

Norm Localisation and Security Communities: Amitav Acharya's Framework Applied to The Thailand-Cambodia Preah Vihear Border Dispute

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Abstract

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The paper draws on Amitav Acharya's theoretical frameworks of norm localization and security communities to examine the Thailand-Cambodia conflict over the Preah Vihear Temple, one of the most enduring international relations cases in Southeast Asia. The research will fill an important gap in the scientific literature by discussing how the constructivist ideas of Acharya shed light on the process of regional norm adaptation, identity formation, and the complications that arise when the ASEAN is forced to deal with an intra-mural territorial conflict as a fledgling security community. The study was based on using a qualitative case study approach with a secondary source analysis of the International Court of Justice proceedings, diplomatic archives, scholarly literature, and media archives to prove that local actors in both Thailand and Cambodia actively localized international norms of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and peaceful dispute settlement in a manner that both facilitated and hindered resolving conflicts. As the results demonstrate, the Preah Vihear conflict revealed underlying tensions within the ASEAN normative structure, especially between the principle of non-interference and the organization's goal of becoming a mature security community. The article also examines the significant roles of the ASEAN chairmanship of Malaysia under Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and of United States President Donald Trump in mediating the crisis in 2025, focusing on the Kuala Lumpur Peace Accord, its failure, and the future of peaceful relations. The article leads to the study of International Relations by showing how Acharya's framework can provide analytical resources for understanding norm-conflict in the Global South, while also criticizing Eurocentric approaches to norm diffusion and elucidating the role of peripheral actors in the formation of regional order.

Keywords: norm localization; security communities; Preah Vihear dispute; ASEAN; Thailand-Cambodia relations

1. INTRODUCTION

The case of Thailand-Cambodia over the Preah Vihear Temple is one of the most difficult and educational territorial disputes in international relations in Southeast Asia today. Lasting over 60 years of disputed sovereignty, diplomatic strains, military build-ups, judicial determinations, and frequent humanitarian crises, this conflict is an excellent example of how far-reaching the effects of colonial boundary demarcation, the presence of historical grievances in the determination of modern state behaviour, and the constraints of international law are in the resolution of disagreements which are inherently rooted in nationalist ideology and domestic political calculus (Kulwuthivilas, 2021; Gerstl & Strasakova, 2017; Turcsanyi & Kriz, 2017). The old temple built in Angkorian era and standing on a 525 metre cliff in the Dangrek mountain has become, as Hayes (2011) framed it, the only one that has linked the whole country in Cambodia, highlighting strong emotional and nationalistic undertones that makes technical borders issues to be existential issues of identity and civilisation.

This paper draws on Amitav Acharya's theoretical frameworks of norm localization and security communities to shed light on the dynamics of this long-running conflict. The works of Acharya in International Relations theory represent a challenge to Western-based scholarship, offering constructive theories that acknowledge and integrate non-Western views, histories, and perspectives on world order (Acharya, 2001; Acharya, 2009; Acharya and Buzan, 2019). His idea of norm localization is that local players develop congruence between transnational norms and local beliefs and practices, thereby transforming those norms into more effective and legitimate ones in local settings (Acharya, 2009). This conceptual prism would be useful as an analytical buy-in terms of how Thailand and Cambodia have managed to internalize international standards of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and peaceful dispute settlement to their historical and political experiences, whose effects have not only defined the future of bilateral relations in the region, but also pushed the boundaries of the regional machinery.

This research is important since it helps address a specific gap in the available literature. Although significant academic research has been conducted on the Preah Vihear controversy using historical, legal, and security lenses (Svay, 2015; Boonkob, 2023; Wagner, 2021), relatively little has been done to apply constructivist theoretical frameworks to the normative aspects of this dispute, especially those that were formulated by the Global South scholars. The novelty in researching the forms of territorial conflicts in Southeast Asia has come to appreciate the ideational aspect and identity construction (Katzenstein, 1996; von Feigenblatt, 2012), but the theoretical implications of Acharya on the concept of norm localization and identity construction have not been fully deployed in the examination of the Thailand-Cambodia case. This gap in the scholarly literature is filled by the article, which shows how Acharya's framework can provide new analytical tools to explain how global norms, regional institutional dynamics, and bilateral conflict interact, thereby avoiding the shortcomings of purely materialist or legalist approaches.

The scientific novelty of the given research is that it goes beyond the application of the Acharya framework in the context of its original use on the development of the ASEAN institutions and their adoption of the norms, and extends it to the case of a particular bilateral territorial conflict, which has pushed the boundaries of the conflict management ability of ASEAN. In addition, this paper will include the examination of the latest events in the conflict, such as the theatric escalation in 2025, the mediation attempts of the Malaysian Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, under his chairmanship of the ASEAN council, the negotiating role of President Donald Trump in the Kuala Lumpur Peace Accord, and the following failure of the accord. The research problem is: How do the localization of norms for the formation of territorial disagreements operate in nascent security communities, and what does the Preah Vihear case tell us about the tensions between the localization of sovereignty norms and the formation of regional security communities? The hypothesis that influences this study is that local norms mediate interstate conflicts in both constraining and enabling ways, in which the results depend on how local political actors use localised normative structures to achieve political goals.

The purpose of this paper is three-fold, first to clarify the main aspects of the theoretic framework of Acharya on norm localization and security communities and to use this framework to the systematic analysis of the Preah Vihear dispute, secondly, to examine how cognitive priors and norm entrepreneurs have influenced the course of the dispute, with special consideration to the ASEAN chairmanship under Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and the role of the United States President Donald Trump as a mediator in the 2025 crisis, including the Kuala Lumpur Peace Accord and its consequences. The article flows in the following structure; Section 2 includes the analytical framework based on the theoretical contributions of Acharya, Section 3 includes the research methodology, Section 4 includes the results and the discussion of the historical analysis of the case, Section 5 includes the analysis of Malaysia as the ASEAN chairman, the ceasefire, the role of Trump as an intermediary and future of the sustainable peace, Section 6 offers the concluding remarks and suggestions to conduct further research on the specific case.

2. ANALITICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 ACHARYA'S NORM LOCALIZATION THEORY

An idea introduced by Amitav Acharya, dubbed norm localization, represents a revolutionary shift in constructivist theory, shifting the analytical emphasis from the passive adoption of norms to the active adaptation of local players. Norm localization is the creation of congruence by local actors between transnational norms and local beliefs and practices, so that the norms can be transformed to be more effective and legitimate in specific situations (Acharya, 2009; Acharya and Buzan, 2019). This procedure highlights that norm diffusion is not a unidirectional process in which influential Western actors transfer norms to weaker parties but rather entails significant local agency in the reinterpretation and reconstruction of norms within local structures and priorities. The idea of cognitive priors, coined by Acharya, holds that normative beliefs, identity commitments, and past experiences influence the reception, interpretation, and adaptation of transnational norms by local actors (Acharya, 2009). These cognitive priors serve as filters through which external normative influence is processed to identify which features of transnational norms are accepted, repudiated, or adapted to local circumstances (see Figure 1).

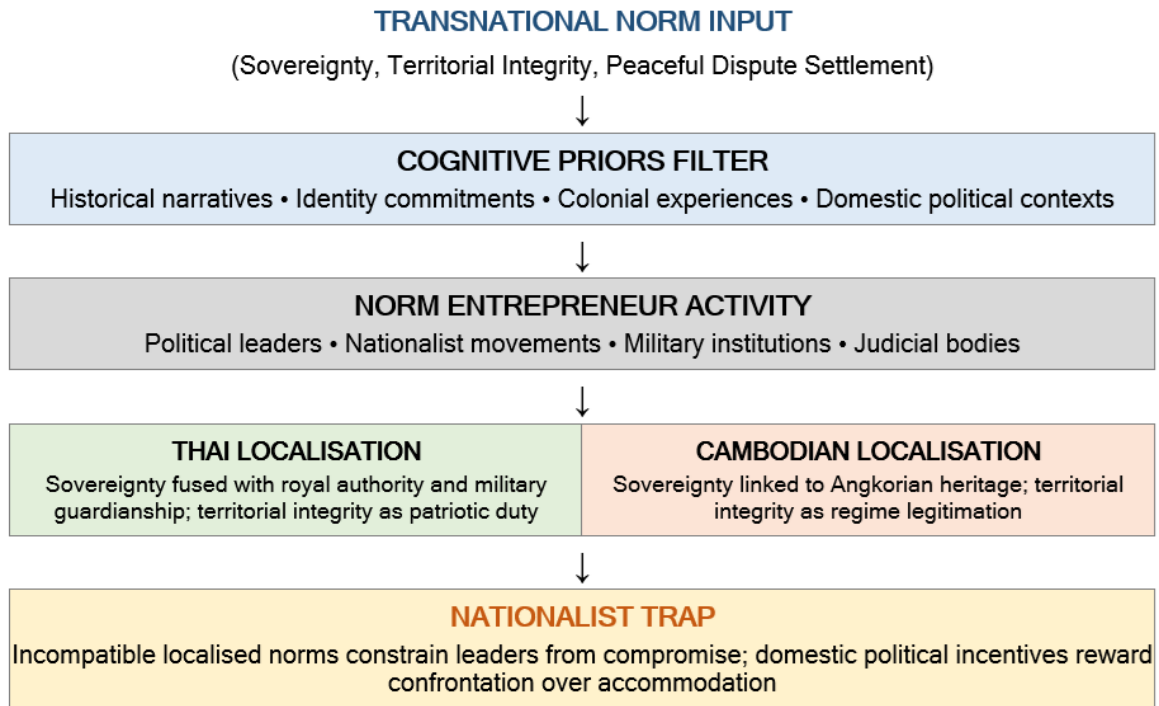


Figure 1. Thailand-Cambodia Preah Vihear Dispute Conceptual Model of Norm Localization and the Nationalist Trap

Note: Author's own elaboration based on Acharya (2009).

Acharya's framework also emphasises the role of "norm entrepreneurs", namely individuals or groups who actively promote the adoption and adaptation of norms within their societies (Acharya, 2009). In the context of territorial disputes, norm entrepreneurs may include political leaders, nationalist movements, religious authorities, or intellectual elites who frame issues in normative terms and mobilise support for particular interpretations of sovereignty, territorial integrity, or historical rights. The concept of norm localization thus provides a more nuanced understanding of how international norms operate in practice, recognising that the same norm may take different forms and produce different effects across different cultural and political contexts. This theoretical perspective directly challenges Eurocentric assumptions about the universality and uniformity of international norms, instead highlighting the creative agency of actors in the Global South in shaping normative frameworks.

The application of norm localization theory to territorial disputes reveals how seemingly universal principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity are interpreted and operationalised in culturally specific ways. ASEAN's founding documents endorsed fundamental norms derived from the United Nations Charter and the Bandung Conference, including non-interference, peaceful dispute settlement, and respect for sovereignty (Acharya, 2001). However, these norms were localized through the incorporation of distinctively Southeast Asian elements such as consultation ("musyawarah") and consensus ("mufakat"), thereby strengthening regional cooperation without fully conforming to Western models of integration based on legalistic procedures and supranational authority (Acharya & Johnston, 2007). Complementing norm localization, Acharya's concept of norm subsidiarity further enriches constructivist insights into norm dynamics by emphasising how peripheral actors create norms to counter dominance from core powers (Acharya & Buzan, 2019).

2.2 SECURITY COMMUNITY THEORY AND ASEAN

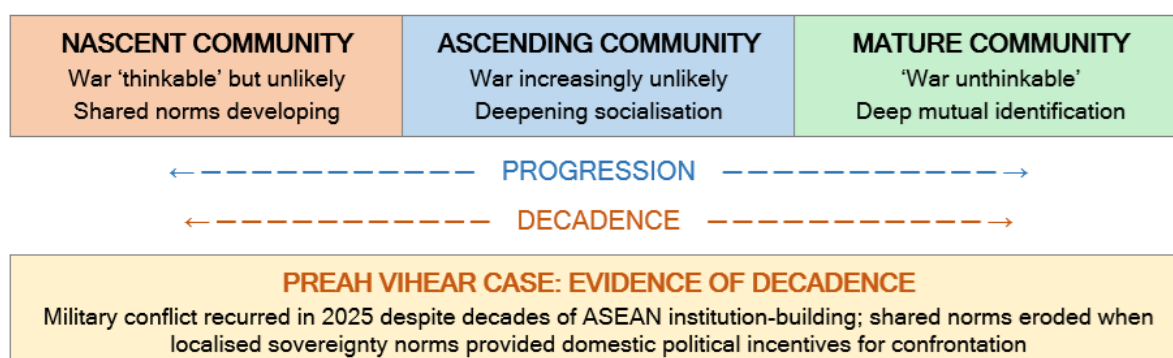
According to Acharya, a security community is a category of states that have, over time, developed habits of peaceful interaction, effectively excluding the possibility of using force to resolve a conflict with a fellow state (Acharya, 2001; Acharya, 2014). This definition is based on the original theory of Karl Deutsch from the 1950s, which characterized a security community as one that has become integrated, with integration referring to a sense of community and institutions strong enough to guarantee peaceful change among its members over time (Acharya, 2001).

The Acharya adaptation framework is based on the constructivist approach, which emphasizes processes of socialization, norms, and identity formation rather than material integration or institutional amalgamation. This practice acknowledges that security communities are essentially ideational formations that are perpetuated through shared understandings, mutual identification, and commitments to norms, rather than through formal accords or material interdependence.

Acharya draws a noteworthy distinction between pluralistic security communities that have sovereign states and retain reliable expectations of peaceful transformation even though they retain their independence, and amalgamated communities, in which states become part of one political unit (Acharya, 2001; Acharya, 2014). He considers ASEAN as an early or emerging pluralistic security community, the major feature of which is that since 1967, there has never been war among the members, and that the norms have evolved to make the use of force a mere thoughtlessness in intra-mural relations (Acharya, 2001). Nevertheless, ASEAN is a limited or nascent community, in which war is always thinkable but unlikely because of shared norms and socialization, but not a mature one, where war is altogether unthinkable (Acharya, 2014). This difference is analytically useful in the case of the Preah Vihear dispute, where the use of military force was not just conceivable but also a reality, testing the judgments on the maturation of ASEAN into a security community.

Most importantly, Acharya criticizes the linear progression model developed by Deutsch and proposes the original concept of decadence, in which a society may regress due to internal conflict or external pressure (Acharya, 2014). This theoretical breakthrough enables a more subtle conception of the community formation of security, in which failure points and the potential for retrogression are taken into account rather than an unquestioning advance toward a deeper level of integration.

(a) Security Community Development Spectrum



(b) ASEAN Conflict Management Framework

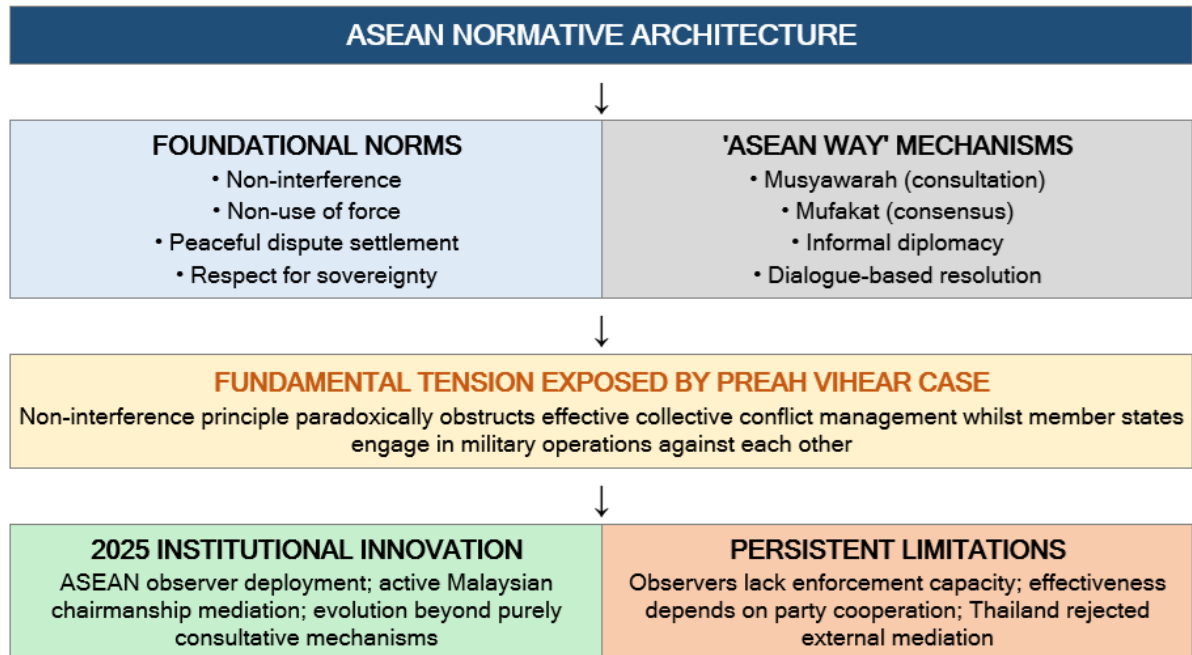


Figure 2. ASEAN Security Community: Normative Architecture, Development Stages and Structural Tensions Unveiled by Preah Vihear Case

Note: Author's own elaboration based on Acharya (2001, 2014)

According to Acharya, the main norms of the ASEAN development include non-intervention in the domestic matters of the member countries, avoidance of violence to resolve the conflicts, peaceful resolution of the conflicts through dialogue and consultations, rejection of multilateral military alliances, and bilateral defense cooperation arrangements (Acharya, 2001; see Figure 2).

2.3 FRAMEWORK INTEGRATION FOR THE PREAH VIHEAR CASE

Combining the norm localization theory with a security community analysis offers an all-embracing approach to the Preah Vihear dispute. The combination of the two approaches helps grasp how Thailand and Cambodia have localised international norms in unique ways, how these localisation processes have influenced the course of the dispute, and what the case implies about ASEAN's hopes of maturing into a security community. It is a framework made around three intersecting dimensions: first, the process of norm localisation in which both states have localised international norms of sovereignty and territorial integrity to their respective histories and domestic politics; secondly, the security community formation, especially how the dispute has challenged the norms of non-interference and peaceful settlement of disputes at ASEAN; and thirdly, the part played by norm entrepreneurs and localisation processes in fuelling and defueling the conflict at various stages of its history.

This analytical framework was chosen for its ability to shed light on aspects of the Preah Vihear conflict that are uncovered by materialist or, simply, legal analysis. According to constructivist theory, the international system is more ideational than material and therefore not fixed in a way that always creates constant conflict and war (Wendt, 1999). The claim that

states make anarchy what it is redefines the concept of the inter-state conflict, where, instead of the anarchy being a material condition that compels states to adopt self-help strategies and inevitable rivalry, it is a cultural phenomenon that states create based on their common understandings and practices (Wendt, 1999). In the case of Preah Vihear, this viewpoint highlights that the definition of the temple and the territory around it, the character of the threat posed by the other party, and the suitability of the different responses are all social constructs through which norm localisation and identity development occur. The framework can therefore be used to examine why the legal rulings of the International Court of Justice have not been effective in settling the conflict, and why mediation attempts have continued to encounter challenges deeply rooted in normative structures embedded in both societies.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

The qualitative case study method employed in this paper is well-suited for investigating complex social phenomena in real-world settings. Yin (2018) argues that case study research is most applicable to the research that aims to address the question of how or why, and the researcher has little control over the actual events in behaviour and the contemporary events within a real-life context. The Thailand-Cambodia Preah Vihear conflict fits all three criteria: the research question is on the localization of the norms that may result in the occurrence of the territorial conflicts; the researcher does not interfere with the phenomena under study but observes it; the conflict is a current process in the present-day world, which is grounded on the complicated historical, political, and cultural circumstances. Stake (1995) distinguishes between an intrinsic case study and an instrumental case study, in which a case is researched to become familiar with an issue or to formulate a theory. It is instrumental as a case study because it uses the Preah Vihear dispute as a vehicle to elaborate on and refine Acharya's theoretical framework of norm localization and the security community in the context of territorial conflict.

The Preah Vihear dispute is selected as the case for the current study for methodological reasons, specifically the selection of cases in developing and refining theories, as used in the case study literature. George and Bennett (2005) argue that selecting cases for research should not be guided by their representativeness of a broader population, but by their contribution to theoretical knowledge. Preah Vihear case can be termed as an example of an argument that can be termed as a critical case in order to test the propositions of the theoretical concepts that were advanced by Acharya: in case the processes of norm localization and dynamics of a security community are functional, one would be interested to see its outcome in this highly salient territorial dispute that took two ASEAN states to the brink of war and in 2025, into a military war. It is the complexity of the case that is a matter of the intentional or unintentional fusion of the colonial histories, nationalism, courtroom investigations, regional government, and interventions of the great power, which endows it with an analytical richness, which gives it a broad spectrum of the independent variables of interest through the six-decade history of its evolution.

Based on the principles articulated by Yin (2018) regarding the use of different sources of evidence in case study research, the current research draws on several types of documentary evidence to ensure triangulation and enhance validity. The first comprises the International Court of Justice's 1962 decision, the merits decision in 2011, and the order of provisional measures in 2013. Such legal works present the official statements of the parties involved, the facts found by the Court, and the legal reasons relied on in the controversy. The second category involves academic literature, specifically books, journal articles, and edited volumes, that have addressed various aspects of the dispute in historical, legal, political, and security contexts. The third category comprises analytical reports by regional experts and policy analysts that provide expert commentary on the dispute's dynamics. The fourth type is grounded in media archives, which provide a contemporary account of events, particularly the

Diplomat, which has provided detailed coverage of the dispute at many levels. Data collection was performed through systematic searches of academic databases, collections of law-related materials, and media archives using keywords related to the conflict, the theoretical concepts to be examined, and the core topics under consideration. The period was extended to include events dating back to the colonial era through December 2025, the most recent.

These are some of the methodological weaknesses that are to be considered. This is because secondary sources are used, which means the study lacks access to the personal considerations and intentions of key actors. Yin (2018) acknowledges that documentary evidence can reveal the biases of its writers and may not necessarily provide complete access to the studied phenomena. Norm localization analysis processes must involve interpreting verbal expressions and observable behaviours to form a picture of the intricacy of decision-making within governments. In addition, the ongoing conflict in 2025 suggests that not all developments can be tracked in available sources, and new events may require revising the original assessments. Despite these limitations, the methodological approach is suitable for addressing the study's objectives. According to Stake (1995), case study research is oriented toward naturalistic generalisation, in which insights aimed at use by readers in their circumstances are generated from particular knowledge of a particular case, rather than statistical generalisation. This research paper will offer an analytical work by demonstrating how the Preah Vihear dispute can be analysed and interpreted within the framework provided by Acharya, and how the findings of the case study may be used to improve or even expand on this theoretical framework.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 provides an overview of the chronology of the Preah Vihear dispute and traces the dynamics of norms through seven phases since the colonial period through the collapse of the accord in 2025.

Phase	Key Events	Norm Dynamics	Outcomes
Colonial Era (1904-1907)	Franco-Siamese treaties; Annex I Map temple in Cambodia against watershed principle.	Western territorial principles on mandala system; submission achieved by Thai silence.	Topographic anomaly provided basis of future contradiction.
ICJ Judgment (1962)	Court uses doctrine of acquiescence; grants Cambodia sovereignty; directs Thai to withdraw.	Applied International legal norms Thai norm resistance by formal compliance but substantive rejection.	Sovereignty question settled in law, but out of politics in Thailand.
UNESCO Crisis (2008)	World heritage nomination; mobilisation of PAD; nullification of Joint Communique; government overthrown.	The turn of cultural heritage issue into sovereignty crisis is done by norm entrepreneurs; institutionalisation of nationalist framing.	It was nationalist trap laid down; compromise made unsustainable politically.

Phase	Key Events	Norm Dynamics	Outcomes
Military Clashes (2008-2011)	Direct gun battles; 18 and above killed; 80,000 displaced; cluster bombs used.	Norms of the security community had been broken; the ASEAN mechanisms were not sufficient.	2013 interpretation of the ICJ reaffirmed the sovereignty of Cambodia; the tension was minimized in the short term.
2025 Escalation	Fighting breaks out on July 24; rockets, artillery, F-16s airstrikes; displacement estimated at 500,000 or more.	Local principles of sovereignty trump peace undertakings; national political interests promote war.	The greatest war in history of dispute; humanitarian disaster.
Kuala Lumpur Accord (Oct 2025)	Malaysia-brokered deal; Trump interference; pulling out of weapons; joint clearance of landmines agreed.	ASEAN standards of peaceful settlement active; formal procedure without covering of territorial issues.	Shifting down; basic normative contestation is not fixed.
Accord Collapse (Nov-Dec 2025)	Landmine kills Thai soldiers; Thailand withdraws accord; fighting restarts December 7.	Incident induced collapse is fragile; localised norms that are stronger than the procedural commitments.	Community decadence on security; peace future questionable.

Table 4.1 Normative Dynamics and Timeline of Conflict.

Note: Author compilation based on the proceedings of the ICJ, literature and media archives.

4.1 THE BOUNDARY-MAKING OF COLONIALISM AND THE NORMS

The causes of the Preah Vihear conflict are closely connected to the colonial-era boundary demarcation, when Western ideas of territorial sovereignty were imposed on political environments in Southeast Asian countries that were traditionally characterised by permeable boundary zones and overlapping spheres of influence. Under the Franco-Siamese Treaty of 1904, the watershed principle was adopted as the basis for the boundary, with the natural border set at the crest of the Dangrek mountain range (Sophalkalyan, 2025). Nonetheless, this principle was not adhered to in the Annex I Map created by the mixed boundary commission, which designated the Preah Vihear promontory as belonging to Cambodia rather than Thailand because the strict watershed delimitation would have forced it to do so (Kulwuthivilas, 2021; Boonkob, 2023). This spatial anomaly would turn into the cause of future controversy. Since the Annex I Map was submitted to the officials of the Siamese, as Sophalkalyan (2025) wrote there was not a written protest, no formal objection followed, either due to the fact that it is a bureaucracy there is little idea of what the map entails, or it is an unwillingness to challenge the power of the French in an asymmetric colonial relationship.

Within the Acharya-developed norm localization framework, this colonial boundary-making procedure represented an early imposition of Western territorial norms on a region where sovereignty operated differently. Acharya highlights that an overlapping system of mandala-based graduated sovereignty was the characteristic feature of premodern Southeast Asian polities, not the strict, Westphalian vision of territorial monopoly control that came with colonialism (Acharya, 2013; Buzan and Acharya, 2022). The colonial covenants, therefore, imposed on Thailand and Cambodia a normative order based on territorial sovereignty, which was essentially alien to their historical experience. Later adoptions of these imposed norms in local contexts, what Acharya refers to as localisation, would determine how states in both states understood and struggled over the colonial boundary during the post-colonial period. It is this historical background that is vital in knowing why the dispute has been so resistant: the two parties are acting within a normative framework that has been externally imposed and not organically given rise to, but each has internalised and localised that normative framework in such a fashion that makes compromise a politically expensive affair.

This meaning of the temple in the national stories of competitors depicts how cognitive priors, the existing beliefs and structures that govern norm reception, essentially made a difference in how each of the parties received and reacted to the colonial boundary settlement. To Cambodians, the temple is a strong testament to the best of Khmer civilisation at the peak of Angkorian power, an icon of justified historical success reduced to helplessness by foreign invasion and colonial interference (Chandler, 2008; Hayes, 2011). The Cambodian response to Thai assertions is straightforward and irresistible, as Hayes (2011) reported: "Yes, but we made it!" We began to build it in the early 9th century, altered and improved it over two half-thousand years, and have been praying and praising our Gods there since, in another three hundred years. To Thailand, the temple symbolizes land taken away unfairly to Cambodia via skewed colonial cartography that went against its own watershed principle of the treaty, a symbol of national defeat which the governments of Thailand themselves have never been politically comfortable to accept. These contrasting cognitive priorities were what led to this conflicting arrangement of colonial boundary, which would be perceived in radically incompatible manners by the two opposing sides, each seeing their stand as self-evident and the other as founded on false historical and moral premises.

4.2 NORM RESISTANCE OF THE 1962 ICJ JUDGEMENT

The 1962 decision of the International Court of Justice was the definitive application of international legal norms to the question of sovereignty, but its adoption in Thailand demonstrates the weakness of international adjudication when local norms and identities are unwilling to be determined by outside force. The Court used the doctrine of acquiescence and found that Thailand did not say anything for a long time about the accuracy of the Annex I Map, and acted in a manner that was equivalent to acceptance, which made Thailand bound by the French-drawn boundary (International Court of Justice, 1962; Svay, 2015). This rule of law, which holds that silence under a claim can constitute acceptance of an international rule, was applied by the Court without regard to domestic political ramifications in Thailand. The court ruled that Cambodia had sovereignty over the temple and that Thailand was to withdraw any military or police from it.

The reaction of Thailand to the judgment can be seen as an example of norm resistance, as defined by Acharya, i.e., the denial or adaptation of external norms deemed inconsistent with local beliefs and interests. Thailand also formally complied with the ruling by withdrawing its forces from the temple itself, but it denied the extension to the territorial promontory surrounding the Annex I Map. Thai nationalists are unwilling to accept the court's decision granting Cambodia sovereignty over the temple, despite Thailand having accepted the dispute for submission to the ICJ and being bound by its ruling (Walsh, 2011). This formal obedience and substantive resistance indicate the disconnect between the norms of

international law and those of localised sovereignty, the subject of the Acharya framework. The cognitive prior of Thai nationalist discourses, the temple as an unlost Thai land appropriately taken away by colonial-era intrigues, proved to be stronger than the international legal finding, which cannot allow the successive Thai governments to acquiesce to the entirety of the 1962 judgment.

4.3 UNESCO INSCRIPTION CONTROVERSY AND NORM ENTREPRENEURS

The 2008 UNESCO World Heritage inscription scandal provides valuable insights into how norm entrepreneurs can amplify territorial conflict through strategic normative framing. The move by Cambodia to seek UNESCO inscription was intended to cement its sovereignty claims by leveraging the normative power of international cultural heritage recognition (Reed, 2025). The inscription meant that Cambodia had to provide a management plan for the temple site, and Thailand would have been an early backer by signing it in a Joint Communiqué supporting the Cambodian application. But once this agreement was revealed in Thailand, it provoked a nationalist backlash that turned the inscription into a crisis of sovereignty, showing that the localisation of sovereignty norms can override other normative aspects.

The yellow shirt movement, which came to be known as the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), turned out to be what Acharya would call a local norm entrepreneur who propagated a different normative reading that would interpret the UNESCO inscription as a danger to Thai sovereignty that needed nationalist retaliation (LaRocco, 2011; Ponniah, 2013). According to Ponniah (2013), one faction of the Thai political split took advantage of temple listings in Cambodia and used them as one of the main platforms to topple the existing pro-Thaksin regime during that period. The PAD took possession of the Government House in Bangkok and used it effectively to assist in the overthrow of the government. The PAD politicized the temple issue by turning it into a matter of national pride, as LaRocco (2011) found. It was this norm entrepreneurship that changed the dispute from a question of boundaries to one of essence, and it was a patriotic question, a test that any Thai government could not afford to compromise its international interests in the face of domestic political maneuvering.

This episode highlights an important aspect of the localisation of norms that the Acharya framework illuminates: the struggle between rival normative conventions in domestic political spaces. The success of the PAD in establishing the UNESCO inscription as a sovereignty breach rather than a cultural heritage success shows that norm localisation is never a homogeneous process across countries, but one that entails conflict among domestic actors seeking to advance alternative understandings. The nationalist normative framing of Thai legislation was institutionalised when the Thai Constitutional Court invalidated the Joint Communiqué in support of Cambodia's inscription, due to the agreement's requirement for parliamentary approval on border issues (Kulwuthivilas, 2021). This judicial intervention is an example of how domestic institutions may be subject to norm contestation and of how localised understandings of sovereignty may be institutionalised in formal legal codes, thereby limiting future governments' ability to act flexibly.

4.4 MILITARY ESCALATIONS AND SECURITY COMMUNITY LIMITATIONS

The military confrontations between Thailand and Cambodia during 2008-2011 and their dramatic recurrence in 2025 are fundamental problems for conceptualizing ASEAN as a security community. In accordance with Acharya's theorisation, the main feature of a security community is the reliability of expectations of peaceful change, and war becomes increasingly inconceivable between its members (Acharya, 2001; Acharya, 2014). The Preah Vihear clashes prove that war remained a discrete possibility between those two ASEAN members despite decades of regional institution-building and the creation of common standards for

peacefully resolving conflicts. The fighting of 2011 took at least 18 lives and displaced about 80,000 civilians (Ponniah, 2013; Lloyd-George, 2011). Cluster munitions were controversially used during the conflict, with experts at the international Cluster Munitions Coalition affirming that nearly fifty percent of the 12 border areas they visited were littered with unexploded cluster bombs (Hunt, 2011).

The urban upsurge in 2025 was even more disastrous and widespread. A new conflict between Thai soldiers and Cambodian soldiers broke out on July 24, 2025, near Ta Moan Thom. Within a few hours, the battle had spread to other sections of the border, where both armies used heavy weapons, including multiple-launch rockets, artillery, and tanks. The Cambodians fired rocket batteries of Russian BM-21, and the Thai scrambled to F-16 jets to drop bombs on the military targets in Cambodia (Strangio, 2025). By the end of December 2025, over half a million people had been displaced on each side of the border, and both armies and civilians had reported large numbers of dead on both sides (Strangio, 2025; Hobbs, 2025). The magnitude of the 2025 conflict was much greater than that of the 2008-2011 conflicts, with hostilities spreading to almost all sectors of the 817-kilometre shared border between the two countries.

Such a repetitive pattern of military conflict is actually a sign of what Acharya calls the security community's decadence: a decline to past levels of peaceful communication under the influence of domestic conflicts or new conditions (Acharya, 2014). The usefulness of the concept as an analytical tool is that it challenges linear theories of security community development, which emphasize gradual development through enhanced integration. The Preah Vihear case shows that the establishment of security communities is not irreversible; norms may be undermined, and military conflict, even between states with decades of peaceful relations and institutional cooperation, can recur. The 2025 escalation, however, was a consequence of all the institutional development undertaken by ASEAN since its inception, implying that the organisation's conflict management structures remain weak to address what is happening when localised norms of sovereignty offer domestic political incentives for confrontation rather than accommodation.

4.5 NORM LOCALISATION IN DOMESTIC POLITICAL POLITICS

The comparison shows unique trends of the localisation of norms in Thailand and Cambodia that perpetuated the conflict and limited possible avenues of resolution. International standards of territorial integrity were mixed with the national accounts of the self and royal power, as well as military protection in Thailand, which made the Preah Vihear an exceptionally political problem. In Thai politics, according to Strangio (2025), one of the surest ways of undermining a political opponent is to accuse them of territorial loss. This political force resulted in a ratchet effect in which every government was under pressure to either maintain or surpass its predecessor's nationalistic position, making compromise harder. Another aspect of norm localisation is demonstrated by Thailand's military. The Thai army, not the government, is the key, as the Cambodian political analyst, Lao Mong Hay, pointed out, is an independent Cambodian. It has official accountability for Thailand's territorial integrity and is answerable to the King (Ponniah, 2013). Such institutionalization of the military role as the protector of territorial sovereignty gave military actors considerable autonomy to advance hardline positions on the border, regardless of civilian governments' desires.

The Preah Vihear conflict in Cambodia gave the ruling Cambodian People's Party an opportunity to display nationalist virtues. The CPP has had difficulty asserting control over Cambodian nationalist discourse since 1979, and anti-Vietnamese nationalism has been the domain of the opposition parties (Hutt, 2025). The Preah Vihear controversy provided the party with a platform to polish its nationalistic credentials in Thailand, a safer bet than Vietnam because Cambodia has a complicated historical association with its eastern neighbour. The 2025 tensions with Thailand provided the CPP another chance, and Hun Manet acted as a

militarist leader, participating in the pageantry of patriotism while other top officials visited troops at the border (Hutt, 2025). The localisation of sovereignty norms in Cambodia was therefore a goal of regime consolidation, in which international norms of territorial integrity served as a legitimising structure for domestic political mobilisation of the state against external threats.

The local sovereignty norms, which were domestically localised, resulted in what can be called a nationalist trap for political leaders in both nations. Any government seen to compromise on territorial claims was delegitimized by domestic opponents through nationalistic discourse. This is why several efforts in bilateral negotiations and international adjudication have not been successful in creating lasting solutions: although governments have reached agreements with temporary solutions, local political forces have sabotaged implementation efforts. This dynamic was well brought out by the leaked phone conversation in June, 2025, between former Thai Prime Minister, Paetongtarn Shinawatra and Hun Sen. The call leak where Paetongtarn demanded peaceful solution and charged a Thai military commander with engineering anti-government feeling on the border matter turned out to be politically fatal and this was a factor that made her lose her office at the Constitutional Court (Strangio, 2025). The case shows that domestic norm entrepreneurs can use the discourse of sovereignty to limit leaders who pursue accommodation.

5. THE ASEAN CHAIRMANSHIP, KUALA LUMPUR PEACE ACCORD AND THE MEDIATION ROLE OF TRUMP

5.1 THE ASEAN CHAIRMANSHIP OF MALAYSIA UNDER ANWAR IBRAHIM

In the case of the worst escalation of the Preah Vihear dispute since the conflict began, Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, the ASEAN Chairman in 2025, played a key role in brokering between Thailand and Cambodia. Anwar, as an intermediary, exemplifies what Acharya calls the ASEAN Way of informal diplomacy and consensus-making, though these mechanisms were put to the test by an instance of active military conflict between member states. After a new conflict broke out in December 2025, Anwar encouraged both parties to keep calm, saying: We urge both parties to show utmost restraint, keep the lines open, and make use of what is available to the maximum. Malaysia is also prepared to support actions aimed at restoring sanity and preventing repeat instances (Strangio, 2025). This was a classic ASEAN approach to handling conflicts through dialogue and restraint, without explicitly condemning either side, in line with the norm of non-interference.

Anwar's diplomatic involvement showed the potential and constraints of ASEAN's conflict management systems. In a post on social media after the break-up of the October accord, Anwar said that he had held a call with both Thai Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul and Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet and that both had given him positive feedback and reiterated their intention to seek a peaceful solution as per the October 26 agreement (Strangio, 2025). Anwar wrote: I have reiterated that Malaysia further urged that friendship and ceasefire between the two nations should be enhanced in line with the agreement made in Kuala Lumpur last month. I also informed that Malaysia was ready to continue playing its role as a facilitator in mapping this path to peace (Strangio, 2025). This continued diplomatic involvement despite the ongoing combat was a manifestation of ASEAN's desire to engage in conflict management through peaceful dialogue, as well as a demonstration of the shortcomings of such methods when the parties involved are not sincerely committed to de-escalation.

One major institutional accomplishment of the Malaysian chairmanship was persuading Thailand and Cambodia to deploy ASEAN observer teams to the contentious border. Anwar reported that the Chief of Defence Force of Malaysia, Mohd Nizam Jaffar, who would head the ASEAN Observer Teams, would visit the border and hoped that the scheduled ASEAN foreign ministers' meeting would create a breakthrough in the pursuit of a ceasefire (Strangio, 2025).

On August 1, 2021, Malaysia's Foreign Minister Mohamad Hasan said that the country was willing to act as an intermediary between the two countries, noting that they had lost trust in one another and that each had contacted Malaysia to hold negotiations in Kuala Lumpur (Strangio, 2025). This is a significant advancement in ASEAN's conflict management capacity, as it has finally outgrown its old aversion to intervening in bilateral conflicts through mechanisms like observer postings, which earlier versions of the ASEAN Way may have preempted.

According to Acharya's security community model, Anwar's mediation activities as leader of the Malaysian government operationalised ASEAN's norms of peaceful dispute settlement in circumstances where those norms were actively being contravened through the use of military conflict. The introduction of ASEAN observers was a good institutional innovation within the organisation and a step beyond the consultative mechanisms, which would involve the organisation in more active conflict-monitoring activities. Nevertheless, observer deployment also demonstrated the limitations of ASEAN action: they could observe and report, but lacked the power to enforce, and their performance relied on the goodwill of both sides to collaborate. The hardline approach being taken in Thailand throughout the month of December 2025, with Prime Minister Anutin specifically refusing any outside intervention, showed that the ASEAN mechanisms may be rendered useless by a member state that is bent on achieving its military goals at any cost to regional diplomatic pressure.

5.2 THE KUALA LUMPUR PEACE ACCORD

The most notable diplomatic success regarding the Thailand-Cambodia border conflict was the signing of the Kuala Lumpur Peace Accord on October 26, 2025, at the 47th ASEAN Summit in Malaysia. In collaboration with ASEAN and the Malaysian government, United States President Donald Trump mediated the agreement after intervening to mediate a ceasefire on July 28 that initially stopped the fighting (Sophalkalyan, 2025). The agreement was the result of extensive diplomatic work that united the interests of the regions and the great powers to stabilise the conflict, and Trump's involvement gave the Malaysian-led ASEAN mediation process international strength. As provided in the agreement that Trump termed the Kuala Lumpur Peace Accord, the two parties agreed to dump heavy weapons along the border, carry out enhanced landmine clearance, and increase their collaboration to prevent online scamming activities, which had caused bilateral tension (Strangio, 2025).

The joint declaration restated the end of hostilities and aimed to transform the wobbly July ceasefire into a workable, long-term de-escalation framework. Cambodia and Thailand also reached an accord on the gradual removal of heavy weaponry from the most hotspots along the border, with Trump and Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim serving as witnesses (Sophalkalyan, 2025). Prime Minister Hun Manet demanded that Cambodia would never give up any territory as part of the new peace settlement because the localisation of sovereignty norms limited Cambodian negotiating positions domestically. Nevertheless, the accord never sought to address the territorial conflict at its heart, a conflict that is over a century old. According to that described by Hun Manet, the consent is to the conditions and procedures to create a good environment to end conflicts and regain relations, noting that although neither of these agreements refers to matters pertaining to the territory and borders, it does not imply that any of the parties is willing to abandon its rights to administer the land within its own sovereign land (Hunt, 2025).

Based on Acharya's theoretical framework, the Kuala Lumpur Peace Accord identifies the potential and weaknesses of norm-based conflict management at the ASEAN level. The accord reflected the initial principles of ASEAN on non-use of force and peaceful settlement of disputes, but the fact that it was facilitated by ASEAN Chair Malaysia showed that the organisation can manage conflicts proactively when the concerned member states have sufficient political goodwill. Nevertheless, the way the accord manages to avoid the underlying

territorial issues shows the limitations of the localised norms of sovereignty, which deny both sides of the conflict the chance to yield on key territorial demands. The consensus was therefore more of a procedural guideline to address conflict than a normative resolution of the normative conflict that underpinned the dispute. Such a distinction between conflict management and conflict resolution is analytically significant: the mechanisms of ASEAN seem more relevant to the former than to the latter, especially when the conflicts entail deeply rooted nationalistic identity claims

5.3 THE MEDITATION ROLE OF PRESIDENT TRUMP

United States President Donald Trump played a major role in the first mediation process that led to the July 28, 2025, ceasefire and, subsequently, the Kuala Lumpur Peace Accord. The United States' presidential-level intervention was unprecedented in the Thailand/Cambodia conflict, underscoring the acute nature of the 2025 escalation and the external powers' interest in Southeast Asia's stability. Cambodia has nominated Trump for the Nobel Peace Prize for his work in diplomacy and the pressure he exerted on both sides, as well as on China, during the July talks that produced the ceasefire (Hunt, 2025). This acknowledgment was credited to the great US influence in the peace process and to Cambodia's strategic interest in developing American engagement as a counterbalance to the regional situation and the complicated relations with China.

After hostilities resumed in December 2025, President Trump declared that he had reached out to both leaders and convinced both parties to honor the October 26 deal. They have agreed to stop all shooting this evening and to return to the original Peace Accord they made with the assistance of the great prime minister of Malaysia, Anwar Ibrahim. Trump wrote on his Truth Social (Strangio, 2025). The Thai Prime Minister Anutin, however, rejected the call for a ceasefire after speaking with Trump, saying that Thailand would not halt military operations until it felt threatened or further harmed by its land (Strangio, 2025). Such open conflict between Trump's announcement signing and Thailand's official stand indicated the limits of external pressure on a conflict shaped by strong nationalistic feelings and localised norms of sovereignty that outsiders cannot determine, no matter how strong and prestigious the source.

The disjuncture between diplomatic proclamations and realities on the ground illustrated the problematic nature of great-power mediation in deeply rooted territorial conflicts. During the weekend after new fighting, Trump said he had ended the war in Cambodia- as part of bigger claims of ending six wars in six months - which puzzled military observers who could still see fighting along the border (Hunt, 2025). As noted by Hunt (2025), Trump may have to wait to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, given the current conflict, despite his mediation efforts. Theoretically, Trump's mediation work demonstrates how outsiders can help reach a consensus on procedural frames when they cannot change the underlying cognitive backgrounds and localised norms that perpetuate territorial conflicts. Considerable authority coercion can produce short-term ceasefires, whereas lasting solutions require transforming national normative systems that cannot be easily forced by external actors, whether through material strength or diplomatic participation.

5.3 THE FAILURE OF THE PEACE ACCORD AND NEW HOSTILITIES

On November 11, 2025, Thailand halted the enforcement of its peace agreement with Cambodia following a landmine explosion that injured four of its soldiers. The blast occurred when soldiers were on a normal patrol along the Thailand and Cambodia border, Sisaket and Preah Vihear provinces, respectively. Anutin Charnvirakul, the Thai Prime Minister, ordered the release of all Cambodian soldiers in the country as prisoners of war and a complete stop to the agreement (Strangio, 2025). Defence Minister Natthaphon Narkphanit of Thailand

claimed that the landmine seemed freshly laid as the explosion took place on a road that was constantly used by Thai soldiers. Thailand alleged that the mine was a PMN-2, a Soviet-made missile which Thailand had never held in its store or used. Cambodia refused to plant any new mines and claimed that the border area was full of landmines that were leftovers of previous wars in the years under the Khmer Rouge regime and the civil wars that took place afterward (Strangio, 2025).

On December 7, 2025, the conflict resumed on the controversial border, claiming the lives of at least five individuals at first and encouraging the inhabitants of both sides of the border to flee. The conflict quickly spread along the frontier, as both sides blamed each other for the events (Strangio, 2025). The war intensified into almost all areas of the 817-kilometer-long combined front between the two countries, where artillery was extensively used, rockets were fired, and on the Thai side, F-16 and Gripen aircraft were frequently used in airstrikes. Thai F-16s attacked the Chey Chumneas Bridge of the Veal Veng district of Pursat province, which the army said was used to distribute heavy weapons and other supplies to the border region (Strangio, 2025). The destruction of the Cambodian military capacity, as Thailand declared, was vague and maximalist. The chief of staff of the Royal Thai Army, General Chaiyapruet Duangprapat, said: "This is to make Cambodia militarily useless sometime long enough--safety of our children and grandchildren" (Strangio, 2025). This pronouncement was a total denial of the conflict management system in military solutions.

The humanitarian cost of the resumed warfare was disastrous to the civilian population on both sides of the border. As the frontier warfare resumed for over two weeks, Thai air sorties and Cambodian BM-21 rockets were still flying across the border and causing an ever-increasing military price. Figures that The Diplomat had access to via a provincial health official in Cambodia indicated that at least 400 Cambodian soldiers and border police had been injured in the action in Preah Vihear province alone since December 8 (Hobbs, 2025). The provincial health official told him that at least 13 soldiers had been killed on the front lines at the Preah Vihear and carried to the hospital to be kept. Casualties of dozens more were hinted at in reports in local newspapers and shared posts on social media. The difference between the two armies was apparent even before the escalation of the conflict, and Thailand had far greater air power and precision-strike potential (Hobbs, 2025).

The failure of the Kuala Lumpur Peace Accord puts into practice Acharya's theoretical wisdom on the precariousness of security community development and the potential inevitability of the so-called decadence or regression. Although the de-escalation procedures are formally established in the agreement and are supported by ASEAN, the United States, and the two governments in conflict, local sovereignty norms and domestic political interests have outweighed the commitments to the procedures outlined in the accord. The collapse incident triggered by a single landmine explosion shows how negotiated structures can easily collapse when normative contestation at the under-level is not eliminated. As Sophalkalyan (2025) concluded, the border issue will return to a dormant state, as it was in the previous century. As a land-mine in the undergrowth, it will wait, waiting, to be caught by the next unsuspecting political step. The cyclical character of the conflict and the restraint of procedural accords that fail to explore the case's normative bases are well explained in this metaphor.

5.3 FUTURE OF SUSTAINABLE PEACE

It is yet to be seen how sustainable peace can be achieved in the Thai-Cambodian border dispute, and various structural impediments restrict the process of achieving long-term resolution. Cambodia has announced that it will submit the border conflicts to the International Court of Justice, seeking its decision on the contentious areas at the Ta Moan Thom, Ta Moan Toch, and Ta Krabei temples (Strangio, 2025). Cambodian Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn said that a ruling by the ICJ based on international law would provide a just, unbiased, and sustainable solution. Nonetheless, Thailand has opposed any involvement of the ICJ, opting

to settle the disputes bilaterally through the Joint Boundary Committee (Strangio, 2025). The ICJ can never hear a controversial case without the agreement of the two parties, and Bangkok has not been keen on the agreement, especially given domestic political factors and flashbacks to the 1962 and 2013 judgments that supported the Cambodians.

Analysts have recommended alternative resolution pathways to end the deadlock. Sophalkalyan (2025) proposed that each party might officially admit that sovereignty over a particular contested territory will be suspended, neither party having deployed permanent armies or heavy equipment, but conducting shared patrolling with light weaponry. As a collaboratively managed venture between the Ministries of Tourism of both countries, Hayes (2011) suggested that the controversial 4.5 square kilometres around the temple should be co-managed as a joint enterprise, with the revenues from taxation equally shared between both nations. The third way is to create an entity with the title of Piranitting a fixed Cambodia-Thailand Boundary Arbitration Commission, consisting of one Cambodian jurist, one Thai jurist, and a rotating third-party chair who is a member of ASEAN (Sophalkalyan, 2025). This solution might have been effective, as it allows both parties what they really want: Cambodia to receive internationalisation and the legal momentum, and Thailand to retain its flexibility and dignity without the ultimate IJC judgment.

In light of Acharya's security community model, sustainable peace cannot be founded solely on procedural agreements or even legal determinations. It involves the conversion of existing cognitive premises and localised principles into a territorial conflict that becomes an issue of existential national identity. As Strangio (2025) noted, the existing reservoirs of bitterness may pollute bilateral relations for several years, as in the case when an external power can make both countries return to a previous ceasefire. The war has mobilized the entrenched nationalistic fears of both countries, giving the strongest forces to the most militaristic groups and exacerbating the situation, making compromise a political challenge to any government. A normal ceasefire would involve the confirmed withdrawal of troops, buffer zones supervised by independent observers, and a system to monitor incidents before they spiral into fresh fighting. As ASEAN lacks enforcement capability, and Washington seems to have no effect with its pressure on Thailand, some analysts believe that China may have a rare chance to lend a hand, though Beijing has traditionally favored keeping the region stable over appearing to be in charge of such conflicts (Hobbs, 2025).

The inherent problem with sustainable peace is the internalization of sovereignty norms, which perpetuate conflict. The leaders of Thailand and Cambodia can hardly tolerate compromises couched as concessions of their territories without serious domestic political ramifications. The nationalist trap that has gripped the successive governments in both countries does not seem to be unclenching at all, especially after the brutal battling of 2025 has raised more grievances and casualties to be remembered. The cycle is so deeply rooted that it can only be broken by either a fundamental change in the politics of the two nations, such that nationalism becomes less politically useful, or by the development of alternative norms and interests strong enough to counter the claims of sovereignty. Neither of the two seems to be happening any time soon, indicating that the Preah Vihear dispute will likely continue to be a source of similar bilateral conflicts and even military confrontations in the foreseeable future, periodically testing ASEAN's capacity to manage conflicts and the boundaries of external mediation.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper uses the theoretical frameworks of norm localisation and security communities, as explained by Amitav Acharya, to examine the Thailand-Cambodia Preah Vihear Temple dispute, illustrating how these frameworks can help us appreciate aspects of the conflict that have been ignored by materialist or strictly legalistic analysis. The hypothesis that local norms mediate the effect of interstate conflicts, both constraining and facilitating conflict resolution, is

supported by the research findings in two ways: the results vary depending on the extent to which domestic political actors use the localised normative frameworks to serve political ends. The analysis of the case studies showed that both Thailand and Cambodia have localised international norms of sovereignty and territorial integrity in unique ways, influenced by cognitive priors shaped by historical accounts, colonialism, and current political interests. Such localisation processes gave rise to what this article describes as a nationalist trap, in which both political leaders in these two countries are delegitimised if they engage in compromises that can be described as territorial concessions.

The scientific novelty of the present study is that it shows that the framework proposed by Acharya, initially intended to explain the evolution of the ASEAN institution and the adoption of norms, can be useful for analyzing particular bilateral disputes in the regional context. The analysis has found that norm localisation processes do not operate solely at the regional institutional level but also in domestic political arenas, where rival actors advance alternative normative interpretations in furtherance of other political interests. The influence that norm entrepreneurs like the PAD in the Thai case exerted over the discursive world and limited the government's range of choice was especially important. The analysis of Malaysia's ASEAN chairmanship under Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and the mediation of President Trump also illustrated the potential and limitations of external actors in mediating the conflict when localised norms cannot be easily changed. The Kuala Lumpur Peace Accord was an interesting diplomatic success that failed to materialize because it did not address underlying normative contestation, but it still demonstrated the weakness of procedural accords that fail to intervene in comprehensive procedural agreements.

The Preah Vihear case has serious implications for ASEAN's ambitions to mature the security community. The conflict revealed the weakness of the "ASEAN Way" in addressing intra-mural territorial issues, and the concept of non-interference was ironically the one that hindered effective conflict management by the member states, as they engaged in military activities to fight one another. However, the proactive mediation efforts by Malaysia as chairperson of 2025 suggest that ASEAN may undergo a change in its capacity to manage conflicts, which can be attributed to the deployment of ASEAN observers like never before. The notion of security community decadence, as highlighted by Acharya, is analytically useful because negotiated agreements may unravel and military conflict may recur when normative contestation is not sufficiently addressed. The 2025 explosion proved that decades of ASEAN institution-building did not make war among members unthinkable when territorial antagonism and the political motives of the motherland collide.

The wider implications of International Relations scholarship relate to the problem of agency of non-Western participants in the establishment of normative orders and the drawbacks of the Eurocentric concept of norm diffusion. The framework created by Acharya demonstrates that the norms do not flow in a one-way fashion, with Western centres exporting them to peripheral recipients; rather, local actors transform, modify, and adapt the norms to suit their local needs and belief systems. The case of Preah Vihear shows that even international legal determination, great-power mediation, and regional institutional structures are limited by localised rules, which domestic political actors use for their own purposes. The result questions the assumptions of liberal institutionalist strategies that territorial disputes can be overcome through international institutions and legal mechanisms that offer authoritative solutions and enforcement structures. Once norms of sovereignty have become thoroughly presupposed in the national identity discourses, external will might not hold the capacity to be legitimate in compelling domestic political motivations to contest.

Future research recommendations include conducting a comparative analysis of the application of Acharya's framework to other territorial disputes in Southeast Asia, such as rival South China Sea claims, to determine the overall generalisability of the findings in the Preah Vihear case. Research on the role of external powers, especially China and the United States, in the processes of norm localisation in Southeast Asia would help clarify the role of competition

between great powers in shaping regional normative practices. Longitudinal studies of the implementation and development of the ASEAN observer mechanism put in place during the 2025 crisis could provide insight into whether and how ASEAN's capacity to manage conflicts evolves in response to disputes between member states. Lastly, some studies on the domestic politics of Thailand and Cambodia that perpetuate nationalist mobilisation over territorial matters would help develop a sense of the circumstances in which the nationalist trap concept identified in this paper can be avoided or strengthened.

To conclude, the Preah Vihear settlement is a great example of the complex nature of interactions among colonial pasts, international legal regimes, local politics, regional institutional structures, and great power intervention in the processes of defining borders in postcolonial Southeast Asia. It will not only require legal solutions or the conclusion of diplomatic deals, achieved multiple times and yet backfiring, but also changes in domestic political environments and national identity discourses that will allow the temple to be a symbol of a disputed national honour rather than a common cultural heritage. With such a change, as evidenced by the conflict, it has been elusive to determine when localised norms of sovereignty give political actors effective instruments for mobilisation and when external interveners, notwithstanding their good intentions and power, are unable to enforce cognitive change for durable peace. The Preah Vihear case is therefore a wake-up call for international institutions, legal frameworks, and great power diplomacy in the face of a conflict driven by overlapping normative constructs and supported by domestic political interests that promote conflict over compromise.

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