

ANALYSIS: 'No winners' as Thaksin heads out from Cambodia

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Phnom Penh - Thailand's fugitive former premier Thaksin Shinawatra left Cambodia on Saturday, four days after his arrival brewed up a diplomatic storm between Phnom Penh and Bangkok, plunging relations to a new low. During his stay, Thaksin took a public swipe at his foes in Thailand's current government, saying that Bangkok's anger with Cambodia was based on "false patriotism."

Thaksin's comments followed an increasingly bitter war of words between the neighbouring countries. Cambodia regards its appointment of Thaksin as economic adviser to the government, and as a personal adviser to Prime Minister Hun Sen, to be an internal matter. Bangkok holds that the appointments - and Cambodia's rejection of a Thai request to extradite Thaksin, who is fleeing a two-year jail sentence - are a slap in the face.

Matters were not helped late this week when Cambodia arrested and charged a Thai national with violating national security, ostensibly for passing on Thaksin's flight schedule to Thailand.

Both countries expelled the first secretaries from each others' embassy over that incident. The previous week, each had recalled their respective ambassadors.

Thaksin's exit leaves relations between the two Southeast Asian neighbours at their worst since 2003, when the Thai embassy in Phnom Penh was sacked and burned by rioters in a night of violence against Thai interests.

Cheang Vannarith, executive director of the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, said neither side has gained from the latest deterioration in diplomatic relations. "It's a lose-lose. No one won in this political game," he said.

But he said he was hopeful that the worst had passed, and cited as evidence Cambodia's drawdown of troop numbers at a disputed border area during Thaksin's visit.

Another encouragement was that Thailand's threatened economic sanctions and border closure failed to materialize, likely because Thailand had much more to lose in trade dollars.

"Thailand reconsidered," the analyst said. "Cambodia had responded quite aggressively and said if Thailand sealed the border then Cambodia would ban all Thai products in Cambodia." The row also drew in the 10-nation Association of South-East Asian Nations. ASEAN Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan said the bloc "cannot afford to be seen as being so seriously divided" ahead of its summit with the US in Singapore on Sunday.

Cheang Vannarith said ASEAN's standing has been damaged by the row, and it clearly wants the issue resolved. The US-ASEAN summit could see pressure exerted on both sides, despite Cambodian statements Friday that the summit is not the proper venue to air the bilateral dispute.

He said Cambodia's reluctance to broach the subject stems from a desire to avoid having ASEAN wash its dirty linen in public. But regional powers such as China and Japan - along with the US - want a solution and a united ASEAN.

"ASEAN is learning from the model of the European Union. You can see problems in the EU but you don't have such serious tensions as you do between Cambodia and Thailand," he says. He suggested that under ASEAN's influence, relations between Cambodia and Thailand could one day resemble those between Germany and France. The two European powers were enemies for centuries, but are now at the centre of the EU.

If the past fortnight has been bad for bilateral relations, it remains unclear quite how it will play out for Thaksin. Cheang Vannarith said a recent survey in Thailand suggested the former premier has lost some popularity back home, which could be consequential for his supporters with an election expected next year.

That echoes comments in the Wall Street Journal by Thai political science professor Thitinan Pongsudhirak. He said Thaksin's closeness to Cambodia could backfire with his political base in Thailand.

"If Thaksin persists with this alliance with Cambodia, the nationalist backlash in Thailand will pick up, even among his own supporters," the Chulalongkorn University professor told the newspaper.

Both nations will need to make an effort to get relations back to normal. Cambodian Foreign Ministry spokesman Koy Koung says Phnom Penh wants a solution.

"Cambodia welcomes all means of solution: bilateral, multilateral, regional or international. We are prepared for all means of settlement," Koy Koung told the German Press Agency dpa. Cheang Vannarith said all parties to the row need to reconsider their approach in order resume normal relations.

"I think Thaksin understands this, which is why he didn't stay too long," he said.

"Now that Thaksin has left, the situation will calm down a little bit, but he is still an adviser to the Cambodian government so he could come (to Cambodia) at any time," he said.