Thailand VS Cambodia: Proxy War Or Internal Power Struggle?

The military tensions at the Thai-Cambodian border have exploded this week into all-out artillery warfare. Military personnel and civilians have died and the political fallout in Thailand has cost the prime minister her job. What is going on? To discuss this, I'm joined today by Dr. Digby J. Wren. Based in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, Dr. Wren has been connected to the region for decades. He runs a geopolitical risk advisory firm and is a former External Relations Advisor to the President of the Royal Academy of Cambodia. He is also the publisher of the very successful Substack Analysis, "the long Mekong". Dr. Wren's Susbtack: https://longmekong.substack.com Our Shop: https://neutralitystudies-shop.fourthwall.com

#M3

Hello everybody, this is Pascal Lottaz from Neutrality Studies, coming to you with a special episode on the ongoing and unfortunately still escalating conflict between Cambodia and Thailand. Here with me to clarify what's going on is Dr. Digby Wren. Based in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, Dr. Wren has been connected to the region for decades. He runs a geopolitical risk advisory firm and is the former external relations advisor to the president of the Royal Academy of Cambodia. He's also the publisher of the very successful Substack analysis, The Long Mekong, as you can see right behind him. Dr. Wren, welcome back.

#M2

Welcome. Yeah, it's really nice to be back on the show, Pascal. I really enjoy your show.

#M3

Yeah, thank you very much, Digby. We talked about half a year ago, or maybe a year ago, last time, and I'm really glad that you agreed to give us your take on what's happening. I also reached out to you because you are an Australian citizen, although you're living in Cambodia, so I do think you have somewhat of a third-party perspective on this entire region. Some neutral analysis is important right now. On Twitter, what we see is, "Oh, pro-Cambodia," "Oh, pro-Thailand," which is absolutely dumb. But can you give us a rundown of what's actually occurring right now as we speak, on this Saturday, July 26th, in Japan and Phnom Penh?

#M2

Yeah. So, well, the key thing, I suppose, back to your point just now about events, right? Everybody's either pro-Cambodia or pro-Thailand or pro-something. But yeah, it's a series of events. It's not as if this is just new. This has been going on for quite a long time, these sorts of border skirmishes—well, at least since the 1990s, and even before, really. But this current series is originally about a whole lot of—so, seven sites on their shared border. That shared border is up in what they call the Emerald Triangle—so, northwest Cambodia, northeast Thailand, up where there's the juncture with Laos as well. So that's kind of the area. We're talking about mountainous forests—not easy to navigate.

So it's been going on up there. Now, these places are these temples, right, that mark these sites. And these temples are Hindu temples—they're really old, ancient Khmer temples. What people don't realize is that the Khmer Empire used to be a lot larger, stretching all the way down to what is now South Vietnam, which was originally part of the Khmer Empire, and parts of what is now Thailand, up in the northeast and northwest, were also part of the Khmer Empire. So that's why you have these constructions, these temple constructions, on the mountains and things like that. So that's sort of the historical context. But the real problem came, of course, with colonialism. It was the French and the British who split and set all the borders. This is not a new problem.

You know, this is happening everywhere—in Africa, in the Himalayas, everywhere. All these British and French borders, you know, Sykes-Picot and all that stuff. So they've done the same thing here. Thailand wasn't really colonized, but it was sort of cut down from its largest empire stretch, which was in the 19th century. And so it's never been happy about losing what it had taken from the Cambodians during its expansion in the 17th and 18th centuries. They lost all of that—the French and the British cut that back, carved Cambodia out in the middle. So now, in the present, if you're a Cambodian, you think of yourself as being squeezed between the crocodile of Vietnam—which is that long, thin crocodile all the way down the coastline on the South China Sea—and the tiger of Thailand.

So those are the two big ones. And so this was supposed to be all very good and constructive within the ASEAN format, within the RCEP formats, and, you know, internal trade with ASEAN. And so Cambodia was going to benefit enormously because it's directly between the tiger of Thailand—also an industrial tiger—and Vietnam, also an industrial crocodile. So that was going to be great for Cambodia. It's going to be a node, a hub for light manufacturing, components, and all that sort of thing.

#M3

Yeah, it's a little bit like Switzerland benefiting from being right between Germany, France, and Italy and being the connecting hub, right? And that can be great for a landlocked country.

#M2

Exactly. And geographically, Cambodia is really in the center of Asia. The port of Sihanoukville, for example, is actually the closest point for transport across the Gulf of Thailand to Bangkok, Thailand, as well as to Malaysia and Vietnam. So Cambodia, you know, I think the last time I was on your show, we talked about how Cambodia really is geographically super well placed, just like Switzerland. And that's why neutrality is important, right? But that seems to have flown out the window. I suppose the first question we should ask is, how did this recording between the— I have a lot of trouble pronouncing these Thai names.

#M3

Yeah, it's Shinawatra, right? And we need to give the background for this one. So there was a phone call, right, about three weeks ago between the female prime minister, Ms. Shinawatra of Thailand, and the prime minister of Cambodia, Mr. Hun Manet. Hun Manet. And funnily enough, they're both the children of the patriarchs of their countries—Mr. Shinawatra on the Thai side and Mr. Hun Sen on the Cambodian side, right?

#M2

Well, that's right. And they've known each other basically since they were teenagers. It's not as if the two prime ministers are strangers. These families have been quite close for about 30 years. So the Hun family in Cambodia, which has held power in real terms, I suppose, for at least 20, 30, 38 years. And the Shinawatra clan in Thailand, who've had three prime ministerships.

#M3

But on and off, actually, because they were even kicked out of the country sometimes, since they're quite hotly hated by one part of the Thai political establishment.

#M2

Yeah. So we need to think about the structure of Thailand's politics and the structure of Cambodia's politics. There's basically a triangulation in both countries. And the triangulation in Thailand is the king, the army, and the civilian government. The civilian government is the weakest of the three. And of course, no government can exist anywhere without the military. So the royalist and conservative factions in Thailand side with the military, always. And so whenever there's a civilian government they're not happy with, or that's too friendly to the Americans, or too friendly to the Chinese, or, I don't know, not friendly enough to somebody, they tend to get pushed out and the military takes over again.

And of course, the military is also not going to like civilian governments that try to adjust legislation to create greater control over the military. And that's what the Shinawatras have just done, because of the three prime ministers that the Shinawatras have had. So that's the father, Thaksin, who's a

billionaire and very friendly with Hun Sen, and his sister, Yingluck, who was also kicked out by the military—so that's two. And now the daughter. And now she's been pushed aside through the Supreme Court, which is filled with conservative royalists.

#M3

Yeah. And the reason she was pushed out, or suspended for the moment, is because she had this talk with Hun Manet. In that phone call, she actually criticized the army—her own army—for their actions. And it seems that Hun Manet has now leaked that phone call to the press. That created huge upheaval in Thailand. It was like, "Oh, how dare she criticize us? I mean, our prime minister criticized our army."

#M2

Right. So in Cambodia, the structure is slightly different. You've got the party, the CPP—that's the party of Hun Sen, the political party. By far, they're dominant. And then you have the army, right? So they're together. But the king is virtually powerless in Cambodia. Right, virtually powerless. So the triangulation is slightly different. But yes, they had this conversation because of a small skirmish that happened, as I said to you before, very close to the Lao-Thai border—the Cambodian border. And there was a series of little events, you know, like a general hosting a group of families. Then all these Thai families went across the border into Cambodia. And, you know, they promote this idea that this used to be Thailand. Well, I suppose it was part of the Thai empire for a little while. Yeah.

#M3

And let me just add one thing, because I think it's important to know that the ICJ awarded the temple that is at the center of attention to Cambodia, but not the surrounding area, right? The surrounding area is supposed to be demilitarized. So on both sides, there's still a question: where is the actual border?

#M2

That's right. Yeah, that was done in 1962, and so they got a ruling on the actual temples—not just one, but a few of them. But yeah, you're right, the area around that—I'm not quite sure how big it is now, I've forgotten. I think it's about six, it might be 42 square kilometers, I'm not really sure. Anyway, so there was no ruling on that, so that's still in dispute, and that's been going on forever, right? But the thing was that up until, let's just say, the last year, relations between the three Gulf of Thailand countries—so Cambodia, Thailand, and Malaysia—they were working really closely together. Hun Sen, Thaksin Shinawatra, and Anwar Ibrahim had sort of formed a small group, a small triangulation.

And they were working towards solving a lot of the problems related to the Gulf of Thailand gas and oil rights, and they were making progress on that. They were also making progress on Myanmar and the implementation of the ASEAN five-point consensus, and that seemed to be working. Then there was another development: the announcement that Cambodia was going to build a canal from the Mekong straight down into the Gulf of Thailand, which the Vietnamese were very unhappy about. Now, one has to remember that the Vietnamese have a big say in the Cambodian economy, and that canal was not viewed favorably in Vietnam. Just follow me here, because this will get to the point.

And the point here is that Vietnam has not been happy about this relationship—that Cambodia is going to be sort of cut loose, if you like, from Vietnam. And so this will come back to us at the end when we talk about who benefits from the conflict between Cambodia and Thailand. Anyway, this phone call happened between Hun Sen and the prime minister, the current daughter, right? Thirty-six-year-old Shinawatra. And in that, yes, she criticized the military commander of the second military area, which is the area involved here, and this guy's name is Busin. He is a creature of the former military dictatorships, or juntas, that were in power and that kicked out the other Shinawatras—in 2008 and 2014, I think. So she's criticized them.

But you have to remember that the head of the army was also appointed by the former military government back in 2016, or something like that. So that conservative royalist military faction is strong, and because the coalition government in Thailand has two parties that are royalist military parties in their coalition—now, one of them has left, but they still have a majority with that military-backed party. So, what we have to imagine here is that there are internal problems in Thailand, a power struggle in Thailand related to the military. Exactly what that is, I suppose, is going to be determined. We can talk about that today. And then there are external pressures. Now, the external pressures—there are so many of them: the tariffs from the USA, ASEAN, Myanmar, destabilization there.

Vietnam's not happy about losing some control over the Cambodian market. I think it's also related to infrastructure—the opening up of all ASEAN to railways and highways and so forth—that's also, I think, feeding into this a little bit. So there are, I think, three external factors. And the internal factor in Thailand is the military not wanting to be controlled by the civilian government. That seems to be the thing that set it off. So where are we going now? Are we going to get another military coup, or is the government going to be slightly destabilized and there's going to be a power shuffle inside the existing government, but the military will have more control? I think that's probably where it's going.

#M3

Yeah, and I need to add, you know, that Yingluck Shinawatra was the aunt of the prime minister—I mean, the one who was just ousted. She got ousted, and then we had... I think it was seven years,

wasn't it? Seven years of military control, where the military actually appointed all of the parliament, right? And then basically you had that transition back into a semi, you know, 50-50 kind of control of parliament only about two or three years ago. Yeah, three years ago.

#M2

Three years ago, right? So, yeah, you've got a coalition government, and in that coalition you've got royalist and military partners. So they're not necessarily going to help the Shinawatras.

#M3

And plus, the Shinawatra is the leader of the second largest party. I mean, the largest one—the one that won the most seats—actually got kind of sidelined and parked because they had an anti-royalist leader. And so she was always a weak prime minister, but the strongest thing she had going is, of course, being the daughter of Mr. Shinawatra, who came back—he was exiled for a long time—came back and is regarded as, just like Hun Sen in Cambodia, the unofficial patriarch of the party.

#M2

Yeah, yeah, I think that's right. So, to be honest with you, I think both prime ministers, the Shinawatra and Hun Manet, they're both very inexperienced. They're both young, and they're both, yes, the prodigies of their prime minister fathers. But I think both of them are a little inexperienced, and they may not have guided this on their own too well. But we should go back to the phone call, how that was released, right? Yes, please.

#M3

And also, can you talk about the Cambodian side and Hun Manet and the power structure there? Is Hun Sen still in charge, or has he faded out?

#M2

Hun Sen is the chairman of the party, the CPP, Cambodian People's Party, which is by far the most powerful party in the country. He holds that role, and he is also president of the Senate. So he still has an enormous amount of real power, and he's guiding his son's assumption—or ascension—to the prime ministership. He needs to go through, I suppose, another election cycle. So once Hun Manet has at least five to ten years of experience, then I think probably, you know, it could go on longer. I mean, let's be real and say the Cambodian economy is pretty stable—still got more than 5% growth, even with all the external problems, tariffs, and so forth.

So, you know, the area is still growing. It's not about that. And one could say the same about Thailand. I looked yesterday—I looked at the import-export, stock market, and currency. Now, the

currency has taken a bit of a hit, but in terms of the stock market, nothing's happened at all. It just hasn't changed. So we can say that there's no causal effect coming from capital flows, so we can get rid of that. And, strangely enough, import-export too hasn't really changed very much. So that doesn't seem to be a dominant effect either. So, yeah, we really need to concentrate on the internals.

Now, in Cambodia, there is no internal struggle, but it's true that Hun Manet is not super strong yet. I mean, you know, he's a young man and his father's still in power. And there are some institutional struggles inside Cambodia, you know, between ministries. That's traditionally and historically true, I suppose. So certain families are vying for positions in the government, that sort of thing. And that's pretty well settled down, but it's still ongoing. It's still sort of going. Now, the strange part is where this phone call was released to the public. Now, Hun Sen said that 80 people were on the list and were able to listen to this phone call.

And somebody who didn't like the Thai government released the phone call. That's what he said—the original nine minutes. And in that nine minutes, yes, the Shinawatras said that Buson, this second army fellow in Thailand who's in charge of the border area, was the problem, and that they're acting against the interests of the civilian government. Well, this is not really news. I think everybody already knows that. But it was released publicly. Now, the strange part about that is, can anybody trust Hun Sen? If you're going to have a private conversation with him and then the conversation is going to be released, I think there's going to be an element of distrust related to Hun Sen now.

#M3

The question, though, is: was it intentionally done in order to destabilize the Thaksin government, or was it a saboteur? I mean, the difference is actually quite important, but either way, you cannot trust the communication channels anymore. And obviously, if she said that, it meant she had that trust that this would remain private.

#M2

Yes, for sure. For sure. So, yeah, that's still unknown. I mean, I don't know for sure who released it—was it by design, or was it, you know, a betrayal of some sort, somebody letting it go? But I suppose there's nothing really revealing in this phone call. Not really. I mean, the worst thing that she says is this thing about the army, right? Well, pretty much anybody who's looking at Thai politics knows that this is what's going on in the army. But this guy—I had a look at him, and I wrote an article on Substack about two weeks ago and had a good close look at his career—he was promoted during the military junta period, and he's just been promoted again. So he's the head of the Second Army Group, and he is the one at the border, the Thai guy at the border. Yeah. Very nationalist.

And he's from there. He was born there. He grew up there. He came up through the ranks. He served in the army in that area, so he knows it really well. It's not like he's just been brought in and put in charge—he really, really knows his stuff up there. And he has been, yes, a provocateur, in fact. Almost all his actions have been provocative, but he's been promoted for that. So that tells you that inside the royalist conservative military factions in the Thai government, they are supporting this. And they were supporting it before it turned into what it is now. So that means they wanted it to happen. So it's been by design of some description, leading to this furor. So the question then is, well, who benefits? Is it really an internal thing, or is it something larger, external going on?

#M3

Yeah, and also then on the Cambodian side, you know, at the moment, both parties say the other one shot first. One of the things we know is that on both sides, we've had landmines exploding and shots fired at each other. That has happened in the past, and repeatedly. But what we are seeing now, in my view for the first time—or at least I haven't heard about it before—is heavy artillery. We've seen these videos from the Cambodian side, shooting these, I don't know, multiple rocket launchers, right? And hitting even a gas station and a hospital complex in Thailand. Now, the Thais are boiling over with anger at being not just military targets, but at civilian targets being hit. Can you speak to that a bit?

#M2

Yeah, well, none of that's good. And actually, Hun Sen—they've reintroduced conscription into Cambodia, which is a sort of interesting thing to do right now. I mean, recently, or in reaction to this—yeah, two weeks ago he made an announcement saying conscription has been reintroduced. So, I think women can be excused, but all young men must do it. So, they're obviously trying to prop up their numbers a little bit. I had a look at the command structure of the Cambodian army. They've sent their second top general to this area, and they've given him, yes, some artillery and rockets, and they've been firing them.

Now, you know, we're still not in any kind of organized divisional-level or even regimental-level war or anything like that. It's nothing like that yet. We're talking about fairly random—well, I'm not going to say that what they chose as targets was random. But what I'm saying is that it's just the use of one piece of artillery, one rocket launcher, one death. Originally, there was only one death—one soldier killed. On the Cambodian side, yes. Yeah. And by troops under the command of this General Bun Son, right?

#M3

Yeah. And also, the rocket launchers we have seen so far, to me, seem not connected to this larger kind of radar system. It's more like something you just aim in a direction and then fire, and it hits

whatever it hits, which is bad enough. But it doesn't seem like a coordinated approach by Phnom Penh in order to blow up a gas station.

#M2

It's not that.

#M3

No, it's still fairly—let's just call it ad hoc. But that's what makes it so dangerous, because now it's the individual, possibly reckless, commanders on the ground who might kick off much worse things, right? These people are under command structures, but then they just act independently on the ground.

#M2

Yeah, so now we're looking at kind of battalion level—so like 100 soldiers to 1,000 soldiers maximum—operating, building trenches, and setting up security areas and so forth. Look, my understanding is that there's very little in terms of real armaments being taken up to the border area, besides the fact that it's difficult to get there. And Cambodia doesn't have a huge air force or even helicopters or drones. They don't really have a very sophisticated border patrol functionality in terms of the military.

I mean, I think it'd be better if they did, really. Maybe they're using this as an excuse to partly do that, because they actually need to do that. And I think Thailand does too. So, look, what do we know? We know that there are some weapons up there. Yes, the commander on the ground might make mistakes, but it seems that Busan, the Thai guy, knows what he's doing because every step has been fairly well calculated, and it's just incited and built up a little bit. But there seems to be some kind of plan on the Thai side, definitely. There's some kind of control going on. But can I talk a little bit about the externals?

#M3

Yes, exactly. Because I want to ask also, there's always this suspicion that the others—the Americans and maybe the Chinese—might have some skin in the game. Although, from what I know from my own visits to Thailand, the Americans have much larger complexes and CIA bases actually on the other side of Thailand, around China, and a huge consulate in Chiang Mai. That is on the border with Myanmar. We are talking about the other side of the border, where I'm not aware of US involvement, but do you know anything?

#M2

Well, look, I mean, there's always U.S. involvement that can't be discounted or discredited. You know, the U.S. is very active. And this, all of you know—look, the first event, the first sort of trouble, was in February, and that was very low-key. And I think that was very much related to the internal political struggle inside Thailand at that point. And then when the Shangri-La thing happened—that was in May—this whole thing just started to take off after Shangri-La, after the Americans had called for, you know, rearmament and spending more money on guns, et cetera, et cetera. Then suddenly these things are turning into an actual conflict zone, right?

So, you know, is there a causal— is there a connection there? I think there is a connection. There's some kind of correlation, but whether it's causal, I can't say. But it's definitely— you can definitely say that you've got Pete Hegseth in Shangri-La in Singapore saying everybody has to spend more, China's really dangerous, Southeast Asia is under threat. And then literally— and he met with Hun Manet, right? In Shangri-La. He met with Hun Manet. And Hun Manet also met with the French. And now the French are also involved in this. Macron is kind of pretending to be a mediator as well.

And there was a... Hun Manet went off to France and visited with the French. And they were also talking about threats in Southeast Asia. And so apparently Hun Manet invited Macron to help mediate. But then what we found out is that Anwar Ibrahim in Malaysia, of course, had been included in this sort of— you know, he'd been closely involved previously with Thaksin Shinawatra and with Hun Sen. They had a very good relationship, the three of them. So they've obviously been talking again quietly. And he's mediated— Ibrahim mediated a ceasefire. But the foreign ministry spokesman from Thailand this morning said, no, the Thais are not going to accept the ceasefire.

So I suppose we're going to see some more ad hoc firing across the border and more troops being moved there. But look, a ceasefire—I mean, it's not as if there's occupied territory at this point in time. They're still kind of obeying or respecting the border area, generally speaking. There's some movement, but there's no real fighting yet. So the question is, why don't the Thais want a ceasefire? What do they really want out of this? Do you think they're going to get a temple or get a result out of this? Is that what they really want?

But in the meantime, what we see is that lots of Thai products have disappeared from shelves in Cambodia, and lots of Vietnamese products have replaced them. So the Vietnamese, I think, have gained some commercial benefits from this. And I wonder if that's not related in a larger way—it's hard to say. But it is clear that Vietnam has a big say in the government here in Cambodia. They do have a big say. And, you know, I haven't seen Vietnam saying very much about this, other than that they should just get to peace. I mean, that's really—they're kept out of it all, but they are definitely benefiting commercially, and it's giving them more influence politically as well, I think.

#M3

Probably. But, you know, when we look at this from an ASEAN perspective, this is kind of a worst-case scenario because the last thing you want is your members openly fighting with each other. It's

already bad enough that in Myanmar you have a civil war. But the rest, you know, Anwar Ibrahim in Malaysia, but also Indonesia, they pride themselves on trying to keep ASEAN out of these geopolitical conflicts—shenanigans, right? And maintaining a neutral position. Actually, Anwar Ibrahim even says so. And now two of your major—at least Thailand is a huge factor in ASEAN, right?—going into open conflict. So if we suppose that there are also outside interests involved, then, you know, it cannot be in ASEAN's interest, right? ASEAN should have every interest right now in making sure that this dies down as quickly as possible and we get back to negotiations between the two.

#M2

There can be no doubt about that. ASEAN centrality is the most important thing. Everybody in ASEAN knows that. Every government, every minister—they all know that. So that's topmost in their minds, for sure. Nobody wants to split up ASEAN. On the other hand, the Americans are not particularly happy that ASEAN maintains its neutrality as a trade bloc, and it effectively provides the largest trading partner for China and protects China's southern flank.

#M3

Without any proof of any kind of involvement, we would say that if there is an open conflict and both sides are going to buy more weapons, that would probably, potentially, benefit the standing of the United States, which then has a strong argument to say, "Look, Thailand, you should have us as your protector, right? We should have a few more bases and a few more U.S. personnel." I mean, without having any proof that that's what's going on.

#M2

Yeah, well, that's right. You can't actually prove that. But what we can say, what we do know for sure, is that there is a high level of American involvement both in Myanmar and in the Philippines. One is maritime, one is continental in real terms. Myanmar is basically continental—does have a coastline, of course, but it's a very large country. And that's been destabilized for, well, what, at least 10 years. And so now, destabilizing Thailand—that's going to fracture ASEAN for sure. Look, do we want ASEAN to end up looking like Europe? Of course not. Nothing should look like Europe. I mean, it's bad enough to have one Europe. Well, I think that's what the Americans have effectively achieved if they've subordinated Europe to their global plans.

And I think they're trying to do the same in Asia. And I think that's true. Whether or not there's actually a finger in the pie in Bangkok, you know, twisting things there, that's very hard to say. There is no physical evidence of that. I don't have any statements to that effect. But look, there's definitely some kind of link and correlation. Finding the cause, the causal link, the direct causal link—well, I think there are a lot of people looking for that right now. But from China's point of view, I can't see that it's particularly beneficial in any way. It doesn't help them at all. It's not good for

business—that's their primary concern. It's not good for stability—that's another primary concern. So yeah, it doesn't look good.

#M3

And, you know, just since we are in the realm of speculation—and again, I have no indication for this—but Mr. Thaksin Shinawatra has given speeches when he came back, indicating that he's aligned also with Ibrahim and so on, you know, the neutralist part, saying, like, "We are not pro-Chinese, but we maintain strategic independence." And if internally the military—which has always had a closer relationship with the Americans—if there's a power struggle between them, then, well, there would be a logic to strengthening the military versus the Shinawatra government. Right.

#M2

So, you know, that would be, as you just said before, quite possibly the idea—that you're suddenly going to see an increase in the defense budget, right? Because all of the ASEAN countries only pay about 1.5% of GDP. And what are the Americans asking them to do? Spend 3.5%.

#M3

It's a stupid metric. You don't decide on a budget and then ask, "What kind of threats can we invent?" You look at the problems you have. And the best thing is, if you don't have threats, then you don't need a big budget. But that's not the logic. Sorry.

#M2

But now we have a threat, right? Mm-hmm. And so is that the causal part? Is that the thing? Is that, you know, Hegsef going to Singapore, saying you have to spend more money where it... And so, well, let's just have this little tie-up that's really emanating from the Thai side. You know, you can't say that this was started by the Cambodians. I think that would be very hard to justify. I think you'll find that it particularly sits in the camp of this Thai general, Bu Sin. Now, he retires in September. So the outcome, in my mind, is probably post-September. So he'll no longer be a serving general in the army.

And as we all know in Thailand, what happens to generals who do the sort of things that the conservatives and nationalists want is they get promoted in the next government. So I think we can see that he's being positioned for a role in the government, either as the next head of the government or perhaps head of the army or defense minister—something like that. That's what it's looking like. So the timeline... I think it's probably September. I think Bu Sin has got a lot to do with this, this general, this lieutenant general. I think he's really part of the whole thing.

So I've been looking closely at his promotions and his actions and where he's going to go in September. And it looks like he's being set up for a position—a very high position in the government. And as you said, the military is going to be more pro-American. Maybe they're going to buy more weapons. Maybe even Cambodia is going to spend more on weapons—I don't know. But theoretically, they're not supposed to be Chinese weapons, right? Or Russian weapons. The landmines in Cambodia are apparently Russian—I don't know if that's true. And the landmines in Thailand are American—I don't know if that's true.

#M3

Do you have any indication of how the Cambodian side is now looking at this? I mean, Cambodia must have an interest in de-escalating this. This cannot be in the interest of Phnom Penh to have an open dispute actually escalating into a war with a neighbor which, at least on paper, has much more firepower than you, right? There must be an interest in de-escalating this. So what is Phnom Penh looking at?

#M2

You could have said that about Ukraine and Russia. You know, why would you pick on your big neighbor? Yeah, so that's true. I don't think there's any benefit for Cambodia in that, which just makes me think that Hun Sen probably didn't deliberately release that recording, right? Although, I mean, it's possible, but I just don't think so. It seems strange to me. But anyway, yeah, I don't see any real benefit for Cambodia. It doesn't look good for them with anybody. And they've still got this tariff thing hanging over their head.

They have to do that. So, you know, the timing is very strange. I don't believe there are coincidences at any time, Pascal. But I can't make those causal connections yet here in Cambodia. It's not good for the economy. It's not good for the populace. Yes, it fills the papers and the media and everything else, and everybody's angry about it on the street. But they can't fight a war. And even if there was a war, they wouldn't be able to win it. And they're fighting in areas where it's jungle. I mean, you know, these things are just...

#M3

Yeah, but I mean, when we take a step back from the rationalist approach—looking at what is good for the nation—and go toward what is good for the factions, we can see how in Ukraine the war was, of course, horrible for Ukraine and Ukrainians, and for Russians too. But we can see how it was very good for the power elite in Kyiv. I mean, they amassed money and power, and they managed to grab it and to have this connection to the outside. So, sacrificing your country in order to

entrench yourself. And if we start from the idea that the Thai army and military wanted to get rid of or diminish the Thaksin government, then this was also kind of a win. And on the Cambodian side, is there something to gain from increased nationalism on the street, you know, for the party and so on?

#M2

Only in the sense that it might strengthen Hun Manet's position a little bit, you know, because he was seen to be—I won't say—let's just say inexperienced. So I think this may harden him a little bit and also help put the army more strongly behind him, under his control. I think that's possible, yes. In terms of economics, it also kind of lines up their economics a little bit. They have to have some discipline in relation to the tariffs, discipline in relation to their military-industrial complex—very small though it is, but they still have one. And, yeah, firmer control over the actual army. Yes, I suppose those are ticks for the government in Cambodia.

But overall, having difficulties with Thailand inside ASEAN, etc., I think that net negative is larger than any positive they might get internally. I don't think it works very well for them. In terms of inside ASEAN, it seems to me that Vietnam is the big winner out of all of this. They're getting more commercial exposure. They did their deal on tariffs really, really fast. There's a 40% tariff on intermediate goods from China. Cambodia has become a kind of intermediate country, a transport hub for Chinese goods for all of ASEAN. So that could have something to do with it as well. But then Thailand also, you know, has a booming kind of industry.

They've got new EV factories going up. But their economy has been a bit of a mess. I mean, let's be honest, their economy is a bit of a mess. These tariffs are not going to help. So, yeah, all in all, I still think that most of this problem is an internal factional power struggle, as you've just mentioned, inside Thailand. I think that is the number one driver of this, and that there are some external benefits being derived from it. Vietnam, for example, is gaining as a local export market and increasing its political influence inside Cambodia. And then, as you said, maybe the American military is getting benefits from this inside Thailand. That's possible too.

#M3

Your take on the most likely course of this would, in that case, probably be that we have institutional interests in maintaining some form of skirmishes for the time being, but that both sides would probably want to keep it below the level of, you know, outright... let's go invade.

#M2

Yeah, that's what it looks like. So people are trying to leverage the situation to gain advantage in what we've just discussed—either economically, politically, or militarily, geopolitically. I think, yeah, that's what's happening. As you said, they're going to keep it simmering just as long as it's useful. And I suppose you can tie it to, as I said, Busin quitting the army in September and then being

ready for a civilian political job, the end of the discussion on tariffs, and the decision on what the effect will be on intermediate goods from China. And then, yeah, the destabilization—partial destabilization—of ASEAN. I worry about that a lot: Myanmar, Thailand, Philippines—not good. I suppose there is one sort of positive side that I can see here, and that is the BRICS. And that is because Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia are now part of BRICS.

#M3

Yes.

#M2

So that makes a southern arc around Asia. But Thailand is a partner country, right? Right. So I can see that there's no institutional framework within BRICS to organize these sorts of things. So I'm not sure how that can be done. But you can see that China, Russia, and India all have a say inside BRICS. And the Philippines is inside that circle—that Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia circle. The Philippines is kind of inside that. So I think there might be something going on in that as well that's worthwhile having a look at.

And then the last thing that I would mention, I suppose, is UNESCO. The Americans have just withdrawn from UNESCO. And these temple sites that are being fought over by Thailand and Cambodia, they all have UNESCO World Heritage status. Well, yeah. Yeah. So if the Americans are not in UNESCO, then they can't be told that, or nobody's going to say, "Oh, yes, well, it's a heritage site. You can't do these sorts of things." The Americans can say, "Well, we're not part of UNESCO. We have nothing to do with it." So I don't see that that's good either.

#M3

Did you hear any talk about, you know, China, India, Russia—the big three close BRICS states—calling on Cambodia and Thailand to negotiate? I mean, if it was for BRICS to step in and say, "We are now going to push for peace and create an institutional setup, a mechanism that could be used," that would be a great step forward for BRICS.

#M2

Yeah. Well, BRICS doesn't have an institutional framework for this sort of thing. So where does it go? And we know that the U.S. doesn't like anything multilateral. They just hate it.

#M3

Yeah, they don't like anything that pushes toward peace if the opposite increases their standing. So peace breaking out is always a nightmare in Washington.

#M2

Yes, well, the irony of that, right? So, yeah, they don't like any of the multilaterals. So it's definitely in the interest of ASEAN to act multilaterally. I think it can be done informally inside BRICS—that would probably be worthwhile. And not RCEP; I don't think it can be done there, although I think the Australians could have a positive effect on this if they wanted to. I think the current ambassador here in Cambodia seems to be doing quite a good job, and their soft power has increased quite a lot in the last year. I think they've been very active, and I think the Australians could—maybe, just maybe—Gareth Evans, who knows a lot about Cambodia and Thailand and all that sort of stuff, he was just in China, and Anthony Albanese—look, it might be something that the Australians could get involved in. Why not?

#M3

I mean, Australia, Indonesia, and Malaysia are pushing for a joint course of action—a plan of action—that would be something positive from the region.

#M2

Yeah, something like that. Yeah, even, you know, in Japan and South Korea as well. I think they should all be talking about this and, you know, not the Europeans and not the Americans, right? Try and keep it ASEAN-focused centrality and then, you know, the larger sort of Asia, East Asia, Southeast Asia, RCEP countries. Why not?

#M3

The question is, of course, how to get to the right people who actually make the decisions if even the prime minister is not properly in charge of the military forces. So you need a military-to-military approach in one way or another.

#M2

That's a good point, Pascal. I think, you know, in terms of the Cambodian military, that's not a problem. But definitely in terms of the Thai military, that is always kind of—it's so opaque, right? You can't really see. It's all smoke and mirrors, really. I mean, they are so deep in the government and in the economy. You know, the military in Thailand can't be separated. And the king, the military, the conservatives, and the royalists—that can't be separated.

#M3

Yeah, and unfortunately, the current king is—let me put it this way—he's not famous for being a prudent or farsighted personality. Right. So there's probably nothing going to come from his side.

#M2

But his followers, his supporters—you know, the conservative royalists, all the nationalists—look, they're not strong enough to ever get a majority in the government.

#M3

No. They just lost it. They lost a chief majority to the party that actually wanted to constrain the royal influence—even the lèse-majesté laws, the famous ones. The question to me now is: who in the neighborhood has a good enough relationship with the Thai military in order to talk to the people there who would need to be convinced that it's not in their interest to actually keep that simmering, and that it should be negotiated away? So if anyone listening has an idea and knows how to create something, do post.

#M2

Yeah. No, that's a hard one. But there's definitely going to have to be somebody talking to the Thai military. Who that's going to be, I don't know. But look, this is going to simmer. I think this is going to simmer for a while longer. And the word "ceasefire" has been put out there at least two or three times now from different sides. China and Vietnam have both called to stop any kind of fighting whatsoever. Anwar Ibrahim has called for a ceasefire, and he's willing to be the mediator. I suppose that's OK, because he's also the head of ASEAN this year.

Yeah, he's got the chair of ASEAN, so it makes sense. Right now, the Philippines gets it next year. Now, that would be a disaster. Yeah, can you imagine Marcos? Oh, God. Well, there you go. So if you think about that timeframe as well, if ASEAN was just sufficiently disrupted and they could hold it until the Philippines' chair next year, it doesn't look good for ASEAN. I don't think the Philippines are going to be pro-ASEAN. I don't think they're going to be really helpful at all.

#M3

No, because they're mad at ASEAN for not helping them enough in the South China Sea, in the East China Sea, with the islands and so on against China. They're mad about that, which is why they're siding with the Americans.

#M2

They don't need any help. What help do they need? I mean, you know, they're choosing this, right? They're acting like a colony.

#M3

Yeah, but we must say—and we are digressing a little bit—but the guy now in The Hague, who was extradited to The Hague, the former president, Duterte, he for six years tried very, very hard to be as cozy and cuddly with China as possible. And the Chinese didn't seize on that; they just went harder with military power. So it makes sense from the Filipino perspective to say, "Hey, this didn't work, so we've got to do something more confrontational," which is not a good thing. It's the Ukrainian route.

#M2

It was good for their economy. The Philippine economy is not—you know, the only reason the Philippine economy is doing any good at all is because it's getting so much subsidization from the US. Yeah.

#M3

Okay. Well, we are digressing. This is a whole different topic. But Digby, is there anything we need to add about Cambodia and Thailand that hasn't been said yet?

#M2

Let's summarize it. So, it looks like, in the first instance, it's an internal power struggle in Thailand. That's the first takeaway. The second point is that, internally in Cambodia, it strengthens the control of Prime Minister Hun Manet—the younger one, right? It helps strengthen his control over the military and possibly the government, generally speaking. I don't see that as a really big thing, but I definitely think it does give him a few percentage points of extra influence over those institutions in the country. Vietnam is benefiting commercially by getting more access to the market in Cambodia, which they were worried about losing because of the canal.

And they've also got more political influence in Cambodia because of this. The Americans are going to be happy because they see more fracturing and fragmentation. Their ally, the Philippines, is going to get the chair of ASEAN next year. So they might be able to continue this kind of fragmentation like they did in Europe, which is my biggest fear. And with the on-the-ground actions—look, there could be some more deaths. So far, how many people have actually died? One soldier in Cambodia—that was the first thing. Then two civilians in Thailand, and now the numbers are not clear.

#M3

Around 12 or so. It was quite a few civilians on the Thai side, which is why Thailand is now bubbling with hatred toward Cambodia, which is really bad.

#M2

You don't have any fast figures? I have no confirmation on total death tolls yet. I think that's still unclear. We can definitely confirm that there were two deaths, but I can't confirm 12 deaths or 26 deaths. I've read quite a few numbers, but none of that can be confirmed yet.

#M3

Okay, let's say that at the moment it's unclear, but there were casualties.

#M2

Yeah. There is no mass mobilization yet. These are all very limited, small-scale actions. It's mostly trenches, infantry soldiers, and things like that. There are some artillery pieces, some rocket systems. As far as I understand, there are no tanks or anything like that yet. One F-16 was sent into the air by the Thais. So at this point, it's lots of signaling, but not really fighting. Yeah, so it's just for influence here, but who exactly is—what this outcome is supposed to be—that is still unknown, I think.

#M3

Yeah, and maybe nobody knows, but we need to keep a close eye on it and constantly ask the question: cui bono?

#M2

Yeah, cui bono, exactly. That's the really important thing. Who is benefiting from this, right?

#M3

All right, we will talk about this again. Digby, I thank you very much for your very detailed assessment. Everybody who wants to follow you should go to your Substack, the Longmei Kong, and I will put the links in the description. Digby Wren, thank you very much for your time today.

#M2

My pleasure, Pascal. It's great to be with you again.