

## ASEAN must act in Thai-Cambodian dispute

Written by Chheang Vannarith  
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**The regional alliance may be the best forum for Cambodia and Thailand to work out the disagreements that have led to casualties on both sides and threatened damage long-term economic relations in a manner that harms both countries.**

### COMMENT

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**Chheang Vannarith**

THE Association of Southeast Asian Nations is trying to realise the goal of an ASEAN community, similar to the one in Europe, by 2015, with the ultimate objective of living in peace and prosperity under a shared common identity. ASEAN is regarded by many as the driving force in shaping regional architecture in the Asia-Pacific region, yet the alliance is currently held back by the fact that domestic politics and nationalism still dominate foreign policy and international relations in the region.

The Cambodia-Thailand border conflict is a case in point, demonstrating the alliance's limitations. Because of ASEAN's well-known non-interference principle, its potential for conflict resolution in the region has not been utilised.

History has often found Cambodian and Thailand in rival positions, leading the states' respective populations to demonise one another. This legacy of nationalism and mistrust is at the root of present-day disagreements between the two countries.

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Thai ex-prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra is expected to give a public lecture today to hundreds of Cambodian economists in his capacity as government economics adviser.

Because of his experience and expertise, it is possible that Thaksin's advice could be useful to the ruling Cambodian People's Party as it formulates its economic policy. I am concerned, however, about the implications of Thaksin's appointment and his presence here in Cambodia for Cambodian-Thai relations and, to a larger extent, regional security overall.

As a result of Thailand's anger over Thaksin's arrival, bilateral dialogue and negotiation between Thailand and Cambodia over the border issue will now likely come to a standstill, a possibility portended by Thailand's decision to revoke the memorandum of understanding on overlapping maritime boundaries agreed upon and signed in 2001.

Economic relations between the two countries could be cut as well, which will significantly

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impact the livelihoods of poor merchants and others from both countries who live along the border. Economically, this is a lose-lose situation.

How to solve this dispute? At the 2008 ASEAN summit, Cambodian Foreign Minister Hor Namhong asked Singapore, then the chair of ASEAN, to form a regional, inter-ministerial group to help find a peaceful solution to the bilateral dispute and prevent military confrontation from occurring.

ASEAN, however, encouraged Cambodia and Thailand to utilise a bilateral mechanism to solve their disagreements. Unfortunately, bilateral dialogue has produced no result.

The mistrust between the two nations has now reached a point at which negotiations cannot move forward without intervention and mediation by a third party. It is therefore necessary for ASEAN to take more assertive action and help broker a solution for the conflict. The ASEAN principle of non-interference must be modified to meet this and other new challenges in the region.

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