events.

Hypothesis 2: Government organizations can more easily mobilize public sentiment around sacred sites than other landmarks to advance their political agenda.

To test these hypotheses, this paper begins with a theoretical analysis of scholarly literature on religious conflict and violence. It then outlines a theoretical framework based on these two hypotheses, using the Preah Vihear case study to demonstrate its applicability. The paper concludes with final remarks, inferences, and policy implications.

Literature Review

Sacred spaces and conflict

The factors leading to religious violence and conflict between states have been of particular interest to international relations and conflict resolution scholars, including Richard Sosis and Nimrod Luz. I analyze the work of three such scholars who employ different frameworks to explain conflicts over sacred spaces to highlight strengths and weaknesses, draw comparisons, and indicate points of divergence. Through an exploration of these theories, I derive my hypotheses to explain the social and political currents underlying these disputes.

In her article “Mediating Conflicts Over Sacred Lands,” Susan Podziba discusses the role of mediators in settling conflicts over sacred lands and why these spaces are disputed. She states that “sacred land disputes involve tangible issues embedded with the complexities of the divine,” and engaging with those with intimate knowledge of the conflict is key to understanding why it persists.ⁱⁱ By focusing on the meanings of sacredness and how it can emerge in different contexts, Podziba highlights that “conflicts over sacred lands may arise from the denial of the very existence of sacredness in the land, or it may result from mutual competition for the same land.”ⁱⁱⁱ Expanding on this idea, she further reiterates how sacred land disputes can involve

secular and religious perceptions of the meaning of land. Acknowledging the role of these competing theologies is crucial to understanding the perspectives of the involved actors.^{iv}

In *War and Guilt*, Thomas Berger discusses the idea of national sources of memory, including how the way historical events are remembered impacts domestic and international policies, diplomatic relations, and the structure of society. Berger puts forward three theoretical explanations for these sources of memory. The **Historical Determinist** perspective is linked to a commonsense view of memory. Proponents of this viewpoint stress the role of events themselves and past narratives in shaping a society's historical memory. In these cases, perceptions of events alter the way people think about the past. Though institutions such as the state or other actors may try to distort the past to serve certain practical or political interests, they will come up against the absolute facts of history, anchored in the individual and collective memories of people. In other words, “the collective memory [of society] sets sharp limits to the official narrative.”^v Examples are various cultural artifacts such as folklore, literature, and oral histories told amongst friends and families.^{vi}

The **Instrumentalist** explanation focuses on actors who manipulate the broader memory of a given society to serve their material interests. This account is based on the proposition that collective memory is highly malleable and the official narrative can reshape the collective memory. Due to life experiences, individuals have some independent knowledge of the world around them. However, the ability of ordinary people to evaluate and interpret the larger world is dependent on elites, who can claim expertise that allows them to control the flow of information and issue authoritative assessments. In this account, society is vulnerable to manipulation at the hands of actors motivated by concrete interests such as gaining, retaining, or enhancing political power and material warfare.^{vii} Such examples are when politically motivated individuals or

influential groups such as the state, shape the narrative regarding a specific historical event through control of media, arts, and educational textbooks. These mediums are then used by influential actors “to create a single ‘master narrative,’ that is accepted as common sense by society, and is only challenged at the margins.”^{viii}

The **Culturalist** viewpoint emphasizes how existing cultural understanding or discourse defines the official narratives that are adopted. A key point is that individuals are embedded within the broader structure of beliefs, values, ideas, and social practices. These things combined constitute culture and shape the perception of how people view the world and relate to it. Culturalist accounts highlight the role of culturally embedded predispositions in shaping the views of the past held by both politicians and society in general. Berger cites the examples of Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait being perceived as a reckless act of aggression from the U.S perspective. However, in the Arab world, it was contextualized against a history of Western dominance in the Middle East, and the arbitrary drawing of boundaries by imperial powers. This example encompasses the main argument of the culturalist approach, which is that the interests of individuals, groups, and elites cannot be understood “independent of the way in which the group and the individuals are culturally defined.”^{ix}

Berger argues that all three explanations are not mutually exclusive but rather should be considered useful devices for explaining the factors that determine the official historical narratives. This resulting narrative helps explain why states engage in conflicts over religious spaces, as historical knowledge and perspectives can influence the policies put forth by national leaders and state institutions.^x

Ron Hassner’s “To Have and to Hold: Conflicts Over Sacred Space and the Problem of Indivisibility” discusses sacred spaces and the elements that make them indivisible. He defines

sacred spaces as “religious centers at which the heavenly and earthly meet, as a means of access between the human and the divine world.”^{xi} He then describes the three characteristics that define sacred spaces: 1) Places to communicate with the divine through prayer and visual images; 2) Places of divine presence that promise healing, success, or salvation; and 3) Places that provide meaning to the faithful by metaphorically reflecting the underlying order of the world.^{xii} Hassner further highlights that “a sacred space is a ‘defined place,’” distinguished from other secular spaces.^{xiii} These two pillars of Hassner’s argument that sacred spaces are inherently more valuable than other areas, and that people view sacred sites as indivisible, contribute to a tendency to fight over sacred places.^{xiv}

Another fundamental claim Hassner introduces is the link between concepts of centrality, exclusivity, and indivisibility as core components for assessing the importance of sacred space. *Centrality* “locates the space in the spiritual landscape,” and depends on the ability of a place to fulfill the functions of communication, prescience, and meaning.^{xv} This implies that if the location of a site is central to the religious community’s identity, then they are more likely to take action when the integrity of the site is challenged.^{xvi} The notion of *exclusivity* asserts that access to certain spaces is limited based on set norms – what is considered sacred and divine can also be dangerous. Lastly, a territory becomes *indivisible* when splitting it between two or more states would diminish its spiritual value. This is evident when examining other sacred sites such as the Temple Mount in Jerusalem or the Uluru (aka Ayers Rock or Big Red Rock) in Australia.^{xvii}

Comparative analysis

Several key similarities and differences emerge from the arguments of these three authors. Berger’s explanation underscores why states engage in conflicts over religious spaces, as to how

things are remembered can influence and determine the actions of different states. Podziba's article focuses on the significance of sacred spaces as a communicative passageway to the divine. Hassner lends insight into why leaders and states take certain actions when it comes to sacred land by focusing on the indivisibility, centrality, and exclusivity of a sacred space. Berger and Hassner draw on different elements of socio-political interaction with sacred spaces, but both explore collective understandings of sacred spaces and how beliefs surrounding these sites shape the way people view them. This, in part, determines why nations pursue conflict over religious spaces.

Hassner argues that the indivisibility of sacred sites challenges traditional approaches to conflict resolution, such as mediation or negotiation. Podziba's article goes a step further in asserting that the common negotiation strategy of dividing and trading becomes obsolete in these cases, using examples of sacred origin sites for tribal people that are so valuable that they cannot be traded for an equivalent origin site. The divergence between the authors may seem trivial, but it represents the fundamental difference between territorial mediation as a strategy that may work in some circumstances versus a tactic that is completely off the table.

The differing views of Hassner and Podziba rest in how the two authors conceptualize sacred spaces. Hassner discusses how forests, rivers, and lakes are often venerated because they reach toward or reflect the realm of the gods, outlining a pathway between the earthly and spiritual realms.^{xviii} Podziba, by contrast, demonstrates that sacred places may actually represent the physical forms of gods and deities.^{xix} She cites the example of Mauna Kea, a volcano considered by native Hawaiians to be the physical form of the god Mauna kea. Podziba's argument, therefore, stands in sharp contrast to Hassner's, specifying that the land is sacred because of mythologically ascribed sacred value, not because of historical significance. In this sense,

Podziba's theory compliments Berger's culturalist framework, as the perception of land as a deity is specific to one's culture and religion.^{xx}

A comparative analysis of the sacred space literature reveals important insights into how religious sites factor into social and political values and why disputes over these spaces tend to devolve into a zero-sum conflict. Nevertheless, serious gaps remain in the existing literature. Berger's theoretical devices, in particular, reveal shortcomings in how these frameworks can be applied to real-life situations. For example, the historical determinist perspective posits that societal memory is episodic and fleeting and can therefore be distorted or reshaped by external factors.^{xxi} If it is true that collective memory often diverges from original events, states should be able to more easily promote official narratives that conflict with the dominant experiences embedded in the collective memory. These narrative changes are therefore highly contingent on evolutions of elite power and interest. The practical application of the culturalist viewpoint reveals further weaknesses, as this framework assumes that a society's culture is static. The view of culture as unchanging and permanent is not only blind to the serious evolutions culture undergoes as society changes, but it is also a frequent source of biases about a given society.^{xxii}

Through an analysis of Podziba, Berger, and Hassner, it is apparent that the significance of sacred spaces is deeply ingrained in people's memory, and that religious, cultural, and historical ties all factor into why nations engage in conflict over historically religious spaces. Additional considerations, however, are needed to fully explain this trend. As outlined in my introduction, I present two hypotheses to further argue how political and societal factors impact conflict over sacred sites:

Hypothesis 1: Conflicts over religious spaces occur because of differing interpretations of modern collective perception of events.

Hypothesis 2: Government organizations can more easily mobilize public sentiment around sacred sites than other landmarks to advance their political agenda.

The following case study of the border conflict between Thailand and Cambodia over the Preah Vihear Temple illustrates why these two hypotheses significantly advance the study of sacred site conflict literature.

Case study analysis

Historical background

The Thai-Cambodia conflict is commonly divided into two periods: first, from 1904, when the borders between Thailand and Cambodia were initially drawn up, until 1962 when the International Court of Justice made their ruling. Second, from 2008 when the Preah Vihear Temple was designated as a UNESCO World Heritage site to the present day.

The Thai-Cambodia territorial conflict began with disputes over early 20th century maps detailing the location of the ancient Hindu Temple of Preah Vihear and its surrounding area.^{xxiii} The temple, one of the many ruins left from the 11th century Khmer Empire, is situated on a stone cliff that abuts the border between present-day Thailand (then Siam) and Cambodia.^{xxiv} Throughout this time, it is important to note that Siam changed its name to Thailand ("Land of the Free") in 1939, and due to the colonial status of Cambodia as a French protectorate during this time, France led all negotiations that transpired with the Siamese (Thai) government.^{xxv} The first phase of the dispute over Preah Vihear's location was due to the ambiguous frontier line constituted under the terms of the 1904 and 1907 Siam-Franco Treaties.^{xxvi} The 1904 treaty established that the Siam-Cambodia border would follow the natural watershed line between the

two countries and established the Franco-Siamese Mixed Commission. The commission, composed of officers appointed by the two governments, was responsible for delimiting the frontier between the two territories.^{xxvii} After the establishment of the mixed commissions, the final task was the preparation and publication of maps, a task designated to a team of four French officers, three of whom were previous members of the Mixed Commission. In 1907, that team composed a series of 11 maps covering the frontiers between Siam and French Indo-China (of which Cambodia formed part), and in March 1907 concluded the boundary treaty.^{xxviii} These maps were submitted to both countries in 1908 and accepted; however, the Siamese (Thai) government later rescinded their approval of the maps, arguing that the temple is located on the Thai side of the watershed line.^{xxix}

In 1959, due to the disagreement over the border's demarcation and thus the temple's location, Cambodia requested judgments in five final submissions to the International Court of Justice (ICJ). In the submissions, Cambodia sought confirmation of three things. The first was that the 1908 map (known as the Annex 1 map) was declared legitimate and published under the Mixed Delimitation Commission. Second, a declaration that the borderline showcasing the temple's location was marked on the Annex 1 map. Third, Cambodia desired a judgment that the temple was in Cambodian territory and that Thai armed forces, situated in the ruins of the temple since 1954, be withdrawn.^{xxx} In 1962, the ICJ ruled in favor of Cambodia, declaring that the temple is situated in territory under the sovereignty of Cambodia. However, the court refrained from ruling on the map submitted by the Cambodian government, declaring that the exact location of the Thai-Cambodian border was invalid. Thus concluded the first phase of the territorial dispute over Preah Vihear Temple; Cambodia gained international recognition of

sovereignty over the temple, while Thailand continued to insist that the maps showing this outcome were in error.

The second phase of the border dispute, which continues to the present day, relates to the unadjudicated 4.6 sq km of land *adjacent* to the Preah Vihear Temple, and the temple's inclusion on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage list. Thailand and Cambodia found a rare point of agreement in their view that the temple was a sacred site worthy of inclusion on the World Heritage List. Initially, the Thai government accepted Cambodia's unilateral UNESCO nomination of the temple despite complaints from Thai citizens. Weeks later, in response to the growing criticism of the Thai government's handling of the situation, the Thai government reversed its tone, taking a definitive stance against Cambodia's one-sided nomination. Thailand argued that it had expressed the desire to submit a joint nomination with Cambodia regarding the temple.^{xxxii} However, the Cambodian government's unilateral submission of a proposal that included the 1904 Annex 1 map (which delineated the Thai-Cambodia border) without Thai involvement refocused attention on the temple, as it included the adjacent land as also belonging to Cambodia.^{xxxiii}

In Thailand, the perceived Cambodian betrayal ignited a political fight. Right-wing protesters used the Preah Vihear Temple issue to garner public sentiment, leveraging their newfound support to unseat the Cabinet of Thailand in favor of their own candidates.^{xxxiv} In 2006, protests by Thai nationalists boycotting national elections led to the ousting of incumbent Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Samak Sundaravej replaced Shinawatra as Prime Minister.^{xxxv}

In 2008, despite the Thai government's call for a postponement, the Sacred Site of the Temple of Preah Vihear was included on the World Heritage List.^{xxxvi} Following the announcement, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen capitalized on the success of the temple

listing during his 2008 campaign for reelection.^{xxxvi} His Cambodian People's Party (CPP) won a total of 90 seats in the 123-seat National Assembly (58 percent of the votes) in the 2008 election.^{xxxvii} In Thailand, meanwhile, rivals of the incumbent party initiated a coup which brought Abhisit Vejjajiva to power.

Analyzing Hypothesis 1: Thai-Cambodia Border Conflict (1902)

To reiterate, this paper draws on the arguments presented by three authors. Podziba explores how disputes over sacred lands often arise due to competing demands for religious use from various actors, and the importance of mediators in settling these conflicts. Berger draws on three tools: historical determinist, instrumentalist, and culturalist, to explain why states engage in disputes over religious spaces, highlighting the role of memory in determining the actions of states. Hassner provides insight into the reasons leaders and states take certain actions when the conflict is over sacred land.

My first hypothesis states that conflicts over religious spaces occur because of differing interpretations of a modern collective perception of events. Within this case study, that implies that the Thailand-Cambodia conflict is in part fueled by the differing interpretations of historical and modern events regarding Preah Vihear Temple and the surrounding land.

Assuming the relative truth of this theory, it can be inferred that the official narrative surrounding the temple in each country is remembered considerably differently. For instance, in Cambodia, the Preah Vihear Temple and its adjacent land are viewed as relics that represent the ancient Cambodian Khmer empire at its zenith. In “Who Owns the Preah Vihear Temple? A Cambodian Position,” Bora Touch, a lawyer and Member of the Cambodian Bar Association, recounts how the 1904 decision to demarcate the Thai-Cambodia border along the natural

watershed line was reached by France (which held Cambodia as a protectorate until 1953) and Siam (Thailand) without Cambodian people playing a role.^{xxxviii}

The 1904 map of the Preah Vihear region, which shows the temple as Cambodian territory—the same document which Thailand later contested as being in error—was initially drawn up by France at the request of the Siamese government. This map was reviewed and not contested by Thailand’s then-Minister of Interior Prince Damrong, an official involved in the 1904 and 1907 treaties who had extensive map training. This series of events is cited by Cambodian scholars as proof of recognition of Cambodian sovereignty over the temple and its surrounding area. This takes the same position as the ICJ 1962 ruling that “Thailand had accepted the boundary map and now was precluded from denying it.”^{xxxix} The acceptance of the map served as definite proof of ownership of the land. Therefore, the Cambodian government saw no problem proposing that the temple be submitted as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The Cambodian government’s interpretation of the Franco-Siamese 20th century map and ruling of the ICJ differs markedly from that of the Thai government. From the Thai perspective, the maps drawn in the early 20th century had clear mistakes, resulting in the temple being counted as part of Cambodia. This was mentioned during the 1959 ICJ case when Thailand asserted that the Annex 1 map contained a material error. According to the report, “[Thailand] never accepted the map or the frontier depicted on it such that it was bound or, alternatively, if it had accepted the map, it did so on a mistaken belief that the map line was drawn to correspond with the watershed line.”^{xl} Thai officials reached this conclusion based on their interpretation of the Franco-Siamese bilateral treaties, contending that:

it seems clear from the Franco-Siamese Mixed Commission that the frontier line along the Dangrek mountain range was to follow the line of the watershed... [and] because

neither party has ever derogated from the treaty and are thus bound by its terms...Thailand still retains sovereignty over the land surrounding the Temple area and there is no overlapping territorial claim in relation to it.^{xli}

Though Thailand accepted the 1962 ICJ ruling ceding sovereignty of the Preah Vihear Temple to Cambodia, it still recognized the surrounding areas as disputed lands. The Cambodian government's UNESCO submission of the Annex 1 map adjudicating the frontier line that "trespassed" into Thai territory, created a problem. This was due to the surrounding area not being demarcated by the Thai-Cambodia Joint Commission.^{xlii} It is for this reason that Thailand perceived Cambodia's unilateral proposition of the temple as a World Heritage Site as a clear betrayal predicated on unresolved territorial disputes. Thailand had repeatedly expressed a desire to nominate the temple and believed there was a consensus that a submission to the World Heritage List would come as a joint or transboundary nomination, requiring the consent of both the Thai and Cambodian governments. However, Cambodia opted for a unilateral submission at the 32nd session of the World Heritage Committee without the Thai government's knowledge or approval.^{xliii} Though the Thai government eventually permitted Cambodia to submit its proposal and UNESCO dedicated the temple as a World Heritage Site in 2008, the border dispute continues until present day.

Through an analysis of Cambodian and Thai perspectives regarding the Preah Vihear Temple and its surrounding areas, it is clear that the two states have different interpretations of the events leading up to the dispute. The Cambodian government interprets the frontier line drawn on the early 20th century maps as fact. They support their claims with the verifications of a high-ranking Thai official involved in the creation of the Franco-Siamese treaties. Prince

Damrong's knowledge of mapmaking and his visit to the temple alluded to its location in ways that recognized Cambodian sovereignty over the space. By contrast, the Thai government insists that both governments verified that the Thai-Cambodian border was to be drawn according to the watershed line – which would suggest the temple is located on Thai territory. By referencing this agreement, the Thai government asserts there were mistakes on the map. Through this examination, it is evident that the perceptions of both governments differ in their recollection and interpretation of historical events, which has led to ongoing disagreements between the two countries.

Analyzing Hypothesis 2: Thai-Cambodia Border Conflict (2008)

My second hypothesis states that government organizations can more easily mobilize public sentiment around sacred sites than other landmarks to advance their political agenda. In this case study of the 21st century border dispute, I propose that Thai and Cambodian political officials and parties mobilized domestic feelings about the Preah Vihear Temple to benefit their political motives.

In the weeks following the July 7, 2008 announcement of the Preah Vihear Temple as a World Heritage Site, protests erupted as Thai nationalists used the temple to stir domestic support for their interests, further escalating the issue.^{xliv} The protests were a response to then Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej and Foreign Minister Noppadon Pattama's approval of Cambodia's ownership over the temple and its UNESCO nomination despite the complaints of the Thai public. Two weeks later, on July 21, 2008, the *New York Times* reported that Prime Minister Samak had reversed his tone, echoing Thai nationalist leader's statements that Cambodian control of the temple represented “a continued violation of Thailand's sovereignty

and territorial integrity.”^{xlv} Nevertheless, public criticism toward the Samak government persisted.

The most prominent critics of the government’s perceived soft-line approach to the temple issue were members of the Thai nationalist People’s Alliance for Democracy Party (PAD), also known as Yellow shirts. On July 20, 2008, *Reuters* reported that PAD leader Sondhi Limthongkul accused the Thai government of selling Thailand’s heritage, stating “our sacred mission is to protect our motherland and take back Thai territory.”^{xlvi} Limthongkul took things a step further on July 28, 2008, when he held a rally calling for the removal of the current leadership and the installation of a new government that would more vigorously support Thai interests in the Preah Vihear issue.^{xlvii} Amidst ongoing Thai-Cambodian negotiations regarding the Preah Vihear dispute, Limthongkul put forward a list of seven demands for the new Thai government. He first included an assertion that Thailand had never accepted the French-Cambodia Annex 1 map. Limthongkul further demanded that geographers be brought from around the world to assert that watershed lines are “universally accepted as border demarcation lines, and to prove that, if the watershed line is used, together with satellite photos, Preah Vihear is on Thai soil.”^{xlviii}

The PAD politicking around the Preah Vihear issue did not stop with public mobilization. The party went on to accuse the Thai government of colluding with Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen. PAD accusations and the Thai government's decision to accept Cambodia’s claim led two Thai officials to leave their post. After signing a deal over the disputed temple, Foreign Minister Pattama resigned in July 2008 still arguing “I insist that I have done nothing wrong. I have not sold out the country.”^{xlix} Nevertheless, in September 2008, PAD efforts paid off, as Prime Minister Samak was also forced to resign. When border clashes broke out between Thai

and Cambodian forces the next month, the PAD took the opportunity to implement their plan. The seizure of two airports, the disbanding of rival political parties, and articles distributed by the prominent Thai newspaper, *Manager Daily*, paved the way for PAD ally Abhisit Vejjajiva to take office as prime minister in December through what many called a “silent coup.”¹ The party also utilized media connections to legitimize their success, such as Thai columnist, editor, and PAD supporter Khamnoon Sitthisamarn’s declaration of “the new ‘political phenomena’ with Abhisit as PM ‘was genuinely a PAD victory!’”^{li}

This overt seizure of political power demonstrates how the PAD party capitalized on the Thai public’s anger toward their government’s handling of the Preah Vihear Temple situation. First, party leaders held popular rallies to galvanize support for their cause. This set off a chain reaction of protests and violence throughout the country, culminating in Prime Minister Samak’s resignation. Finally, the PAD took advantage of military conflict on the border to seize national power and install their ally as the new head of government. The emotional and spiritual connection people had toward the Sacred Site Temple of Preah Vihear made it the perfect fodder for a nationalist agenda, allowing the PAD to change the political situation in Thailand.

Cambodia also experienced politicization of the Preah Vihear issue, as Prime Minister Hun Sen monopolized attention on the temple to further his nationalist political platform, build his domestic image, and help his Cambodia People’s Party (CPP) win elections. In particular, he utilized the timing of UNESCO’s induction of the temple to benefit his election campaign. With Cambodia receiving unprecedented levels of regional and international attention during the ceremonies, Hun Sen presented himself and his party internationally as firm protectors of Cambodia’s sacred sites and cultural heritage. Simultaneously, he projected a domestic image of Cambodia’s military readiness and willingness to fight Thai troops if necessary.^{lii} Notably, he

increased budgetary allocations to the military and actively increased the recruitment of militiamen. In his later speeches, Hun Sen referenced the ‘contentious’ history of the two countries, indicating that Thailand “cheated on history by changing the name of Preah Vihear temple to Phra Viharn.”^{liii} He further accused Thailand, under Abhisit of having lied about the 2008 border incursion into Cambodia by Thai troops, claiming “that Thailand would incur bad karma for their invasion and compromise the country’s religious commitment.”^{liv}

Hun Sen found such proclamations especially useful for garnering Cambodian support, and thus used the Preah Vihear Temple and border conflict as a tool to bolster his reputation. Widely associated with violence and corruption, Hun Sen’s usage of the temple’s conflict changed public opinion considerably. Newspapers such as *The Wall Street Journal* reported that the “CPP rule rests on genuine popularity” and “nationalism in defense of Cambodia’s territorial sovereignty vis-à-vis Thailand.”^{lv} By fostering anti-Thai sentiment and awakening nationalist emotions, Hun Sen and the CCP transformed a border issue into a national campaign. The Cambodian Information Centre posted an *Associated Press* article that reported how undecided voters were swayed by Hun Sen’s firm stance against Thailand, and that the Preah Vihear dispute brought together many Cambodians.^{lvi} In the end, the CCP won 58 percent of the votes in 2008, with 3.5 million people voting for Hun Sen on the ballot.^{lvii} His strategic utilization of the Preah Vihear Temple and reiteration of historical grievances between Cambodia and Thailand allowed Hun Sen to advance his political agenda.

In Thailand, the PAD capitalized on the Thai public’s discontent with the current government’s handling of the Preah Vihear Temple to garner support for a change in leadership. Similarly in Cambodia, Hun Sen and the CCP heightened nationalist sentiment around the temple to gain popularity and ensure their victory. Despite the ICJ rulings and concessions from

previous government officials, as of today, Cambodia and Thailand continue to quarrel over the land adjacent to the temple, with a peaceful negotiation seemingly out of sight.

Though this case study presents only one exploration of my hypothesis, that political parties find it easier to mobilize feelings around sacred spaces because it benefits their political agenda, it demonstrates that there is such a tendency in conflicts concerning historically religious spaces.

Conclusion and Implications

After July 2008

Since 2008, following the dedication of the temple as a UNESCO site, there have been several skirmishes in the frontier area near the Preah Vihear Temple between Thai and Cambodian troops. This has resulted in dozens of casualties and a continuation of tense border relations as both countries maintain troops along the border.^{lviii} 2011 was an especially pivotal year. In April 2011, Cambodia submitted a request for the interpretation of the judgment rendered by the ICJ in June 1962, regarding the Temple of Preah Vihear (*Cambodia v. Thailand*) case. Cambodia argued that while the Thai government recognizes Cambodian sovereignty over the temple itself, it does not seem to recognize Cambodian sovereignty over the vicinity of the area. In July 2011, the ICJ established a “provisional demilitarized zone” surrounding the temple and required both Cambodia and Thailand to withdraw their military personnel.

In November 2013, the ICJ unanimously ruled that the entire promontory region of Preah Vihear was under Cambodian sovereignty, and Thailand must withdraw all forces from the territory. The Court further reaffirmed that Preah Vihear Temple was a place of cultural and

religious significance, and both countries must cooperate to ensure the protection of the UNESCO site.^{lix}

Though Thailand accepted the ruling of the court, they rejected Cambodia's claim of jurisdiction over the Phnom Trap Hill, west of the temple.^{lx} The ICJ Court went on to conclude that in 1962, the Court "did not intend the term 'vicinity [of the Temple] on Cambodian territory' to be understood as applicable to territory outside the promontory of Preah Vihear."^{lxi} Until now, the border conflict between Cambodia and Thailand persists over issues of sovereignty over who controls Phnom Trap Hill. Examining these events makes evident that differing interpretations of certain historical events were certainly a factor in the persistence of the Cambodia and Thai governments' continued fight over land near Preah Vihear Temple.

Conclusion

This paper examined the more significant questions of why states engage in armed conflict over historically religious spaces by drawing on different scholarly frameworks and putting two original hypotheses through a case study analysis. Following scholars such as Podziba, Berger, and Hassner, it is evident that the importance of sacred spaces is fundamentally tied to the religious, cultural, and historical conceptions of sacredness. Each of these concepts factors into why historically religious spaces are often places of armed conflict. Yet, following Berger, I found that history may be interpreted differently and that people can use history and religion as an instrument to attract political support. My two hypotheses sought to provide additional insight behind states' political motives for engaging in violence over sacred sites through an examination of the Thailand-Cambodia border conflict. They demonstrate the

significant role memory plays when analyzing the actions of states, suggesting that state actors choosing to recollect and interpret certain events can turn an issue of a line drawn on a map into a century-long border dispute. This case study also lends support to the idea that political parties and government officials often mobilize public sentiment toward sacred spaces to achieve their political goals.

Importantly, my second hypothesis better explains the continuation of the current border conflict between Thailand and Cambodia. It is apparent that the nomination and dedication of the temple as a UNESCO World Heritage Site was a catalyst that incited protests from Thai nationalists, led to a change in Thai leadership, and prompted the re-election of Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen and his party. The effects of the events within both countries beginning in 2008 continue to have significant repercussions for current Thai-Cambodian border relations and the political climate.

Future research might consider hypotheses that are not examined in this paper but are useful in thinking about this case study and similar analyses. Thailand and Cambodia are primarily Buddhist countries, and research analyzing how or why sovereignty affects religious interactions over land (the temple, for instance) might reveal further insight on states' methods of engagement. Another study might look at how the popularity of sacred spaces influences contestation over ownership of such areas, as countries seek to acquire these destinations as tourist spots for revenue. Other research prospects might look to compare disputes over sacred spaces where the religion of a practicing majority is consistent or similar (such as in the case of Thailand and Cambodia) to places of greater religious diversity.

The implications illuminated by this study of the Preah Vihear Temple and border dispute make evident that although sacred spaces are the points of consternation, the motives behind

states' military aggression are not always in the name of religion. Instead, they involve diverging perceptions and the political agenda of both ruling and rival government entities.

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